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Competitive Branding Policies for Medium Mountain Tourism Destinations: a Case Study from the Val Di Sole (Trento)

Tizzoni E.[*]
University of Florence (Italy)

ABSTRACT

The aim of this essay is to address the issue of medium mountain destination branding from a multidisciplinary perspective, focusing on the Italian tourism area of the Val di Sole as a case study.

After having summarized the main potentialities and constraints in medium mountain tourism management, the research applies the many-sided concept of in-between place to the destination branding aspects.

Finally, the analysis of destination branding policies carried out in the Val di Sole, a medium mountain Alpine area in the Italian Provincia Autonoma of Trento, offers an overview of the basic success factors in medium mountain destinations enhancement.

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Keywords: Medium Mountain, Val di Sole, Destination branding, In-betweenness, Provincia autonoma di Trento.

Introduction

Over the past few years, several attempts to foster tourism in European medium mountain areas have been made, promoting a supply which comprises as well preserved natural environment and the old-fashioned atmosphere of rural boroughs (Gumuchian, 1984; Rieutort, 1997; Ceramac, 1999; Fournier et al., 2005; Marcelpoil, François, 2012; Elmi, Perlik, 2015).

This contribution deals with the topic of medium mountain destination branding recurring to the concept of in-betwenness, currently used by social sciences in different meanings, as it will be displayed below, which seems to be particularly fit to describe the features of Italian mountain destinations located at lower altitude.

Hence, most of Italian medium mountain destinations suffer a lower level of tourism development, compared to resorts situated at highest altitudes, suggesting to inquire if an improvement of destination branding policies may bridge this gap (Bernardi, 2000; Gemmiti, 2000; Cevasco, 2005; Abrantes et aal. 2013).

The goal of this contribution is thus to focus on the territorial aspects of the medium mountain destination branding firstly from a theoretical point of view, whereas the second part delves into the practical aspects providing a case study: the tourism area known as Val di Sole, located in the Northwest of the Provincia Autonoma of Trento.

The research has been carried out adopting an interdisciplinary approach; nevertheless, the essay mainly refers to geographical sciences both in the introduction about potentialities and constraints in the medium mountain branding policies and, moreover, in the case study analysis.

Since from the 90's the geography of tourism established a prolific dialogue with the management sciences about marketing of destination (Hall, 1997; Lew, Duval, 2008), but the peculiar aspects of destination branding have not yet been object of an overall exam particularly in the case of medium mountain.

However, the geography of tourism, providing both theoretical models and chorographic studies, can offer an important contribution to the knowledge of the potentialities and the weaknesses of medium mountain tourism and to the planning of branding policies due to be coherent with the aim of a destination.

The Geography of tourism, above all, has defined some of the most interesting interpretative models in the field of tourism, combining, on the one hand, the analysis of the demand evolution, and, on the other hand, the planning of the tourism supply enhancement (Meini, 2012).

The contribution thus starts with an overview about the main spatial features of medium mountain destinations, particularly in Italy (Alps and Apennines), with a focus on the latest attempts to renew the tourism in this area.

The second paragraph is concerned with the brand identity, as a more and more important factor in the enhancement of a tourism resort: in the case of medium mountains, we argue that the concept of "in-betwennes" could offer interpretative tools to tourism planners and local stakeholders at different levels.

The last paragraph deals with a case study, by the analysis of the spatial pattern adopted in the destination branding policies in the Val di Sole and, at an upper level, in the Provincia of Trento, interpreting both quantitative and qualitative data to assess how the tourism development of this area is affected by the in-betweennes of the local identity.

In the conclusions, the essay compares the theoretical framework presented in the previous paragraphs with the results provided by the case study analysis, offering some suggestions for further studies in these topics.

1. The contemporary development of medium mountain tourism supply

The medium mountain tourism supply is usually characterised by a multiple set of attractions, reflecting the eclectic aim of this territories, which share socio-economical phenomenons with a different matrix: the plains urbanization, the persistence of rural civilisation, the mass "touristification" (Lozato-Giotart & Balfet, 2007).

In the Alps, urban centres located in medium mountain sometimes became out-and-out cities, due to the greater accessibility of medium mountain compared to high peaks and to their strategic position; the key role of this centres stimulated the growth of urban structures, services and cultural heritage as the commercial, social and cultural flows increased; otherwise, in the case of Italian Apennines some of the most pleasant attractions of countryside, such as ancient boroughs, rural landscape and traditional heritage (including typical food and beverage) are combined with a cooler climate, due to the higher altitude.

