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**Perceptions on projected image of a touristic destination:
Stavanger in the eyes of potential Spanish tourists**

AUTHOR

Student number:

227424

Name:

**Aneley M.
Lampugnani Lattuca**

ADVISOR:

**Tone Therese
Linge**

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis was to explore the perceptions that potential visitors have about Stavanger based on official information found online about the destination. The objective of this work is to obtain a broad idea of what is the image perceived by potential Spanish tourists regarding Stavanger. This work has been planned and conducted taking into considerations its usefulness and relevance for both the Tourism industry and the scientific community. On one hand, it generates practical and useful information to the touristic industry; on the other hand, it contributes to the scientific community through the research of tourists' perceptions and destination's image, using Marketing, Image and Tourism theories and applying them to the findings. The thesis focuses specifically on Spanish individuals who have not visited the city, and the subjects of the study were interviewed in Spain, between March and May 2016. The interviews conducted included the combination of word elicitation and photo elicitation as tools for obtaining participants' perceptions on specific assets of the city, and unstructured conversation in order to capture generic impressions about the city of Stavanger based on written and visual information.

The findings point out to a consensus on the perception of Stavanger as a natural and cultural destination. Its nature, gastronomical possibilities and history are the most positively commented aspects of the city, while, as a contrast, the title of the city as the European Capital of Petroleum is an asset regarded negatively by the participants in this study. Overall, all participants except one showed predisposition to visit the city. Finally, the discussion of this work is focused, among others, on the pre-existent presence of Norway in participants' minds, which might have influenced how they perceived Stavanger as a Norwegian city; the lack of previous knowledge of the city and the possible difficulties that it might have when competing with other cities regarding its cultural offer.

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Foreword

Firstly, I would like to thank my teacher and advisor, Tone Therese Linge, for her support, her positivism and her professionalism. Having a supervisor who showed as much passion and excitement for my Master's thesis as me has made this journey more enriching and well-worth of all the work put on it.

Secondly, I am very grateful to the participants in this study, whose patience and contributions made this work possible.

Thirdly, I would like to thank to Lene Lunde, the responsible for web and communications at the Tourist office in Stavanger. It was after her contributions in a personal interview that the idea for this Thesis started to take shape.

1. Introduction

The topic of this thesis is related to the *perceptions about projected image of Stavanger region as a touristic destination*, explored from the perspective of identity theory and with a background of destination image. The thesis will be focused on exposition of participants to official promotional material about the area and exploration of their impressions about it, to gain insight on what are the different images projected by the communication destined to tourism in the area. In addition, a brief background in professed and projected identity of the destination is explored.

The research questions for this thesis are:

How do potential tourists perceive Stavanger as a destination based on its official touristic web site?

How is Stavanger projected identity perceived by potential Spanish tourists?

These questions explore the projected and perceived identity of Stavanger region, while a pilot interview with Lene Lunde (responsible of Stavanger region's communication department) provides background and contextual information about the professed identity of the destination.

1.1. Context and relevance of the topic

Firstly, the context of Stavanger as a touristic place is interesting from the *practical* perspective and in relation to the current situation of the area. The current Oil crisis experienced in the region (Berglund, 2015) might make some wonder what the future awaits for a region attached closely with the Oil and Gas industry, and known as *Norway's Oil capital*. More specifically, Tourism this is the second biggest industry in the area, and

Stavanger is in 10th position in 2014 TripAdvisor's ranking of Top Cities to visit in Norway (Innovation Norway, 2016). Therefore, tourism is an industry of some importance in the area, but not ranked by tourists as well as Oslo, Bergen and other seven cities ranked higher.

Secondly, the research about impressions about Stavanger's *professed* and *projected* identity and the investigation of its image as a touristic destination and as a brand, is virtually inexistent (as will be seen in .5), despite the importance of the touristic sector for the area. Theories of place branding, communication of identity, image and perceptions have not been used widely in this context before, either. In a personal interview arranged in October 2015 with Lune, Lunde referred to the potential of tourism as a relevant industry in the area, both for the amount of visitors to the official region's web page and for the city's competitive advantages against other destinations. In contraposition to other cities such as Barcelona, Paris, London or New York, which have strong brand and recognizable identities and image (Nilson, 1998), it cannot be found in the literature a consensus on how (and if) Stavanger is branded, and more importantly, how it is perceived by potential tourists.

Thirdly, research on destination perceptions often has been conducted regarding Scandinavian tourists' visits and perceptions about Mediterranean destinations: as examples, Selänniemi, Smith & Brent have studied Finnish tourism in the Spanish islands (2001); Haug, Dann, and Mehmetoglu (2007) have conducted research on Norwegian visiting and moving to Spain, and Parsons (1973) studied the impact of tourism in the Spanish coastal areas. Despite this, it is not so often that research focuses on Spanish tourism in Scandinavia.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical background and ground theory

The thesis utilizes as a starting point the model of Moingeon & Soenen (2002) on identity, which is used by the authors to approach organisational identity, but is applied to the tourism field in this work. As will be seen later on in this paper, touristic destinations are often analysed from the perspective of marketing, as brands with their own personality, and therefore, their own identity and image. In this case, the focus will be predominantly in attributed identity (which attributes potential tourists ascribe to Stavanger), although projected image (how the identity projected by Stavanger as a destination is) will serve as a background to understand how Stavanger's promotional plan regards the destination and its assets.

In addition, this work utilizes, as a theoretical umbrella, Gunn's Stage theory (1972). Stage theory distinguishes three phases in the creation of an image in consumers' minds: organic stage, in which all information the consumer has comes from non-promotional material and objective sources; induced image, in which information is obtained from promotional sources; and finally, modified/induced image, which comes with the experience on first hand (this is, the visit to the destination). In this particular case, this theory is of interest because the study is located in the stages prior to visit a destination; therefore, it can be said that this project focuses on the naive and the induced stages.

This research will partially have into account the Path Model (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), which points out that destination images are formed as a result two types of evaluation about the destination: cognitive and affective, or as other authors call, destination attributes and holistic impressions (Choi, Chan & Wu, 1999).

2.2. Tourism in Stavanger and Norway

Most literature than can be found about tourism in Norway is, either focused on specific types of tourism, or on the impact of tourism in the visited areas. Specific areas such as rural tourism (Blekesaune, Brandth & Haugen, 2010; Kaltenborn, Andersen, Nellesmann, Bjerke & Thrane, 2008) or sustainable tourism (Welford & Ytterhus, 2004; Eligh, Welford & Ytterhus, 2002; Borch, 2004) has been researched, as well as the impact that the tourism has in the local destination (Gjerald, 2005; Haukeland, 1984; Teigland, 1996; Moksness Gjørseter, Lagailarde, Mikkelsen, Olsen, Sandersen & Vølstad, 2011).

Regarding Stavanger, there is a very limited amount of papers focused on tourism in the area. Blaaid & Karadas (2011) refer to the potential of gastronomy to attract tourism to the area, while Iniesta (2014) focuses on tourism policies in the city.

Regarding perceptions about Norway as a touristic destination, Borchgrevink, and Knutson, (1997) explore how the country is perceived by Australian, Canadian and American students. Also, Jensen et al. (2002) study how Europeans perceive Nordic countries as tourist destinations.

