



Meta Region Brand, a tool for economic and tourist strengthening for the plain's territory

Marca Región Meta, una herramienta de fortalecimiento económico y turístico para el territorio llanero

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ABSTRACT

The region brand is a marketing strategy that involves the creation of an identity and image for a particular territory, including the development of a brand, a logo and other visual elements that represent the cultural, historical and natural attractions of the region that seeks to promote the economy of the territory and influence the improvement of the living conditions of the population. The objective of the research is to explore whether the Meta region brand can be considered a tool for strengthening the tourism economy. Mixed research was developed, based on an exploratory and descriptive qualitative method and the quantitative method, with the purpose of recognizing the main problems of the territory, in terms of brand recall and positioning of the Meta department. Meta has five tourist routes identified by the Meta Tourism Institute (Embrujo llanero, Amanecer llanero, Piedemonte llanero, La Macarena and Villavicencio), these have not yet been positioned in the minds of tourists and even those born in the territory. The promotion of nature tourism protected natural areas, and cultural tourism can strengthen the tourism industry and create new job opportunities for local communities.

Keywords: advertising, brand image, marketing, region brand, tourism.

JEL Classification: M50, M51, Z35

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RESUMEN

La marca región es una estrategia de marketing, que implica la creación de una identidad e imagen para un territorio en particular, incluye el desarrollo de una marca, un logotipo y otros elementos visuales que representen los atractivos culturales, históricos y naturales de la región que busca promover la economía del territorio e influir en la mejora de las condiciones de vida de la población. El objetivo de la investigación es explorar si la marca Región Meta puede considerarse una herramienta de fortalecimiento económica turística. Se desarrolló una investigación mixta, a partir de un método cualitativo de carácter exploratorio y descriptivo y el método cuantitativo, con la finalidad de reconocer las principales problemáticas del territorio, en cuanto a la recordación y posicionamiento de marca del departamento Meta. El Meta cuenta con cinco rutas turísticas identificadas por el Instituto de Turismo del Meta (Embrujo llanero, Amanecer llanero, Piedemonte llanero, La Macarena y Villavicencio), que aún no se han posicionado en la mente de los turistas e incluso de los nacidos en el territorio. La promoción del turismo de naturaleza, las áreas naturales protegidas, el turismo cultural puede fortalecer la industria turística y crear nuevas oportunidades laborales para las comunidades locales.

Palabras clave: imagen de marca, marca región, marketing, publicidad, turismo.

Clasificación JEL: M50, M51, Z35

INTRODUCTION

The regional brand is a marketing strategy that has reached a development in recent years (Pisula et al., 2023) and involves the creation of an identity and image for a particular territory; for this case, we will address the Department of Meta in Colombia. This includes the development of a brand, a logo, and other visual elements that represent the cultural, historical, and natural attractions of the region that seek to promote the economy of the territory and influence the improvement of the living conditions of the population (Kovathanakul, 2015; Sohn, 2022).



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“Territorial marketing” can be defined as the strategies, policies, models and action plans focused on improving the economy of a specific territory based on local development, among the main objectives are: the transformation of local production systems, the increase in productive levels, the generation of sources of employment and the improvement of the living conditions of its inhabitants (Silva and Sandoval, 2005).

In the context of ecotourism, the regional brand is particularly important because it helps promote the natural attractions of the region and position them as sustainable tourist destinations in the country; the importance of the regional brand in ecotourism cannot be underestimated; a successful regional brand can attract more visitors to the region and increase the length of their stay, as well as their spending on local goods and services (Gómez & Molina, 2013). An example of this is the Spanish region of Castilla-La Mancha, where, based on a representative book of universal literature – *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*, written by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra – the conceptualization of the brand is addressed around the characteristics of the character and his experiences in the region, even adapting the first sentence of the book (In a place in La Mancha, whose name I do not want to remember...) to its campaign slogan (In a place in your life); This allows the region to differentiate itself from its competitors and create a unique selling proposition that attracts tourists. According to statistics for the year 2023 from the Presidency of the Autonomous Community of Castilla la Mancha, tourism has increased by 16% compared to previous years, with the exception of 2020, due to pandemic issues (Castilla La Mancha - International Tourism, 2022).