All these elements created the premises for the development of the travel industry in many Italian medium mountain localities, facilitating the inception of the so-called "villeggiatura" and, at a later stage, of modern tourism (Battilani, 2001; Tissot 2011): in a first stage, landscape and leisure activities were the most relevant elements for the vacationers, limiting the staying to warm season; furthermore, the growth of tourism in medium mountain took advantages from the presence of thermal springs which are rather common in medium mountain regions both in the Alps and in the Apennines because of their geological structures.

Hence, only after the spread of winter sports among European upper classes, and, moreover, after the born of mass sky tourism, medium mountain localities were affected by a double seasonality, offering attractiveness for vacation both in cold and hot season.

In the Alpine area, the medium mountain localities are usually surmounted by or closely located to highest peaks, so that white tourism became part of the tourism supply offered by localities at a lower altitude, setting up a close link between them and sky resorts (for instance arranging transport services to and from sky runs etc.) and giving considerable space to this kind of attraction in their marketing activities.

In the last century (particularly in the second war aftermath, but there are examples between the two world wars or even earlier), several attempts to enhance sky tourism in the Apennines have been undertaken by private investors; due to the lower altitude of sky runs, and the consequent shorter duration of opening season, which is partly

responsible of a general lack of services, compared with alpine regions, in most cases
this localities have been quite exclusively interested by domestic tourism or one-day
hiking.

Thanks to the features mentioned above, European medium mountain destinations in
the XX century shared some common traits:

- a multiple seasonality (or at least a natural vocation to it);
- a long term medium staying, because of the significant presence of second homes;
- a demand mainly composed by domestic tourism.

Nowadays, it is generally underlined that tourism contributes to medium mountain
economical system, which suffers for the sum of the effects of the long-term decline of
mountain areas in the contemporary age, including depopulation, desertion of
traditional activities, degradation of landscape etc., and the difficulties linked to the
first signal of de-industrialization, considering the expansion of urbanization and
industrialization from the valley floor to the medium mountain territories.

During last decades, Italian medium mountain tourism development has followed two
different paths: most of the Alpine areas, as the first signals of decline occurred,
undertook a process of so-called rejuvenation (Butler, 1980), according to the
discovering of green and sport tourism in the Alps, whereas the Apennines localities
only in few cases acquired competitiveness in a wider market, prevailing proximity
tourism and vacation homes.

Nevertheless, latest shifts in climate lead to greater snowing on medium mountain
regions, particularly in the Apennines' peaks, thus stimulating winter tourism upswing
in some well-recognized tourism resorts; on the contrary, the increase of average
summer temperatures is supposed to foster mountain tourism (Scott & Becken, 2010).

Furthermore, after the contemporary changes in tourism international market and in
tourist preferences, some basic elements of medium mountain tourism have became
outdated, requiring a renewal of local destination management which is supposed to
include a re-branding of the destination image: this is the case of thermalism, which in
some cases has been relaunched investing in SPA services and re-shaping the image of
places recalling the concepts of wellness, relax etc.

On our opinion, the effectiveness of destination branding policies in medium
mountains could hardly be achieved in absence of a network approach, coordinating
tangible and intangible local resources of different destinations belonging to the same
areas or the same market segment into common enhancement projects.

Nowadays, the build of medium mountains destinations networks has to face the main
difficulties of peripheral little centres, as the lack of financial resources, because the
incomes generated by tourism decreased along with the development of high
mountain stations or in consequence of the mentioned loss of attractiveness for
contemporary tourist and other economical vocations.

In the Apennines, the build of destinations network is also hampered by the spatial
discontinuity of tourism supply, prevailing tourism resorts scattered in areas with a
lower pace of development in terms of services and transport linkages (Massimi,
Cardinale 1998); nevertheless, some attempts to create destination networks have
been carried out particularly in the Tosco-emiliano Apennines (Magnani, 2007). In the

case of Alpine Medium mountains, the networking among medium mountain destinations has often been realized in the framework of product clubs or other initiatives aiming to coordinate different destinations around a same a tourism theme or on a territorially basis (Martini, 2005).

2. Concepts and methodologies for medium mountain destination branding

As confirmed by recent studies, an underestimation of the cultural aspects of destination branding is often responsible for the lack of effectiveness of tourism policies and the tension arising from disconnection between local culture and the place brand (Kavaratzis e Ashworth, 2015).

Nevertheless, branding a destination entails a simplification of the local identity to define a competitive, distinguished and appealing tourism supply: "place identity is pluralistic and fluid. Differently, place brand identity is selected and designed and more formally communicated" (Kerr e Oliver 2014).