As it can be seen, literature about tourism in Norway has been researched from different points of views. Stavanger region as a touristic destination, though, has received less coverage by the scientific community. Neither at a national level nor at a local level (Stavanger region) research is conducted regarding perceptions prior visit to the city, or with focus on one specific nationality as a focus group and source of tourism to the area.

2.3. The tourist

2.3.1. Pre-consumption experience

This thesis focuses on perceptions that potential tourists might have before deciding to visit Stavanger. Hence, its focus is on the pre-consumption experience, which includes “searching for, planning, day-dreaming about, foreseeing, and imagining the experience” (Carù & Cova, 2003, p.271). From the marketing perspective, destinations can be marketed as brand, and as such, consumers have their opinions and own preferences regarding places to visit even before visiting the destination (Dinnie, 2008).

The mental representations that consumers have about different countries and cities come from different sources: firstly, personal experience (actual visiting to the area); secondly, external channels that create national stereotypes, such as word-of-mouth, image portrayal in media and advertising (Dinnie, 2008; Belch & Belch, 2014). Other authors agree, and add up that the destination’s image is a sum of three type of images: naive, induced and modified/induced (Gunn, 1972). These images provide from the same sources as commented above (informational, promotional, and first-hand experience). In any case, several authors point out that there is generally a pre-existing idea of what a country or city is like, as long as there is information of some kind for the individual to create such image (Dinnie, 2008). Research points out, therefore, that prior consumption, there are pre-existing images and ideas in consumers’ minds.

In order to evaluate the nature of the image of a place in the mind of the consumer, some researchers use brand personification, which is “a qualitative research technique that invites consumers (and non-consumers) of a brand to treat it as if it were a person” (Dinnie, 2008, p.47). To do so, the consumer is asked to describe the brand –or the destination, in this case- as if it were a human being, describing it through adjectives. According to the author, this

technique can help to gain insight into the brand's image and determine its strength in the consumers' mind.

2.3.1. Perception

Belch & Belch (2014) explore the processes of consumer behaviour, emphasizing that brand success is more likely once the consumer psychology is taken into account. This includes, in a first stage, to examine how they make decisions prior purchasing a product or acquiring a service. This process generally starts with the recognition of a problem or a need, which triggers motivation into researching and information seeking (Belch & Belch, 2014.) In the case of tourists, the outcome of choosing a destination and visiting it starts by having the need and/or the motivation to travel, which is followed by research on which are the options of vacation destinations that suit their needs and ideas of the ideal place for a holiday time (Belch & Belch, 2014)

From a psychological perspective, *perception* is the very heart of the pre-consumption stage (Belch & Belch, 2014), and is composed by three steps: sensation, selection and interpretation. Sensation refers to the immediate, direct response that the consumer has towards the stimuli showed to him or her (this is, for example, an ad or the name of the destination itself). The authors explain that often, marketers try to add as much sensory input as they can in their advertising products, since the senses are the first area that responds to this type of communication (Belch & Belch, 2014). The second step is the selection of information, which consists of focusing the attention in some elements of the advertising information, and discharging others –according to the personal preferences and interests. Finally, the third step is the interpretation of the information: once the consumer has chosen what elements of the ad are relevant for him or her, the information is organized, categorized and interpreted in the individual's mind. Interpretation depends on the personal characteristics, preferences and the impact that the ad has on the consumer (Belch & Belch, 2014)

2.3.2. Appeal

The appeal of a product, service or –in this case, a destination- refers to the chosen angle used to catch the attention of customers, and to make an impact on them. Appeal is “something that moves people, speaks to their wants or needs, and excited their interest” (Belch & Belch, 2014, p.283). The appeal depends of how the ad or advertising product has been created and delivered, and what it communicates to the consumer.

The appeals can be either rational or emotional. Promotional material with a focus on rational or information traits present characteristics of the product or service, and the possible benefits that it can report to the consumer (Belch & Belch, 2014). Therefore, this angle puts the attention on facts, hoping to convince the customer that they are making the right choice when choosing one brand over another one for practical or technical reasons (or, in this case, one destination over other, based on objective traits, activities and assets from that specific destination).

On the other hand, promotional material also uses emotions to create a more attractive, appealing content for the potential tourists. In other words, it can be planned in order to address the consumers social and psychological needs, motivations and wishes, instead of focusing on what the destination offers objectively. According to Belch & Belch (2014), this approach is more effective, since it addresses emotions, which is not as easily disregarded as the benefits that objective traits of the destination can bring to the potential tourist. According to Belch & Belch (2014), emotional appeal is more effective in touristic advertising.

Despite all, researchers point out that commercials can combine both appeals, and make the touristic destination more attractive for both practical and emotional reasons for the tourists (Belch & Belch, 2014).

This is, consumer purchase decisions –and tourist choice of destination to spend their holidays- are made on based on both practical and emotional reasons. The most relevant element to

consider is, as pointed previously in this paper, how consumers think of the destination (the brand, in general terms) respect to the benefits that it can provide for himself or herself. Authors point out that it is relevant to explore how well advertising communicates product information (Belch & Belch, 2014) –this is, in relation to Identity theory, what is projected from the destination- and what is interpreted –the attributed identity of the place.

Before knowing the destination or brand specific characteristics, consumers are not loyal, but once they are introduced to it and can interpret its messages –and considering how it would benefit them to visit that place in particular- consumers attach a personality to the brand (Dinnie, 2008). In addition, the consumer can develop a feeling or emotional attachment to the brand, only after he or she has get to know it and perceived identity takes shape in the mind of the consumer (Belch & Belch, 2014).

Some authors also refer to attractiveness, in relation with appeal (Belch & Belch, 2014). Attractiveness includes similarity, familiarity and likability. Similarity is related to the resemblance between the destination's projected and attributed personality or identity as perceived by the consumer. Familiarity refers to the extent that the destination is known by the potential consumer, and likability refers to the positive associations that the individual makes as a result of its perceived traits and characteristics (Belch & Belch, 2014). With all, destination attractiveness can help to persuade the potential tourists to visit the area –and to maintain a regular relationship among the two (Belch & Belch, 2014)

2.4. The destination

2.4.1. The destination as a brand

Promotional material has the ability to influence the tourist both before they decide to take a journey and during it. Brochures, web pages and other promotional material helps to mold expectations and present the destination to potential visitors (Dann, 1996).

Lynch & Chernatony (2004) express that brands are formed by both functional and emotional values and the compromise of providing a positive experience to the consumer. At the same time, Macrae et al. (1995) points out that a brand “represents a unique combination of characteristics and added values, both functional and non-functional, which have taken on a relevant meaning that is inextricably linked to the brand, awareness of which might be conscious or intuitive” (1995, p.14).

When a strong brand image is built, products and services can be positioned in the market according to the attributes that differentiates them from similar ones (Aaker, 1991). In this case, when destinations are built as a brand, they can express those characteristics that make them a better choice for a vacation destination in comparison to others.

2.4.2. Destination image

As Reynolds (1965) states, the word ‘image’ is related to reputation, and it comprises both the what the public thinks about a destination or corporation, and what that corporation thinks of itself. Image, according to Govers and Kumar (2007) can also be related to identity. What Reynolds (1965) define as image and reputation, authors like Moingeon & Soenen (2002) define as different types of identities.

