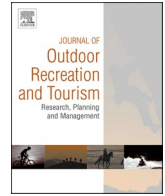


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Research Article

Introducing sense of place narratives in image projection for marine destinations

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ABSTRACT

There is a research gap around destination image projection for natural outdoor destinations, specifically the potential that the use of sense of place – a construct used to characterise the relationship between people and spatial settings – has for these destinations. This is especially the case for some preserved marine destinations. Here, public and private destination management organisations (DMOs) have an opportunity to develop collaborative promotion strategies that highlight local cultural imaginaries to boost and provide more authentic visitor experiences. The study seeks to bridge the research gap by analysing the coast of the Busturialdea comarca (county) in the province of Biscay in the Basque Country (Spain). It performs a qualitative analysis of the online destination image projected by the DMOs and study the presence and social significance of the Cantabrian Sea in this image. Findings show how the construction and projection of this image still follows a limited conventional strategy based on specific markets and ad hoc activities. There is therefore scope for DMOs to collaborate and to work with locals to take advantage of a new destination image based on the area's marine imaginaries. This would naturally incorporate social attachments and meanings. In other words, a sense of place.

Management implications

This study shows the need for DMOs for natural outdoor destinations to collaborate and to incorporate local imaginaries that constitute the local sense of place. Outdoor activities should be promoted as place-based recreational activities. This shift could ultimately create motivational and differentiated experiences that are distinctly local. As recent literature highlights, these motivational and differentiated images are the basis for greater and particularly better visitor attraction.

1. Introduction

For some years now, contemporary tourism has largely been defined by certain flexible and largely subjective processes, specifically the search for authentic and unique personal experiences (Wang, 1999). Image identity is seen as being related to the tourist object and therefore plays a very important role in a destination's projected image. However, authenticity should be seen as being related to the tourist subject, and therefore to the perceived image of tourism destinations (Marine-Roig, 2015). This search for authenticity is grounded in a combination of social valuations that connect potential tourists with a destination's

stakeholders, mainly residents (Kyle et al., 2003; Wynveen et al., 2012). The literature (Anholt, 2009) has demonstrated how destinations should improve the projection of their identity and highlights the importance of their communities in creating an emotional connection. A destination's atmosphere can be felt through its character, or in other words, its sense of place. Local stakeholders and particularly DMOs must project this sense of place and showcase local features to meet tourists' expectations around authenticity (Cresswell, 2004). In that regard, sense of place embraces concerns around local distinctiveness (Jarratt et al., 2019, p. 415; Massey, 1997).

This sense of place is interpreted as an idea or construct used to characterise the relationship between people and spatial settings and which generates a noticeable identity that is deeply felt by these people. It is represented through the different meanings of place, the degree of territorial attachment projected and the social norms that the destination promulgates. Cresswell's exploration (2004) of place understands it as a practice setting and centre of meaning connected to a rooted, authentic sense of identity, though forever challenged by change. Authors like Massey (1997) sustain those places can be understood as dynamic contexts of relationships undergoing constant change (Jarratt et al., 2019) and in continuous construction (Cresswell, 2015). May

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(1996), Massey (1997), Harvey (1996) and Harvey and Harvey (2000) postulate that place is a way of understanding the world, a social meeting context, and even a locus of collective memory (Cresswell, 2004, p. 61). In the meantime, the role of place is evolving in the digital age to take on new dimensions, moving away from the mainstream and offering unlimited milieu for the co-creation of images (Garay, 2019).

Although the relationships between a destination's image and its sense of place have been explored through operational concepts such as place branding, there is still a gap in terms of the processes around destination image creation and projection in natural, vulnerable and/or protected outdoor destinations. Tourism development should be aligned here with the concept of moral geography introduced by authors such as Cresswell (2004), which emphasizes how ecological fragility has to contend with new unmanaged versions of tourism amid a growing interest from both the private and public sectors. Communication strategies based on sense of place would help identify local distinctiveness and should therefore be part of broader environmental conservation strategies (Sibbald, 2012; cited in Jarratt et al., 2019).

Marine destinations have been subject to mass tourism development of previous decades for a number of reasons, including blurry institutional protection. However, at present, under the umbrella of the blue economy, public and private organisations have been trying to create development strategies that recognise the importance of marine resources and their potential for innovation and growth. This relies on the pull of natural attractions and the beauty of some preserved marine areas, which are highly vulnerable to environmental and social challenges. For tourism in these fragile environments to be truly resilient, it must consider these unique factors. In this context, the role of DMOs (mainly public and/or private tourism boards) will be especially crucial. Traditionally considered from a single mercantilist perspective, DMOs' purpose has been generally centred in the promotion and management of a territory as an attractive travel destination for individual and collective visitors. However, in vulnerable spaces such as those analysed in this study, DMOs should reconcile tourism promotion and management with the need for economic, social and environmental justice.

In fact, as has been seen in the development of countless destinations, a strategy based exclusively on economic development and that does not consider environmental and cultural balances, usually reverts to different problems that appear in the medium or long term. This is largely the lesson of some of the most classic references in the tourism field, beginning with that of Richard Butler (2006), in his tourism area life cycle proposal, which shows us precisely the type of imbalances that many territories experience after reaching the peak of a development exclusively guided by business profits. Therefore, this is the context where strategies as a promotion based in the destination's sense of place can be especially useful to balance tourism development with the economic needs of residents but also with respect for their territories' natural and cultural heritage.

From these ideas, our primary research questions are as follows: 1) Which DMOs primarily manage the image projection of these marine destinations? 2) Are these DMOs collaborating with each other and with local stakeholders to project this image? 3) Does the projected online image show the value of the unique sense of place (meaning, attachment and social values) of these marine destinations? To understand how this sense of place can be used in image projection for this kind of marine destinations, this study examines the coast of the Busturialdea comarca in the province of Biscay in the Basque Country (Spain). Busturialdea is a perfect example of a destination capable of attracting new but more aware and respectful tourists owing to its historical and cultural values, some of which are linked to its marine identity. The destination's characteristics call for a collaborative strategy underpinned by a sense of place.