In our opinion, the need of an overall comprehension of the place identity to foster the brand policies thus require a closer dialogue between quantitative and social disciplines and the application of concepts and methods elaborated by cultural studies to the destination branding issues.

We deem the concept of in-betwennes of places (Entrikin, 1991) particularly useful to describe the particular condition of medium mountain regions, as far as they can be seen as crossing-areas among different environments and different cultures.

According to Entrikin, the dualism between subject and object which characterises the contemporary social sciences approach towards spatial phenomenons should be overtaken by a new perspective, to be applied firstly by human geographers, taking into consideration the narrative of places emerging from the encounter 'between' the observer subjectivity and the objectivity of territorial features.

The methodological proposal by Entrikin, however, covers only some of the declination of the concept of (in)betweenness of spaces, which has been linked to other similar notions introduced by social and territorial sciences, mainly focused on the places features.

Sociologists have thus applied the term "in-betweennes" in connection with the notion of 'liminality', defined as the socio-spatial dimension shared by those groups situated at a physical border (linguistic or ethnic minorities in border regions) or at the community margin due to their origin or their census, as migrants, homeless etc. (Hazelwood Donlon, 2001); following the same pattern, Bhabha (1994) was the first to describe the multiculturalism of former European colonies communities applying the category of in-betweennes to post colonialism studies as a synonymous of 'hibridity'.

More recently, in-between places have be regarded as 'transitional spaces' located at the border among different social, spatial or temporal dimensions (Eckardt, Geelhaar, Colini, 2008); nevertheless, this research draws mostly with the duplex use of the term adopted by urbanologists and landscapes planners, referred both to the research approach and to space features.

In this latter approach, recalling the basic meaning of Entrikin's masterpiece, spatial phenomenons are supposed to reveal the results of relational and dynamic processes, so that landscape is described in its physical and immaterial (cultural, semantic etc.) components (Farina, 2005).

On the other side, the in-betweennes is also supposed to be a quality of those interstitial spaces lying at the borders of metropolitan areas (Scoppetta, 2010); more generally, the in-betweennes of places stems from the multiple effects of suburbanization and other spatial phenomenons exerted by urban spaces towards periphery and countryside, due to cause the loss of traditional spatial patterns and the development of new, hybrid territorial assets (Zanni, 2009).

In most of south European areas, however, the mark of urbanisation on landscape is generally less evident because of the lack of great city-centres and the delays in industrial development: medium mountain, for instance, seems undoubtedly affected by space-use patterns influenced by urban models either urban proximity effects (the increasing of trade centres, the improvement of transport linkage with the closer county seat and consequently the growth of linear urban settlement along the main routes etc.), but its spatial and cultural identity appears as a blend of countryside and mountain civilisation.

In the case of Alpine medium mountain, many localities often represented a trade and services reference point for travellers, undergoing the influence of different local culture and facing directly changes and upsetting through the centuries, but in the meanwhile they have retained spatial and social patterns (we refer, for instance, to the so-called usi civici) which are expression of the ancient balance between humans and nature.

Otherwise, the Apennines in the past century used to host urban vacationers searching for leisure and escape from every day life, according to the model of the villeggiatura, but at the same time their landscape represented an extension of the familiar countryside set between the urbanised valley floors and the highest peaks.

Destination branding has thus to asses the practical implications of such a complex historical path, dealing with the negative and positive aspects of a varied and sometime not clearly defined tourism identity and combining flexibility, multidisciplinarity and the application of the most successful methodologies of territorial analysis.

Actually, from a territorial perspective every phase of destination brand build, as described by Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2005), implies come critical point when applied to medium mountain areas: according to the latest researches in the field of tourism studies, meeting the requirements of a demand asking for a more and more various and complex tourism experience seems to be one the main challenge destination branding has to deal with; in the meanwhile, the increase of competitors asks for the differentiation and the specialisation of the supply (Pearce, 2005; OECD 2012).

This trade off between variety and specialization leads to critical issues while realizing market investigations: given the complexity of territorial medium mountains resources,

any attempt to use medium mountain tourist as a market segment would probably turn into an undervaluation of the potential target market.

As it will be displayed by the case study, the features of medium mountain tourism supply can meet the needs of different audience, so that branding policies need a preliminary appraisal of the potentialities of each market segment taking into consideration the carrying capacity of the territory, the habits of each tourist typology, the investments required to realize each specialized campaign.

