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Post-pandemic collaborative destination marketing: effectiveness and impact on different generational audiences

Abstract

In a break from the traditional focus on destination image recovery in post-crisis scenarios, the COVID-19 pandemic required a different approach to collaborative destination marketing. This research aims to fill a gap in knowledge about the factors that drive post-pandemic collaborative destination marketing strategies, the objectives that are set, their effectiveness, and the different impacts on diverse age groups. Grounded in stakeholder and generational theories, this study examines an innovative collaborative marketing campaign for Spain in 2022. Spain's tourism rebounded swiftly that year, almost reaching pre-pandemic international visitor numbers. The campaign was collaboratively developed by TourSpain, the Spanish National Tourism Organization (NTO), along with six regional and local Spanish Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), Expedia, and TripAdvisor. In-depth interviews were conducted with all stakeholder groups involved in the campaign, and this was complemented by focus groups with UK residents, grouped by generation. The findings revealed how the stakeholders reoriented their post-pandemic collaborative strategies to considering variables, such as customer journey stages and sociodemographic factors, to achieve branding and conversion objectives. The study also discovered that the campaign's effectiveness varied across different generational audiences. This research provides valuable insights for NTOs and DMOs in designing future post-crisis collaborative marketing initiatives.

Keywords: collaborative destination marketing; joint brand advertising; stakeholder theory; destination image; travel intention; post-pandemic; generational theory

Introduction

In a post-crisis context, collaboration among tourism stakeholders is required to accelerate tourism recovery in the medium to long term (Orchiston and Higham, 2016), and to repair destination image damaged by these events (Chan et al., 2020). For destinations, this collaboration is especially valuable in management, planning, and marketing activities (d'Angella and Go, 2009). Due to the unprecedented characteristics of the COVID-19 crisis, marketing strategies shifted compared to previous crises (Pascual-Fraile et al., 2022). During the pandemic, collaboration among different stakeholders in the tourism industry was highlighted as essential to recovering activity and building destination resilience (Zenker and Kock, 2020), and messages were focused on diminishing risk perception (Wen et al., 2021). In the post-crisis scenario, DMOs were encouraged to pursue these collaborative marketing models (Ketter and Avraham, 2021), such as joint brand advertising which is one of the most utilized strategies in collaborative destination marketing (Can et al., 2020). Unlike previous post-crisis situations, in which destination image repair was the focus of marketing models (Chan et al., 2020), the changes in joint-brand strategies for destinations in the unique post-pandemic context remains understudied and demands further investigation (Can et al., 2021) and (Singh et al., 2022).

This research aims to shed light on those changes in post-pandemic collaborative marketing strategies, and the factors influencing the selection of these new strategies. For that, stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) was applied to analyse the often-complex horizontal and vertical relationships among diverse stakeholders, and the processes followed to achieve a common goal. Moreover, the application of Can et al.'s (2020) joint brand advertising framework

permits scrutiny of the campaign components and the opportunity to examine the practical aspects of the collaboration and strategy implementation.

These theoretical frameworks, combined with generational theory (Mannheim, 1952), allows for the threefold objective of this research: to analyse the relationships established between the stakeholders of collaborative destination marketing strategies; to determine what influences the co-op campaign approach; and to investigate the effectiveness of the campaign across different generational audiences, all in the unprecedented post-COVID-19 context. With this study, DMOs at national, regional, and local levels can obtain practical insights for collaborative marketing strategies in future post-crisis scenarios.

Literature review

Stakeholder theory

The core principles of stakeholder theory involve identifying stakeholders and their relationships with the organizations, understanding the need to prioritize open and active communication among them (Freeman, 1984). The theory further underscores the interdependence between the organisations and their stakeholders, acknowledging that the former's success is intricately linked to the support and resources from the latter (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). It also advocates for social and ethical responsibility towards these stakeholders and seeks ways to create shared value that benefits both the organisation and all associated groups (Berman et al., 1999). Continuous management and monitoring of stakeholders' expectations and needs are vital for effectively adapting strategies and actions (Mitchell et al., 1997). In these collaborative initiatives, alliances composed of horizontal or vertical networks are created involving various entities, from competitors to supply chain members (Lewis et al., 2015) .

In the realm of tourism, these stakeholder collaborations have shown remarkable efficacy in addressing crises (Filimonau and De Coteau, 2020). Collaborative strategies, as described by Sheehan and Ritchie, (2005) and d'Angella and Go, (2009), offer solutions to

multifaceted problems like destination branding, risk and cost minimization, and market positioning. In past crises and disasters, these collaborations typically focused on reputation recovery and restoration of destination image (Chan et al., 2020).

However, the COVID-19 crisis posed a unique scenario, where collaboration among tourism stakeholders was required to create destination resilience and recover tourism activity (Zenker & Kock, 2020). Thus, collaborative marketing campaigns developed amongst public and private sector organizations aimed to boost future travel bookings (Lin and Zhang, 2021) and their messages were based on the concept of ‘safety’ (Wen et al., 2021) .