2. Towards a [re] balance of the attributes of the destination image in the digital context

There is general agreement among scholars that destination image is a multi-faceted, composite construct comprising interrelated cognitive and affective evaluations interlaced into overall impressions. Image projection is particularly relevant for destinations because it has a significant impact on destination choice (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2006). This explains why DMOs have designed and implemented marketing and promotional strategies at the destination level (Garrod & Fyall, 2017) for years, since their projected image is mainly an induced or planned image (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). However, as we will see below, the digitization of these processes has caused profound changes in the balance between the actors who projected and received these images, as well as in the very nature of this image of destination. While digitization in the destination's image processes obviously affects all types of destination, it is especially important to observe its development in vulnerable destinations that need a DMOs' projection of their image more in line with their reality and sensitive characteristics and where more dialogue is also needed with all the stakeholders who can influence these processes.

Image is traditionally projected through a variety of textual and audio-visual media but is now mainly projected in the virtual domain and mostly through social media (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2006). Digital narratives have assumed control over destination image creation and projection in view of the volume of information sought by visitors to facilitate their decision-making (Garay, 2019). Information receivers (visitors) are now not only content consumers but produce user-generated content (UGC), giving pre-eminence to an organic image based in this case on perceptions and opinions that sometimes prevail over the facts (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015). These virtual spaces have been developed in environments where sociability is vital; users increasingly demand more interactive and, importantly, affective communication (Kirářlová & Pavlíčka, 2015). Destination image projection is currently becoming a multi-directional, interactive, dynamic and fluid process (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) where affective and motivational narratives are acquiring more pre-eminence.

The external factors which promote the attractiveness of a destination – and therefore influence tourists' individual perceptions – together generate an image through what is mainly a social process (Wynveen et al., 2012). Said process is essentially dialogic, incorporating the projection needs of some stakeholders and the perception of some receivers. Destination image can be interpreted as the result of evaluative responses to a given stimulus (Mazanec, 2009). These evaluations are primarily formed from cognitive and emotional attributes and mostly include a third conative or behavioural attribute (Ahn & Back, 2018). This is the classical interpretation of the attributes of destination image. In recent years, however, innovative approaches have enriched its interpretation. The literature has attempted to elucidate the causal relationship between cognitive and affective attributes (i.e., Beerli & Martin, 2004) and, to a lesser extent, their impact on conative or behavioural attributes. The aforementioned irruption of virtual spaces and the content projected by new stakeholders has generated a growing body of affective elements (Garay, 2019, Huang et al., 2022) amid a social context that relies on the empathy of other users.

Cognitive attributes remain the primary resource for building a destination's image, though these are being reinterpreted. Authors such as Giovanardi (2012) were among the first to call for a more representational cognitive conception of destinations relating to their value expression and deemed it necessary to recover the concept of hard and soft factors initially described by Kotler et al. (1999). Hard factors are identifiable, tangible elements in a destination (i.e. infrastructure),

whereas soft factors are intangible constructs such as quality of life, culture, flexibility and dynamism. At present, soft factors have become increasingly important in how destinations present themselves to the world (Kotler et al., 1999). Therefore, whereas hard factors provide essential information on a place's attractiveness, soft factors are associated with the sense of place and help foster social interaction and community (Mengi et al., 2017).

3. The sense-of-place-based narrative needs collaborative promotion, particularly in vulnerable destinations

As previously mentioned, both due to the current context of empowerment of new stakeholders in projecting the image of destinations and also owed to the particularities of vulnerable natural destinations, it is more necessary than ever to consider collaborative promotion strategies that go beyond of the traditional unilateral vision of certain DMOs. Here, it is where the perspective of the sense of place plays a special role, since it is precisely part of a collective consideration, of community identity, which transcends the traditional vision destined for a singular and individualistic reception.

In this context, the literature has shown how the construct of a place's identity is built up through the combination of physical environments, social meanings and experiences (Belhassen et al., 2008). Hence, the individual experience frequently interacts with a collective discourse around the destination to generate this discursive relationship, which constitutes the basis of a subjective attachment with a place and subsequent development of sense of place (Cresswell, 2015). To that end, according to the literature on place identity, the narratives around the destination should include both the place and people to create this connection (Anholt, 2009). The projected destination image, i.e. the one that should be planned or induced and guided by DMOs, should adhere to constructive authenticity (Belhassen, 2008), rather than symbolic authenticity, which uses branding strategies with 'unique' activities based around landmarks. The aim, then, should be to integrate the social discourse related to the place into the destination image. Until recently, however, the opinions of many stakeholders have been excluded from this process (Jarratt et al., 2019). A more collaborative promotion of sense of place should be explored in destination image projection and in building the sense of place itself.

Local stakeholders are key to generating contemporary branding models (García et al., 2012), mostly owing to the potential of digital environments. DMOs are in a better position than ever to profit from projecting a destination image with place-based narratives that share the community's values and social norms and facilitate a connection through meaning and attachment is the novel approach supported by place branding studies (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2015) that consider the need to improve the sense of connection. In this context, Lewicka (2008) explores place attachment through notions of place identity and place dependence, with the added dimensions of affective attachment and social bonding explored by scholars such as Kyle et al. (2004). Here, given the uncertainty of geographic fragmentation and modern spatial disruption, sense of place is considered a reaction against being seen as a homogeneous community.