The process of consuming, and more specifically, the consumption of services related to travelling, involves the consumers’ search for information prior their decision on where to go, and what to experience once they are in the chosen destination (Leemans, 1994). By collecting

and analysing information, the consumer builds up an image or “mental prototype” (Tapachai & Waryszak 2000, p. 37) that represents the travel experience. As tourism services are not tangible, often in this process, mental images become more important than reality (Gallarza, Saura & Garcia, 2002). Therefore, the tourist destination projected images influences in a big extent how the place is perceived by consumers, even before actually being there physically.

According to other authors, a destination’s image consists of beliefs, ideas and impressions towards a place (Choi et al., 1999) and it often is analysed based on the destination traits and the impressions about the destination. Because images are created in individual’s minds, both the characteristics of the place related to functionality and psychological or emotional responses should be included in the research of destinations images (Qu et al., 2011; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991).

The perceptual/ cognitive evaluations refer to the beliefs or knowledge about a destination's attributes whereas affective evaluation refers to feelings toward, or attachment to it. A common agreement is that this depends on a cognitive evaluation of objects and the affective responses are formed as a function of the cognitive responses (Que et al., 2011; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

The destination attributes are related to the knowledge or perception that individuals hold regarding a destination’s traits and characteristics. (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Choi et al., 1999). These characteristics are more tangible than impressions at a holistic level and are easier measurable than emotional impressions. They can refer to available services in the area, transportation options, activities and architecture, among many others (Choi et al., 1999).

Impressions at a holistic level refers to the individuals' evaluation of the destination characteristics at an affective level-this is, their feelings, attachment and opinions regarding the place attributes (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Choi et al., 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991).

2.4.3. Destinations' identity

According to Moingeon & Soenen (2002), identity belongs both to its owner and to the groups evaluating it. In general terms, authors point out that there are individual perceptions, and collectively attributed perceptions, both forming part of what identity is. More specifically, the authors discuss different types of identities from both perspectives –self-image and external perceptions-, although in this particular case, focus is in few of them: professed, projected and attributed identity

Professed identity relates to what the organization says about its own personality. In other words, it is how the organization or brand is defined and described by its members (Moingeon & Soenen, 2002). Projected identity (Moingeon & Soenen, 2002) refers to those tools an organization uses to present, define and describe itself and its assets to specific audiences (in this case, potential tourists).

Finally, the attributed identity refers to those traits that the different audiences point out as salient about an organization (Moingeon & Soenen, 2002).

2.4.4. The concept of uniqueness

According to Qu, Kim & Im (2011), what makes the branding of a destination successful is the projection of unique and different characteristics. If a destination or some of its assets are perceived as unique, the destination is more likely to be positioned more clearly and positively in the tourist mind (Qu et al., 2011). Having a strong brand provides destinations with both competitive advantage and a clear identity easy to be recognizable, and thus, remembered by consumers (Qu et al., 2011).

The lack of focus on one or few special characteristics of the destination is common, despite all. “Generic characteristics of destinations are frequently emphasised in all marketing campaigns as they attempt to attract too many target markets” (Buhalis, 2000, p.17). In fact, Porter (1980) argues that the key for differentiating one brand of another is based on the successful communication of what it is unique about it, rather than the description all the assets that compound the product or service.

Considering the high competence among destinations, and the raise of popular destinations visited massively by large groups of tourists, some authors point out that uniqueness is an asset that tourists appreciate and that can help destinations maintain their number of visitors, or even increase it (Blain, Levy & Ritchie, 2005; Buhalis, 2000).

2.4.5. The country as the brand

Brand origin is the result of a link created in consumers' mind, between a brand and its geographical origin (Thakor and Kohli, 1996). Some cities are branded in a way that transcend their national origins, and thus are well known for their own set of assets and characteristics (for example, Paris and its iconic Eiffel tower). Despite this, and in general terms, the towns and cities of a certain country are inevitably linked to the country they are located in. National brands are formed, not only by strictly promotional or informational material, but also entertainment products, the media, business and political relations, among others (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002). Just as products coming from a specific country are affected by the attitudes towards that specific country as a political, economical and cultural nation, cities are, too (O'Shaughnessy & Jackson, 2000). Towns are the specific units receiving visitors, but they form part of a wider geographical area –nations-, which at the same time, contribute to how these towns and cities are imagined, expected and perceived even before an actual visit to them. In other words, tourists might build stereotyped images of a city based on the information they have acquired for life about the geographical area where it is located

(Askegaard and Ger, 1998). Even when there is no previous knowledge or a short amount of information collected by the tourist about a specific town or city, the information they have acquired during their life –coming from either promotional or other type of informational sources-, can be a competitive advantage, named country-of-origin reputational advantage by Chisik (2003).

As some authors point out, stereotypes and generalized images are created in order to simplify and differentiate countries in the individuals' minds (Askegaard & Ger, 1998). As seen previously, such national stereotypes can contribute to a positive attitude towards a town or city that has not been visited yet, but at the same time, it can influence potential tourists' expectations. As Goffman put it, and MacCannell explains (1976), any social interaction is divided into front and back regions, being the front the meeting point for hosts and guests (tourists and locals), and the back, the place where technical details are prepared for such interaction. This differentiation, applied to the touristic experience, implies that the visitors are seeing only one part of reality –what is shown to them in the front region-, although their expectations are, in occasions, to have authentic experiences (this is, to transcend the front stage), according to MacCannell (1976). Considering the concept of nation stereotypes, formed by naïve and induced images (Gunn, 1972), it makes sense that tourists might seek for authenticity –being authenticity for them, a reality formed in their minds based on the information they have collected from the country they visit. Complexity arises because, as Bruner (2001) puts it, authenticity is different for every individual, and can “gain and lose meaning in diverse touristic and world contexts”. Therefore, tourists' expectations can be met as long as what they perceive from the destination shows a relation with the image they previously had in their minds of what it is real and authentic to that specific geographical area (Bruner, 2001), but at the same time, because each individual obtains information through

different sources and personal experiences, what it is authentic for one, is not for another (MacCannell, 1976).

3. Stavanger

3.1. Spanish tourism in Stavanger

According to Dinnie (2008), brand image and nation brand image must be examined with previous segmentation of the target audience, in order to determine and monitor what is the image of the destination for each addressed public. People from different countries visit specific destinations with different motivations and expectations, and perceive the destination in a different manner than groups from other countries or cultures (Kozak, 2002; Buhalis, 2000). For this reason, this thesis examines uniquely the perceptions of one of the biggest groups of tourists in Stavanger: Spanish tourists. It is interesting to observe that there is plenty of literature on Scandinavian tourism in the South of Europe, but not so much on the reversed situation.

According to Lunde, the number of visitors to the webpage Visit Stavanger is around 23.000.000; which means that there is a big number of potential tourists being exposed to information about Stavanger.

Regarding target markets, Lunde points that Spanish tourists are, among other nationalities, a very important sector of potential tourists. She remarks that, considering that Spain has been facing economic crisis for some years, Spanish tourists are among those who spend more money in activities such as helicopter trips and excursions. In addition, Lunde remarks that young students are popular visitors to the area, although this group do not spend much money and make a more humble type of tourism.