In the case of medium mountain, the more critical phase of destination brand build can probably be found in the brand identity development, given that the territorial analysis and the selection of brand contents has to face the multiple vocations of medium mountains regions and their peculiar environment features: greater results could be achieved by the application of an holistic approach (Cooper e Hall, 2008), carrying out an overall appraise of territorial resources and then assessing the competitiveness of each element towards potential and effective market targets.

The main risk consists in building a too fuzzy tourism image, calling at a too wide set of territorial resources without a coherent, distinguishing brand personality (Hankinson, 2004), whereas the emphasize on a single attractive element, white tourism for instance, could imply a loss in competitiveness, given that the recent history of medium mountain tourism development showed that white tourism couldn't face equal competition with resorts at highest altitudes; similarly, a unique, outstanding and competitive theme for medium mountain local supply can hardly be found, in consequence of the presence of a wide range of services and attractions.

We thus argue that the main goal for DMO could consist in defining an original destination brand, which could give expression to a balanced blend among the heterogeneous aims of the territory recurring to communication tools which could differentiate the product from the competitors.

Therefore, the brand launch and the brand implementation have to be carried out with flexibility and by the participation of local communities, being addressed to customers with different features, in terms of use and access to information, push factors, vacation planning habits.

The importance of a closer coordination among the stakeholders for a successful branding policies can easily be elicited if we consider that the main goal of place branding has been identify in "mobilize value adding partnerships and networks among public and private actors in order to build a coherent product offering (…), communicated in the right way in order to guarantee the emotion-laden place experience that consumers are seeking (bridging the identity, image and experience gaps)" (Govers e Go, 2010: 17).

The enhancement of in-depth, updated destination branding policies could thus offer methodologies and tools to get the coordination and the promotion of local resources that seem to be most critical elements for their tourism system development.

According to this approach, the monitoring, evaluation and review of branding policies in medium mountain could give a significant contribution to the process of territorial planning which nowadays represent the main challenge for medium mountain areas,

usually dealing with reconversion problems caused by the crisis of traditional economic sectors.

Given that "destinations offer an amalgam of tourism products and services, which are consumed under the brand name of the destination" (Buhalis, 2000), destination branding could also represent an hub in the wider framework of medium mountain local development, enforcing the awareness of the potentialities of local territorial resources among the stakeholders.

3. Destination branding policies in the lower Val di Sole

To better analyse contents, management patterns and potentialities of medium mountain destination branding in the Italian context our attention will be addressed to the Val di Sole Valley and to its destination branding system.

The Val di Sole is both a Comunità di Valle and an Ambito turistico   situated in the North-West of the Provincia Autonoma of Trento, on the border with the Lombardia Region: from a geographic point of view this area consists of the river Noce valley and the tributaries valleys; the altitude of the valley goes from around 700 metres to over 3.000 meters in the highest peaks (Cevedale, Punta San Matteo), but most of urban settlement is located in the valley floor (Peio paese, 1584 metres on the see level, is the municipality seat at the higher altitude).

The Noce river and the woods sloping from the peaks included into the Parco Nazionale dello Stelvio and the National park of Adamello Brenta represent the basic natural environment elements; traditional landscape includes also cultivated field (mostly wine yard and apple orchards) whereas after the second world war a diffuse urbanisation along the main transport routes (the SS42 and the railway Trento-Malè) created a linear establishment which ties modern building and ancient boroughs.

The tourism industry in Val di Sole moved the first steps in the XIX century, thanks to the presence of thermal springs in the localities of Peio and Rabbi; at the end of the century, the valley was discovered by some of the most known European climbers (among them Douglas William Freshfield), and in the following decades, according to a pattern shared by most of the alpine tourism resorts, settlements and services for summer staying and for white sports increased, acquiring notoriety among the destinations of the Trento Province.

The Val di Sole white tourism supply gained growing success at national and international level, becoming the most important economic sector of the valley and stimulating the build of sky resorts in the municipality of Mezzana (Marilleva 400), and Peio (Peio Tarlenta), which today join the destinations network Dolomiti supersky.

Actually, since from the end of 70's, when the mass white tourism patterns displayed the first signals of crisis in the Val di Sole too (Martini, 2005), local communities became aware of the risks of soil and environment consumption brought by the growth of high mountain resorts, raised up on private corporates initiative, far from a real territorial integration; this turning point was set forth with a referendum held in the valley in 1977, rejecting the building of further high quote resorts (Mosca, 2009).

Today the tourist accommodation mainly consists of hotels, whose quality index is the
highest in the Province, thanks to the prevalence of four stars establishments; for what
concerns accommodation other than hotel, private apartments count for more than
10.000 beds.

