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Assessing residents' perception for a sustainable co-creation of brand identity in regional destinations

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Abstract

Tourist destinations worldwide have started to pay particular attention to the creation of territorial brands to communicate their identity values to visitors and to differentiate their areas from their competitors. In the academic debate, it is claimed that brand creation needs to be achieved through an integrated and sustainable decision-making process that includes the numerous stakeholders that may be involved in a particular destination. Among the various stakeholders, residents are certainly essential to be considered when it comes to building durable and effective destination brands and sustainable development strategies. Although the importance of residents in place branding has been acknowledged in the literature, there is still a lack of conceptual and empirical research regarding their role in the brand creation process and on their perceptions of the brand identity elements that should be conveyed. The main aim of this study is to address this gap by proposing a conceptual framework that will serve to assess residents' perception of their own destination identity during the brand development process. This framework is tested empirically in the area of Alto Piemonte and perceptions of residents are assessed with an online questionnaire. Thus, the study provides both conceptual reflections that can be used for teaching and research purposes, as well as empirical evidence that enable to conduct similar investigations in other geographical areas.

Keywords: Brand Identity, Local Community, Place Branding, Regional Destinations, Residents' Perceptions, Sustainable Co-Creation

1. Introduction

During the past few decades, there has been a strengthening of interest by Destination management organisations (DMOs) in creating destination brands as a means of achieving differentiation and identification of a particular geographical area.

According to Qu et al. (2011), place branding can be defined as a way to communicate a destination's unique identity and differentiate it from its competitors. They underline that a destination brand has two critical functions: differentiation and identification (Qu et al., 2011). Identification in place branding is not an easy task, foremost because places are not

physical products, but rather an amalgam of material (e.g. monuments, landscapes, museums, etc.) and non-material elements (culture, traditions, history, etc.) (Florek, 2005). Secondly, multiple destinations worldwide are opening up to and investing in tourism, considering its potential contribution to the territorial development of a place. According to the World Tourism Organisation (2019), the tourism industry is witnessing decades of persistent growth that makes it one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world. This means that successful destinations must be able to emerge within an extremely competitive market. As a result, numerous DMOs are pointing at the creation of territorial brands in order to build emotional brand connections with their tourists and increase recognition (Huang et al., 2017).

Different authors have claimed that brand creation needs to be achieved through an integrated and sustainable approach that fosters an inclusive decision-making process. This means that the process of brand creation needs to include the numerous stakeholders that may be involved in a destination (Easterling, 2004; Braun et al., 2013; Ribeiro et al., 2017). In particular, this paper focuses on residents, since residents' attitudes and perspectives are directly related to successful tourism destinations and they are therefore essential to be considered when it comes to building sustainable destination brands and development strategies (Sharpley, 2014; Martín et al., 2018).

This study proposes a conceptual framework that serves to investigate residents' perception of their own destination identity during the brand development process. The research has been undertaken in Alto Piemonte, a sub-regional destination located within Piedmont Region, in north-west Italy. The constitution of the Alto Piemonte Promotion Committee in 2015, subsequently became DMO Alto Piemonte Turismo in 2017, started a process for the creation of a new integrated brand for the area, which wanted to involve its residents since the very first steps. In accordance with the Alto Piemonte DMO, a structured, self-administered online questionnaire was designed to gather the data for the study, subsequently processed by using the statistical software SPSS 23.

The study is conceived to provide an interpretative frame and a methodological approach to assess residents' perception for a sustainable co-creation of brand identity in regional destinations. This conceptual framework can be used theoretically for teaching and research purposes, as well as empirically in order to conduct similar investigations in other geographical areas.

2. Residents involvement in place branding

As destinations worldwide are facing fierce competition in attracting visitors, place branding strategies are becoming key in order to increase differentiation and recognisability. In fact, according to Kaplan et al. (2010, p. 1289) "place branding refers to the practice of applying appropriate marketing strategies in order to differentiate cities, regions, and countries from the competition". Mosca et al. (2016, p. 34) also defined place branding "as a technique to create and develop the positioning of places at different geographical scales".

In recent years, place branding has become an extremely important topic that has increasingly attracted the attention of many researchers and practitioners (Konecnik and Go, 2008; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013; Vanolo, 2017). Place branding has its theoretical roots in the principles of brand management, initially developed exclusively for products. However, building and managing place brands differs from building and managing product or service brands (Hankinson, 2007; Konecnik and De Chernatony, 2013). As highlighted by Hankinson (2007), the main challenge that destination managers need to address concerns a large number of stakeholders. In fact, different public and private actors can influence the branding process, leading to difficulties for destination managers in controlling the whole process. Thus, the different views of local stakeholders need to be considered, since branding messages can be potentially in contrast with the aspirations and feelings of local actors (Vanolo, 2017).

Buhalis (2000) identified six main groups of stakeholders that need to be taken into

consideration: 1) the public sector and government; 2) tourism enterprises and SME's; 3) tour operators; 4) residents; 5) tourists; 6) environmental groups, cultural groups, etc.