3.2. Identity and branding in Stavanger

This research looks into identity (Moingeon & Soenen, 2002) in order to analyse both how Stavanger is defined internally and externally. Professed identity is commented briefly based on Lunde's contributions during a personal conversation, and it is utilized as a tool for providing certain background of what Stavanger's marketing is focused on. At the same time, by looking at how Stavanger is marketed and promoted, this project looks into the projected identity of the city, too. Finally, the information provided at Stavanger's page in VisitNorway.no is used as a source of information to inquire participants about their perceptions (both on Stavanger as a destination, and Stavanger's way of communicating about itself). In this case, the attributed identity is the core and centre of this project, since its main objective is to obtain, analyse and reflect on what are the perceptions from potential tourists regarding Stavanger as a touristic destination.

3.2.1. Professed identity of Stavanger

As explained previously, and in order to gain insight in the professed and projected identity of the city a pilot interview was conducted to Lene Lunde, team manager and responsible of communication and web in Stavanger's tourist information. The interview, conducted in November of 2015, included questions about market targets of Stavanger, main assets of the city and its branding. A summary of obtained information follows.

Target markets of Stavanger

Among the most relevant targets of the communication of Stavanger as a destination, Lunde points out Spain, Germany, the UK and domestic tourism (Norway). Spanish tourism is, according to Lunde, generally formed by tourists who participate in payed attractions (helicopter trips and fjord excursions in boat, for example). Also, young tourists come from Spain, with a more limited budget.

Expectations about Stavanger

According to Lunde, tourists who visit the city and the region come due to its nature and its fjords, mainly. Other assets are either unknown or not considered as relevant as its nature, such as gastronomical or cultural offers.

Assets and uniqueness in Stavanger

Lunde points out that what makes Stavanger unique as a destination is its variety of offer in touristic activities, as well as its international atmosphere. Lunde points out the fjords, the beaches, the gastronomy and the culture as the main assets of the city.

Branding in Stavanger

“All within reach” has been the slogan used for branding the city for the last 10 years. It refers, according to Lunde, to the compact nature of the city –easy accessibility to all assets of the city- and to the wide offer of options on things to do and see in the city. The assets of the city are remarked as its competitive advantage, as the city is described as a Norway in miniature – it has many of the assets that other destination in the country have, all in one same city.

Knowledge of Stavanger among potential tourists

Lunde points out that, although Stavanger is well known at a domestic level, more work needs to be done at an international level. Although some of its main attractions –such as Preikestolen- are relatively known around the world, not all tourists locate them in Stavanger. Gastronomy, culture and family activities are the assets that, according to Lunde, Stavanger has to offer and to communicate more extensively to potential tourists.

3.2.2 Projected identity

The webpage *VisitNorway* was selected in this case as a source of information and as an example of how Stavanger's identity is projected. The webpage features a short text and a set of images, in addition to informative content about how to get to Stavanger, where to stay and where to eat. In relation to the concept of appeal (Belch & Belch, 2014), it can be said that the found information about Stavanger is of rational nature. In other words, information about assets, attractions and things to do can be found in the website.

The projected identity of Stavanger is used in this project as a source of information for the participants to absorb and give opinions about. Although firstly the web page *Visitstavanger.no* was considered to analyse the image of Stavanger as a destination, finally *VisitNorway.no* was chosen due to two factors. On one hand, VisitNorway.com offers a condensed version of touristic attractions and assets, and on the other, it was possible to translate it to Spanish and English, which made the process of interviewing more convenient to avoid translation problems in the transcriptions.

4. Methodology

4.1. Planned method

The original method planned for this research included the combination of diverse techniques; all used as means to obtain construct elicitation.

“The elicitation of constructs from the population being studied through qualitative research minimises the danger of forcing respondents to react to standardised framework that may not be an accurate representation of their image” (Jenkins, 1999, p.7). Crompton (1979) was one of the first ones to use elicitation: he used content analysis of reading material, travel brochures and unstructured interviews to determine attributes related to a destination.

According to Jenkins (1999), content analysis of written information, such as guidebooks or visual information including photographs in travel brochures can provide a great deal of information about the images projected of tourist destinations, and therefore, it was initially decided to use promotional material found online as the source of information to be shown to potential tourists in the interviews. Starting with semi-unstructured interviews about the tourist's background, the planned method included, firstly, the exposition of participants to information –both written and visual- about Stavanger city. This information, originally planned to be taken from RegionStavanger.com, but finally retrieved from VisitNorway.com, would be the basis for the following steps in the method.

Further on, and in order to continue the process of construct elicitation, Kelly (1995) points out the benefits of combining different techniques. In this case, two were initially selected: triading, laddering, and a Repertory grid, which would help visualizing the positioning of Stavanger as a destination, and to define what are the concepts that potential tourists relate to Stavanger.

For the triading, it was considered to select destinations that could be compared to Stavanger. Norwegian destinations were selected, among which there were Bergen, Oslo, Trondheim, Tromsø, Kirkenes, Flam, Kristiansand and Trondheim. Such cities were selected regarding the TripAdvisor ranking on most preferred cities according to tourists in Norway. In such ranking, Stavanger ranks 10th (Innovation Norway, 2016)

Once the cities were selected, and following Kelly's advice (1995), the researcher planned to ask the participant to point out how two of the three examples are different from the third.

After obtaining a construct in relation to the cities, the participant would name two opposites of it, identifying one as positive and the other as negative, according to his or her perception.

Following up with the triading process, more combinations of cities were to be compared in order to elicit more constructs, repeating until the participant could not offer any new constructs.

After triading, the planned method included a laddering process, in which Means End Chain theory (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988) was going to be used, in order to determine how the attributes pointed out about Stavanger related to the participants' perceptions on the consequences for them, and their own personal values. Finally, a repertory grid was planned to be created, as it was used successfully in previous papers studying tourists' images and brand associations (Pike, 2012; Caldwell & Coshall, 2002; Coshall, 2000).

4.1.1. Problems and barriers

While putting in practice the planned method, some unexpected problems were encountered, both regarding technical and practical issues. Firstly, the initial chosen webpage selected for the study (*Region Stavanger*) was not performing correctly regarding the translation of its contents to Spanish. Therefore, at the time of using such information to interview Spanish participants, it was not possible to offer them the information in Spanish. This issue was solved by choosing another official webpage (VisitNorway.com), which had a site for Stavanger specifically and was working correctly regarding the translation of its contents to Spanish.

In addition, once the contents were available in Spanish for Stavanger and the rest of destinations and the first interviews were conducted, the lack of previous knowledge of each destination made it difficult for participants to express their perceptions while performing the triading phase of the study. Participants verbalized discomfort and showed signs of tiredness, and difficulties to distinguish each destination.