Once the emergency phase of the crisis was over in 2022 (European Commission, 2022), the post-pandemic scenario presented a significant pent-up demand for international travel (UNWTO, 2023). DMOs were encouraged to maintain collaborative strategies to convey messages of welcoming-back the tourists (Ketter and Avraham, 2021), disseminating through online channels, and with customized campaigns to target different audiences (Toubes et al., 2021). In this post-crisis situation, the application of stakeholder theory allows for the analysis of the relationship between DMOs and the rest of the stakeholders involved in collaborative destination marketing strategies, and their drive in achieving a common objective.

Collaborative destination marketing

Collaborative marketing involves branding, product promotion, or other marketing communications activities, in which different stakeholders share talents and resources to address a common objective (Qi and Li, 2012). The aim is to share transaction costs, minimize risk, and achieve a better market position or performance (Qi and Li, 2012). For DMOs, the main benefits of collaborative destination marketing strategies are the competitive advantages of economies of scale, the extension of linkages with participating suppliers (Abou-Shouk, 2018), and increasing their resources efficiency (Wang, 2011). From the cost perspective, as collaboration implies sharing campaign costs among partners, lesser known and regional destinations are encouraged

to participate (Wang et al., 2013). Moreover, collaboration can contribute to enhanced visibility if the collaboration is with well-known brands (Wang et al., 2013).

Of the different collaborative destination marketing strategies, cooperative advertising is utilized by DMOs when their goal is to promote tourists' travel intention (Park and Nicolau, 2015). McKinney et al., (2009) asserted that cooperative advertising strategies have a greater impact on audiences than individual campaigns. In cooperative advertising, joint brand advertising is the most utilized formula (Can et al., 2020). According to these authors, the main benefits of joint brand advertising strategies are related to branding and the influence on tourists' behavioural responses. Moreover, when the alliance is built between familiar and lesser-known brands, the synergies created by the collaboration makes tourists associate the credibility of the well-known brands with the lesser-known ones (Can et al., 2021). Despite these likely benefits, the effectiveness of joint brand advertising for destinations remains understudied (Can et al., 2020).

Generational theory

Mannheim (1952) laid the groundwork for generational theory by defining a generation as an age group that shares a geographical, social, and historical context, and the everyday experiences associated with that context. These experiences predispose them to collectively develop their thinking, values, and beliefs (Pendergast, 2009). This generational lens becomes crucial for the tourism sector as age influences how tourists plan their trips, including their expectations, requirements, choice of destination, purpose of visit and trip duration (Hysa et al., 2021). Thus, academics and practitioners agreed on the validity of generational theory to investigate tourists' behaviour (Li et al., 2013). For example, according to Wang et al., (2022), age and perceived risk were two essential variables impacting on travel intention during the COVID-19 pandemic; different generations showed different levels of risk perception which affected their travel decisions during this crisis.

Generational theory allows the segmentation of audiences into generation cohorts: Generation Z, Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers, according to the classification established by the Pew Research Center, (2019). Each cohort has unique characteristics, values, and preferences influencing their interactions and responses to marketing strategies (Schewe and Meredith, 2004). In the tourism sector, some studies, such as the ones by Fromm and Read, (2018), Li and Huang, (2023), Molinillo et al., (2018), and Hysa et al., (2021), utilized generational theory to explain travellers' behavioural patterns according to the different age cohorts. Generation Z (digital natives) are different from other generations in their emotional experiences of travel and word-of-mouth evaluation. As young people, independent from their families, and adventurous, they have become a target group for digital destination marketing strategies (Fromm and Read, 2018; Li and Huang, 2023). Millennials are collaborative, interactive, strongly influenced by friends and peers, and eager to travel and discover the world. They are the most tech-savvy generation, and heavy users of social media to search for and purchase tourism products, so marketers consider them as a potential target for their online advertising campaigns (Molinillo et al., 2018). Unlike the two younger generations, Generation X tend to include their family members in their trips; their friends and family are an important part of their holidays. They enjoy discovering new destinations and cultures on their travels and like interacting with local communities. Despite being born in the analogue era, they have adapted to the digital environment to plan and book their trips (Hysa et al., 2021). Lastly, Baby Boomers are a target group for marketing strategies as they tend to increase the frequency of their international travel due to their secure social and financial position, and for retirees, they also have the luxury of more disposable time. Considered as 'active holidays' fans, they choose travel in which they can relax, take care of their health with wellness treatments, engage in sports, enjoy activities such as wine-tastings, and generally have fun (Hysa et al., 2021).