The steady growth of the tourists flows registered during the last two decades has lead
the Valley to the third place in the provincial ranking by arrivals numbers, following the
Val di Fassa and the Garda Lake; the winter season 2013-2014 has shown an increase of
the arrivals, thanks to the foreign component, contrasting with the trend at provincial
level, while the number of travellers which have chosen this territory for the summer
holidays in 2014 has decreased, mainly because of the prolonged spell of bad whether
(in this case the Italian component is predominant).

For what concerns the local tourism supply contents, during the last three decades the
image of the valley has been reshaped as an ideal location for green tourism: the
environment of the Val di Sole, hence, offers a wide range of outdoor sports, suitable
for both experts and families (walking, trekking, river sports etc.).

The valley has strengthen its attractiveness for active holiday lovers also by hosting
international sports events (as the mountain bike world cup) and the summer training
camps of some of the most popular European soccer teams (Napoli in Dimaro, Bayern
Monaco in Peio).

The most ancient attraction of the valley, the thermalism, has maintained a key role in
consequence of a renewal, turning the old-fashioned therms into modern wellness
centres; furthermore, today many tourist establishments offer SPA services and joined
one of the two provincial product club concerning this theme, "Vita Nova e Trentino
Wellness" and "Trentino Charme", or both them.

More recently, historical heritage have been upgraded too: common goods as cultural
heritage, traditional events and typical food have become symbols of the valley quality
of life in a framework of a vacation experience based on relax, sustainability, discovery
of ancient values.

Furthermore, bike tourism represents a promising sector for a sustainable
enhancement of vacation industry in the valley, thanks to the build of the "Val di Sole"
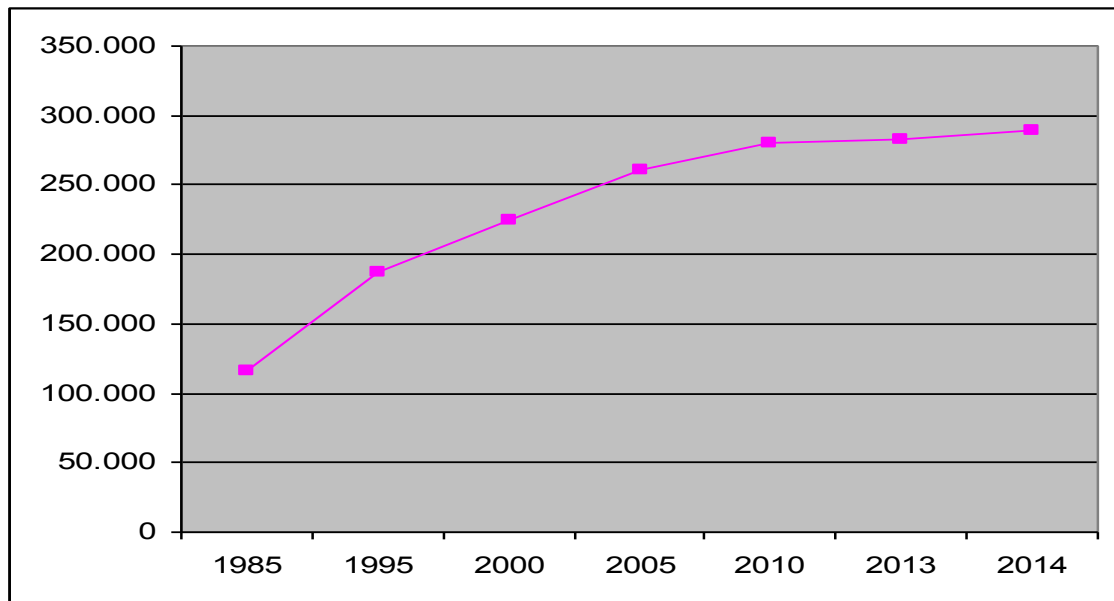bike route, part of the provincial network of bike paths.