After discussing with the first participants and finding consensus about both the difficulty of distinguishing cities, which have not been previously visited, and the problems at

differentiating between different Norwegian destinations, the author explored different possibilities. The initially planned method would have perhaps worked better if Stavanger was compared with cities with strong branding –such as Paris, Barcelona or New York-, and therefore, the author considered this change. Despite this, this would have compromised the purpose of this study, which was to obtain information of how Stavanger is defined in relation to its actual competitors; this is other Norwegian destinations with similar branding and geographical area. Comparing it with well-known cities with strong brands would have resulted easier, but not fair in the light that Stavanger is not positioned at the same level as the commented cities in the participants' minds, and is not directly competing for tourism with them.

4.2. Actual method

4.2.1. Design

Finally, the decision taken was to alter the method, although keeping the general process of word elicitation, and use a combination of structured interviewing (basic questions about previous knowledge about Stavanger), word elicitation, picture elicitation and unstructured interviewing based on what the potential tourist remark as important for themselves as tourists and as for being motivated to visit the city. According to Jenkins (1999), the free elicitation, in the form of word-association, has been used widely in the field of marketing research; for example, Reilly (1990) has conducted research about Montana, asking participants for three adjectives that describe the state of Montana as a destination for vacation or pleasure travel. In addition, Jenkins (1999) points out that the main advantages of free elicitation for destination image research are that it allows the respondent to describe the target stimulus in terms that are salient for the person, rather than responding to the researchers' pre-established system of constructs (Reilly 1990, as seen in Jenkins, 1999).

In this case, participants were asked to read the text that can be found in VisitNorway.com/Stavanger, which describes the main assets of the city, including activities, cultural offer and atmosphere of the city, as well as references to its main industry and its history. With this text as a starting point, free word elicitation was conducted by asking participants to mention three aspects or adjectives they would personally use to describe the city or summarize its essence.

Also, word elicitation was also used based on each aspect promoted in the city in such text. This is, first, a general approach on the general image created in the participant's mind, followed by a more detailed word elicitation based on specific words used in the description of attractions and character of the city in the webpage VisitNorway.com.

Furthermore, and after considering the Prebensen's work (2006) a picture elicitation was also included. Prebensen studies images of northern Norway by using word elicitation, picture elicitation and the creation of a collage by the participants.

For the picture elicitation, the images shown in the above mentioned page VisitNorway.com were used. The pictures show Preikestolen, the Petroleum Museum, Nuart festival, Hafrsfjord and the Old town. Preikestolen is described in the text of the same webpage as "located 604 metres above sea level, is the most visited attraction in the county of Rogaland. Lonely Planet named it the number one most breathtaking viewing platform in the world" (Innovation Norway, 2016). The old town is described in the following manner: "Old Stavanger offers Europe's best preserved wooden house settlement, consisting of more than 170 white wooden houses" (Innovation Norway, 2016). The rest of attractions shown in the pictures are not described in the text, and therefore, were just shown with no background information –as it is given to potential tourists visiting the webpage.

Continuing with the procedures used in this paper, and in order to preserve the reference to the Means End Chain theory (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988), after conducting the word elicitation and the picture elicitation, and in the case that participants remarked one topic or feature of great value or interest for them, they were asked “Why is that important for you?”. This question was posed by rephrasing the participant in order to refresh his or her memory, as follows: “You have said that having nature around is the most important thing for you while you are on vacation. Why do you think that having nature around you is so important for you?”. This was done only when participants show a natural predisposition towards one aspect of the destination, or, on the contrary, when they showed a strong negative predisposition to an asset of the city.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, first in Spanish, and then, to English. The author of this thesis personally translated to English the interviews, and sent the Spanish transcriptions to the participants in order to guarantee that they were as faithful as possible to the individual’s meanings.

As a summary, the final method used in this study was word and picture elicitation, included in semi-structured interviews.

4.2.2. Sample

The number of participants was determined by saturation (this is, new participants stopped being added to the study as soon as there was no new information given in the interviews). The 10 participants of this study were aged between 21 to 59 years old, and both genders had the same amount of representation in the sample. The sample was selected in two ways: The author used online recruitment of volunteers to meet before travelling to Spain, and the rest of the sample was met through personal contacts –family members and friends acted as spreaders of volunteer’s search for the research.

Interviews were undertaken between March and May of 2016, in the region of Catalonia (Spain).

4.2.3. Data collection

The qualitative interview is a “uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing the experiences and lived meanings of the subjects’ everyday world” (Kvale, 1996, p.70). This type of interviews allow the participants to offer their views, opinions and impressions from their own perspective (Kvale, 1996). In addition, the inclusion of a flexible structuration in them makes them an adequate method to study images of touristic destinations in tourists’ minds, because this gives more space for the participants to reflect on their meanings and avoids studying irrelevant constructs that might be interesting for the researcher, but not meaningful for the subjects of the study (Ryan, 2000).

According to Kvale (1996), there are seven stages in the creation of interview guides, which were considered and followed in this project. Phases include thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying and reporting the findings.

Thematising consists of formulating which is the goal of the research and what is the topic being investigated (Kvale, 1996). In this case, the goal was to obtain meanings, perceptions and images about Stavanger from Spanish individuals who have never visited the city before.

Designing, which includes the design of the study and the consideration of ethical and moral implications of the research (Kvale, 1996). Questions related to the topic, the destination’s assets were planned, taking into consideration the fact that the planned structure might vary, and some topics would be of more interest than others, depending on the participants’ own interests as tourists. Ethics were taken into account to the extent that it was considered necessary; although the topic of how a destination is perceived should not bring ethical issues to the table, the interviewer and author of this study made it clear to all participants to talk

freely and to the extent they were comfortable with in each question. In other words, the design of the interview included both flexibility that allowed for conversation outside the specific planned questions, and moral considerations to change the subject in the case that the participant seemed or expressed to be uncomfortable or not interested in talking about a specific topic. For the actual interviewing, the interview guide was followed, with the full commitment to creating a distended, professional relationship between interviewer and participants in the study, as suggested by Kvale (1996). The interviewer and author of this project also considered to go deeper in topics that seemed of interest for the participants, allowing to obtain as much meanings as possible without limiting the conversation topics to the ones suggested in the interview guides.

The transcribing, which consists of the translation of oral interviews into written material (Kvale, 1996), was done, in this case, from audio recording combined with notes taken during the interviews as an aid to complement the oral information.

The analysing, consisting on going through the transcribed material, and choosing of information that is going to be used in the study (Kvale (1996) was performed after obtaining each interview, and revised after having all of them transcribed. In this case, most of the obtained information was taken into account, but irrelevant comments out of topic or not considered relevant for the study were discarded.

Before reporting the findings, a verification phase took place, as Kvale (1996) suggests, in order to determine the grade of generalizability, reliability, and validity of the interview findings. The reliability in this case was considered regarding the consistency of the results (are there similarities among responses? Is there consensus in some topic? Is it disagreement or very despair responses on a specific topic?). Validity was assessed through the revision of the used

theory and the revision of the research question, and comparing if what was intended to be studied was actually investigated with the interviews.

As a final step, in the reporting; findings were organized and communicated in an structured and readable manner, and possible moral concerns regarding both the topic and the material obtained in the interviews were considered.

Interviews frame

Before starting, all participants were informed about the subject and the purpose of the interview, as it should be done prior interviewing (Kvale, 1996). At the end of the interview, participants were explained how the information obtained would be use in the paper, and the main points made in each interview were summarized to the participants to clarify agreement in the understanding of participants' meanings, just as Kvale (1996) proposes.

