

DESTINATION IMAGE REVISITED

The interplay of perceptions, immigration, and travel propensity

A RESEARCH NOTE

By

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The research was commissioned by Stenden University as part of its educational vision that resides in contributing to a better world. It was thus conceived as a strategy to strengthening existing ties between the Netherlands and Morocco through tourism (2007-2008) www.stenden.com.

ABSTRACT

The importance of studying and understanding destination image from a cross-cultural perspective seems more relevant today than ever before. The dynamics of immigration, perceptions and stereotypes offers a platform for discussion on current issues in tourism. Perceptions are fundamental in tourist decisions and are crucial in the formation of destination image and branding. The purpose of this research was to assess the perceptions that the Dutch potential tourists have of Morocco as a tourism destination and to examine how these affect destination image and travel propensity. Although Morocco's important tangible tourism attributes are positively perceived, the overwhelming negative perceptions and stereotypes of (a) the Dutch Moroccan community and (b) the Moroccan people seem to be uninviting perceptual borders, negatively affecting the Dutch travel propensity to Morocco. To change perceptions and correct misconceptions, it is important to deliver and communicate the bundle of subjective attributes that are valued by the target market. The realities of the 21st Century, including the enlargement of the EU, continued instability in the Middle East, international terrorism, home-grown terror, Iraq war, war in Afghanistan, world poverty, epidemics, natural disasters, ethnic cleansing and other types of conflict beg for the study of destination image to be revisited.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that the reputation of the Moroccan people does not do justice to the rich cultural and natural heritage of the nation, and specifically to its progressive social-political achievements. In the midst of the challenges of the new Millennium, a need for *intellectual* nation branding, including its peoples is needed for enhancing Morocco's reputation as a nation and a people, as well as for promoting the country as an inviting and competitive tourism destination.

BACKGROUND

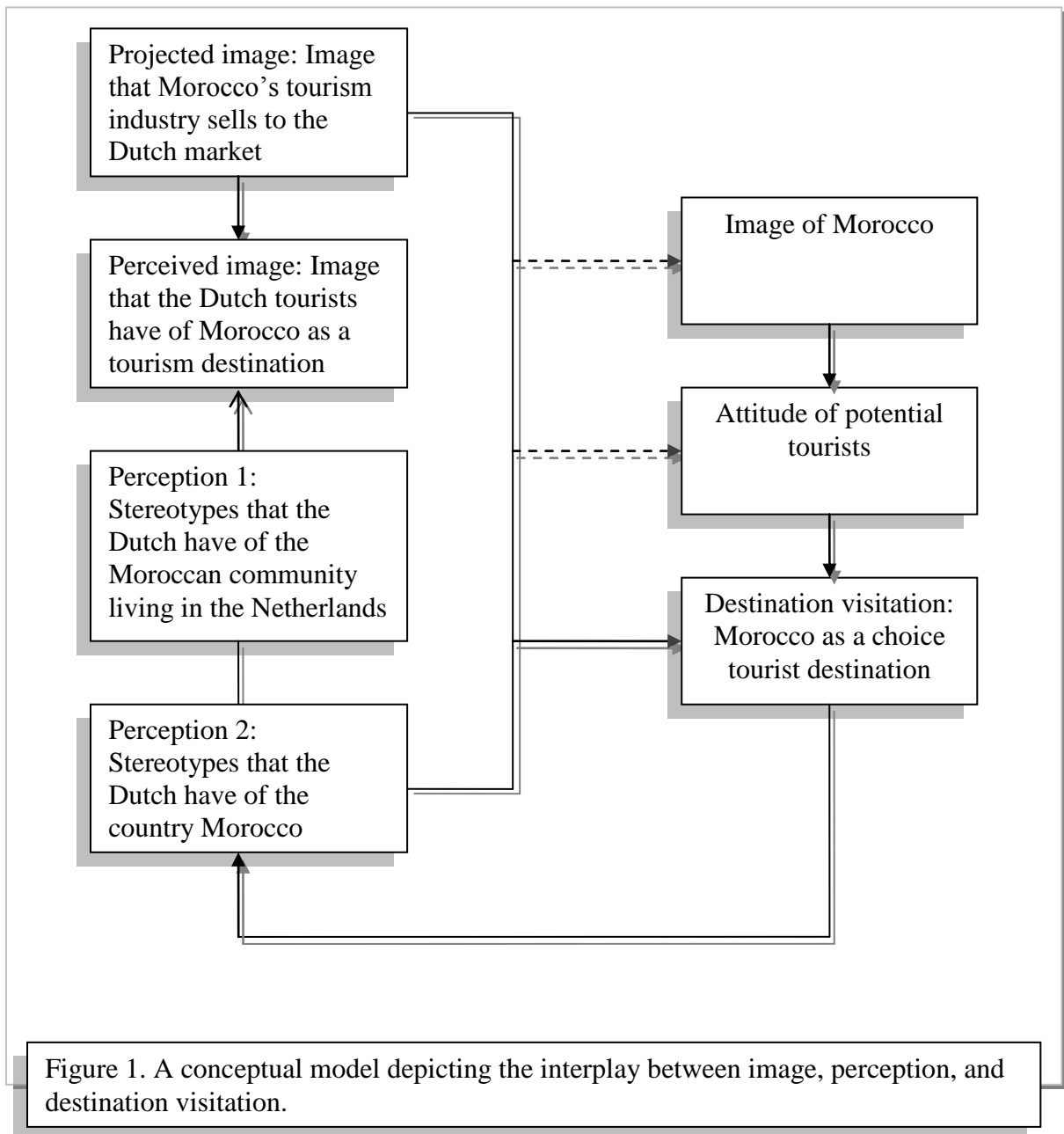
In an overcommunicated society (Ries and Trout 2001: 3), a troubled 21st century, and a very crowded tourism market place (Morgan and Pritchard 2004) where the lion's share of tourism receipts goes to the top five destinations (WTO 2005), and where emerging tourism destinations are growing strong, low brand or no brand destinations face bigger challenges to create a positive and strong image (Kotler and Gertner 2004). Images are based on perceptions (Reich 1999). A clear understanding of tourist perceptions is crucial for developing a sustainable tourism industry and for developing successful positioning strategies (Sonmez and Sirakaya 2002; Reich 1999). The decision to travel comes from a perception. Negative perceptions and misconceptions affect the propensity to travel. A