Understanding these generational differences is thus critical for designing more effective collaborative marketing campaigns in the post-pandemic recovery stage, in addition to other common variables affecting tourists' destination image creation and travel intentions. According to Beerli and Martín, (2004), destination image is a concept created by tourists reasoned and emotional interpretations, composed of two components: the cognitive/perceptive evaluations and the affective appraisals. Besides, destination image is influenced by information sources (e.g., previous travel experience, media, and marketing campaigns) and personal and social factors (e.g., age, gender, and social class) (Beerli and Martín, 2004). Regarding travel intentions in the post-COVID-19 era, risk perception – which had a great influence on tourists' travel decision-making during the crisis – may diminish in relevance (Matiza and Kruger, 2021). Thus, other factors should be considered: the substantial pent-up demand created during the COVID-19 travel restrictions (UNWTO, 2023), age, income, and the psychological and economic impact of the pandemic (Pappas, 2021).

This focus on generational theory complements our stakeholder-centric perspective and can inform collaborative destination marketing strategies as how to best target differently age audiences. The study provides a twofold perspective, from both industry and customers, on an innovative joint-brand advertising strategy developed in the specific context of the recovery stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. The investigation was conducted using the following research questions:

RQ1: How are relationships established among stakeholders in post-pandemic collaborative destination marketing strategies?

RQ2: What are the factors that drive a post-pandemic collaborative marketing campaign and objectives set?

RQ3: How was the strategy designed to maximize effectiveness, in relation to its objectives?

RQ4: What are the impacts of collaborative destination marketing strategies on different generational audiences?

Methodology

The co-op marketing campaign

The co-op marketing campaign analysed in this research was developed by the Spanish NTO TourSpain in collaboration with six regional and local DMOs, the worldwide online travel agency (OTA) Expedia, and the world's largest travel guidance platform TripAdvisor. The campaign ran from April to July 2022. Spain was the second most visited country in the world (after France) in the pre-pandemic period, with visitor arrivals increasing from 2017 to 2019 (UNWTO, 2023). Despite the drop in international visitors during the COVID-19 crisis, in 2022 the number of international visitors to Spain nearly match pre-pandemic levels (-15%) (National Statistics Institute (INE), 2023). Spain's rapid tourism recovery makes it a particularly compelling example. Six regional and local DMOs decided to join the initiative proposed by the Spanish NTO, with campaigns representing diverse segments of the Spanish tourism offer, including urban, sun, sea and sand, nature, gastronomy, and heritage tourism.

Within this broad campaign, there were two different types of collaboration. The NTO played the leading role in all six campaigns. In four campaigns, collaboration was made between both TripAdvisor and Expedia and the DMOs, and for the other two campaigns there was collaboration between the DMOs and just one of this private sector partners. TourSpain and the DMOs contributed financial resources, and the private companies provided advertising space on their respective web pages with an economic value equal to each DMOs investment (national, regional or local). Therefore, all the partners shared the costs of the collaborative campaign equally. The stages of the campaign from the customer perspective are shown in figure 1.

[Figure 1 here]

Figure 1: Customer perspective of the stages of the campaign

Research design

Two phases of qualitative data collection were undertaken; the first phase involved 9 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with representatives from each campaign stakeholder, and the second phase involved 4 focus groups with UK residents. Qualitative research is increasing its presence and relevance in the academic literature of many scientific fields, including marketing, and to ensure the research is carried out rigorously, comparisons between different data sources is recommended (Vogler, 2022). In this research, two different sources of data were collected and analysed (interviews and focus groups), and comparisons were made. This allowed for the preliminary results from the first phase of data collection to be considered and checked as part of the second phase (Irwin, 1987).

According to Bryman, (2016), qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews present some advantages compared to quantitative interviews; they offer insights into interviewees' perspectives, with rich and detailed answers, and their flexibility allows the interviewers to stress or adjust the emphasis of the research in relation to significant issues that may emerge in the course of the interviews. As for the focus groups, they can generate a considerable amount of data, as participants can argue with each other and challenge each other's views. Additionally, the moderators can obtain data observing the interaction that takes place within the group (Bryman, 2016).

Gathering of data

To gather the data, two lists of questions were designed, with one for the interviews and one for the focus groups. The constructs in which the questions were based are intrinsically related to

stakeholder theory and generational theory. The stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) provides a framework to evaluate the collaborative strategy (Can et al., 2020), while the generational theory (Mannheim, 1952) contributes to the study of destination image (Beerli and Martín, 2004) and travel intentions (Pappas, 2021). The constructs for the questions of the interviews and focus groups are as shown in tables 1 and 2 (see Table 1 and Table 2):

[Table 1 here]

Table 1.- Constructs of the interviews

[Table 2 here]

Table 2.- Constructs of the focus groups

The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, with the participants' permission, and all transcribed manually, for their later coding and analysis with Nvivo 11. Some interviews were carried out in Spanish and some in English, and the Spanish interviews were transcribed and translated into English for analysis. This process required a close check to avoid common errors of translation (Bryman, 2016). Research ethics procedures were followed, and all participants were offered the opportunity to remain anonymous in the presentation of results.