Klijn et al. (2012) found that the complex interdependencies among actors and the complex nature of the decision-making process imply that stakeholders need to be included if governance processes such as place branding are to be successful. This is because “those actors often have different perceptions about the place to be branded, the desirable solutions to problems and different ideas about the desirable image to be communicated. We may expect multiple interpretations of the brand or even contestation if the image contains elements that are up for dispute” (Klijn et al., 2012, p. 504). In fact, these actors have their own interests, benefits, and responsibilities regarding a place, and often have opposing ideas (Konecnik and Petek, 2012). It has been posited that place branding strategies that engage local stakeholders are likely to be effective, while those that ignore their viewpoints are highly likely to fail (Houghton and Stevens, 2011).

Although recent literature emphasizes the significant roles of diverse stakeholders, the majority of previous studies on place branding narrowly discussed the matter from the perspective of tourists (Konecnik and De Chernatony, 2013). On the other hand, little attention has been paid from the viewpoint of internal stakeholders. As stated by Konecnik and De Chernatony (2013), internal stakeholders have a major impact on the way enacting the place branding promise occurs, therefore any model of place brand identity needs to encapsulate the contributions of internal stakeholders and should portray the place's unique characteristics as well as contribute to any strategic marketing. They also highlight that ideally, internal stakeholders should be involved in both the brand development process and its implementation.

In fact, place brands stem from a place's identity, and place branding is an interactive process of identity construction involving a dialogue between stakeholders (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). Thus, place branding should be seen as a collective phenomenon in which all the

stakeholders should commit to the same brand and work together to deliver a coherent image (Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009).

Among internal stakeholders, the literature stresses the pivotal role of local residents. Over the past decade, several authors have agreed on the idea that investigating the perceptions of residents is critical, as they play different and significant roles that can affect the destination brand (Easterling, 2004; Kavaratzis, 2012; Braun et al., 2013; Zenker and Erfgen, 2014; Woosnam et al., 2016; Ribeiro et al., 2017).

Braun et al. (2013) highlighted three fundamental roles that residents can fulfil:

- (1) Residents are able to positively or negatively influence tourists' perceptions of a place, and their relationship with visitors is crucial to the tourist experience and destination image formation in the minds of tourists. This goes beyond the visitor-friendly behaviour, as the current residents also send messages to all other target groups about the place's core values (Zenker and Erfgen, 2014).
- (2) Residents can act as brand ambassadors and place brand communicators if the local community identifies itself with the image conveyed in the brand. As also confirmed by Zenker and Erfgen (2014, p. 227) “destination managers should acknowledge this role and aim to strengthen civic pride and the residents' sense of belonging. If handled well, this approach can become a very powerful word-of-mouth tool for strengthening and communicating the place brand”. Residents' word-of-mouth communication can be even more effective than a conventional brand campaign, as residents' opinions are usually considered more authentic and trustworthy. Armkvist and Hellström (2014, p. 9) argue that this aspect is critical because if the local community does not approve of the image communicated, “not only might they not function as good brand ambassadors, they might even actively resist the campaign and in worst case launch counter-campaigns”.
- (3) Consequently, residents have another important role, i.e. the power to approve or disapprove of the whole place branding

process. Hence, the perceptions that residents have of their region as a destination is a fundamental issue when it comes to building a positive brand image from the visitors' perspective (Agapito et al., 2010).

These assumptions highlight the necessity of resident involvement in the place branding process of a tourist destination. According to Eshuis and Klijn (2012, p. 151), "stakeholders feel more committed and loyal to a brand if they have been involved in the construction of the brand because during their involvement they can influence the content of the brand". They also emphasize that the most effective form of stakeholder involvement is when they "co-decide and co-produce the brand" (*ibidem*, p. 116).

In general, there is an urgent need to rethink the role of residents towards a more involvement-orientated practice (Kavaratzis, 2012), while acknowledging that residents are not a coherent group, but rather a multiplicity of groups that carry different expectations, needs, and perceptions (Zenker and Erfgen, 2014). Thus, assessing the different perceptions of residents is crucial in maintaining their support for tourism and a sustainable co-creation of the destination brand.

3. Assessing residents' perception of regional brand identity: a conceptual framework

In recent years, the concept of brand identity has received increasing attention in the tourism and geographical literature (Konecnik and Go, 2008; Wang and Chen, 2015). The processes of branding are, indeed, "geographical because they are entangled in inescapable spatial associations" (Pike, 2009, p. 619), and therefore territorial brands and brand identities cannot be considered "spaceless concepts" (Lee, 2002, p. 334). Also according to Andersson (2014, p. 143) place branding is "inherently geographical, since it is situated in and associated with spaces and places" and needs to be addressed in a multi-disciplinary research field.

Although several different definitions of brand identity have been given over the years, researchers unanimously agree that the concept of brand identity should be understood from the supply-side perspective (Konecnik and Go, 2008). In fact, brand identity characterizes the self-image and desired image of the market (Pike, 2002), and is created by private organizations or public administrations in accordance with how they want their brand to be perceived by tourists (Kapferer, 1998). A destination brand should, therefore, be considered from the senders' perspective as the projection of destination identity; and from the receivers' perspective as the image of a place (Florek et al., 2006). Since the positioning and communication of a brand need to be rooted in reality, brand identity is essential for the generalization of desirable characteristics projected from the supplier's perspective (Qu et al., 2011). According to Kapferer (1998, p. 71), assessing the characteristics and values of brand identity is vital for tourist destinations because "before knowing how we are perceived, we must know who we are". Thus, the destination and its internal stakeholders, rather than the visitors, are those who should define the regional brand and its content. As stated by Konecnik and Go (2008, p. 179), "a tourist destination is a complex concept, which is based on a myriad of different products, services and experiences, managed by different stakeholders [...] Within such context, a brand identity can serve as a network picture, which draws, in turn on historical, national and cultural relationships to develop a common view, which becomes the basis for joint action for / or against change". In this perspective, investigating residents' perceptions of their regional brand identity is fundamental in order to build successful and meaningful brands. Residents' perceptions should be taken into account from the very beginning of the brand development process. An inclusive process would, in fact, allow destination managers and planners to get the ultimate acceptance of residents, as well as their active commitment to tourism development (Easterling, 2004).