5. Findings

Following the interviews structure, the findings are as follow:

5.1. Stavanger in three words

The first question, regarding with which three words the participants would describe the city of Stavanger after reading the information provided in the web, showed that “culture” is the most repeated asset pointed out by the participants (all participants except one pointed out to this characteristic). “Natural” is the second most agreed concept used to define the city, while “Oil-related” is the third. Only one participant could not answer this question, explaining: “Stavanger sounds like a mix; it makes me curious but it really does not come to my mind a specific image of how it is” (R., male, 59 years old). Other traits repeated in fewer occasions were “young”, “urban” and “dynamic”.

5.2. Previous knowledge of the city

None of the participants heard of the city of Stavanger prior the interview, except for one, who pointed out knowledge about the name of the city, but whom could not provide any further comments or information about how the city is or what are its assets.

5.3. Word elicitation

Using the specific wording of the text found in VisitNorway.com, participants were asked in detailed their perceptions and opinions of each asset of the city of Stavanger, here organized by groups:

Nature

“The city of natural heighs”

Most participants related this phrase directly with nature (mountains and high fjords), although two of the participants interpreted the sentence as a remark of Stavanger as being up to the expectations of visitors. In the latter, in one case the phrase was regarded positively (“It means that it has nothing to envy to other places”, D., female, 27 years old), and in the other, as a remark that should be reconsidered (“At least, in Spanish, it sounds pretentious to say something like that”, M., female, 28 years old).

“Breathtaking surroundings with beautiful fjords, mountains, and long, white beaches”

While all ten participants considered the phrase self-explanatory and what they would expect from a city located in Norway, the last part of the sentence caused curiosity and surprise among half of the people interviewed. “Talking about beaches in Norway is not very appealing to me; I would not bath in a Norwegian beach” (M., female, 28 years old), “It surprises me to read about white beaches because it is not what I would associate with a Norwegian city” (A., male, 25 years old). “When I read ‘white beaches’ I think of the

Caribbean, not about Norway” (M., female, 56 years old), “I am not sure if Norwegians can enjoy those beaches as we do, sunbathing and having baths in the sea” (R., male, 59 years old).

“The Stavanger region boasts many scenic attractions”

All participants agreed that scenic attractions are a relevant, attractive asset in a destination, and three of them reflected on the word “attractions” as an unclear term, wondering if it referred to activities that can be done out in the nature, or if it meant that the views were attractions in themselves. One of them made an interesting remark: “I imagine nature transformed in a show; but I would rather have virgin nature, which you can enjoy in a relaxed manner, without stress or timetables. The fact that they call nature an attraction suggests to me that the experience becomes less real than it should” (A., male, 25 years old)

Cultural offer and history: museums and the Old town

“On your walk you can easily stop by some of the city’s many museums such as the Norwegian Petroleum Museum, Stavanger museum of Fine Arts and the Norwegian Canning museum”

Regarding the Norwegian Petroleum Museum, all except two participants agreed that it would not be a part of their visit if they were in the city of Stavanger. While most point out this Museum as seeming “boring” or “not interesting”, others considered it as a reminder of a negative aspect of the city. The two participants who would be interested in visiting this museum remark the importance of it, because they imagined it could help them understand the city’s economy and history.

The Stavanger museum of Fine Arts is viewed with scepticism by some, and lack of interest by others. The four participants included in the first group (sceptic), point out that it is not the kind of museum that could surprise them; for example, one of them pointed out: “I would rather visit Italy or France if I was interested in seeing Art, because I know they offer a wide range of art

styles and artists” (J., male, 26 years old). Another participant made a remark in the same direction: “The Museum of Fine Arts sounds nice, but I am not sure if it can be compared to other cities, such as Paris. Really, all cities have at least one museum of Fine Arts, so I would not say this is a very special place to visit in Stavanger” (M., female, 28 years old). In the second group, all participants agreed that they would not be interested in this type of museum because of its thematic and its lack of relevance as an attraction while on vacation.

Regarding the Canning Museum, opinions were divided. Some express their doubts about what this museum offers, and while some are open to visit it if they were in town (“I would go to the Canning Museum because it says something about the industry in the area”, by D., female, 27 years old), others discard it from their imaginary itinerary due to its lack of interest in the process of canning fish.

Finally, the Old Town had a consensus of positive perceptions among all participants. All ten showed excitement to visit it, and while some wondered if they could visit the houses inside and learn from how life was before in Stavanger, others focused the relevance of the site in architectural terms. Two of the participants made the following remarks about how this site speaks of the city and its personality: “It talks about its past, its history, and it probably has the charm that all old places kept as time never passed have” (M., female, 56), and “It makes me think of Stavanger as a place where they know how to take care of things; also, the fact that the houses are made of wood gives it extra value, because it talks about the local population and their respect and closeness to nature” (R., male, 59).

Atmosphere

“Stavanger is a university city, and home to a number of institutions of higher education and research”

Although all participants regarded this aspect as a positive asset that makes the city dynamic, open and with young spirit, four of them pointed out that this asset would not make a difference while deciding if visiting the city or not; despite the fact that this group included both participants in their 50s and in their 20s, all four pointed out that meeting young people or seeing young people in the city they visit is not relevant when they are on vacation. All agreed, though, that having university and educational centres probably provides the city with a good offer of night activities. In addition, two participants remarked this fact as relevant for the city's advance and international reputation.

“The city has an urban and lively atmosphere and a varied assortment of shopping and dining opportunities”

Regarding this aspect, opinions and perceptions were divided. Some did not consider having an urban atmosphere as something worth of mentioning, as it is not something particular about Stavanger. Others expressed that this is a contrast with the natural sights (which two of them remarked it was confusing), while three others perceived as a positive asset to have both the nature and the urban atmosphere in one same city. Regarding shopping, participants showed lack of interest in this activity, either because is not the type of activity they perform while on vacation, or because they did not think they would like to do it in a place like Stavanger. There was general agreement about gastronomy being the asset with the most relevance for all participants, in this category, although in few cases, they wonder about the prices of the food and the variety that Stavanger offers. Most agreed that if they could taste something typical, they would pay the price even if it were higher to what they are used to.

“The petroleum industry attracts different nationalities to the region, making it a highly international destination”

For all participants, the fact of cultural diversity and plurality in nationalities living in the city was a positive aspect. Despite this, six out of the ten participants pointed out that a city being international has no merit nowadays. “Pretty much all cities have people from different countries living in them, and tourists coming from different countries, too” (J., male, 26 years old). “I do not think it is a very unique characteristic and it would not impact my decision of visiting the city” (M., female, 28 years old).

Gastronomy: Gladmat

“The Gladmat Food Festival, usually held at the end of July, is a large happening in the region, and attracts around 250,000 visitors every year”

There was consensus about the interest and relevance of this festival, although none of the participants had heard of it before the interview. Factors that participants pointed out as most relevant in their decision of visiting or not the Festival if they were visiting the city were, on one hand, the opportunity to taste typical food, and on the other, the price range.