Interviews. Each partner involved in this collaborative destination marketing campaign - TourSpain, the six regional and local DMOs, Expedia, and TripAdvisor - participated in the interview phase of this study. The interviews were carried out online, using MS Teams, from May to November 2022, and each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes. The interviewees were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy, based on their position in their different organizations (Patton, 1990). The interviewees selected were responsible for either the design or implementation of the campaign, representing each of the nine stakeholders. All requested anonymity and agreed to be interviewed. See Table 3 for the profile of interviewees.

[Table 3 here]

Table 3: Profile of the interviewees

The interviewees were asked for their views on the aims of the campaign, the role and involvement of the stakeholders in the design and implementation of the campaign, and its effectiveness. Questions were also asked regarding Spain's destination image, tourists' risk perception, and tourists' travel intentions during and after the pandemic, to be compared with the responses from the focus groups.

Focus groups. To examine UK residents' responses to this collaborative marketing campaign and their attitudes towards Spain as a tourist destination in the post-COVID-19 era, four focus groups were held in May-July 2022, each lasting approximately one hour. The focus groups were formed with six participants in each, and each represented a different age generation, according to Pew Research Center's (2019) classification. To enlist participants, a snowball sampling technique was used (Noy, 2008). From those who accepted to join to the research, the final participants were selected only if they had previous international travel experience, but not necessarily to Spain, and if they had been resident in the UK for at least 5 years. The UK market was chosen for the focus groups in this study because the UK has traditionally been the main source of international travellers to Spain (National Statistics Institute (INE), 2023). After the crisis, by December 2022, the UK was again the main source market for visitors to Spain with more than 15 million arrivals during that year, followed by France (10.1 million) and Germany (9.8 million) (National Statistics Institute (INE), 2023). See Table 4 for the profile of the focus group participants.

[Table 4 here]

Table 4: Profile of the focus groups participants

The focus groups were structured into two parts. During the first part, without having watched the collaborative marketing campaign, participants were asked to discuss their opinions of Spain as a tourist destination and the factors that affected their own perceptions of Spain's destination image. Following this, they were asked to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic and how

this had affected their perceptions of risk associated with travelling to Spain, both during and after the crisis. During the second part, participants were shown the online collaborative marketing campaign, and participants were then asked again for their opinions about Spain as a tourist destination, in what ways the campaign may have influenced their perceptions of the destination's image, their travel intentions, and associated levels of risk. Furthermore, participants were asked for their views on collaborative marketing campaigns and the extent to which this kind of collaboration could be effective in influencing their destination image perception and travel intentions.

Data analysis

The same studies used for the interviews and focus group constructs and questions (Beerli and Martín, 2004; Can et al., 2020; Pappas, 2021) were used as the basis for coding. The stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and generational theory (Mannheim, 1952) were the unifying threads for the main themes of the research: collaborative destination marketing, and destination image and travel intention, respectively. For the coding, a thematic analysis was conducted, following Braun and Clarke, (2006). This method of analysis involves detecting themes that are commonly mentioned by participants and identifying and organizing relationships between those themes.

The coding process was conducted as follows:

- data recognition: thoughtful reading of the results of focus groups and interviews by the authors to establish preliminary codes
- initial code generation: individual selection of topic codes by one of the authors after data recognition
- determination of themes: validation of the codes with a sequential check carried out by the authors, as proposed by Miles, (2020)
- Themes revision: authors' consecutive verification of the codes' determination

- Themes definition and reporting: Use of Nvivo 11 software to corroborate the manual coding process and aggregate the codes (see table 5 and table 6).

[Table 5 here]

Table 5: Coding of the interviews.

[Table 6 here]

Table 6: Coding of the focus groups.

Results

Industry's perspective about the co-op strategy

Stakeholders' selection and relationships

All industry interviewees agreed that, before developing a collaborative destination marketing initiative, it is vital that all stakeholders are aligned in terms of brand values and audience objectives. Once this consensus is reached, an alliance can be created to achieve a common goal. All the partners involved in the horizontal and vertical networks created for this marketing initiative obtained benefits from the collaboration. Regarding the horizontal relationship, in this case between the NTO and the regional and local destinations, it provided the opportunity to simultaneously promote Spain's national tourism brand as well as the diversity of destinations within Spain and their unique identities and product offerings. Destinations at both local and regional levels benefited from the association with the well-known national brand of Spain, in terms of image, branding and economies of scale, which overall maximized their investment.

'With this collaboration with TourSpain, our investment tripled. For us, this co-op strategy is undoubtedly the best option, as we unify efforts and messages with the NTO.

Besides, this campaign not only aims at conversion, but also at travel inspiration'
(interviewee 5).

