

# Place Marketing Collaboration and City Image Perception Among Residents: A Case Study

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**Abstract:** *This study aimed to investigate residents' perceptions of the local image of Tuparendi, a municipality in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. A quantitative research design was employed, with primary data collected via a structured questionnaire comprising 22 items related to image marketing. The instrument utilized a Likert-type scale and was administered to a sample of 100 residents. Data analysis was conducted using relative frequency distribution and percentage methods (with 100 as the base denominator). The findings indicate that the municipality's image is positively characterized in terms of religiosity, safety, pleasant living conditions, and cleanliness. However, the research also identified weak or negative perceptions concerning job availability, limited opportunities for new businesses, and public administration. Furthermore, participants did not perceive Tuparendi as a tourist destination or a modern city. These issues likely represent the main challenges for public managers seeking to transform and improve the city's image, addressing its negative aspects to enhance attractiveness and development.*

**Keywords:** Municipality; Image; Place marketing.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Generally, cities with low population density and far from major urban centers face difficulties in attracting investments, tourists, visitors, residents, as well as large factories and companies. This process increases the challenge for public managers, often leading them to need to find new alternatives that can contribute to the development of the municipality.

Place marketing, when well applied, can contribute to the growth and development of cities, making them more attractive and generating value, as they come to offer better services and infrastructure more suited to people's needs. It also enables better job opportunities, quality of life, and other benefits.

Marketing can help prepare places to deal with an uncertain future, since, like companies, places are also affected by important forces that impact the economic balance of communities. Places also face the challenge of rapid technological changes, global competition, and political variables in the external environment, which are generally beyond the control of public managers (Kotler et al., 2006).

In this direction, it is important to find support from strategic themes, especially place marketing, which can serve as a basis for reflections, mainly by the public sector, and from there, more in-depth studies and analyses, aiming at the applicability of certain marketing strategies.

One of the strategies of place marketing is related to the image marketing strategy of a place. This process involves effective tools such as slogans, visual symbols, phrases, and positioning. Major cities manage to be attractive because in the past they developed an image in people's minds, capable of conveying something that citizens and businesses appreciate and feel proud to be part of. For Kotler, Haider, and Rein (1994), an image is a set of ideas about a place; and this involves both positive and negative aspects of a particular place.

Therefore, the main objective of the present work is to understand and analyze the perception of residents of a small municipality, in this case the municipality of Tuparendi - RS, regarding the elements and attributes associated with the image of the place.

Images are among the most important intellectual materials of human beings, being capable of influencing and directing their behavior. Understanding the image that a person forms of a particular place can influence the decisions that the city needs to make to improve its activities and develop a more appropriate direction for its financial resources.

The proposed theme for this study explores an area of knowledge in which the public sector, especially small

municipalities, has limitations in developing and often may face difficulties in elaborating image marketing strategies. One of the goals of image marketing is to create a creative and credible slogan that has a basis. Public marketing has occupied limited space in the public sphere, inhibiting more robust actions that could improve the image of a municipality.

Therefore, for didactic purposes, this study was divided into five sections, aiming to facilitate understanding of the subject. In the first section, the introduction, information regarding place marketing, concept of image, and image itself is presented, situating the reader regarding the theme and objective of the study. Next, the terminology present in works that mainly address place marketing, the image of a place, and positioning is presented. In the following section, the methodology and classification that supported the research are presented. In the fourth phase, the results and discussion are displayed, and finally, in the fifth and last section, the final considerations of the work are listed.

## **2. PLACE MARKETING**

Place marketing is a developed tool used to influence specific interest groups regarding products and services in a particular location. However, the place marketing literature presents different approaches based on the characteristics of its multidisciplinary nature. Most studies seek to define it with reference to the sustainable development of places, aiming to satisfy target segments, identified as current and potential, in order to create or generate positive value for those involved, as well as strengthen the attractiveness and competitiveness of a place, focusing on external and internal markets (Ashworth; Kavaratzis, 2008).

According to Kotler et al. (2006), when places have a weak image due to factors such as location, lack of own resources, or a small population, they need to be especially skillful in changing their image. In this sense, even if these places have attractive characteristics, if they are not transformed into competitive advantages, the tendency is for these places to remain anonymous.

### **2.1 Understanding Image - Concept**

According to Gomes (2004, p. 256), the "image-concept is not built on identity itself, but based on the perception that the other has of it, that is, on what it seems to be". Of a symbolic nature, the image-concept is grounded in signification processes.

Thus, the idea of image-concept is explained as a symbolic, complex, and synthesizing construct, of a judgmental/characterizing and provisional nature, realized by the other (reception) through permanent dialogical, dialectical, and recursive tensions, within and between a diversity of force-elements, such as information and perceptions about identity (something/someone), comprehension capacity, culture, imagination, psyche, history, and structured context.