Meta, located in the Colombian Orinoquia, is characterized by its agricultural, livestock, mining, agro-industrial, commercial, and ecotourism development (Triviantes, 2022). The Department's Tourism Institute has provided support in key sectors of tourism. Luis Londoño, director of the Meta Tourism Institute, states that: “We reach the territory, supporting entrepreneurs and operators from all municipalities. People must understand that tourism is the fundamental axis of our economy and that tourists look for natural sites, and here we have a great alternative” (Gobernación del Meta, 2021). However, a change has been noted regarding how the region's tourist attractions are made known, thanks to digital platforms (Carrasco-Farré et al., 2022; Song et al., 2020); word of mouth from tourists and the population itself has expanded to unimaginable places. This element, among other things, motivates thousands of people to connect with nature without leaving aside the fun, family togetherness, and adrenaline found in the Meta department.

Although it is true that the Meta brand has been in the works since 2014, with its slogan “The natural route”, it does not have the strategic development of a regional brand, which generates recall and positioning in terms of the tourism model. As William Cabrera, Manager of the Villavicencio Tourism Company, states: “Here we have to think about what the client wants and based on that design variety in the offer.” The purpose of the regional brand is to create a positive perception of the region among visitors, residents, and potential investors, which can lead to an increase in tourism and economic growth in the department (Robles, 2015).

Another example at the Colombian level is the Putumayo region, which has developed a brand that highlights its natural beauty, cultural diversity, and commitment to sustainable tourism; this has helped to position the region as one of the main ecotourism destinations in Colombia and attracts a growing number of visitors each year (Carvajal & González, 2016).

This research aims to structure, through marketing, the design of an exclusive identity that differentiates Meta's regional brand from other departments. Additionally, with the implementation of this project, we will seek to reinforce the regional values of the Llanero territory, devising an action plan to strengthen the culture, tourism, and economy of the department's tourist routes. Claudia Lucía Osorio, director of Cotal in Colombia, said that she had seen “in Meta that the private and public sectors are very well articulated and work as a team and that this was key to thinking about holding the international congress” or that “Meta is now seen internationally as a tourist destination and it is good for tourists to see that in Meta there are many destinations other than Caño Cristales to visit” (Portafolio, 2017).

Therefore, it is important to take into account similar research, in order to obtain relevant information that allows us to complement our object of study.

The objective of the research is to explore whether the Meta Region brand can be considered a tool for economic and tourist strengthening.

METHODOLOGY

The research to expand the sources of knowledge was based on the “Design Thinking” philosophy (Hews et al., 2023; Tsai et al., 2023). The objectives of deploying the philosophy focused on two variables, namely, Generation of innovative ideas and Perfection of design thinking. The question that guided the research was: Can the Meta Region brand be considered a tool for economic and tourism strengthening?

Type of study

A mixed research (Beck & Casavant, 2019) was developed based on a qualitative method of an exploratory and descriptive nature (Anâker et al., 2021; Carvalho et al., 2005), with the aim of recognizing the main problems of the territory, in terms of brand recall and positioning of the department; In addition, an inductive approach (Heller et al., 2022) was used for the analysis of the main concepts of territorial marketing, as a premise for the identification of components that are applied in the creation and exploitation of regional brands and products with designation of origin, through a documentary review. And the quantitative method (Ding et al., 2023), supported by tools – such as surveys – for the measurement of population variables.

Selected population

Among the selected clusters is the MTO Eastern Tourism Cluster, which allowed us to work with the communities of the tourist destinations in the foothills and, mainly, with the inhabitants of municipalities such as Restrepo, Cumaral, and Barranca de Upía, from which we can see extensive work from community tourism implemented in different sectors of Meta.

Likewise, other areas of the department were worked on, especially those located in the northern area of the Sierra de la Macarena National Natural Park, which has one of the most attractive destinations in the country and the world, such as Caño Cristales, and other destinations that are now beginning to be key in the ecotourism framework of Meta, such as the Güejar River and its different settings (canyon, natural pools, waterfalls, among others); all of this, together, allowed us to carry out an exploration of identification, characterization and recognition of the territory.

RESULTS

The “region brand”, as a concept, is relatively new and has its counterpart in the country product image (Bouzdine-Chameeva et al., 2017; Vints et al., 2021), which refers to the image with which tourist packages are sold in the territory. It is a powerful tool to promote tourism, as it can increase awareness and recognition of a region’s natural resources and attractions (Fernández-Cavia et al., 2014; López-Dóriga et al., 2019). Formulating economic and tourism plans is a key exercise in defining public policies for the sector, and creating tourist routes can be a dynamic element of the local and regional economy, promoting integration and development (Gambarota & Lorda, 2017). A product can be related to a destination based on its design (Boehe et al., 2016; Davidson & Rogers, 2006), the components that comprise it, the country where it is processed, or other factors (Oflac et al., 2015). In this sense, territories strengthen their brands with cultural, economic, social, and geographic elements from the differentiation with other territories or places, which become, in turn, an objective that attracts visitors or tourists (Gautier et al., 2011; Sohn, 2022).