With regards to the vertical networks, the NTO' and DMOs' interviewees explained that they needed a sales channel, which they lacked, and that a collaborative marketing strategy with

private sector stakeholders provided this. The alliance with such internationally well-known online tourism companies was the opportunity to harness the international pent-up travel demand for Spain in the recovery stage of the pandemic. Moreover, the regional and local DMO participants highlighted that working with large online tourism information and booking sites, such as TripAdvisor and Expedia, through co-op marketing campaigns was the only way for them to target certain international markets and successfully achieve conversion objectives, as without these partners, a similar campaign would have been financially unviable. Furthermore, for some of the lesser-known regional DMOs, this collaborative marketing campaign helped them to increase the destinations' brand awareness independently of conversion results. Participants from TripAdvisor and Expedia commented that the vertical association was an opportunity to increase their brand visibility by partnering with a prestigious global national brand. Interestingly, these interviewees also explained that their involvement in this campaign helped them to achieve their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) objectives, which at that time was to provide assistance to destinations in the post-pandemic recovery period.

'Branding and conversion were the main objectives of this campaign. We did the complete sales funnel: from awareness to sales conversion, both destination and product. We have been above average in terms of overall conversion' (interviewee 9).

Objectives and drivers of the co-op campaign in the post-pandemic context

With this consensus in place, the overarching objective of the campaign was established: short-term conversion. To achieve the strategy's potential, all partners considered the stage of the pandemic, the 'customer journey' phase of their potential visitors, the characteristics of their different audiences, tourist's perception of risk, and Spain's destination image at that moment in time.

With reference to post-pandemic recovery, participants highlighted that destinations needed to position themselves against their competitors, and channel towards Spain the "massive

pent-up demand” (interviewee 3) that had been created during the crisis. As the pent-up demand is not loyal to a destination, the interviewees considered this collaborative marketing campaign as a useful way of harnessing this demand for Spain:

“Pent-up demand is not enough to get conversion, because if you stop doing marketing campaigns, a destination disappears from the minds of consumers”

(interviewee 6)

Regarding the customer journey phase, participants from the NTO and DMOs observed that their potential visitors were, at that time, in the pre-purchase consideration phase of the customer journey. They all commented that, despite the uncertainty about a possible global recession, customers had stayed at home during the lockdowns for a long period of time, and may have saved money that they may be willing to invest in travelling:

‘After two years of restrictions to travel, customers saved money they did not spend on travelling. But we must monitor the news about emerging crises, especially financial ones, that could retract the tourism activity recovery’

(interviewee 6).

Finally, participants discussed the differences between their potential customers by age generation and the factors that may affect travel intention and Spain’s tourist destination image. The interviewees shared the view that the COVID-19 crisis had not significantly damaged the image of mainland Spain or any of its popular island destinations (e.g., Canary Islands), and that tourists’ levels of perceived risk of Spain, in any age group, was fairly low. As a result, all partners agreed that the post-crisis campaign messages needed to avoid using the concept of ‘safety’ because, rather than encouraging visitors’ confidence and travel intention to the destination, it may in fact have been detrimental in causing the opposite effect.

“Our image has not been eroded during the pandemic. For the 2022 summer, we do not need to communicate that we are a safe destiny, it is something that is already known. If we do so, it could have a boomerang effect” (interviewee 1).

Strategy design of the campaign: message, source, and audiences

With a perceived lack of damage to Spain’s tourist image and the low perceptions of risk amongst potential visitors, stakeholders designed the co-op campaign messages with a “welcome back” theme. The slogan of the campaign (“You deserve + the name of the destination”) *“was aligned with the need to switch off from these past hard two years”* (interviewee 3). In the post-COVID-19 era, DMOs conveyed emotional messages to offer the tourists *“the warmest welcome ever”* (interviewee 6).

Concerning the development of the campaign in the digital environment, all the interviewees agreed that tourists at any age were already familiar with online communication, a factor that was enhanced during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Furthermore, digital marketing was the focus of their strategies as traditional media campaigns were considered as: *‘additional strategies to the main one, which is always digital marketing’* (interviewee 7).

‘I think that post-COVID-19 situation will make some budget shift away from offline marketing actions. It will be used in online visual campaigns, that enter directly into consumers’ homes. This trend will even increase in the future’ (interviewee 2).

As for their potential customers, the interviewees explained that each of the six cooperative marketing campaigns in this promotion were tailored to different audiences, depending on the destinations’ preferences for targeting markets and their tourist products and services on offer: e.g., Millennials, families, senior tourism, or mature markets in Europe. For some destinations that were well-known amongst senior domestic and UK travellers, this

collaborative initiative offered the opportunity to attract new customer segments. For other destinations, it was the opportunity to recover the pre-pandemic levels of international tourists from Portugal, France, Belgium, Holland or UK.

‘We have different audiences for this campaign: we want to break the trend of staycations, and open up to a more cosmopolitan, upper-middle class market. We also target partially families and young people, for whom price is a key determinant’. Interviewee 1).

‘We would like to increase market share in Belgium and Holland, to reach a younger audience from these countries’ (interviewee 4).

Effectiveness and results

During the interviews, the NTO and DMOs claimed that the campaign provided them with positive results in terms of click-through rate (CTRs) which is used to measure campaign attractiveness and effectiveness with regards to conversion rates. Destinations obtained CTRs from 0.02% to 0.45%, and CTRs between 0.15% and 0.4% are considered successful by industry standards. For those participants where the CTR data were lower, the campaigns were valued for their contributions to increasing visibility and improving destination image and brand recognition:

‘We are very satisfied with the results of this campaign. We reached our objectives and now we are considering repeating this collaborative formula for the next campaigns in 2023’ (Interviewee 1).