The image-concept is constructed in place, and is of the quality of signification, not communication. Communication is dethroned from its position as a determinant in the construction of the image-concept, being displaced, within these processes, to a position of auxiliary to signification. It is noteworthy that the image-concept of a given identity (company, institution, person) can be constructed even if no communication actions are materialized for this purpose (Baldissera, 2008).

### **2.2 Developing the Image of a Location**

The authors Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) provide an important review of the different concepts of product or brand image over the past thirty years. Based on their studies and analyses, the authors understand that image can be comprehended as the result of the impressions consumers receive from many sources.

According to Almeida (2008), image is a subjective impression, engraved in our minds through experiences and sensations, and does not need to be the result of a current experience. Image is a photograph that an individual or group has of an organization, as a consequence of information and interactions.

By studying the image of a place, it is possible to identify its strengths and weaknesses. This knowledge contributes to the efficient and effective promotion of the location, as well as facilitating the tourist development of that geographical area. From a marketing perspective, the intensification of competition between localities is the

main reason for exploring the perceived image of places (Martínez, 2006). However, it is important to highlight that the municipality must decide what image it wants to have and what can be achieved.

As per Normann (1984), for the construction of an image, the attitude resulting from the perception of an object must be considered, grouping beliefs and/or understanding of reality, and is regarded as a guide for people's behavior.

In this way, the image of the city is formed, according to Lynch (1997), not by the city itself, but by the perception of its citizens. Thus, it is understood that urban planning is a participatory organizational tool, where its representatives will shape the city according to the image that residents have or desire for the city. For Kotler et al. (2006, p.72), "the smaller a place, the more important it becomes to offer unique and genuine values. (...) The place must create and transmit signals of its identity".

Ashworth and Voogd (1995, p.158) highlight the complexity of the process of managing city images and define communication as the "set of strategies and actions aimed at providing, making known, stimulating interest, and creating favorable images of the city with the objective of attracting consumers".

The construction of a city's image results from a set of information from various sources, interests, and perceptions. For Ashworth and Voogd (1995), the main information sources identified by visitors and decisive for constructing perceptions about the tourist destination can be summarized into three categories: personal experience, information provided by professionals (opinion leaders), and common sense.



**Figure 1:** Information Sources Recognized by Tourists as Decisive in Constructing the Image of Cities

Visitors' experiences in a place, whether positive or negative, generate personal experiences, and this constitutes the most important source for forming the destination's image. Additionally, the image is built from information provided by professionals, both in travel agencies and tourist information centers. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 1, there is common sense, derived from various sources that contribute to forming perceptions about a given tourist destination, although less importance is attributed to them.

### 2.3 Image Positioning

We emphasize that city marketing, like traditional marketing, when working with the marketing mix, treats the city as the product. And as a product that can be traded through exchange value, the place has a set of tangible and intangible attributes to meet market needs (Kotler; Armstrong, 2023).

Based on this understanding, it is understood that public management must work on the main characteristics of the place, have a slogan and a strong brand that associates with a set of positive and attractive attributes, positioning and promoting these elements in a differentiated way in the market. Along this line of reasoning, positioning is customers' perception of a product or brand, that is, the way customers perceive products and brands in their minds. It is the place that the product occupies in consumers' minds in relation to competing products.

"Positioning is the art of configuring the company's image and the product's offered value in each market segment, so that customers can understand and appreciate what the company provides in relation to the competition" (Cobra, 1992, p. 323). Positioning also involves creating a favorable perception of the product in relation to competitors.

An extension of the brand image concept, defined as a sum of perceptions, favorable or unfavorable, about a product's attributes, based on the experience and knowledge that consumers have of it (Kotler; Armstrong, 2023).

In this direction, the organization must find ways to differentiate itself from other competitors. And one of the strategies is to seek differentiation through image. Therefore, in image differentiation, companies must strive to

establish images that set them apart from their competitors. The image of a company or brand should contain a unique and distinct message, communicating the main product benefits and its differentiated positioning. Thus, image is how the public perceives the company (Kotler; Armstrong, 2023).

Kotler et al. (2006) state that when places have a weak image, due to factors such as location, lack of own resources, or a small population, they need to be especially skillful to change their image. In this sense, even if these places have attractive characteristics, if they do not seek to turn them into competitive advantages, they will probably remain in anonymity.

Improving the image is not enough to ensure a locality's prosperity. It is necessary to develop special characteristics to satisfy residents and attract people from outside. There are localities that have attractions, whether due to nature, antiquity, gigantic constructions, among others. However, localities lacking this advantage can build convention centers, conventional shopping centers or those with open-air streets, museums, and entertainment centers, making themselves essentially attractive (Siano, 2001).