critical component in destination positioning is the determination of what tourists will desire in the near and long future. Perceptions help to understand the target market and will play a major role in determining the most effective position of the destination in the market place (Reich 1999). This research was set to assess the image of Morocco as a tourism destination for the Dutch market using the conceptual model developed by the author (Figure 1), where immigration and perceptions interact to shape destination visitation.

The persons who have immigrated to the Netherlands for one reason or another, and those who were born from a parent or both parents coming from abroad are called "allochtonen". In 2015 they are projected to represent 15% of the Dutch population (Schnabel 2002). Numbering 315,000, in 2005, the Moroccans constitute the third largest allochtonen-non-western- community in the Netherlands, after the Surinamese (328,000) and the Turkish (358,000) (Statistical Yearbook 2005). According to the Dutch media, the Dutch-Moroccans are generally perceived to be the least integrated community in the Netherlands. Long before September 11, the assassination of Pim Fortuyn and the murder of Theo van Gogh (Jaarrapport Integratie 2005), the integration of the Dutch-Moroccans in the Netherlands has been perceived by many Dutch people, also known as "autochtonen" or "native Dutch", as a "multicultural drama" (Scheffer 2002). Criminality, unemployment, dependence on social welfare, and school dropouts have been used by the Dutch media as direct proxies for measuring integration in the Dutch society. For example, in 2004, the total percentage of the unemployed labor force in the Netherlands represents 6.4%. For the native Dutch it is 5.2%, and for the Moroccans it reached 22.3%, marking the largest percentage of the unemployed labor force in the country (Statistical Yearbook 2005). In 2003, about 1.6 million of persons aged 15-64 were enrolled for disablement benefit, unemployment benefit, or income support. While this number constitutes 14.4% of the represented population, it is about 28% for the Moroccan population, second highest after Turkey (29%) (Statistical Yearbook 2005). These proxies, with other factors/indicators related to religious and socio-cultural values contribute to the shaping of perceptions and stereotypes that the Dutch have formed about the Moroccan community living in the Netherlands. It has been acknowledged that "the tourist image is only one aspect of a country's general image" (Sonmez and Sirakaya 2002: 188).

On this background, as the world becomes more globalized and cultures interact continuously (Sonmez and Sirakaya 2002), the author of the present study postulates that if the host country (the Netherlands) perceives the immigrant population (the Moroccans living in the Netherlands) positively, tourists from the host country (native Dutch) will also perceive the country of origin of the immigrant community (Morocco) positively and consequently visit

the country (Morocco). A negative perception will detract the native Dutch tourists from visiting Morocco.