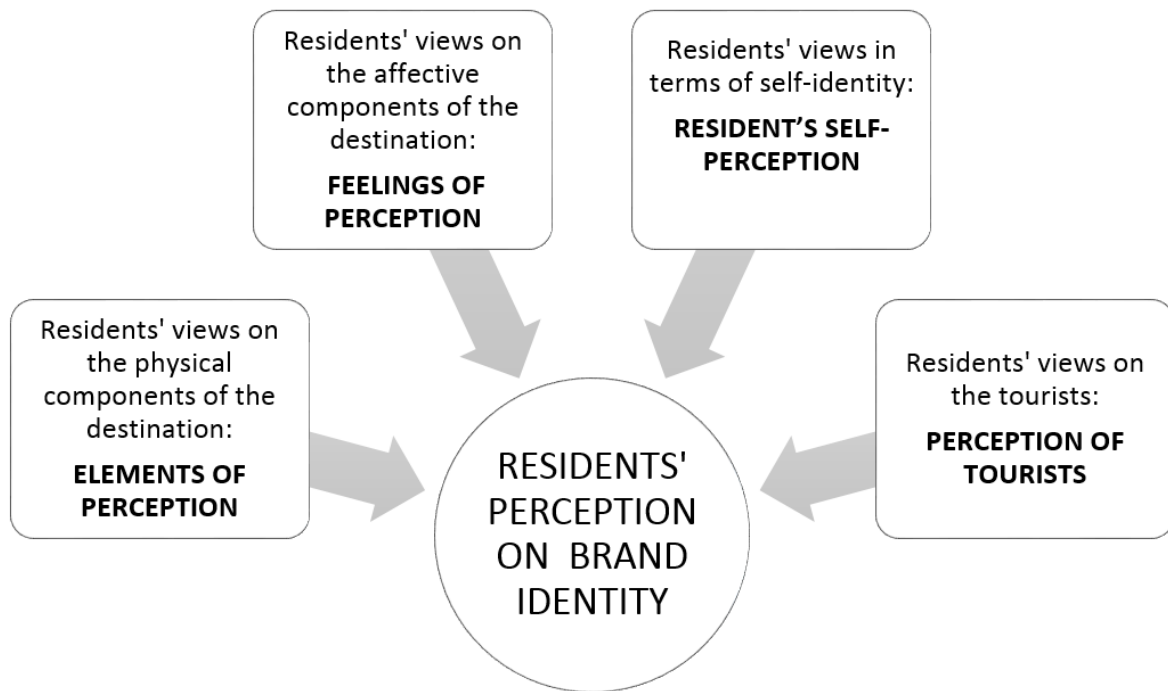


Figure 1. Conceptual framework: four components to assess residents' perception on destination brand identity. Source: Author's elaboration.

With this aim, this study proposes a conceptual framework that serves to investigate the overall residents' perception of their own brand identity, by using four components (Figure 1):

- (1) Physical attributes and cognitive components that residents relate to the destination (elements of perception);
- (2) Meaning, association and affective components (feelings of perception) that residents relate to the destination;
- (3) The perception that residents have of themselves (residents' self-perception);
- (4) The perception that residents have of tourists (residents' perception of tourists).

According to Wang and Xu (2015), place identity theories tend to suggest that the primary dynamism in influencing a resident's attitudes toward the destination brand may originate from his or her self-concept of the place. In other words, a destination's place identity is able to satisfy the residents only if its identity attributes are consistent with their personal values and views. Hence, for destination planners and

managers, one key to enhance tourism development "should be to allow residents to incorporate the place identity attributes into their own self-concepts so that residents' self-concept-related motives can provide a simple engine for their support for tourism development" (Wang and Xu, 2015, p. 241). Since the delivery of the brand promise stems from the local tourism community, the latter should feel that the destination brand is representing their "sense of place", which links to the concepts of values and identity (Wheeler et al., 2011). In fact, the concept of identity has been described by Stets and Biga (2003, p. 401) as "a set of meanings attached to the self that serves as a standard or reference that guides behaviour in situations". Bott et al. (2003) specify that place identity is constituted not only by the physical components but also by the meaning and association developed between people and place.

In the conceptual framework, the cognitive (elements of perception) and affective (feelings of perception) components have been borrowed from the destination image literature (Baloglu et al., 2014; Hosany et al., 2006). Since identity

and image are two strongly linked concepts, the destination image literature provides significant reflections that can also be applied to research on brand identity.