### **3. Methodology**

In the present work, the research developed can be characterized as quantitative, exploratory descriptive, and bibliographic. Regarding the approach, the research is classified as quantitative, which is a simple method that translates the obtained data into percentages and numbers, providing conclusive answers. The focus is on the collection and analysis of numerical and statistical data. Standardized instruments, such as structured questionnaires, are used to obtain quantifiable information from participants. Quantitative research seeks to measure relationships, patterns, and trends through statistical analysis, generally using representative samples (Oliveira, 1997).

In relation to objectives, the survey used exploratory research, generally conducted when the topic under study is little explored or does not have a consolidated theoretical basis. According to Gil (2002, p. 41), exploratory research "aims to provide greater familiarity with the problem, with a view to making it more explicit or to formulating hypotheses".

According to Gil (2002, p. 42), descriptive research seeks to describe the "characteristics of a particular population or phenomenon or, alternatively, the establishment of relationships between variables. (...) It seeks to describe characteristics, behaviors, and phenomena of a particular population or context".

Considering the technical procedures, the research is classified as bibliographic. This form of investigation covers the theoretical framework already made public regarding the topic under study (Lakatos; Marconi, 2002).

Therefore, considering the research classification, the present study meets the characteristics of each model, insofar as the data are presented in a quantitative manner and the topic is considered little explored in scientific studies. Also, the study presents characteristics of the respondents, being characterized as descriptive research, and explores bibliographic concepts for analysis, enriching the knowledge on the topic.

The representatives of the research sample were defined in a way that would generate the necessary information to meet the research objective. The research involved the Yeté State Basic Education School, the Trade and Industry Association (ACI), and other residents of the municipality of Tuparendi - RS, with a total of 100 completed questionnaires collected. In this way, the study sample is non-probabilistic, being by accessibility. For Vergara (2000), this type of sample is far from any statistical procedure, with the research elements classified by ease of access.

Once the sampling process was defined, data collection was carried out. For data collection, a questionnaire with closed-ended questions was formulated, regarding the residents' views on the municipality's image. Barros; Lehfeld (2001) emphasize that when developing their research instrument, the researcher should be concerned with predetermining the size, content, organization, and clarity of the presentation of questions, with the aim of enabling the informant to answer them. The questionnaire included 22 questions, including those related to the characterization and profile of the sample and objective statements, structured using a Likert scale with five points ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Data collection took place in August and September 2023 and was conducted via the Google Forms platform, where the questionnaire was made available and a link was generated to be sent to the initially selected sample population. The questionnaire link was distributed through

WhatsApp groups and email.

The initial question of the questionnaire aimed to identify potential research participants, i.e., those residing in the municipality. Consequently, individuals who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the final research sample, this being the only restriction for their inclusion. Data collection ended on September 29, 2023, and 100 valid responses were obtained. According to IBGE (2022), the population of the city of Tuparendi - RS reached 8,363 people in the 2022 Census, representing a decrease of -2.27% compared to the 2010 Census.

Data analysis was performed quantitatively, with survey data presented primarily in the form of percentages. Therefore, the results were mainly presented as percentages, and based on this, explanatory comments were made, seeking to establish a relationship with the theoretical studies conducted on the topic and with the researcher's perception, aiming to achieve the proposed objective.

## **4. Results and Discussions**

### **4.1 Characterization of the Study Sample**

Regarding the study sample, 100% of the participants are residents of Tuparendi - RS. In terms of gender, 74.7% identified as female and 25.3% as male. It was also found that the majority of participants are in the 15 to 25 age group, corresponding to 48%, and 20% in the 26 to 36 age group. Therefore, the majority of participants are female and in the 15 to 36 age range.

Additionally, regarding the education level of the research participants, it was observed that 21% have postgraduate education, master's, doctorate, and specialization degrees, 18% of respondents have higher education, 17% have completed high school, and another 16% have incomplete high school.

### **4.2 Perceptions of the Municipality's Image - Positive Aspects**

According to Martínez (2006), the image of a city is the synthesis of its identity, defined by a set of permanent attributes that constitute its essence and serve to differentiate it from other localities.

The image of a municipality plays a fundamental role, as if people have a positive perception of a set of attributes responsible for building the locality's positive image, these elements can contribute to the city's development, attracting investors, residents, and tourists.

With a positive image in people's minds, the municipality can attract investments, as companies are more likely to establish operations in areas with a good reputation, which can generate jobs and stimulate economic growth.

The image of a municipality directly affects the quality of life of its inhabitants. A good reputation can attract talent, improve infrastructure and public services, making the location more pleasant to live in.