The customers’ perspective: impacts by age generation

Impacts of the collaborative strategy

Interestingly, the impacts of the cooperative marketing campaign differed by generational group. For the private-sector partners, this collaboration influenced some Generation Z members to discover or extend their knowledge about Expedia and become potential future customers. As

Millennials and Generation X participants were already users of TripAdvisor and Expedia, they felt that the campaign provided a useful opportunity for them to discover new destinations in Spain, or to expand their knowledge of destinations that they were already familiar with. Baby Boomers commented that they liked the campaign in general terms, but as they have mostly visited Spain, they would need something more to encourage them to revisit a destination they already knew very well.

'I like the collaboration in this campaign, as I have the opportunity to have information and booking options at the same time' (participant 4, Generation Z).

'It is a good idea to increase the visibility of destinations; the collaboration with well-known companies makes the campaign more accessible' (Participant 18, Generation X).

From the potential tourists' point of view, the youngest generations (Generation Z, Millennials and Generation X) showed their preference for online marketing campaigns, while Baby Boomers expressed a slight lack of trust in online marketing and wanted more sources of information besides an advertising campaign before selecting a destination.

'I cannot remember many campaigns on traditional media. I only pay attention to online marketing campaigns' (participant 5, Generation Z).

Effectiveness of the campaign

These varied generational perceptions about the impacts of the collaborative strategy differed from the industry's objective of targeting a wide range of audiences: only some of the participants considered themselves as a target audience of this campaign. The most receptive were Generation Z members, as they were the most impressed by the information provided. The Millennials commented that the campaign and the booking system were not the most appropriate to them – they viewed this campaign as being more closely associated with typical package holidays - and they are more used to searching online and booking travel themselves. Generation X participants

were reluctant to book immediately after watching the campaign. They preferred to seek more information before making purchase decisions. Baby Boomers did not deem themselves a target audience of this campaign; they felt that the destination shown to them did not match their travel interests, which tended to centre more on cultural, architectural, and gastronomic experiences.

‘After watching the campaign, I am a bit curious about the destination. Maybe I would click on the banner to compare the prices of the bundle trip to the separate ones I can find in other websites, but I’m not completely sure I would finally book a packaged trip’ (participant 9, Millennial).

With regards to the campaign messages, the impact on each of the four generations varied. The emotive content of the slogan only effectively reached the Baby Boomers, who were unanimously capable of remembering it 15 minutes after watching it. Participants from all other generations could only remember some words or did not remember it at all. Generation Z members were more significantly impacted by the images shown in the campaign than by the written texts or the slogan, while Millennials and Generation X participants wanted more visual content, like videos. Baby Boomers with previous travel experience of the destination presented in the campaign were pleasantly surprised by the information and photos provided; they explained that it was very different from what they remembered of that location and from their expectations of the destination.

‘A video is always better than too much more information. I like the campaign’s photos, but a video shows much better the people’s emotions’ (participant 18, X Generation).

Impacts on destination’s image creation

Participants from all generational groups agreed that Spain’s destination image had not been damaged by the pandemic. They did not perceive a lack of health security when visiting the country during the pandemic, and they did not receive this message via external stimuli, like

news reports on various media channels. This corroborated the industry's views that tourists had a relatively low risk perception of Spain. When participants were asked about their perceived image of Spain as a tourist destination, without having seen the collaborative campaign, they commented on Spain's architecture (especially among Millennials and Generation X), culture and gastronomy (Baby Boomers) and leisure or sun and beach (Generation Z), but none of them mentioned any perceptions of a lack of safety.

'I did not have much information about the pandemic in Spain, so I consider there were not many troubles there. So, the image has not changed drastically compared to the one I had in 2019' (participant 6, Generation Z, with previous travel experience to Spain).

The focus group participants across all generations that had already visited Spain explained that it was their previous travel experience which had mainly formed their image of the country. Without previous travel experience, participants across generations explained that they would seek various sources of information to build an image of a destination in their mind. These sources of information may include collaborative marketing campaigns, such as the campaign used in this research.

'The idea I have of Spain is made of my previous travel experience but not of watching any marketing campaign' (Participant 23, Baby Boomer, with previous travel experience to Spain).

'I think that information and marketing campaigns could change my image of Spain with all the partying in the islands' (Participant 14, Generation X, with no previous travel experience to Spain).

In addition to previous travel experience and external stimuli, there were other factors that influenced participants cognitive and affective image of the destinations, and these varied by generation. Generation Z and Baby Boomers considered personal factors as being the most

influential (like age and nationality), and Generation X and Millennials commented that social factors (family, friends, and their social environment) were more influential.