The objective of creating regional brands is to promote both economic and social progress by exalting the conditions that generate greater importance and perception for the population of the territory or foreigners. It is considered a marketing strategy with a reach of region, territory, or place, and its success is aligned with the satisfaction of community needs and the expectations of visitors, investors, or potential buyers (Lu et al., 2020). The region must focus on maintaining the offer of services and products that guarantee the satisfaction of all stakeholders in it (Bhattacharya et al., 2023; Mancini et al., 2022), which shows that it is a continuous creation process, which evolves based on the development of new infrastructures, social customs, policies and strategies for the development of public spaces, the evolution in government management and international and national markets. In this sense, the brand must adjust to the specific historical conditions of each territory, region, or place (Coombe & Malik, 2018).

The regional brand combines all the elements that distinguish a territory based on all its assets: historical, technological, geographic, political, natural and commercial, as elements that influence the perception of visitors. It seeks to reinforce the participation of citizens and all economic actors in the creation of value in services and products (Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020; Kim et al., 2021).

The management of the regional brand is structured by the phases of research, analysis, or diagnosis of the area based on its heritage to achieve the identification of differentiating factors as a region, which allows it to increase its capacity for recognition at the national and international level, cultural quality, versatility, and technical performance, as well as the validity of its business strategies (Bisani, 2021; Marin, 2022; Ramos & García, 2019).

Undoubtedly, the environmental factors of the environment are a great opportunity for brand building. From there, the richness of each region allows it to capture and retain the attention of potential tourists looking for a place that offers them serenity, tranquility and a balance between fun and rest.

Colombia has numerous competitive advantages due to the diversity of its landscapes and cultural traditions, which is an element that makes it impossible to have a single brand as a country, although it gives the possibility of thinking about segmentation in regions. One of the strategies framed in this is the image of nature tourism, knowing the country's problems due to globalization, distribution logistics, due to poor road infrastructure, as an element that reduces cooperativism and collaboration, among others (Carvajal Valero & González, 2016).

Therefore, tourism can impact the economy of regions that develop differentiating strategies for products and services with high standards of quality, environmental preservation, and built heritage (Ma & Ouyang, 2023; Shan & Ren, 2023).

Based on the above, Colombia, as a country where different cultures, customs, and races stand out (Higuera et al., 2023), allows the implementation of innovative marketing strategies in terms of tourism (Ríos et al., 2020). Making the most of its potential in flora and fauna, or biodiversity, allows tourists interested in learning about new cultures to acquire new experiences. However, the six regions that our country has present a problem in the connectivity of the routes; for example, in the Orinoquia region, there are fascinating places, but unfortunately, issues of road infrastructure, armed conflict, and violence prevent recognition as one of the areas with the greatest majesty in its natural and cultural heritage.

In the Department of Meta, there are many territories that, following the signing of the peace agreements in 2016, began to be known but still do not have rules and regulations that allow their access, preservation, and recognition as emerging tourist destinations. The dissemination of strategies that encourage tourism in the department of Meta could be considered a step forward in the potentialization and construction of the brand.

It must be said that each region's citizens are vital for the potentialization of the Regional Brand (Song et al., 2012). Because of that, in the present research, the perspectives of different people who are part of the Meta department are taken into account. The sense of belonging, in addition to its contribution to the formation of the brand, will create ties with the culture and image, which will contribute to the final result of each strategy (Chen et al., 2022). In that order, the value promise will be connected with the cultural message, and that will be the most important method of differentiation based on the essence of the llaneros.

All this is possible if ties are generated between the different sectors that are part of the department's tourism cluster (Picaud-Bello et al., 2022; Sattler, 2022). Suppose there is an agreement about the needs that we seek to satisfy. In that case, this will allow us to design a line of tangible and intangible assets that adequately represents the customs of the territory, guaranteeing an evolutionary development in the construction of successfully executed strategies, consolidating a promise of value through the creation of innovative products and services, by means of the union of the tourism sector of our region. And this is where the use of a tourism cluster arises.