According to Baloglu et al. (2014), the overall image of a place can be seen as a multidimensional construct of two main dimensions, i.e. cognitive and affective evaluation. In cognitive evaluation, a destination is evaluated for the objective elements and attributes it offers, such as physical resources, natural environments, cultural heritage, activities and other resources and traditions (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017). In affective evaluation, a destination is evaluated by the feelings or affective qualities associated with it (Hosany et al., 2006). These two components have been widely accepted as influential indicators of destination image (Bott et al., 2003; Hosany et al., 2006; Qu et al., 2011; Baloglu et al., 2014; Wang and Xu, 2015; Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017), and can also be used to investigate the residents' perceived image of their own destination.

The third component included in this framework is the "resident's self-perception", i.e. the perception that residents have of themselves. Over the last decade, different authors have underlined the need to investigate the residents' views in terms of self-identity and self-perception (Gu and Ryan, 2008; Nunkoo and Gursoy, 2012; Palmer et al., 2013; Wang and Xu, 2015; Woosnam et al., 2018). This study takes into consideration resident's self-perception, based on self-perception theory – which is increasingly gaining momentum in the tourism literature – since it can offer an introspective framework to consider in explaining residents' perspectives of tourism within their community (Woosnam et al., 2018). In the tourism literature related to residents, it is also underlined that analysing the self-perception and personal value systems can be used to explain and better understand the resident's attitudes toward tourism development (Gu and Ryan, 2008; Wang and Chen, 2015). Gu and Ryan (2008), highlight that self-esteem (i.e. the positive evaluation of oneself or the group with which one identifies) and self-efficacy (i.e. an individual's belief in his or her capabilities to meet situational demands) can act as a

contributor to self-image and to their attitudes towards tourism development. In light of these previous studies, principles related to self-perception theory have been borrowed in our study in order to analyse the self-perception of residents, their personal evaluation and identification.

Lastly, the fourth component presented in the conceptual framework is the perception that residents have of tourists (residents' perception of tourists). Since the early 2000s, the academic literature has recognized the need to focus its attention and to further investigate on the issue of place identity by understanding residents' attitudes towards tourism (Pizam et al., 2000; Choo et al., 2011; Wang and Chen, 2015; Ribeiro et al., 2013). This study analyses the resident's perception on tourists, since it has been and still is considered key to understanding the residents' commitment to the regional brand and their potential influence. Indeed, within a brand creation process, residents can exert a major influence on tourists' interpretations of the destination brand, hence it is crucial to find out how residents recognize, understand, and identify not only the destination but also their attitudes towards tourists (Choo et al., 2011). It is important to maintain residents' positive attitudes toward tourists and tourism development, as friendly interactions between residents and tourists can strongly influence the visitor satisfaction with the destination (Pizam et al., 2000). Wang and Chen (2015) claimed that the nature and strength of residents' place identity, and attachment to community and surrounding landscape, may be important determinants of successful coexistence among residents and tourists. Based on this view, they also highlight how researching feelings and attitudes of residents should be able to assist tourism planners in selecting the types of developments, maximizing positive impacts and minimizing negative impacts on the host community (Wang and Chen, 2015).

The primary aim of the conceptual framework proposed in this paper is to assess the overall residents' perception of their own destination brand identity. Alongside, it is also important to investigate in-depth about the willingness of residents to develop tourism in their regions. In order to meet this further aim,

the research also analyses the perception of residents about their attitude towards tourism development and their attachment to the destination (Choo et al., 2011; Ribeiro et al., 2013). Choo et al. (2011) suggest that it is important to monitor and prevent residents' negative attitudes and perceptions towards tourism and visitors to maximize a destination's success in tourism. In fact, successful place branding is achievable only when local planners, policymakers and business operators consider the perceptions and attitudes of residents. Residents' attitudes towards tourism have been, in fact, widely studied in the past few decades with the aim of understanding their feelings about tourism development (Ribeiro et al., 2013). According to Ribeiro et al. (2013), the tourism industry is dependent on the hospitality of the local communities and, thus, it should be developed according to their needs and desires. They also claim that a favourable attitude by the host community is vital to the future success of a destination because it has a positive impact on visitors' satisfaction and loyalty (*ibidem*). Hence, residents' attitudes towards tourists and their perceptions about the impact of tourism on their community must be continually assessed.

4. Assessing residents' perception in Alto Piemonte, Italy

In order to test the proposed conceptual framework, the study has been undertaken in Alto Piemonte, a sub-regional destination located in Piedmont, the second-largest region in Italy, in the north-west of the peninsula (Figure 2). The territory of Alto Piemonte includes four administrative areas, i.e. Biella, Novara, Verbania and Vercelli provinces. It has around 900,000 inhabitants in total (around 20% of the total population of Piedmont), distributed over 6.600 square kilometres of land area (around 25% of the total land area of Piedmont). It is a tourism area still under development, characterized by different landscapes, tourism products and experiences. This variety is shown even in each province. For example, the province of Vercelli alone can boast a landscape that passes from the rice plains to the summit of Monte Rosa, the second highest peak in Europe,

with its approximately 4600 meters. This favourable geographical context makes Alto Piemonte a multi-faceted tourism destination able to attract different types of tourists, of which many are foreigners. According to regional statistics (Osservatorio Turistico Regionale, 2018), the four provinces attract approximately 4.9 million visitors in total (around 32% of the visitors of the entire Region, which are approximately around 15 million). However, these four areas have long been promoted separately and there have been few initiatives for an integrated promotion of these areas with similar culture and traditions.