The related notion of place dependence refers to functional attachment and stresses the need to consider the destination as a place for carrying out individual or collective routines (Gross & Brown, 2008). The resources and attributes of the place therefore define this functional dependence (Lewicka, 2008), as they are key factors for place-based branding, according to García et al. (2012). On the other hand, Scannell and Gifford (2010) showed that visitors' experience with residents has the potential to create location-based social bonds. Most of these studies highlight the role of DMOs in facilitating encounters between tourists and residents. In this sense, the virtual spaces in which destination image is currently projected seek to exploit these encounters and stakeholder sociability to attract new visitors (Garay, 2019). The range of communication activities carried out by DMOs goes far beyond

merely projecting a destination image, in fact, and communication flows can co-create a common agenda and develop alliances (García & Cater, 2020).

Common goals are particularly significant in the aforementioned moral geographies coined by Cresswell (2004). In protected areas, for example, the tourism strategy must align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). In that sense, collaborative marketing provides the most suitable framework (Chiodo et al., 2019), since it is a dynamic process that relies upon trust between the participants. Moreover, the collaboration between the public administration and the private sector should break down unilateral strategies. As Hristov and Ramkissoon (2016) argue, the management of natural outdoor destinations is normally characterised by place-based leadership and coordinated by the most representative public and private DMOs, though small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are usually the most prominent stakeholders. This is possible via multi-level coordination and collaboration whereby the social capital is activated at the invitation of both local and non-local stakeholders (Chiodo et al., 2019). Stakeholder networks eventually create resilience among communities, where relationship is more important than bond type. These exogenous strategies are expected to boost awareness, active participation and decision-making ability.

There has been a shift in destination image projection from exogenous marketing at the national level to local marketing. In their review of collaborative destination marketing, Garrod and Fyall (2017) explain that destinations were traditionally promoted through national or regional DMOs called Regional Tourism Boards (RTBs). The concept of destination has since been endogenously enhanced with the knowledge of Local Tourism Associations (LTAs). The role of DMOs is now conducted by LTAs; micro-clusters (local enterprises and partnerships) develop the marketing constellation for a destination. Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and regional Rural Development Associations (RDAs) are examples of these innovative marketing strategies based on local collaborative creation of a destination's image.

A collaborative approach to place-based narratives could prepare the ground for a better understanding of a destination's particularities by unearthing local stories to build truly authentic experiences. This could boost the experience economy, or exonomy (Pine & Gilmore, 2011), by planning tourism around a supply of personal, unique and varied experiences. In parallel, destination image projection – particularly for natural or vulnerable areas – needs a collaborative strategy more than ever, considering current common agendas like European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST).

4. Materials and methods

4.1. Case study

The study examines the coast of Busturialdea, the marine fringe adjacent to the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve and its coast. This coast looks onto the Cantabrian Sea, the part of the Atlantic Ocean that bathes most of the northern coast of Spain and the extreme southwest of the Atlantic coast of France. The area is situated in the province of Biscay (*Bizkaia* in the Basque language) (Fig. 1) in the Basque Country (Spain). The Urdaibai region became a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1984 (only for its land area). The Basque Government developed a special legal regime to protect and manage the reserve and set up a management board (the *Patronato de Urdaibai*) comprising members of various government bodies and other key stakeholders. Tourism development in this area is quite recent compared with iconic Basque destinations such as San Sebastián. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, however, Biscay was experiencing steady tourism growth thanks mainly to Bilbao, its capital. According to official figures from the Biscay Tourism Observatory (*Observatorio Turístico de Bizkaia*, 2020), a body supported by the provincial council, Biscay welcomed more than 1.5 million people in 2019.

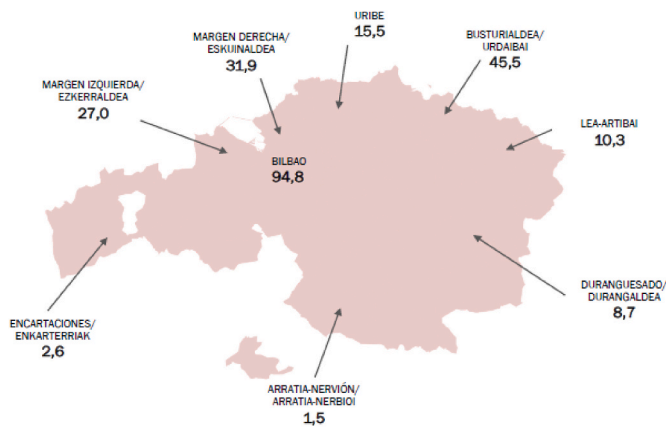


Fig. 1. Distribution of visitors in Biscay
Source: Observatorio Turístico de Bizkaia (2020).

In selecting the study area (see Fig. 2), the following criteria was used:

- Marine destinations with a cultural coastal heritage such as lighthouses and marine landmarks (e.g. islands or capes) and which may have a socio-historical backdrop.
- Marine destinations well known for traditional activities such as fishing and/or more modern activities like beach tourism and surfing.
- Marine destinations that fall into conservation category or strategy or host institutions engaged in ad hoc scientific production.

The shortlist of destinations in ‘Busturialdea coast’ area comprised Bakio, Bermeo, Mundaka, Sukarrieta, Busturia, Gautegiz Arteaga, Elantxobe and Ibarangelua. Most of these destinations are featured in a brochure from Turismo de Euskadi (the Basque Government’s tourism body) called *La Costa Vasca* (The Basque Coast) that promotes the significance of this coastal environment to the region.

4.2. Methodology

The research was guided by a qualitative research framework. The research questions guided the information collection process, in which the study sought to define the digital narrative associated with the case study and potential stakeholder cooperation in forming a destination image with a *blue significance*. Exploratory analysis began in winter 2019, followed by a descriptive-explanatory phase during 2020 and

2021 (Saunders et al., 2009). Deductive reasoning was primarily used, with sense of place as the main lens through which to interpret the destination image. Then, the constructs outlined in this study’s theoretical framework were analysed, such as place meaning, place attachment through place identity, place dependence, affective place, social bond and social norms.

