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Image Profusion and Fuzzy Branding: The Douro Tourism Tropes

The Douro Valley, Portugal, has been identified as a destination with a remarkable potential for tourism development. Although its attractiveness is frequently attributed to the cultural winescape, the destination promotion, made by multiple agents through multiple media and referring to different overlapping territories, brings up very different imagery, signifiers, metaphors, aesthetics, and symbols. In this context, the present paper analyses the semiotics of Douro promotion, aiming to: i) map the diversity of representations; ii) identify potential ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions resulting from that diversity; iii) understand how this diversity affects branding and positioning both for domestic and international markets; iv) interpret stakeholders' thoughts and feelings about the image-brand duality and expectations about a consistent destination branding. To attain these objectives, the analysis combines several qualitative methods, namely participant observation at the destination; content analysis of promotion materials from municipalities, business associations, and private tour operators; ten semi-structured interviews and four focus groups with the relevant stakeholders (entrepreneurs, associative leaders, and tourism practitioners). Results confirm a pronounced profusion of destination representations and identities. Although most stakeholders consider Douro as a brand, they fail to agree on brand meaning, image, and dominant cultural resources. Paradoxically, they suggest very different targeting and positioning strategies, while agreeing that a well-defined consistent brand is fundamental to successfully marketing the destination. Discussing and interpreting these results, in order to highlight the paper's potential theoretical contribution, we assume that the salient branding fuzziness is not necessarily a threat to Douro tourism development. In the era of postmodern branding and antibranding consumer culture, marked by the increasing importance of "infomediaries" and digital influencers, a certain degree of fuzziness leaves room for multiple points of tourists' attachment to the destination. However, it is argued, a minimum consensus on targeting and positioning is needed, for the brand to thrive.