To address these issues, currently, the new Alto Piemonte DMO is planning to redevelop and reorganize its tourist offer along the lines of an integrated marketing system, which cross the administrative boundaries of individual provinces. Thus, the outcome of this process is to create a new common brand for Alto Piemonte, in order to systematise the variety of the territories, rather than the amalgamation of completely homogeneous territories.

The DMO started this process considering the perceived identity recognized by all stakeholders, including residents. The role of the local community has been conceived as fundamental to foster an inclusive and sustainable co-creation of a common brand.

In order to investigate the opinions of Alto Piemonte residents, a structured, self-administered online questionnaire was designed to gather the data for the study. The online questionnaire was distributed and promoted through private and public mailing lists, social networks, as well as advertising in local newspapers over a four-month period, from August to November 2016. This period included both low and high season, thus avoiding any possible bias related to seasonality. The questionnaire was anonymous and required approximately 10 minutes to complete. A total of 675 respondents completed the survey. All the respondents were residents of Alto Piemonte. The data were processed by using the statistical software SPSS 23.

From the statistical analysis it is possible to first outline the respondents' profile. As shown in Table 1, approximately 58% of the

respondents were female, and the majority were between 18 and 35 years old. Over 85 % held a high school diploma or above. About 27 % of the working population in the sample were employed in the tourism industry and 80% were working in Alto Piemonte. In comparison with the regional data provided by PiSta – Piemonte STATistica, this sample is representative of the regional population for the socio-demographic

variables (gender, age, education, professional status). Hence, the findings from the sample can be generalized to the whole population (Gravetter and Wallnau, 2016).

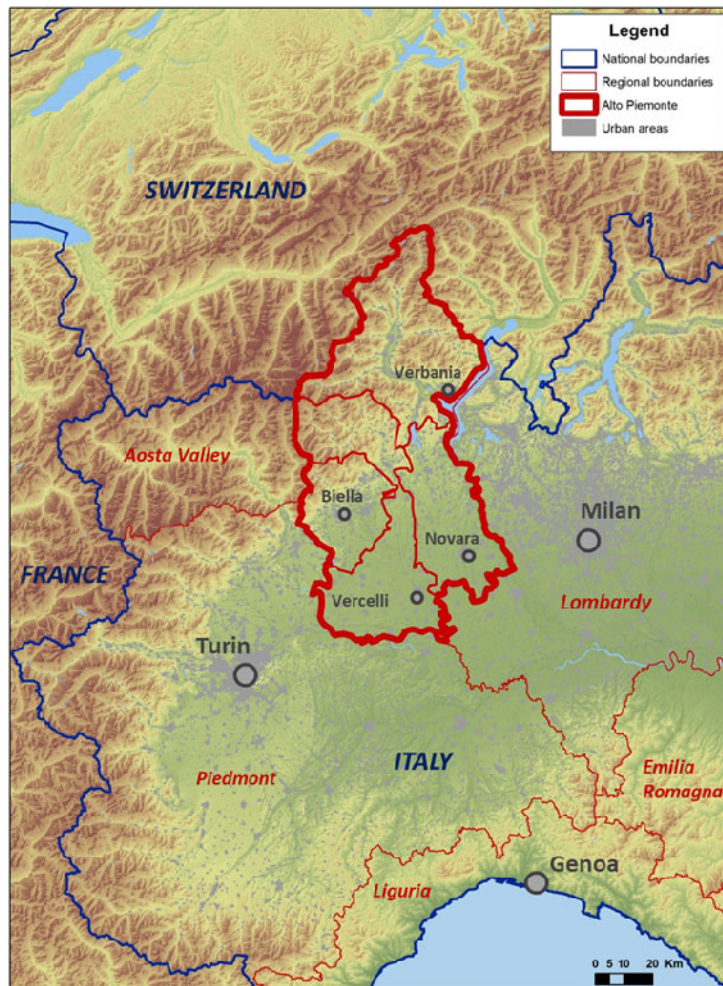


Figure 2. Map of Alto Piemonte, Italy.
Source: Author's elaboration using ArcGIS.

Variable	Sample (N=675)	Percentage (%=100)	Regional data
Gender			
Male	287	42.5	48.5
Female	388	57.5	51.5
Age			
18-35	259	38.6	46.12 (median age)
36-50	196	29.2	
51+	216	32.2	
Education			
Basic studies	97	14.4	12.6
Secondary school	281	41.6	61.4
University	297	44.0	24.0
Professional Status			
Employed	411	60.9	64.4
Unemployed	32	4.7	6.8
Student	110	16.3	28.8 (inactive)
Retired	51	7.6	
Other	71	10.5	
Type of work			
Related to tourism	146	26.7	
Not related to tourism	401	73.3	
Place of work			
In Alto Piemonte	438	80.1	
Not in Alto Piemonte	109	19.9	

Table 1. Profile of respondents.

Source: Author's elaboration (regional data available at PiSta: www.ruparpiemonte.it/infostat).

As anticipated, the main results concern the four components that make up the conceptual framework proposed in this paper. All the questions were formulated through a 5-point Likert-type scale for each item (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Results are shown using the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) to explain the shape of the distribution¹.