Figure 1. Arrivals in Val di Sole - hotels (1985-2014)
Source: Servizio Statistica della Provincia autonoma di Trento, Annuario del Turismo 2014
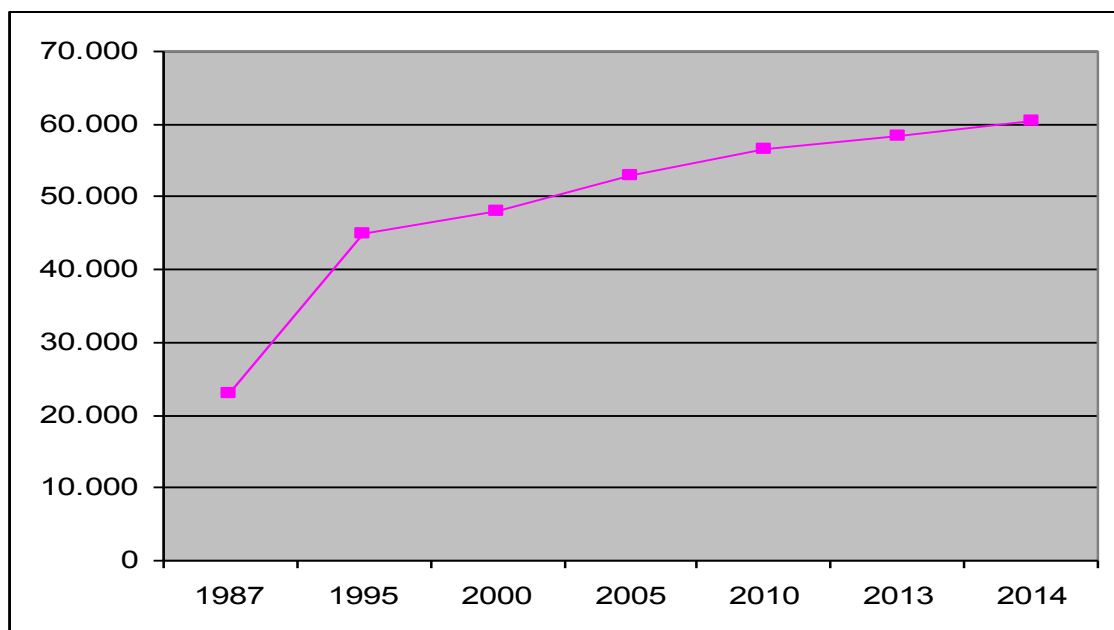

Figure 2. Arrivals in Val di Sole (other than hotels, 1987-2014)
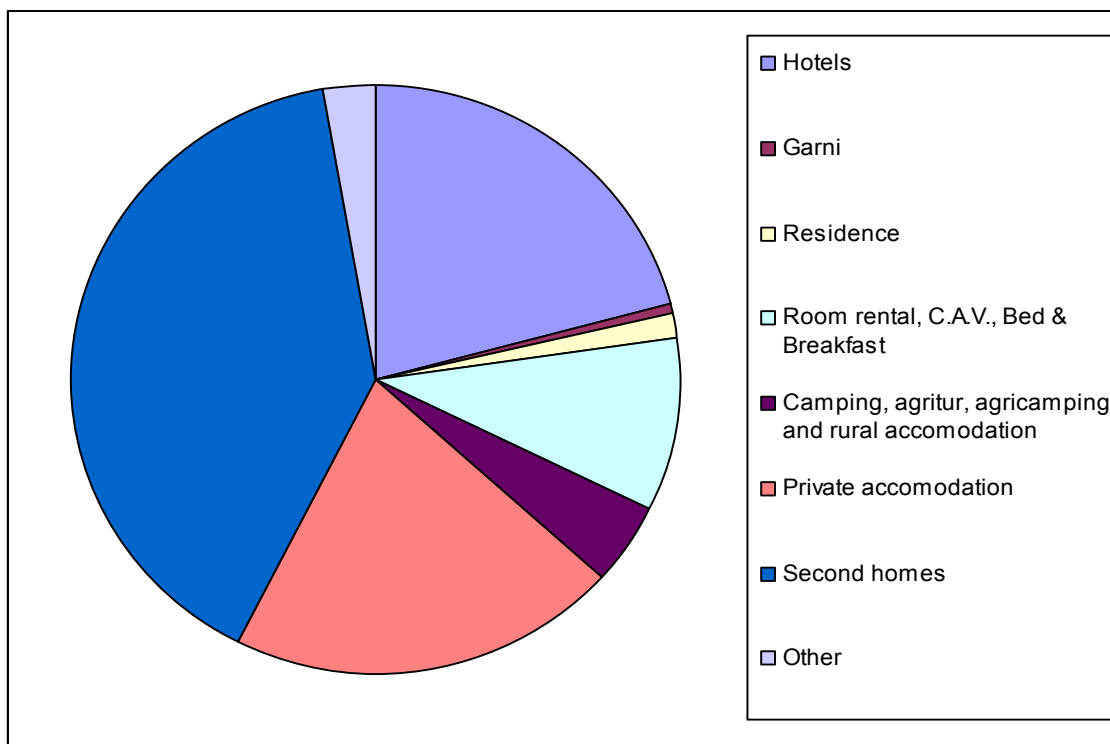*Source:* Servizio Statistica della Provincia autonoma di Trento, Annuario del Turismo 2014

Figure 3. tourism accommodation in Val di Sole (number of beds, 2014)
Source: Servizio Statistica della Provincia autonoma di Trento, Annuario del Turismo 2014

The discovery of this new vocations of the Valley has been based on long term branding policies carried out by the local APT (Azienda di Promozione turistica), underpinned by local administrations, economic agents and inhabitants.