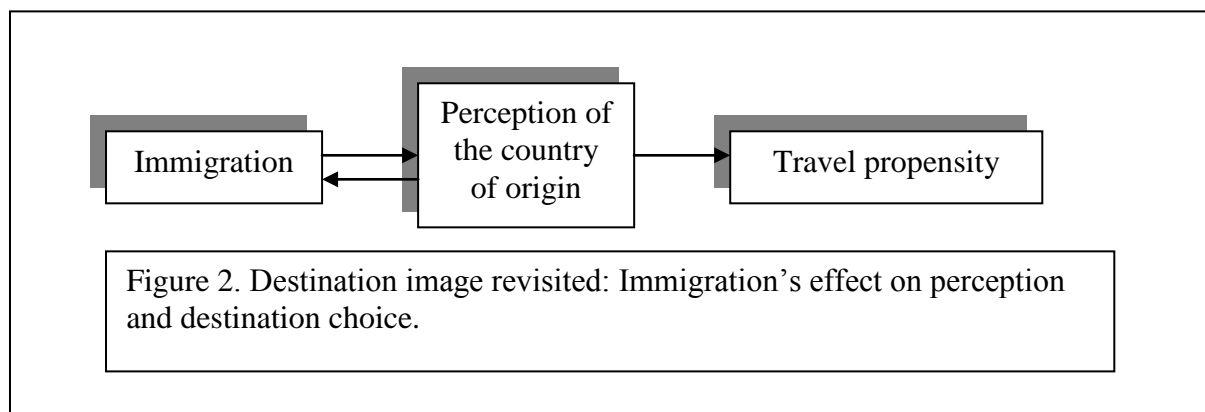


OBJECTIVES

Accordingly, the objectives of this study were: (1) to assess the image that the Dutch have of the Moroccan community living in the Netherlands, (2) to assess the image that the Dutch have of the country Morocco, (3) to assess the projected image of Morocco as a tourism destination for the Dutch tourist and compare it with the perceived image. The complexity of the theoretical relationship is depicted in the proposed conceptual model.

A BRIEF DISCUSSION

In summary, there is a need to (a) intellectualize Morocco's tourism communication, (b) romanticize Morocco's marketing campaigns, (c) shift from destination selling to destination branding, and (d) deliver the bundle of the intangible attributes that are valued by the target market. In a highly competitive and dynamic global tourism environment, there is a need to develop a clear identity based on emotions. There is a need to concentrate on conveying the essence or the spirit of Morocco to change existing perceptions and misconceptions of the country and its people. To conclude, based on our research and the 21st century's realities, e.g. disparity between the haves and the have nots, terrorism, fundamentalism, civil unrest, prejudice, discrimination, and home-grown terror, it becomes difficult to dissociate immigration from travel propensity and destination choice. It is also myopic to assume that immigration does not mirror, justly or unjustly, both the immigrants' receiving country and the immigrants' generating country (Figure 2). We thus propose that for tourism to grow in a dominantly Islamic developing country there is a need to supplement tourism pictures with words of wisdom, accountability and transparency. If, as has been supported, the new tourist is more demanding, perhaps s/he has also become more critical and concerned. And Morocco's tourism can use, promote, and benefit from the country's emerging progressive policies and social-cultural changes.



This means, there is more to tourism than to promote tourism. There is a need for nation branding. The promotion of tourism is only a part of the whole (Anhol, 2004). The willingness of tourists to visit a destination is determined by the (real or unreal) borders that lie between the destination and country of origin. According to Timothy and Tosun, there are two borders that keep people out of a country: real borders (e.g. visa requirements) and the perceptual borders that are felt by a person (e.g. extent of cultural similarities between both destinations). Important perceptual borders in a borderless communication century are

negative perceptions and stereotypes. In the Moroccan context and within glocal changing political, economic, social, technological and environmental environments, these borders may be seen not as a weakness but as an opportunity. For tourism to grow, policymakers would have to deliver and communicate the bundle of subjective attributes (socio-political progresses) that are valued by the target market. In abstract terms, since there are (almost) no laws in cross-cultural hospitality, hospitality must constantly be renegotiated (Rosello, 2001) and so must the image of a destination. Destination images are influenced by traditional attributes, but also by how the people (nationals) are perceived by the target market. Perceptions are important because they can help to predict travel propensity, destination choice, host/guest encounters, and cross-cultural understanding. More importantly, however, is that they can be detected and corrected (Reisinger and Turner, 2003). Perceptions can be corrected, and misconceptions overcome, through 'people branding, a concept proposed in the upcoming discussion. The nation brand is the sum of the perceptions of the country and its people (The Anhot Nation Brands Index, 2006).