The exploratory phase comprised an online enquiry procedure to (a) identify key stakeholders in digital narrative development. In parallel, (b) the main destination image categories were selected, considering the balance between their hard and soft attributes (Giovanardi (2012): landmarks (tangible and intangible); tourism experience (activities and products); green-blue space (protection and sustainability); historical and current narrative and creating memories; and place making. Both processes concluded with (c) data entry for the digital narrative. A top-down cascade was used to capture digital narratives from the destinations’ official websites. As Költringer and Dickinger (2015) indicate in their analysis of destination image projection using online sources, a DMO’s objective is to provide information about a destination’s attractions and functional elements. Hence, in a preliminary study, the networks and spaces used by stakeholders to project the destination image and the structure and type of information to understand where to capture it for further analysis were observed (see Fig. 3).

The official Basque tourism agency, Basquetour, and its website *Turismo Euskadi*, comprise the main RTB. Biscay Provincial Council and the *VisitBiscay* website comprise the secondary RTB. Another layer with official tourism responsibility was then observed, comprising the websites of the Urremendi RDA in the Busturialdea comarca and the Jata-Ondo RDA in the Uribe comarca. Town council websites comprised the final layer of this top-down approach. The information on their websites is the main entry point for accessing ad hoc tourism services such as hospitality and accommodation. Cascading down, services such as tourist agencies and websites for specific attractions are the main route into place-based experiences. Emerging digital platforms such as Airbnb currently also play a key role in shaping destination image via a company’s own suggestions as well as UGC.

This process generated 466 captures of the digital narratives from these websites, comprising a total of 127,799 words. This forms the basis of the case study. Then, the information with a review of official reports (grey literature) was consolidated and 12 semi-structured interviews with DMOs and other local stakeholders identified during the exploratory phase, including official bodies, the local tourism sector and various knowledge producing institutions (see Table 1).

These stakeholders were interviewed to understand their role in creating the image of the Busturialdea coast. The elements of collaborative marketing described by Wang (2008) guided the semi-structured interviews, which covered the following areas: 1) development of the digital narrative: decision-makers, competences, procedures and



Fig. 2. Case study area
Source: Map from the official *La Costa Vasca* brochure (Turismo de Euskadi, 2018, May 2021).

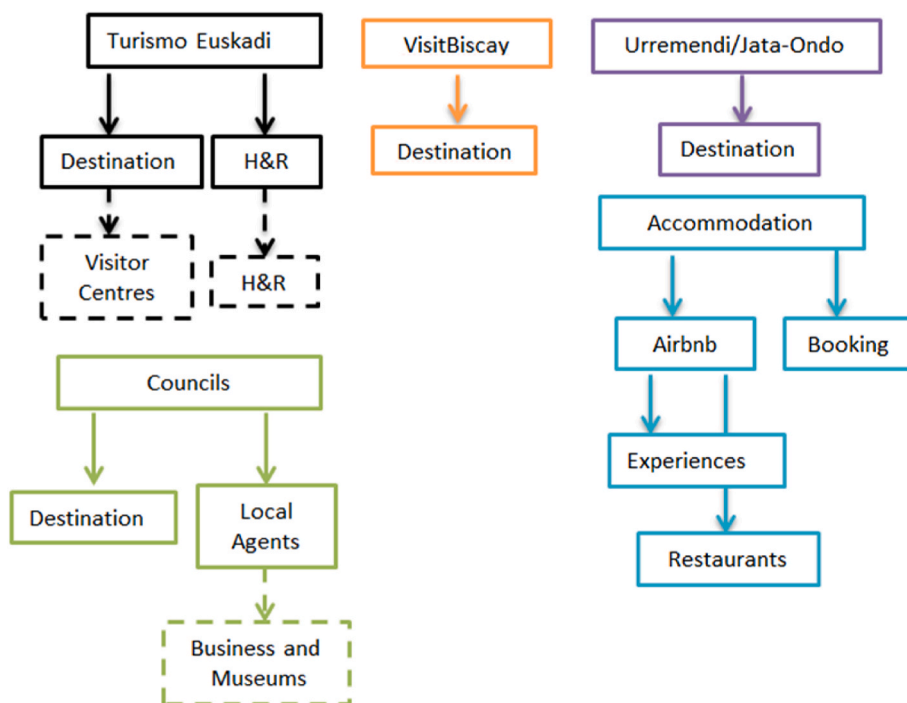


Fig. 3. Stakeholder networks and image projection spaces for the Busturialdea coast. Note: H&R = Hospitality & Restaurants. Source: Own creation.

Table 1
Key local stakeholders.

Sector		Organisation
Authorities	RTB: Basque Government	Basquetour
	RDA: Uribe Kosta	Jata-Ondo
	RDA: Busturia-aldea	Urremendi
	Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve (UBR)	Servicio de la Reserva de Biosfera de Urdaibai (SRBU)
Tourism industry	Council's tourism department and tourism information centre	Bermeo
	UBR chamber of commerce for tourism	Tourdaibai
	Tourism consultancy firms	Itxaslehor S. L.
	Tourism businesses	Hegaluze
Knowledge production & outreach	Museums	Museo del Pescador
	Blog about UBR	Urdailife
	Research Centre	Cátedra Unesco-UPV-EHU
	Outreach Centre	Ekoetxea
		Unesco Etxea

Source: Own creation.

strategies; 2) relationships with other stakeholders: collaborative promotion; and 3) the dialogue between the sense of place and place making (linked in this study's case to the destination's marine heritage).