The contents of the Val di Sole destination brand is based on values like natural environment and relax activities, as recalled by the pay-off "Un oasi verde nel Trentino" ("A green oasis in Trentino").

Figure 4. The logo of the brand "Val di Sole"
Source: website of the Apt Val di Sole, url: http://www.valdisole.net

This approach seems coherent with the rise up of "placefulness", as one of the core element in mountain destination branding enhanced by many European private corporation, a concept stemming from the notion of *sense of place* which consists in

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emphasizing local heritage heterogeneity as a value, thus presenting a tourism area as a four season destination (Williams et al. 2004).

For what concerns the operative aspects, the APT is the subject charged of planning and coordinating the destination branding policies, as well as the main aspects of destination management and territorial marketing in the area of the valley.

The APT acts in a closer coordination with institutions at provincial and municipal level (the regional agency for tourism *Trentino Sviluppo*, the Province of Trento, the municipalities of the valley, the Comunità di valle) and with the involvement of private sector, represented by single economic agents or by trade associations or other collective subjects (Pro Loco, associations for the promotion of cultural heritage etc.).

The APT therefore looks after the main aspects of branding policies, including coordinating the stakeholder, defining brand's contents, planning and carrying out advertising and public relations, evaluating the results of each marketing campaign and, if necessary, correcting weaknesses and mistakes.

The branding policies are part of an annual promotional plan, realized thanks to the financial and logistic support of economical agents by subscribing services packages (advertisement in the seasonal supply catalogues and in the web portal; participation to exhibition and tours; support in dealing with tourism professionals and in realizing their own advertising etc.).

To promote the valley brand, the APT coordinates the participation to fairs, workshops, press tours at both national and international level; edits and broadcast paper and web advertisement; represents the tourism system towards public bodies, private associations and enterprises; realizes events that can enhance the tourism image of the area; takes part to the branding policies developed at the provincial level by Trentino Sviluppo.

Actually, the Val di Sole destination branding policies are conceived according to a concentric model, which comprehends:

- a provincial level, taking part to the provincial initiatives which promotes the Province of Trento as a whole, but giving also a huge space to local excellences;
- a valley level, promoting the "Val di Sole" destination;
- a local level, in consequence of the creation of second-level brand.

Actually, over the last year some second level destination brands have been enhanced by local tourism boards, in the framework of a separate marketing activity.

The sub-level brands have been conceived more or less independently from the valley brand, in terms of visual and communicative aspects (logo, pay off) and from the side of management: in the case of the *Consorzio Dimaro-Folgarida Vacanze*, for instance, it is limited to enforcing the peculiar identity of the destination in the frame work of activities realized with the partnership of the APT, while in the Rabbi Valley a cooperative society (the *Rabbi vacanze*) has been established to enhance marketing campaigns collaterally to the APT activities.

The most sound attempt to carry on an independent branding policy, though integrated into the valley marketing plan, is being experimented by the Val di Peio by

the Consorzio Turistico Pejo 3000, in collaboration with the national Park of the Stelvio and other local institutions and associations, realizing an internet portal and an information point located in the centre of Cogolo, the main locality of the Val di Peio.

To appraise the effectiveness of the branding initiatives described above we can refer to the annual customer satisfaction survey promoted by the Provincial tourism Observatory, which confirms that more than 50% of the winter tourists choose the Val di Sole to enjoy an "active holiday" devoted to winter sports (sky and snowboard), whereas just 20% prefer an active holiday spent in other activities; the winter travellers who don't play sports (Italians in majority) spend their time in relaxation and spa services (45%)[*].

In the case of summer season, the survey revealed that natural environment (with a particular appreciation for the the Stelvio and the Adamello Brenta national parks) and relaxation are the most attractive pull factors.

Just 30% of the sample survey is represented by new-comers, thus revealing an high level of fidelization; furthermore, only one third of the interviewed takes into consideration other destinations in choosing the journey location and the preference for the valley has been based mostly on parents or friend advice, even if the contents of the tourism campaigns are deemed favourably, as well as the effectiveness of the activities by the local Apt.