Firstly, residents were asked to evaluate the physical attributes and cognitive components that they relate to the destination (i.e. elements of perception), answering the question "To what extent do you think these elements represent the Alto Piemonte tourist destination?". Table 2 depicts the elements of perception that Alto Piemonte residents believe are more representative for their area. The findings reveal that the highest mean score is 4.36 for the

variable "lake" with a low standard deviation (SD = 0.764). With very high mean and low SD also the variables "landscape and environment" (M = 4.25; SD = 0.737) and "mountain" (M = 4.25; SD = 0.766) are considered representative of the territorial identity of Alto Piemonte. Following, also "gastronomy" (M = 3.73; SD = 0.941), "winter sports" (M = 3.73; SD = 0.938) and "typical products" (M = 3.66; SD = 0.919) are considered as strong identity elements that complete the vocation of this territory, with higher SD, which represent a more dispersion of the variable.

As concern the meanings, associations and affective components (i.e. feelings of perception) that residents relate to the destination, the residents of Alto Piemonte were asked to answer the question "To what extent do you think these adjectives represent the Alto Piemonte tourist destination?". Table 3 shows the feelings of perception that Alto Piemonte residents believe are more representative of their territory. The results suggest that the highest mean score pertain to the adjective "beautiful" with a low SD (M = 4.03; SD = 0.788), followed respectively by "pleasant" (M = 3.86; SD = 0.746) "relaxing" (M = 3.85; SD = 0.778) and "charming" (M = 3.82; SD = 0.948). According

¹ The mean represents the central tendency of the data's values, while the SD (variance) represents the differences of the observed values from the mean. If the data points are further from the mean, there is a higher deviation within the data set; thus, the more spread out the data, the higher the standard deviation (Lee, In and Lee, 2015).

to the residents, Alto Piemonte is also considered a “safe” destination ($M = 3.71$; $SD = 0.837$). The lowest mean and the highest SD are registered for the adjectives “eccentric” ($M = 2.24$; $SD = 0.872$), “young” ($M = 2.51$; $SD = 0.872$), “vibrant” ($M = 2.71$; $SD = 0.892$), and “fun” ($M = 2.83$; $SD = 0.83$).

The third component presented in the conceptual framework concerns the perception that residents have of themselves (i.e. residents’ self-perception). The respondents were asked, “to what extent do you think these adjectives represent the residents of Alto Piemonte?”. Table 4 highlights the adjectives that Alto Piemonte residents believe are more representative to describe themselves. Results show that the residents of Alto Piemonte perceive they are “educated”, “professional”, and “punctual”. These adjectives have, in fact, registered the highest means and low SD, respectively of 3.46 ($SD = 0.795$), 3.43 ($SD = 0.793$) and 3.32 ($SD = 0.776$). On the other hand

the lowest means are represented by the adjectives “open-minded” ($M = 2.57$; $SD = 0.83$), “joyful” ($M = 2.72$; $SD = 0.747$) and “friendly” ($M = 2.77$; $SD = 0.821$), denoting a self-consciousness of a poor attitude in hosting tourists in a welcoming way.

Lastly, the fourth component of the conceptual framework assesses the perception that residents have of tourists (i.e. residents’ perception of tourists). Answering the question “To what extent do you think these adjectives represent the tourists of Alto Piemonte?”, the residents of Alto Piemonte evaluated the adjectives that they believe are more representative to describe the tourists of Alto Piemonte (Table 5).

ELEMENTS OF PERCEPTION	Mean	Std. Deviation
Lake	4.36	0.764
Landscape and environment	4.25	0.737
Mountain	4.25	0.766
Gastronomy	3.73	0.941
Winter sports	3.73	0.938
Typical products	3.66	0.919
Wine	3.58	1.050
Rice	3.51	1.126
Relax and wellness	3.46	0.898
Art and Culture	3.43	0.906
Events	3.28	0.895
Summer sports	3.24	0.953
Local and traditional handicrafts	3.20	0.921
Devotion and Religion	3.19	1.009
Industry and industrial	2.95	1.106

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of “elements of perception”. Source: Author’s elaboration.

FEELINGS OF PERCEPTION	Mean	Std. Deviation
Beautiful	4.03	0.788
Pleasant	3.86	0.746
Relaxing	3.85	0.778
Charming	3.82	0.948
Safe	3.71	0.837
Exciting	3.49	0.967
Elegant	3.30	0.887
Welcoming	3.25	0.958
Accessible	3.14	0.928
Organized	2.84	0.885
Fun	2.83	0.830
Vibrant	2.71	0.892
Young	2.51	0.872
Eccentric	2.24	0.872

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of “feelings of perception”. Source: Author’s elaboration.

RESIDENT'S SELF-PERCEPTION	Mean	Std. Deviation
Educated	3.46	0.795
Professional	3.43	0.793
Punctual	3.32	0.776
Precise	3.24	0.776
Available	3.07	0.844
Organised	3.05	0.846
Ambitious	3.02	0.872
Welcoming	2.96	0.832
Enterprising	2.96	0.878
Creative	2.95	0.877
Nice	2.93	0.734
Friendly	2.77	0.821
Joyful	2.72	0.747
Open-minded	2.57	0.830

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of “residents’ self-perception”. Source: Author’s elaboration.