Lastly, a descriptive and explanatory phase to analyse the information gathered was conducted. Here, the analysis was guided by an interpretation paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a coding system (see Table 2) derived from the aforementioned theories on sense of place. This system was applied to the local tourism context –the overarching theme for the thematic analysis. Nvivo® was used to assess both the digital narrative captured and the interview results. The coding system of this analysis is shared in the next section.

Table 2
Coding system for the thematic analysis.

Overarching theme: tourism context			
Theme		Codes	Examples
Place meaning	Historical meaning	Landmarks: tangible	Gaztelugatxe
		Landmarks: intangible	Matxixako Battlefield
Place attachment	Current meaning	Landmarks: tangible	Matxixako Lighthouse
		Landmarks: intangible	Surf culture
Place attachment	Local meaning	Local places	Local routes, baserris.
		Scientific meaning	Natural and Cultural Heritage
Place attachment	Place identity	Landmarks: tangible	Elantxobe, marine village
		Heritage: intangible	Blue cloths
Place attachment	Social bond	Heritage: intangible	Madalenas
		Festivals and parades	Arraina soka, Madalenas
Place attachment	Affective attachment	Cultural Events	World surf league
		Memories	Baserris and canning industry
Place attachment	Place dependence	Creating memories	Experiences (sports and local meetings)
		Access	Itineraries
Social Norms	Place dependence	Use	Practice (surf, fishing)
		Categories of protection	UBR, Biotope
Place making	Place dependence	Code of conduct	Protocols
		Social and traditional behaviours	Hamaiketako (elevenses)
Place making	Place dependence	Built landmarks	Dragonstone (Gaztelugatxe)
		Competences	Promotion - Biscay
Co-production	Place dependence	Provincial Council	Ekoetxea-Hegaluze
		Alliances (between stakeholders)	Neskaitillas
Co-production	Place dependence	Narrative production	

Source: Own creation.

5. Findings

5.1. Main stakeholders, strategies and potential collaborations in image projection for Busturialdea

The analysis of the digital narrative captures and of the interviews confirms that the RTBs (the Basque Government and Biscay Provincial Council) and the main RDA (Urremendi) still use a traditional marketing/branding process based on mainstream tourism production. This process puts the focus on the activity without considering the potential of the experience economy, which uses social discourse to facilitate interaction with a destination from a sense of place approach (Massey, 1997; cited in Cresswell, 2004). The Basque Government has led the narrative linking the destination with its marine heritage via the Master Plan for the Basque Coast (*Plan Director de la Costa Vasca*), which informs development on the region's coast, and the Basque Coast Destination (*Destino Costa Vasca*) brand.

The strategy deployed by Biscay Provincial Council is a product of brand analysis resulting in the conviction that Bilbao – the capital of the province – is the real tourism driver in the Biscay province. The provincial council and Bilbao City Hall have developed an integrated strategy to promote the area as a whole, with the city at the forefront (Bilbao, 2019, May 2021). Some interviewees stated that the sea is a cross-cutting theme in this strategy, mainly in terms of coastal activities and relatively traditional tourism products such as surfing, but also through a connection with tourism landscapes. The Undiscovered Coast (*Costa Insólita*) and Seafaring Coast (*Costa Marinera*) labels are examples of this. This was an expected finding, since the current main interaction with the blue space is via the coast.

The main RDA, Urremendi, provides content for projecting the destination image. Urremendi promotes responsible tourism experiences to visitors and day trippers. It should be noted that tourism in the case study area is currently experiencing major changes, such as adoption of the ECST led by Urremendi and Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve Services (SRBU). The ecotourism philosophy, co-management and local participation involved in this collective project have reinforced collaborative strategies throughout the protected area and in this study's specific area of analysis. However, public stakeholders claim that the success of this type of collaborative process depends on the active participation of another relevant stakeholder: the private sector. Similarly, Tourdaibai (the chamber of commerce for tourism in Urdaibai), which acts as an LEP, argues the need for synergies and representation so that the various stakeholders can function as one voice. A robust chamber of commerce is a traditional way of rooting alliances. According to the LEP, however, tourism sector stakeholders in the region continue to work in isolation.

This lack of communication between stakeholders impacts the place-based narrative of the destination and endangers interconnectivity. The SRBU and the Urremendi RDA understand that the ECST provides the framework for conducting their activity and promoting collaboration among local stakeholders. The SRBU is the main stakeholder involved in developing collaborative strategies that could involve multiple stakeholders. This is also relevant to the destination's image projection, where the potential of using the destination's sense of place is now being appreciated. A series of workshops led by the RDA and the SRBU gathered local stakeholders' contributions to develop a single destination-based narrative that highlights the destination's unique character. These same local stakeholders see this collaboration as having a future impact on branding design and management. Beyond strategic intentions and the early steps in terms of collaboration, let us examine how the current image of the destination is being projected and what role the sense of place actually plays.

5.2. The role of sea narratives in the image of Busturialdea projected by stakeholders

The primary analysis of online destination-based information reveals

an absence of collaboration and therefore of co-production of the destination image among stakeholders, and no unified narrative portraying the destination online. Depending on the particular DMO, the destination image may involve a storyline (websites of Bermeo and Bakio local councils), a tourism product (*Turismo Euskadi* website) or a list of tourism resources on other websites (i.e. some company sites). Place-based stakeholders acknowledge that a nuanced, yet robust destination image is key to growing value but confirm they are not actually responsible for constructing one. While they provide the information, the narrative itself is created by professional services. They claim there is no sense-of-place-based narrative production, though the information they provided is enriched by various committees such as the Basque Country's sailing committee (*mesa náutica de Euskadi*) or the surfing club created by Basquetour (Basque Government - RTB).