In our opinion, the coherence between the tourist behaviours and the branding policies distinguishing contents represents a success factor of the latter for what concerns markets segmentation and the brand image effectiveness, while the high degree of satisfaction stated by the travellers can be deemed as the consequence of the initiatives carried out to strengthen the brand equity.

The local branding system is also supposed to give a contribution to the good tourism performance of the valley, as shown by the positive trend in the arrivals and the length of stay, which in the last winter season amounted to about six day, longer than the average value registered in the other tourism areas of the Province.

Conclusions

In this contribution we had tried to describe some of the greater difficulties emerging in branding medium mountain destinations: the in-betwennes of these territories, their various and sometime not clearly defined identity, the interaction among different socio-economic processes represent critical issues which require to focus on all the elements which can build the destination core brand.

A recently developed field of study has thus shown that "causal attributions mediate the affective experience–brand attachment relation", underlining that the consumer attachment towards destination brands mostly relies on both the positive emotions arisen from the visit and the perception of a strong link between places and the respective brands (Orth et al. 2012); moreover, the branding policies has to take into consideration that the brand loyalty usually relies on the brand trust, which is, on its

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[*] The customer survey promoted by the Apt allows 2 responses.

turn, the effect of the brand knowledge as the encounter between the brand image and the brand awareness (Hsu, Cai 2009).

Such considerations emphasize the importance of both subjective and objective elements in planning and managing a destination brand: actually, the physical aspects may show the effects of past and contemporary socio-economical phenomenons, but the authentic place identity can be discovered only after a in-depht analysis of immaterial elements referred to traditions, social relationships etc., involving the subjectivity of the researcher.

We thus propose to retrieve the original meaning of the concept of in-betwennes as theorized by Entrikin, who states that "to understand place requires that we have access to both an objective and a subjective reality. From the decentered vantage point of the theoretical scientist, place becomes either location or a set of generic relations and loses much of its significance for human action. From the centered viewpoint of the subjective self, place has meaning only in relation to one's own goals and concerns. Place is best viewed from points in-between" (Entrikin, cit., p.5).

When referring to the second meaning of the conceptual category of inbetweenness, conceived by the territorial scientists to describe cross-border and liminal spaces, successful destination branding policies are to be based on both material and immaterial elements, as shown by the case of the Val di Sole.

The destination branding system of the Valle di Sole could hence represent a best practice in terms of flexibility and integration with local communities, thanks to his concentric structure which comprehends an upper level (the participation to branding activities enhanced by Trentino Sviluppo), a medium level (the branding policies implemented by the APT to promote the valley as a whole), a local level (with the adoption of sub brands). This model, seems also to fit with the relational approach prevailing in latest destination branding theorizations, mixing coordination and autonomy of territorial different subjects, and probably gave a significant contribution to get the positive tourism performance of the valley over last years.

However, we argue that the concentric architecture of destination branding in the Val di sole stems from those traditional autonomy and well-citizenship which are typical of many of the Alps internal valleys, as consequence of their environmental features and their historical path, allowing to the coexistence of different actors in the field of destination branding without succumbing to parochialism.

Furthermore, we must consider that in the Province of Trento tourism is not only an important economic sector but it's also part of the local identity (Leonardi, 2006), whereas in other medium mountain areas, and particularly in the Apennines, a general scepticism about the potentialities of tourism is still prevailing.

Yet research evidence shows that medium mountain areas are often affected by elements of weaknesses which represent a long term threat for environment, economic development and for the same survive of local communities against ageing and depopulation.

Maybe the growth of tourism can't represent the solutions for all of these difficulties, but undoubtedly a better knowledge of the territorial features, the increase of services supply, the conservation and the enhancement of local heritage and all the other

actions required to foster tourism could give a contribution to better the quality of life for temporary and permanent residents.

Nevertheless, in the case of in-between territories the development of responsible and sustainable tourism could hardly be attained without the implementation of in-depth and accurate branding policies based on a balanced and shared destination management spatial model.

The aim of this essay is thus to highlight the risks, but also the potentialities in branding in-between territories, as medium mountains are supposed to be, and stimulate further contributions by the applications of cultural studies to the destination branding process.

Nowadays, both management studies and social disciplines have to deal with the lack of qualitative sources, in view of the increasing availability of statistical data about the tourism performance (Petite, 2015).

A better, updated knowledge, of the local identity of in-between places could be achieved, for instance, through surveys on the identity perception by tourists and locals, historical and geographical researches, dialogue groups among the residents, bringing the goals of tourism enhancement together with the needs of local development.

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