Some of the participants were interested in the Festival, but were very clear about under which conditions they would visit it. “It depends on what kind of food it is offered, and how expensive it is; and if it is in an open space, it should be sunny and with a nice temperature, otherwise is not very attractive to go to this type of Festivals” (A., male, 26 years old). “I would be interested in going to Gladmat if they cooked salmon or something typical from the city” (R., male, 59 years old). “Unless it was really cheap or even with free entrance, I would not visit it”. (A., male, 25 years old).

Another one of the participants, on the contrary, expressed his preference for good food, regardless the price: “I would actually look for a cheap hotel in Stavanger and use the money I am saving in enjoying good food and going to Gladmat, for example” (J.R., male, 26 years

old). One of the participants remarked the relationship that, for her, gastronomy has with tradition: “I like to taste typical food from places I visit; you can taste new flavours and those flavours also say something about the place traditions’ and history” (J., male, 28 years old).

Link with oil and gas industry

“Today Stavanger is Europe's oil and energy capital, and the main source of income for local people comes from working in the petroleum sector”

One of the participants showed surprise when learning about this fact; the rest reflected on two main topics: on one hand, they pointed out that Stavanger must be a place with economical power and a relaxed lifestyle; on the other, that this is not a positive trait in their opinion. Four of the participants expressed disinterest about this aspect. “I think this is positive for Norwegians, but at a touristic level, it is not very appealing” (R., male, 59 years old). “Maybe I would be interested in seeing the platforms out in the sea, like watching the fight of human versus nature, but the fact of being European Capital of Oil and Gas does not sound very relevant to me; I do not even think this is of interest for any tourist” (M., female, 28 years old). Another participant points out: “I honestly think that tourists do not care much about things like this and I do not think tourists could be motivated to travel to Stavanger knowing that it is so related to the Oil and gas industry” (A., male, 26 years old).

The rest, five participants, pointed out that they associate this fact with negative outcomes, related to environmental or economic issues: “It makes me think of capitalism and money, in a negative way, and also I think it is contradictory to imagine a place full of nature, and then read about its oil and gas industry. To me, the Nordic countries have always been good at using renewable energies and being respectful to nature; but this makes me think that the city has a corporative atmosphere full of oil and gas publicity” (A., male, 25 years old).

5.4. Picture elicitation

Preikestolen

All ten participants expressed the spectacularity and the uniqueness of the attraction shown in the picture of Preikestolen. Despite this, four participants pointed out that the image showed too many tourists on the top of the mountain, which made it feel saturated of people and diminished its charm.

Petroleum museum

Two of the participants pointed out that the image projected the Petroleum museum as an interesting place to visit; although the rest of participants expressed no desire to visit it. Some of them recognized the importance that the industry has for the area, but most described the image as *boring*. Two of the participants pointed out that the museum is not interesting for them, but maybe it is for families with kids (justifying it due to the appearance of a woman and her daughter in the picture).

Hafrsfjord

The element of the picture that caught the most attention between participants was the sculpture of the three swords, which some of them guessed to be related with Viking history. Although the setting itself –the beach shown next to the monument- did not arise any remarkable comments, the link of the place with Norwegian history was the most commented asset of the photography.

Two of the participants remarked Viking history as a very relevant aspect for them as tourists in the following manner:

“I think it is related with Viking history, which is fascinating! I would go to this beach but it is not a place that could have the whole weight of my decision of buying a ticket to visit the city. The symbolism of the place is probably very interesting, though” (M., female, 56 years old).

“This is interesting if it has something to do with the history of the place; I am guessing it is a monument of some kind, maybe related with the Vikings, which is interesting to me. I think actually Viking history can actually make a city attractive, because Vikings are known all over; they are like a brand around the world. The physical location does not look very special though; looks like any other beach” (R., male, 59 years old).

Nuart graffiti festival

Only two of the participants showed enthusiasm and an interest in visiting this festival of graffiti in the city, while the rest discarded it due to the lack of interest of the picture or the topic itself. Some commented that the picture, which shows a detail of a big whale painted on one of the walls in the city, was not clear enough; the rest pointed out that if it were about typical Norwegian art, they would be interested in visiting the Festival, but not if it is about modern urban art.

Old town

All of the participants agreed that the place is interesting and some pointed out it would be worth a visit, probably.

For some of the participants, the picture's importance is related to the Spring feeling exuded by it:

“This contrasts with the image that one has in mind when thinking of Nordic countries; before seeing this I imagined Norway as cold place full of snow most of year... but this picture shows a sunny day, and there are so many flowers, that it breaks the image I had of Norway. I like this

picture because it shows that if you go in Spring or summer you probably can go visit streets like this, and see old architecture. But the thing I like the most is the flowers and the sun, in this picture” (M., female, 56 years old)

Some participants are critic with some of the elements shown in the picture:

“The picture is not descriptive enough; I would rather see a picture of the architecture with some local old woman watering the plants or something like that. I would like to see this street in a more authentic, traditional way. Those three women who seem to go shopping break the charm of the place, which has to do with history and tradition” (M., female, 28 years old).

Others point out to feelings that the picture awake in them and take a further step imagining being there as tourists: “Looks homie, cozy and rustic. You probably feel very welcome living in that neighbourhood and it gives me this feeling of little, old towns where everybody knows everybody and life is very slow paced” (E., female, 20 years old).

“It makes me want to have a walk in those little streets; they seem to have a lot of charm and there is a lot of light because the white houses reflect the sunlight. Very charming” (J., female, 27 years old).

5.5. Open questions

Motivations for travelling and motivation for potential trip to Stavanger

Most participants expressed that what motivates them to travel is getting to know different cultures and ways of life, and only one of the interviewees expressed that Stavanger is not a destination that seems offer what he needs. In this case, the participant pointed out that Stavanger seems like a destination in which it is unclear what it can be done or found that is unique.

Overall, for the rest of participants, three aspects were pointed out as motivations to travel to Stavanger: nature, culture and gastronomy.

Departing from these topics, participants were asked why each element is relevant.

Nature

Most participants pointed out that visiting a place with nature has spiritual and physical benefits, and some of the participants pointed out those two dimensions are very important for them. While four of them pointed out feelings of relaxation and spiritual fulfillment when being around nature, two participants pointed out that they are very sporty at home, and like to be sporty outdoors and in the nature when they go on vacation. One of the participants pointed out both dimensions –physical and spiritual- as being benefited from being outdoors in a natural environment.

Culture

To have a cultural shock, to obtain knowledge about the place visited and to acquire personal enrichment were the three benefits pointed out by participants who pointed out culture as an area of interest when they travel.

“It helps me know better the place I am visiting. Getting to know the traditions of a place and its history helps me feel more full, more connected to the place I am visiting; the worst thing that could happen is to go back home after a vacation and have no feeling of fulfillment in this area” (E., female, 20 years old).