As it has already been highlighted, the role of RTBs in displaying a destination's main landmarks and main place identity storylines. Biscay Provincial Council has developed a consistent digital narrative used by other place-based stakeholders, particularly where historical information is concerned. The main RDA, Urremendi, provides useful information about the destination and is the point of reference for several Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve stakeholders, as the interviews showed. Many key local players use the information on the Urremendi website on their own sites. This creates some problems in that the information from these sources becomes repetitive and an opportunity is missed to enrich the destination image. The branding strategy deploys the symbolic authenticity approach (Belhassen, 2008), based on the main heritage sites and ad hoc activities offered, and is not intertwined with local attachment, e.g., the bond with the sea. Sense of place here draws on the protected area (exclusively of the terrestrial part) and misses the potential of narratives around marine identities.

The information provided by hospitality-related stakeholders includes details of their surroundings and of the nearest attractions. Most of these establishments are former Basque country houses (*Baserris*). These are at the heart of the terrestrial part of Basque culture and usually separate from the area's bond with the sea. The accommodation sector therefore has historical limitations in terms of being a champion of the Cantabrian Sea beyond offering information about beaches, surfing hot spots and maritime festivals. Their references to the sea are generally found in gastronomy narratives involving seafood, rather than using the sea as a cultural agent in a broader sense. Nevertheless, the *Cantábrico* label is becoming part of the destination narrative, and the activities offered include, for example, dolphin watching and visits to the Fisherman's Museum (*Museo del Pescador*) in Bermeo.

New hospitality stakeholders such as digital platforms, and particularly Airbnb, have also failed to provide place-based storytelling. Airbnb's digital narrative focuses on spatial centrality; typical messages include 'very central' and 'ocean views.' In the platform's 'Where am I staying?' section, the host can add information about the surrounding area and leisure activities. However, the information in most of this new form of UGC is limited and fragmented. This re-definition of a destination's sense of place aligns with Massey's (1997) ideas around the dynamic interpretation of place meanings. Here, however, marine identity is practically non-existent.

Beyond public management bodies and the traditional and new private sectors, the main stakeholder responsible for promoting the marine sense of place on the Busturialdea coast is the Fisherman's Museum. Most of the content on its website is standardised since the same public organisation manages all museums in the region. 'Consequently, to personalise the narrative we use social media to have a fluent dialogue with our [potential] visitors'. It is one of the few examples of the use of UGC for destination image projection in the case study area, showing that an image of the area and its maritime fringe can be projected based on both local knowledge and the visitor experience. The image projected by the local canning industry, which was recently involved in experiential tourism, was also analysed. Their projected image still uses online narratives focussed on the story of the family

attachment to the place. DMOs name the sea differently to reach different markets. For example, the Basque Government promotes the Basque Coast brand. In the narrative from Bizkaia Provincial Council, coast and sea appear separately in the text. Meanwhile, the complete absence of the sea in the Urremendi RDA's storyline aligns with the fact that Urdaibai is defined more by its land-based development than its marine bond. The following word clouds (Fig. 4) are the result of the related analysis.

The Cantabrian Sea is barely mentioned. In some official reports, such as those promoting Biscay to the foreign market, the term South Atlantic is used to show the location of the destination – probably because the main market comes from the North Atlantic – but still has no clear presence in the digital narrative. This find is reinforced by the interviews, which confirmed that the coast is more popular than the sea in everyday conversation and informal narrative. Similarly, the thematic analysis shows that the Cantabrian Sea is appreciated from the shore through tangible heritage (e.g., hermitages and lighthouses) and an endless list of beaches but without any connection to its vast socio-historical value.

Given place is a context for social relations (Massey, 1997), the limitation of blue space interactions to local stakeholders such as fishermen, and not exclusively local stakeholders such as surfers, may explain the terrestrial mindset. There is therefore a huge opportunity to project the image of this marine destination with a tourism strategy informed by the analysis. The destination management strategies have opted for diversity in the projected image, rather than offering a unified image that could function as a more solid brand. In other words, they follow intention-based criteria (Arcand and Bourbeau, 1995; cited in Hébert, 2011, May 2021). Though the projected image is diffuse and thus far does not exploit the potential of the area's marine bond, there are still elements that can be identified with a sense of place. The sense of the place of the sea in the case-study is based on the place meaning on a symbolic level; and its place attachment is represented in terms of the social bond, dependence place and place identity.

Place meaning is achieved with a historical emphasis (symbolic authenticity of landmarks):

Gaztelugatxe (Dragonstone in Game of Thrones) is an islet belonging to the village of Bermeo, but closer to Bakio. It is connected to the mainland by a two-arched bridge. On the island there is a hermitage dedicated to San Juan dating from the 10th century, although some discoveries date from the 9th century. (Airbnb, Bakio)

Here, place meaning is complemented with some place attachment through what is essentially the aesthetic layer of the landscape. The emotional response to what is seen and what is experienced becomes the leitmotif when visiting and connecting with the place. Visual media showcases the beauty of the landscape and slogans encourage respectful experiences. However, there is a clear bias in favour of the operational narrative (activities), whereby place dependence is a way of connecting with the destination:

The sands suggest a lengthy list of activities, surf being the most popular, thanks to the quantity and quality of the waves. (Uribe.eu, Jata-Ondo RDA)

The main criterion used in the official promotion of the area is place identity, though it is limited and sometimes repetitive. As mentioned previously, the Basque marine place identity centres around fishing culture:

(...) at the start of the Spanish white tuna fishing season, the fishermen and womenfolk ('neskatillas', women working at the ports) usually go to Gaztelugatxe to ask for good health, mild weather and good fishing. [...]. This is why the sailors/fishermen take their boats to the vicinity of Gaztelugatxe to 'do what has to be done: three turns to port and three to starboard.' (Turismo Urdaibai website, Urremendi RDA)

Fishing culture is projected through some of the area's most important festivities and processions, most of which were (and still are) a way of developing local social bonds (and a sense of belonging among the locals):

To celebrate victory or peace between the two villages, every July 22, on Santa Magdalena Day, hundreds of boats leave from Bermeo and approach the island. The mayor of Bermeo, in the presence of the mayors of Elantxobe and Mundaka, throws a tile into the sea, renewing the property of the island of Izaro, 'That's as far as the leaks from Bermeo go!' (Restaurant)

In this projection, soft cognitive attributes lead the narrative and affective attributes are in the background. This is a conventional tourism projection where leisure-based criteria create a sense of place with a descriptive and operational meaning to enjoyment of the blue space. It is up to the visitor to interpret the destination, depending on their own knowledge or interest.