In this sense, the survey result shows that 83% of participants agree that the municipality is a pleasant place to live and work. Another 91% consider the city a safe place to live, and 83% perceive the municipality as a beautiful place.

Therefore, it is observed that residents' perception of the city conveys and communicates relevant aspects. Thus, it is important for the location to take advantage of this perception of the residents and position itself as a place with an attractive image.

Regarding the natural beauties of the municipality, 60% of respondents agree that the location has natural beauties and, similarly, 79% understand that the city is clean and well-maintained. The study also showed that 69% of survey participants consider the municipality religious.

This set of favorable attributes shows a positive image of the city and constitutes an element that can be explored and publicized by public managers. This action can improve the location's positioning in the region as a competitive differential compared to other cities.

### **4.3 Perceptions About the Municipality's Image - Negative Aspects**

The image of a city is a basic determinant of how people react to a place. According to Kotler, Haider and Rein (1994), images are a simplification of various associations and information linked to the location, being a set of ideas about the territory. Image marketing focuses on how a company or brand is perceived by the public.

According to Kotler et al. (2006), many places have a weak image. They lack a marketing strategy with clear messaging and leadership. A weak or poor image can occur due to several factors, such as a high crime rate, location in a peripheral area, small population, and lack of municipal resources. In this situation, managers need to be skilled to change the negative image of a place, focusing on its attractive characteristics.

The survey result shows that 52% of respondents understand that the municipality is well-managed, and 47% agree that the city is interesting. The negative image may be associated with the local political situation and the economic factor. Regarding job opportunities, 65% of respondents disagree that there are job openings. This can lead the younger population to leave the area and seek work in other regions and states.

Although the percentage of agreement regarding the municipality's management exceeded 50%, it is understood that the result could be more significant, given that there is a percentage that does not agree that the location is well-managed. Management is the basis for a municipality's progress and achievements, as well as for the practice of strategic actions for the municipality; an example is new investments and ventures, which can provide a differentiated condition for the municipality and need the support of the majority of citizens.

Another question asked was about the existence of business opportunities in the municipality. The result showed that 60% disagree, with only 18% agreeing that certain market opportunities exist. The data shows that most participants have the view that the municipality is not a good place for commercial businesses. Additionally, only 10% agree that the municipality is modern.

Regarding the municipality being a tourist destination, 44% of respondents disagree. The municipality has been gradually implementing tourism, with the main square, where decorations are put up on commemorative dates, attracting many people from various places in the region, and local areas in the interior are also being developed for people to discover the municipality's natural beauties. In this sense, it can be seen that there are some initiatives to improve the city's image in terms of attracting visitors and tourists.

The survey also showed that there is a very negative perception of the municipality's image regarding a set of evaluated requirements. This situation mainly calls on public managers to rethink some points that need to be improved and that should be part of the city's planning and master plan. Although it is rare to find municipalities that are able to meet most of the demands and needs of their residents.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

It can be concluded that the study of image is important because it makes it possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses, that is, the positive and/or negative aspects of the municipality, location, city, etc. The applications of marketing strategies are capable of promoting, publicizing, and communicating a location in an effective and qualified manner, facilitating development and ensuring the competitive success of the place.

Image marketing is not done overnight, as images are not easy to change or build. Therefore, it can take years to develop a positive and effective image. In this sense, with four-year political terms, changing and improving the local image can be even more difficult to achieve, especially because investments are needed for this strategy.

However, not every city enjoys certain qualifications and characteristics capable of providing wealth and well-being to its residents. Well-known examples are Paris, London, Dubai, Istanbul, Hong Kong, among others that are highly desired, and whose very name already evokes in people's minds various positive and attractive images of these places.

But the great challenge for public managers and business leaders of municipalities considered and evaluated as poor and weak in image is how to transform and what to do with small cities of low population density, far from major centers, and that do not have a strong image or attractions. Because, often, there is not much to communicate and publicize about the place. This is probably the problem of many Brazilian cities.

The study identified both positive and negative image perceptions of the municipality of Tuparendi - RS. It is suggested that relevant and important aspects be improved, enhanced, and publicized, and that negative situations be a priority, especially for public managers, so that actions and strategies are proposed and implemented to mitigate and reduce the impact of the main problems identified in this study.

Finally, this work suggests continuing research on the same theme to be applied to public managers, residents who also live in rural areas, visitors, tourists, and local leaders, such as representatives of industrial associations, commerce, trade unions, among others.

The research was limited to the evaluation of image based on a sample, which restricted more complex and systemic analyses. By expanding the investigation and involving new actors, the study incorporates new conceptions from other municipal agents. Bringing new perspectives and perceptions about the location, more strategies supported by image marketing can contribute to the continuous improvement of the studied municipality and even other cities in the northwest border region.

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