'The image I have of Spain is made of the memories of my travels there when I was younger. But, as I continued travelling to Spain, this image has changed along the time' (participant 20, Baby Boomer).

Impacts on travel intention

The influence of this collaborative marketing campaign on participants' travel intentions also differed by age generation. While Generation Z participants were the most willing to make a reservation immediately after watching the campaign, Millennials and Generation X expressed more hesitancy, and Baby Boomers were the least influenced by the campaign.

'I would click on the banner for sure!!! I was impressed by the beautiful landscapes shown and the activities you can practice there' (participant 3, Generation Z).

Participants discussed factors, other than the marketing campaign, that may influence their travel intentions in the recovery stage of the pandemic. For Generation Z and Baby Boomers, these were personal factors, such as their age, the cost of travel, and their desire to travel after the lockdowns. For Millennial and Generation X participants, factors such as work commitments and the influence of family and friends were deemed important. However, there was agreement across all generations that previous travel experience was the main element that affected their future travel plans. Only Baby Boomers mentioned that health risks associated with COVID-19 still played a moderate role in influencing their future international travel decisions, but not in the case of Spain.

'Especially coming from the UK, Spain does not seem less or riskier than staying at home. I was worried about restrictions some time ago if they could ruin my holidays. Now I am worried about wearing a mask in hot places, maybe I think it

is 'too safe' for me, unnecessary and uncomfortable' (Participant 24, Baby Boomers).

Discussion and conclusion

The main contribution of this study is to provide an in-depth analysis of collaborative destination marketing in the COVID-19 recovery period, from both the industry and customer perspective. In this particular context, the collaborative marketing initiatives presented some substantial differences compared to those of previous post-crisis scenarios. Partners' views about their collaboration in the campaign, the determining of campaign objectives, its design, and its effectiveness were all examined through the lens of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984). Customers' viewpoints were studied using a generational theory perspective (Mannheim, 1952) to analyse the impacts of the collaborative campaign on differently aged audiences.

In response to RQ1, an in-depth analysis was carried out of the partner selection process and the relationships between stakeholders in collaborative destination marketing strategies, which would later determine the effectiveness of these initiatives. Some authors that have carried out research from a stakeholder theory perspective (Freeman, 1984) argued that all partners in such an alliance should enjoy a win-win scenario, which can be achieved by constant management and monitoring of stakeholders' expectations and needs (Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Mitchell et al., 1997). The findings of this research support this, as the stakeholders in this collaborative campaign shared resources to achieve a common goal, as proposed by Qi and Li, (2012). Moreover, all partners involved in the collaboration obtained benefits from that alliance, such as extending supply links for DMOs (Abou-Shouk, 2018), branding and Corporate Social Responsibility benefits (Berman et. al, 1999), and increasing their competitiveness, and financial risks were shared by all (d'Angella and Go, 2009). The lesser-known regional and local destinations of the collaborative marketing campaign benefited from economies of scale and the ability to access international markets that would have been unfeasible without this collaboration

with global and/or well-known partners. Therefore, from the cost perspective, these destinations are encouraged to participate in collaborative marketing strategies, as affirmed by Wang et al., (2013). Furthermore, the vertical network with TripAdvisor also provided advantages for destinations in terms of destination branding and image, which corroborate Qi & Li's (2012) research. Concerning horizontal networks, the results of this research support Can et al. (2021)'s conclusions, which indicate that collaboration with a national brand is an opportunity for regional and local destinations to increase their visibility and improve their perceived image.

As for the drivers that influenced the collaborative campaign and the objectives set posed in RQ2, the NTO and DMOs focused on their potential visitors' customer journey phase and their perceptions of destination image and risk in the particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic recovery. Concerning destination image and risk perception, the findings of this study revealed that tourists' perception of risk for Spain were low, and thus the image of the destination was not damaged by the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, it was not necessary to focus the collaborative campaign on repairing Spain's destination image and reputation, as was the case for other previous crises or disasters (Chan et al., 2020). Regarding the customer journey phase, interviewees commented that their potential visitors were at the consideration stage of their customer journey, and that there was a huge pent-up demand amongst international tourists after two years of lockdowns and travel restrictions (UNWTO, 2023). In that situation, the main goal of this collaborative strategy was to maximize conversion rates in the short-term.

Regarding RQ3 and the strategy design, the messaging, sources, and audiences were analysed from the interviewees' perspective. With the absence of risk concerns and poor destination image, the messages were not focused on 'safety', but on emotional content related to welcoming back tourists, as suggested by Ketter and Avraham, (2021). Moreover, after the pandemic, a shift in promotional strategies was detected, from the offline traditional campaigns to digital marketing. That shift allowed the development of customized initiatives for different

targeted audiences, like in the case of this collaborative campaign, coinciding with Toubes et al., (2021) study about digital marketing strategies in the post-pandemic era.