6. Discussion

The analysis of the digital place-based narrative for the Busturialdea coast and its development by DMOs has yielded some valuable insights. The power of the current online narrative to create a destination image was then explored. As observed in the literature, this image may be constructed from a conventional commercial narrative based on mainstream tourism production or may comprise experiential narratives. Whereas a narrative based on tourism production depicts the destination as an assortment of activities that can be enjoyed there, the experience approach (Crompton, 1979; Költringer & Dickinger, 2015; Mazanec, 2009) highlights the sense of place and puts the emphasis on emotional attachment. Given the potential impact of the narrative on visitor intention and on their capacity to empathise with local customs once in the destination, this new experiential tourism approach should be promoted, particularly through communication between place-based stakeholders. This is especially important for natural, vulnerable and/or protected outdoor destinations, such as marine destinations, where this sense of place can connect visitors with the place and its community.

The digital narrative for the Busturialdea coast continues to use a traditional strategy based on specific markets and ad hoc activities in its destination image projection. As a result, multiple images are generated without being interwoven into the overall storyline. Official sources of image projection tend to concentrate – rather repetitively – on landmarks (distinctive place-based attributes) and sports activities, thereby contributing to the creation of a standardised destination image.

This strategy fits the concept of symbolic authenticity defined by popular landmarks (Belhassen, 2008) and is worlds away from a personalised image based on experiences. This is essentially a debate between product and experience in which, at a narrative level, the distinctive element may be the emotional aspect that every place inspires. When it comes to the emotional side domain of contemporary image projection, the narrative can promote a sensory experience, as Ahn and Back (2018) describe in their study of customer brand engagement. The potential visitor is encouraged to feel the destination through its intangible resources and their own subjective experiences (motivations and connection to the host community). In the case study area, however, the image narratives are referential and operational.

The digital narrative in the marine area analysed consolidates place attachment through physical place dependence, i.e., the activity is more important than the place. Consequently, the narrative centres around the ad hoc activity market (tourism products approach). Place identity was more significant in the past when culture developed via physical spaces (Cresswell, 2004) defined by geography and where human relationships consolidated the place. In fact, place develops because social interactions are not frozen in time. Sense of place related to the sea has undergone significant changes. Like the metaphor in Harvey's article

'From Space to Place and Back' (1996), the sea becomes a place because of coastal communities. But following massive changes in the fishing industry, the representation of the sea has become more homogeneous and developed a strong 'sun and beach' trend, thus minimising a traditional projection of the sense of place.

The sea is seen by westerners as a blank canvas for experiencing moments of leisure. This is reflected in the narrative of being 'in the place' but not 'with the place; ' environments are landscapes where the destination is observed but not lived in. The narrative reflects an outsider's view based on layers of beauty (shapes, colours) (Cresswell, 2004). The narratives for the Busturialdea coast follow this premise by placing a high value on the aesthetic attributes of the destination's image (landscape versus place), by strong visual aids that reflect society's current inclination for photography.

The conventional version of tourism image projection usually feeds into this view. However, destinations like Busturialdea should be viewed as a meaningful space where subjective and emotional attachments arise from the rich and complex interplay of people and environments. The father of heritage interpretation – Tilden (2006) – explains that the creators of old myths cultivated images in the mind. They understood that the soul of the place is a story, and the soul of the story is a personality. The aim of the narrative should be to create a new tourism paradigm that fosters the notion of 'being there.' In this respect, the digital destination image of the Busturialdea coast reflects an extremely limited version of its sense of place. For example, the official DMOs argue that place identity is a key element, though their narrative lacks a local voice. Fishermen and surfers are shown as the origins of certain festivals, meaning they are passive stakeholders rather than the main characters of local marine narratives.

As at many marine destinations, marine identity is standardised to encompass fishing culture, gastronomy and cultural festivals. The perception of the blue space is therefore more basic than the meaning and attachment felt by the local population. The official marketing material for the study area centres around the city of Bilbao, relegating the local sea and the coast to mere accessories in the official strategy. Moreover, local perception of the area supports the fact that the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve – which covers much of the case study area – has mostly land-based roots and a largely rural society. It is therefore no surprise that the digital narrative reflects this land-based approach.

This finding emphasizes the importance of maintaining a constant dialogue among all place-based stakeholders and with local residents. In this paradigm, key local players are primarily responsible for setting the tone of the place. The contemporary time-space compression with high population mobility described by Massey (1997) compromises the goal of a unique local destination image. Local communities are now more dynamic than ever and there are multiple and diverse versions of sense of place. Harvey brands the search for an authentic sense of place as militant particularism (cited in Cresswell, 2004, p. 61), while Massey (1997) holds that a place can also be defined by outsiders, and Jarratt et al. (2019) question which version of sense of place should be developed.

The information provided about the Busturialdea coast is mostly a set of tips for how to enjoy the destination (place dependence). Place-based intermediaries portray the destination as a place to be enjoyed, rather than fully discovered. Said intermediaries can be considered small versions of tourism information centres given the standardised information they provide. Findings also reveal that the DMOs delegate the place-based narrative to professional service providers. Consequently, the active local voice is barely audible.