Results reveal that the highest means, with a low standard deviation, are recorded for the adjectives “educated” ($M = 3.41$; $SD = 0.639$), “open-minded” ($M = 3.40$; $SD = 0.694$), and “organised” ($M = 3.39$; $SD = 0.769$). On the contrary, the lowest means, with the highest SD, are registered for the adjectives “invasive” ($M = 2.45$; $SD = 0.898$), “young” ($M = 2.58$; $SD = 0.832$) and “loud” ($M = 2.68$; $SD = 0.854$). Hence, in general there is a positive attitude of the residents toward the incoming tourists.

The results deriving from the application of the conceptual model in the Alto Piemonte destination revealed the perceptions of its residents. These opinions will form the basis of the process of sustainable co-creation of brand identity in this sub-regional destination.

To summarise, the residents perceive Alto Piemonte as a beautiful, charming and relaxing destination where lakes and mountains represent its strongest identity elements, as well as the main attractors for the tourists. According to the residents, Alto Piemonte new brand should recall these feelings and the beauty of its landscapes and environment. The combination of lakes and mountains should also be supported by other identity elements that are very important to the residents of Alto Piemonte, as

PERCEPTION OF TOURISTS	Mean	Std. Deviation
Educated	3.41	0.639
Open-minded	3.40	0.694
Organised	3.39	0.769
Friendly	3.35	0.661
Respectful	3.30	0.750
Polite	3.29	0.749
Informed	3.25	0.841
Precise	3.24	0.632
Rich	3.21	0.698
Loud	2.68	0.854
Young	2.58	0.832
Invasive	2.45	0.898

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of “perception of tourists”. Source: Author’s elaboration.

its gastronomy and typical products. Alto Piemonte should also be promoted as an active destination for winter sports’ lovers.

The residents of Alto Piemonte also exposed some self-criticisms that should be improved to encourage tourism development in this area. They recognised that the local community of Alto Piemonte is often narrow-minded and unfriendly towards incoming visitors. However, the results also showed a rather positive opinion on the tourist who visits Alto Piemonte, considered as non-invasive, educated and respectful.

In order to investigate in greater depth about the willingness of residents to develop tourism in Alto Piemonte and their sense of belonging, the questionnaire included further questions to which the residents responded by giving a rating from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Table 6 shows the results related to Alto Piemonte as a place to live in according to the residents. To the question “to what extent do you think Alto Piemonte is a nice place to live?”, about 76% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that Alto Piemonte is a nice place to live ($M = 3.99$; $SD = 0.867$). 71% of the respondents

would recommend Alto Piemonte to other people as a nice place to live ($M = 3.89$; $SD = 0.927$).

Table 7 presents the results related to Alto Piemonte as a nice place to take a holiday according to the residents. To the question “to what extent do you think Alto Piemonte is a nice place to take a holiday?”, about 65% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that Alto Piemonte is a nice place to take a holiday ($M = 3.73$; $SD = 0.999$). 71% of the respondents would recommend Alto Piemonte to other people as a nice place to take a holiday ($M = 3.79$; $SD = 1.008$).

In the questionnaire, residents were also asked about their attachment and sense of belonging to their region. Table 8 displays the results to the question “When you travel, are you proud to tell others where you live?”. Around 71 % agrees or strongly agrees to be proud to tell other people where they live ($M = 3.97$; $SD = 1.013$), showing a great attachment to their territory and a strong sense of belonging.

Lastly, Table 9 presents the results to the question “To what extent would you like Alto Piemonte to become a globally recognized destination?”. This question shows the highest mean score and low SD ($M = 4.39$; $SD = 0.773$). About 87% of the respondents expressed the willingness to promote tourism in Alto Piemonte and to make it a globally relevant tourist region.

In conclusion, therefore, the analysis showed a strong rooting in the territory by residents of Alto Piemonte region, as well as a deep sense of belonging and pride. The residents have recognised the strong appeal that Alto Piemonte can offer visitors, contributing to the identification of the main identity values that the new brand should convey.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	Statistics
Strongly disagree	10	1.5	1.5	1.5	N Valid 675
Disagree	24	3.6	3.6	5.0	N Missing 0
Neither Agree nor Disagree	125	18.5	18.5	23.6	Mean 3.99
Agree	320	47.4	47.4	71.0	Sd 0.867
Strongly Agree	196	29.0	29.0	100.0	
Total	675	100.0	100.0		

Table 6. “To what extent do you think Alto Piemonte is a nice place to live?”.
Source: Author’s elaboration.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	Statistics
Strongly disagree	18	2.7	2.7	2.7	N Valid 675
Disagree	63	9.3	9.3	12.0	N Missing 0
Neither Agree nor Disagree	153	22.7	22.7	34.7	Mean 3.73
Agree	288	42.7	42.7	77.3	Sd 0.999
Strongly Agree	153	22.7	22.7	100.0	
Total	675	100.0	100.0		

Table 7. “To what extent do you think Alto Piemonte is a nice place to take a holiday?”.
Source: Author’s elaboration.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	Statistics	
Strongly disagree	15	2.2	2.2	2.2	N Valid	675
Disagree	44	6.5	6.5	8.7	N Missing	0
Neither Agree nor Disagree	134	19.9	19.9	28.6	Mean	3.97
Agree	235	34.8	34.8	63.4	Sd	1.013
Strongly Agree	247	36.6	36.6	100.0		
Total	675	100.0	100.0			

Table 8. "When you travel, are you proud to tell others where you live?".