People branding

Most recently, tourism marketers have used the concept of branding to sharpen the images of destinations, countries, cities, or even places. Market conditions, influenced by bad news, global or local crises, present a challenge even to the most winning brands. Thus, 'even the most successful brands have to evolve' (Morgan and Pritchard, 2004). On the other hand, good news presents an opportunity even to the least successful brands, to communicate messages about identity, culture, and social-economic achievements. In the context of the interplay of immigration, 'hospitality', tourism, and social or asocial encounters between immigrants and natives, there seems to be an urgent need for 'people branding' ('people' is also a factor in Simon Anholt's brand hexagon). Morocco is perceived positively as a tourism destination. Its traditional tourism attributes –e.g. sea, sun, imperial cities, colours and spices – are appreciated by the potential Dutch tourist. However, 'Blue skies and golden sands or snow-capped mountains are only a tiny part of the reality of a country' (The Anholt Nation Brands Index, 2006: 3).

On the other hand, the image of Morocco as a country is lagging behind, because it is perceived as economically poor, and socially disabled. The opportunity for the country to positively reposition itself in the mind of the potential tourist lies in its most recent socio-political achievements, and the ones that are planned ahead. These need to be better communicated by the country's public relations, and the other media venues. Marketers need

to shift from destination selling to destination marketing. Communicating Morocco's achievements will support the existing advertising campaigns, and add value to the country's image.

Like brands, people do evolve as well. Like brands, people, too, are challenged by bad news and local or global crises. In an attempt to address negative perceptions, people branding suggests a balance between reality and perceptions. How people are is not necessarily how they are being perceived. People branding starts with asking the simple and yet complex and intriguing questions: who am I, how am I perceived by others, and what can help me achieve the most desirable position in the minds of others? Answers to these questions may help reduce perceptual borders, change perceptions, and correct misconceptions. In the Morocco case, for a successful people branding, there is a need for an integrated communication between the industry, marketers, politicians, policy makers, behavioural scientists, the media, and the local communities. Their respective perspectives and related recommendations can help answer the people branding questions, thereby, contributing to a successful tourism positioning. Successful tourism positioning can happen when the traditional attributes of a destination are positively perceived, and the social-political progresses well communicated, adequately transmitted, and well received by the target market. It is important to emphasize that 'I [also] find it inconceivable that any country can change the way the world views it as a whole purely through marketing communications and forms of deliberate propaganda' (The Anholt Nation Brands Index, 2006: 3). Hence, to change negative feelings and to influence the country's reputation in a positive and sustainable direction, there is a need for good governance based on objectivity and transparency. 'Regardless of how many good things a country has to offer, these will be wasted if the target group does not see, hear or experience them' [Secretariat Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs (SMEBA: *Proactive global promotion of Denmark*, 2006: 6)].

People branding contributes to the branding of the whole nation. "Nation branding' is basically a matter of building, refining and maintaining a country or nation's reputation (....) A reputation cannot be constructed: it has to be *earned*' (The Anholt Nation Brands Index, 2006: 6) and it must reflect reality as well; for a 'reputation that is not grounded in reality will not be credible, and the target group will see through it sooner or later, after which more harm than good will have been done' (SMEBA, 2006: 6).

In addition, people branding is proposed as a factor that can help to reduce the tension of culture unrest. Culture unrest has been defined as a context where two communities live together but where harmony between them is lacking or minimized. As the contexts of immigration are changing, the rules of hospitality in immigration necessitate

adjustments as well. The metaphor of the immigrant as a guest (Rosello, 2001) does not apply to the new realities of the world we live in. The reality is that culture unrest is a combination of perceptions, reality, and failed policies. These and similar factors generate xenophobic actions and reactions, animosity, or even racism.

As has been empirically verified, the reputation of the Moroccans living in the Netherlands is far from good. All other things being equal, of course, it is needless to argue that both the native Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch (or Dutch-Moroccan) communities have a share in the building of culture unrest in the Netherlands. In the context of people branding, from the perspective of the Moroccan community living in the Netherlands, there is the belief that culture unrest may change into culture understanding and appreciation when the reputation of this community is adjusted, rejuvenated, and enhanced. A good reputation gives the owner a number of tangible advantages, including competitive advantage, sound relations with others, sound business reputation, positive influence on others, increased investment, enhanced tourism, enhanced partner cooperation, significant political resource, international negotiations, filling top international posts and an appreciation of the country's nationals when they travel to other countries (SMEBA, 2006). In the case of the Dutch-Moroccans, a good and credible reputation will also enhance, adjust, and rejuvenate their image in Dutch society as well as outside its border. The body is beautiful and the soul is healthier but not adequately communicated in tourism...



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