The demand for adaptation of tourism and technology must be clear since visitors are looking for personalized and unique experiences, leaving aside certain traditional activities such as packages or standard tours in main cities. Now, they take a backseat. Nowadays, contact with nature is essential. This is where companies and ventures in our region must leave competition and rivalry aside and opt, instead, for the creation of alliances, unifying ideas, and perceptions as a response to meet the expectations of tourists. Providing a welcoming, safe, and quality environment should be the pillar for our visitors, which will be transmitted with the help of ICTs, from which we will seek to demonstrate tourism development, activities, and experiences.

The development of advertising campaigns that highlight the well-being, safety, culture, gastronomy, nature, flora, and fauna of the region will mark a before and after of what is considered ecotourism in Meta (McCabe, 2009), giving a turn to the economic reactivation derived from tourism in the region (Bowie & Quinton, 2022; Pike et al., 2019).

The idea is to design strategies with the help of marketing that allows the participation of MSMEs (Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021) and contribute to the formation of a new version of tourism experiences in Meta. Emphasis should be placed on the promise of value, which is sought to be transmitted through the potentialization of the region's brand; factors such as planning, experiences, innovation, and authenticity are key to creating the right destination for tourists, where they venture out and become part of ecotourism, with the unavoidable disconnection from their daily routine and the curiosity to live an unforgettable vacation. For this reason, the trigger is to visit the Orinoquia region.

Practical case study

Although the Department of Meta has five tourist routes identified by the Meta Tourism Institute (Embrujo llanero, Amanecer llanero, Piedemonte llanero, La Macarena, and Villavicencio), these have not positioned themselves in the minds of tourists and even those born in the territory; the poorly-advised marketing campaigns carried out to promote the department do not take into account the wordplay that is derived from them; a clear example of this is saying that Meta is "the natural route" when the access roads to the department have been presenting connectivity problems since before their construction; similarly, by the end of 2019 (after having the Villavicencio-Bogotá road closed for 9 months due to landslides and other infrastructure problems) the strategy of "Lifting the gate" was implemented; an allusion to that portico or fence of the haciendas that, when lifted, allow entry to that world of the plain. However, the word "talanquera" refers to tolls, which creates confusion in the message that is intended to be conveyed, even more so when the road has some of the most expensive tolls in the country and with a collection frequency of approximately every 30 km, contrary to international regulations of tolls every 110 km, or the national average of tolls every 70 km (Garcés, 2011).

Despite the department's own problems, including those of road infrastructure, the natural beauty and unique characteristics of the region must be promoted and persuaded; the brand can and should draw attention to tourism and investment opportunities to attract visitors interested in experiencing the natural environment and culture of the region.

The regional brand also drives economic growth in the tourism sector. The promotion of nature tourism, adventure tourism, leisure tourism, and the development of protected natural areas can strengthen the tourism industry and create new job opportunities for local communities, making this economic growth sustainable over time by promoting the protection and preservation of the region's natural resources.

In addition, community-based ecotourism initiatives can help promote environmental conservation and sustainable development. By involving local communities in the planning and management of ecotourism activities, the regional brand can create a sense of responsibility among community members, leading to greater efforts to conserve natural resources (sociocultural and environmental components that affect ..., n.d.). In this way, the regional brand can serve as a tool to strengthen the ecotourism sector, promote economic growth, and encourage environmental conservation and community development.

Among the limitations is the perception of security levels and their evolution over the last 50 years, a situation that shows distrust and fear among community members. Government management strategies should act under these variables.

CONCLUSIONS

In addition to attracting tourists, regional branding can also boost economic growth in the tourism sector. Promoting nature tourism, developing protected natural areas, and cultural tourism can strengthen the tourism industry and create new job opportunities for local communities. This economic growth can be sustained over time if the region's natural resources, customs, and traditions are protected and preserved. By fostering community pride and ownership over the region's natural resources and safeguarding cultural heritage, regional branding can encourage the preservation of these resources for future generations by making them possible for outsiders and locals alike to experience and learn about. In addition, community-based ecotourism initiatives can help promote environmental conservation and sustainable development. By involving local communities in the planning and management of ecotourism activities, regional branding can create a sense of responsibility among community members, leading to greater efforts to conserve natural resources. In this way, the regional brand can serve as a tool to strengthen the tourism sector, promote economic growth, and encourage environmental conservation and community development in the department.

It could be said that one of the limitations is security because although the situation is less difficult than a few years ago and the signing of the peace agreement generated other expectations, fear and mistrust still exist throughout the community. In this case, the support of government entities is necessary to try to eradicate this problem and restore confidence in the community and its visitors.

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FINANCING

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