Source: Author's elaboration.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	Statistics	
Strongly disagree	3	0.4	0.4	0.4	N Valid	675
Disagree	10	1.5	1.5	1.9	N Missing	0
Neither Agree nor Disagree	73	10.8	10.8	12.7	Mean	4.39
Agree	222	32.9	32.9	45.6	Sd	0.773
Strongly Agree	367	54.4	54.4	100.0		
Total	675	100.0	100.0			

Table 9. "To what extent would you like Alto Piemonte to become a globally recognized destination?".

Source: Author's elaboration.

5. Conclusions

The study proposed a conceptual framework that can be used to investigate residents' perception of their own destination identity during the brand development process. Hence, it contributes to the literature by providing conceptual insights for residents' overall perception, taking both cognitive and affective components into account, as well as the resident's self-perception and their perception of tourists. These four components have been discussed separately in previous studies to some extent, but they have rarely been applied empirically, particularly within the realm of brand identity and brand creation.

The conceptual framework was tested in the area of Alto Piemonte, a sub-regional destination that is currently investing in the creation of a new common brand with the involvement of local communities. The study has examined the perceptions of Alto Piemonte residents to identify the factors that residents associate with

the brand identity of the Alto Piemonte destination. According to Kotler and Gertner (2002), in fact, one of the fundamental steps in building successful brands is to define the characteristics and elements forming its unique basis.

As regards the first component (elements of perception), our results have highlighted the physical attributes and cognitive components that residents relate to a regional destination. In the case of Alto Piemonte, the most representative factors of its identity according to the residents are the lake, the landscape and environment, the mountains, and its gastronomy. In accordance with previous studies (Baloglu et al., 2014; Hosany et al., 2006), the study posits that acknowledging these cognitive elements is vital to a regional brand development that is consistent with the residents' views. Also Zenker et al. (2017) argued that the incorporation of the brand attributes into the residents' self-concept should be encouraged. They underline that a certain level of "identity

fit" among the residents and the place brand's core-attributes is essential (Zenker et al., 2017).

The results of the second component (feelings of perception) are strongly linked to the first one and they highlight the meaning, association and affective components that residents relate to a destination. In this illustrative case study, the residents refer to Alto Piemonte as a beautiful, pleasant, relaxing, charming and safe destination. This study argues that for achieving a comprehensive brand identity perception of the residents, both cognitive and affective components should be taken into account. This is consistent with previous literature, in which different authors suggested that both affective and cognitive components together can lead to an overall perception of the destination (Agapito et al., 2010; Qu et al., 2011).

Subsequently, within the process of brand creation and development, this research highlights the importance of a third component: residents' self-perception. The results showed that Alto Piemonte residents perceive themselves as educated, professional and punctual, but also not particularly friendly and open-minded. In line with previous literature (Gu and Ryan, 2008; Wang and Chen, 2015), this study highlights that analysing the self-perception and personal value systems is essential to explain and better understand the resident's attitudes toward tourism development and their relationships with visitors.

Lastly, the fourth component of the conceptual framework assessed the perception that residents have of tourists (residents' perception of tourists). Results showed that residents perceive tourists as educated, open-minded, organised, thus, revealing a generally positive attitude toward visitors. This research posits that assessing residents' attitudes is, in fact, necessary to know their propensity to develop tourism and the regional brand. As also supported by the literature (Martín et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2013), there is a direct relationship between positive residents' attitudes and feelings towards tourists, and their propensity to support tourism development.

This research also provides other important insights, related to the willingness of residents to

develop tourism and their sense of belonging. In the case of Alto Piemonte, results showed that the residents are strongly attached to their region. They also manifest a deep sense of belonging and pride, as well as their willingness to enhance tourism development. As also stated by Presenza et al. (2013), analysing these issues is critical since gaining or maintaining the support for tourism initiatives requires policy-makers to become informed about resident perceptions of tourism and potential directions of new development.

In conclusion, the study has shed light on factors of destination brand identity relating to residents' views. The main contribution is the conceptual implications presented in this study, and which can be generalized for use in other destinations. The study was, in fact, conceived to provide an interpretative frame and a methodological approach to assess residents' perception for a sustainable co-creation of brand identity in regional destinations.

The study also presents significant empirical and educational aspects for other researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and destination managers, who can test this framework in other geographical contexts. On the basis of this research, it is also possible for Alto Piemonte DMO, first to build its brand proposition and to position its new brand in accordance to the local community, and secondly to acknowledge residents' attitudes and feelings about their willingness to develop tourism in this region. In this way, it is possible to plan corrective actions on the identified critical issues to increase the propensity of residents to support a sustainable tourism development of the new brand and the Alto Piemonte destination.

This research is intended as a first attempt to assess residents' perception of the destination identity during the brand development process. Further research is now required to explore more in-depth the perception of residents. For example, it would be useful to conduct an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ensure the reliability of the analysis and to validate the factorial structure. Moreover, it is important to consider the different socio-demographic profiles of residents. During the next phase, the

research should perform a series of one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to search for differences between socio-demographic variables, such as age, level of education, type of work, place of work. It is, in fact, important to acknowledge that residents are not a homogenous entity, where everyone lives in harmony and shares the same perspective on tourism development, but a heterogeneous group comprising different expectations, needs, and perceptions (Woosnam et al., 2016).

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