The question arises around whether the DMOs on the ground have the knowledge and skills to create a place-based narrative. Some DMOs, particularly town councils, understand that the narrative is a valuable tool for managing tourism flow. In fact, the best marine-related narratives have been found at this local level. The place identity of a destination must reconcile its past, present and future to protect a valuable tourism resource. The somewhat romantic past of the bustling fishing

port could coexist alongside gastronomy and certain buildings and traditions that allude to the place's seafaring past. In the destination image, the passive voice could stay true to this past while the active voice could create a present with a renewed sense of place. Drawing on Belhassen's (2018) study of authenticity, place projection should be based on a mix between the socially constructed meaning of place and the individual meaning based on experience. The blue humanities concept developed by Gillis (2013) highlights that marine identity is formed by collective rather than individual references. For example, universal literary masterpieces like Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* have nurtured the blue sense of place in the Western culture. A common social discourse around the sea originated in the imagination of relatively few individuals.

Contemporary social discourses related to the sea mainly focus on leisure. Sunbathing, swimming and water sports together comprise the marine sense of place. Tuan (1977) postulated that socially constructed meaning is impacted by a personal experience of a place. However, the opportunity to truly interact with the blue space is limited to relatively few people. Traditionally, the sea is the venue for sailing, trade, fishing and travelling. It is also the historical hiding place of pirates and smugglers. Only a specific section of society has directly interacted with that environment. A sense of place pertaining to few people has been transposed to the entire population. As Belhassen et al. (2008) highlight, real physical places have a key role in collectively creating meanings. This stems from the impact of the characteristics of the space – liquid with blurry boundaries and uncertain ownership – on the sense of place. The issue comes when the collective memory that contributes to the sense of place vanishes because of the passage of time, changing interactions with the place or population shifts.

Nowadays, the sense of place of the blue space relates to the current use of the destination for water sports and outdoor activities. It is a place dependence that connects easily to the present. The image of the sea in this case study area is shaped around current place-dependent activities such as beach experiences and water sports like surfing. These activities and others, such as visits to the canning industry, could make the transition from being simply leisure activities to genuine place-based activities where the characteristics of the place have influenced and become the active voice for new blue narratives. Currently, the sea maintains an overall sense of place in western culture based on a limited variety of activities in the marine environment and the influence of the social discourse of the blue space throughout time.

7. Conclusions

This research has tried to understand the sources and nature of the projected image of a particular marine destination. In response to the first two research questions, findings show how various public DMOs continue to be the main managers of the projection of this image. Each of these stakeholders generally have a different communication strategy and there is scant collaboration among them. These place-based key stakeholders are aware of the importance of the narrative in managing the destination, though collaborative promotion remains limited.

These stakeholders generally prize the tourism product over other elements of the destination. However, the Urremendi RDA in its association with the SRBU has the potential to propose changes for the future. These changes may come from greater use of the boost given by the ECST in the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve, specifically in relation to the projected image of the Busturialdea coast. Both these stakeholders could bring together other stakeholders to develop and project an image of the destination that goes beyond a simple consideration of tourism production to consider other elements deemed relevant in the current literature.

This leads us to the third and central research question of this study, relating to the possibility of incorporating elements related to the sense of place of natural outdoor destinations, and in this study's case marine destinations. The study analysed the online image of the Busturialdea

coast using the sense of place approach, whereby meaning, attachment and social norms define the place. In this case, this study is concerned specifically with marine content. Findings show how the local sea is discovered through historical interactions kept alive through traditions and heritage. The present use of marine identities excludes local voices, focusing instead on the active experience of the sea through activities such as surfing.

The narrative prioritises operative information and leisure is the main criterion. It does not fully exploit the possibilities of the Busturialdea coast's sense of place. The destination could be presented as a place to be experienced rather than just observed. There are therefore huge possibilities with regard to the use of soft cognitive attributes in the projected image of this type of destination. A projection based on the sense of place, would complement sustainable management of these natural outdoor areas. In this case, this is likely to materialise from the leadership of the local DMOs most involved in said sustainable management. The strategy of the Urremendi RDA and SRBU already draws on the ECST principles.

8. Managerial implications, limitations and future research proposals

This research reveals the need for local stakeholders, and especially DMOs for outdoor natural destinations, to develop a projected image that incorporates local voices to make the potential visitor feel the place attachment and meaning and want to come back to discover the multiple layers of the destination. DMOs should promote the area as a marine tourism destination with place-based values. Given the increasing demand for nature-based experiences, destinations face the challenge of portraying a place-based image in the pre-trip stage to arouse interest and respect for local people, culture and nature. The main drawback here is the limited knowledge among DMOs of the key role played by a complex place-based narrative. Until now, DMOs have hired other professionals to develop the narrative. They are beginning to understand its importance (workshops with the aforementioned stakeholders, and the current proposal to integrate the place-based narrative in their communication strategies). However, they still have a long way to go.

Clearly, this study has limitations since it is restricted to one marine destination. It would be useful to conduct this type of analysis for other outdoor natural destinations where the sense of place may have other peculiarities. It would also be interesting to compare this study with the results found in other types of outdoor destinations located in other macro-regions, since there may be other conditioning factors in terms of stakeholders, and different local population needs. It may also be worth reflecting on the extent to which sense of place can provide value in different scenarios. It certainly seems a good approach to forming an image of a destination that is more consistent with the needs of local stakeholders and fosters respect for the environmental and social settings of natural outdoor destinations.

Future studies should consider the impact of UGC in the destination place-based narrative. The power of social media has turned content users into developers of destination narratives. However, many unknowns surround this premise. Are they knowers or duplicators? Visitors or commentators? Lastly, more in-depth studies should be conducted to examine whether the sea is better understood and described by those who manage it or those who visit it.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Olga García-Hernández: Methodology, Software, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Lluís Alfons Garay-Tamajón:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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