To answer RQ4, the impacts of the campaign from the customers' perspective were examined. The research findings showed that the impacts of collaborative destination marketing strategies varied among differently aged audiences, which is explained by generation theory of Mannheim, (1952), and the research of Schewe and Meredith, (2004), that argued that each age cohort has unique characteristics, values and preferences that affect their responses to marketing strategies. In the tourism sector, practitioners and academics such as Li et al. (2013) used generational theory when investigating tourist behaviour, as different generations showed different consumption patterns and attitudes towards travelling, also confirmed by the results of this study.

In this research, the digital collaborative campaign most significantly impacted on the younger generations (Generation Z and Millennials) in terms of shaping the destination image and travel intentions to Spain, having less travel experience to that destination. According to research by Fromm and Read, (2018), Li and Huang, (2023) and Molinillo et al., (2018), these two generations are most familiar with the online environment when planning and booking their holidays. Similarly, the present study shows that Generation Z and Millennials have a higher willingness to book a trip that is influenced by the digital collaborative campaign than the older generations.

For the oldest generations (Generation X and Baby Boomers) for who previous travel to Spain was more common, this collaborative campaign had a less significant impact on their perceived destination image and their travel intentions. Generation X are more influenced by family and friends, and they tend to include them in their travel plans (Hysa et al., 2021). Regarding the content of the campaigns, the findings of this research show that Baby Boomers liked the information provided by the collaborative campaign, as it may coincide with their preferences

when travelling, like ‘active holidays’ or relaxing. These differences between the age cohorts are aligned with the studies based on generational theory, such as Hysa et. al., (2021)’s, that states that age is an essential factor in influencing travellers’ planning, expectations, requirements, duration of travel and destination choice.

More generational differences were observed in relation to factors affecting perceived destination image of the country (including personal and social factors and external stimuli) and on their travel intention in the post-COVID-19 era (including age, income, and the economic and psychological impact of the pandemic). These findings concur with the model of Beerli and Martín, (2004), which presents these variables as being very relevant in the shaping of destination image, and with the model of Pappas (2021) regarding the factors that affect tourists’ travel intention in the post-pandemic scenario. The only element which showed clear agreement across the generations was a lack of perceived risk associated with visiting Spain during the pandemic or in the post-crisis era. This finding contradicts Wang et al., (2022)’s research regarding generational theory, as these authors considered Generation Z as the most adventurous generation, with a lower risk perception than older age cohorts, a factor that could have influenced generations’ travel decisions during the COVID-19 crisis.

Implications

Theoretical implications

This research enriches the existing literature as it provides an applied example of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) in the context of a collaborative marketing initiative developed in the COVID-19 crisis recovery period. From the tourism industry’s perspective, this study examines the selection of and relationships between partners, the objective-setting, the strategy design, and the effectiveness of the collaborative initiative. Moreover, the factors affecting the effectiveness of the collaborative strategies in the specific post-pandemic situation are analysed, complementing the research by Can et. al, (2021). With a lack of tourists’ risk perception, the

more influential factors are associated with the customer journey phase, and other variables affecting their travel behaviour, which complements the study of (Pappas, 2021). Moreover, with consideration of generation theory (Mannheim, 1952), the customers' perceptions about the impacts of this collaborative strategy and the variables influencing tourists' destination image creation and travel intention in the post-pandemic era were also examined. According to the results of the research, among these variables, the relevance of previous travel experience to the destination, across different age groups, is highlighted. This adds a layer of complexity to existing theories on destination marketing and generational behaviour, suggesting that the familiarity factor could be integrated into future theoretical models for a more comprehensive understanding.

Practical implications

This research present practical guidance for NTOs and DMOs in relation to their post-crisis collaborative marketing strategies and can contribute to increasing their campaigns' effectiveness. In their collaborative alliances, partners should be aligned with a common goal and work together to design the most appropriate strategy to achieve it. The management of stakeholder relationships is vital for an effective collaboration in which all partners benefit, as Donaldson and Preston, (1995) and Mitchell et al., (1997) proposed. Lesser-known destinations are encouraged to join collaborative initiatives with well-established partners to gain visibility and be more competitive (d'Angella and Go, 2009; Wang et al., 2013). Besides, as substantial differences were observed in terms of the impacts of these collaborative strategies on different generations, DMOs are recommended to design customized campaigns to target each potential audience, through online channels as digital marketing provides the best environment to achieve this (Toubes et al., 2021).

Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study are focused on the generalisation of the results due to the qualitative

methodology used and on the characteristics of the analysed collaborative campaign, designed for certain markets and tourists in a concrete time. The focus on UK residents, with a high level of familiarity with the destination could have skewed the impacts of the campaign on the different generation cohorts. This limitation opens up new paths of research into the effectiveness of collaborative destination marketing strategies with consideration given to the familiarity factor across age generations. The effectiveness of these initiatives could also be studied in terms of how they meet other objectives, with other stakeholders, and with tourists at other stages of their customer journey. Finally, research could focus on collaborative marketing strategies in other post-crisis or post-disaster scenarios in the long term.

Disclosure statement

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