Some interpret the approach to the culture of the destination as an approach to its traditions and history: “Knowing other cultures is like opening a window and looking through it; each place you visit is a new window and a new chance to re-discover the world with new eyes” (J.R., male, 26 years old)

Others, point out to intellectual and personal enrichment as a product of visiting cultural sites while on vacation: “Going to museums and learning things about another culture and lifestyle is enriching not only intellectually but also at a personal level; you feel fulfilment in so many ways when you learn about these things” (M., female, 28 years old)

Gastronomy

Gastronomy was among the most relevant elements for participants while on vacation, due to the opportunity of trying new tastes, and to experience something that is not common where they come from. In other words, participants pointed out that eating something different goes beyond the action of eating; it provides them with something to bring back home in the form of an experience they can only have in that particular place they visit:

“When you travel, trying new food is very special; travelling somewhere is an opportunity to try things you do not have at home. If I was in Stavanger for a short period of time, I would like to taste as much as I can from that city and the region. Maybe I do not like it, but at least I have tried, and that I can bring home: the experience of trying something for the first time” (M., female, 28 years old)

Competitive advantage: Is there anything unique about Stavanger?

All participants answered that, in their opinion, what makes Stavanger different is its *nature*. One of the participants added: “The fact that I never heard of it, which means that there are maybe not so many tourists. If I go there, I can probably feel like a discoverer because it is not a well-known destination. It makes me feel special to visit a place not everybody has heard of” (A., male, 25 years old). Some point out that what makes Stavanger unique (its nature), is what makes Norway unique, too: “There is always distinctive elements for each touristic destination; the Caribbean is sun and beach, and Norway is fjords and mountains” (R., male, 59 years old).

Overall impression of the city

Most participants showed positive associations when asked about their opinion about Stavanger's projected image in general terms, and some even pointed out the season they would like to visit the city, and the intention of doing so several times:

"I think I would like it if I went there; but probably I would like it more in the summer than in the winter. I imagine you can enjoy it better when there is no snow and temperatures are more similar to Spain than when it is very cold. Also, Stavanger seems like one of those places that you probably need to visit more than once; I do not think that with one trip I would be able to see everything that it has to offer" (M., female, 56 years old)

Another participant showed some scepticism regarding the fact that the city offers a varied set of attractions. "I think Stavanger tries to sell too many things to the tourists; is like a shop that offers a lot of products that are very different between them. And that does not necessarily mean that the city is more attractive because of it. If you want to buy shoes, you go to a shoe shop; if you want to see the Eiffel tower, you go to Paris. It is not clear what is the main thing you would you if you visit Stavanger" (R., male, 59 years old).

Other participants showed a neutral positioning about their impression of the city: "I would not say that Stavanger is a city that surprises me, or impresses me, but there is nothing that would stop me from going there, either. I think if it was more information about traditions, culture and history I could be more convinced and decide to visit it someday" (M, female, 28 years old)

The rest showed surprise about the fact of not having known the city before, and words as "exciting" and "surprising" were the most used among this group.

6. Analysis

6.1. Norway as a brand, and country comparisons

As seen previously in this paper, country images can affect individual destination's perceptions (source). As an example, it can be seen in the findings that the image related to Norway (a country with nature and fjords, and compromised with responsible environmental issues) collides with the fact that Stavanger is the Capital of Oil and Gas in Europe. Some participants in this study perceive this industry in a negative light, and some express confusion regarding the presence of both nature and this industry in the same city.

Also, and as another example, some participants image Norway as a cold country with snow and low temperatures, and show surprise when they are informed that the city of Stavanger has beaches and none of its pictures show snow. Once again, the naive image about Stavanger competes with the induced image of Norway, which has been building up in the participants' minds for longer than the specific city of Stavanger (unknown by most participants before the interviews).

In some of the interviews, participants show a cultural comparison between their own country (Spain) versus Norway. This can be exemplified with comments about gastronomy, weather and beach life. Stavanger, and Norway as a country, appears in participants' comments as a contraposition to what it can be found in Spain; Stavanger as a place where there is wild nature, but cold; Spain is warmer but it has not such impressive nature. But when comparing both, Norway and Stavanger are two words exchanged as if it was the same concept. This generalization of a destination can be related to what Gunn (1972) calls naive image; although participants had no naive image about Stavanger (no previous knowledge about the city), they do have an image from which their preconception of the city can be built: Norway.

Stavanger is presented as a city with beaches and where there are activities organized outdoors (like Gladmat or Nuart), and none of the pictures or words seen by the participants showed snow, people dressed in winter clothes or any other reference to cold weather. Despite this, and sometimes verbally expressed by the participants, Norway “has snow”. Some of the participants pointed out that they would visit the city in the Spring or summer, and few of them expressed that it is probably not possible to sunbath in its beaches due to the cold weather. Sometimes, even though participants are asked about Stavanger as a city, they mention Norway instead, and this could be related to the previous images present in participants’ minds, which are related to their own naive and induced image of Norway.

6.2. The concept of uniqueness

As seen previously, research shows that uniqueness is a relevant aspect to brand destinations in a successful manner (Que et al., 2011). If a destination or some of its traits is perceived as unique, the destination gains competitive advantage and is positioned more easily in the tourists’ minds (Qu et al., 2011). In this case, the findings show that uniqueness in Stavanger is mostly related to one particular attraction: Preikestolen. The attraction is pointed out as a special asset of the city, but at the same time, participants complain about how it is portrayed: full of tourists. In their mind, although the attraction is per se unique, it loses the sense of exclusivity due to its high popularity and the assumption that it is not difficult to access. For some of the interviewees, this makes it lose its attractiveness.

Uniqueness is also pointed out in relation to gastronomy; the relevance of gastronomical options in the area is related not to the taste of specific products, but mostly to the opportunity to experience something special and different. What makes tasting Stavanger’s typical gastronomy special, hence, is based on the uniqueness of the setting –it is not the same to taste Norwegian food in a restaurant in Italy, than tasting Norwegian food in Norway.

6.3. The “authentic” Stavanger versus the projected Stavanger

Participants show their desire to taste typical food; to see traditional art and to visit a city where they can learn the Norwegian culture and traditions. Moreover, another participant expresses his wish of learning about the “real” Stavanger, without globalization contamination (referring to the number of international tourists and habitants in the city). Participants in the interviews expressed their desire to see something *traditional*, even though tradition is not shown in the pictures or the text to which the participants were exposed to. As commented in the introduction to the city, Stavanger is an international town with different nationalities living in it; thus, the reality of its population is different from what Spanish tourists expect, for example. Despite this, and even after reading the existence of this diversity in cultural terms in the city, the interviewed individuals show their interest in seeing something else; *Norwegians living a Norwegian life*. This can be related to the Stages theory revised by MacCannell (1978): potential tourists have certain expectations and ideas about what it is authentic or real in relation to a destination. What it is shown in the information provided to them for the interviews do not correspond to the ideas they have of what is authentic for a city like Stavanger, and those preconceived ideas often have more weight than the objective information given to them. For example, Stavanger has beaches but some participants showed reticence to sunbath in them or visit them.

6.4. Attributes of the city and perceived benefits

When asked about the three most commented assets of the city (culture, nature and gastronomy), findings showed that benefits of each aspect go beyond the mere practical benefits.

Regarding the attributes of Stavanger, findings show that there are some that are easily recognizable and remembered by participants. When asked why these attributes are relevant, Consumption consequences are drawn. For example, learning about the culture of Stavanger is

important for the participants, because it means learning something from the area, which consequently, enhances feelings of fulfillment, enrichment and personal growth for the tourist. At the same time, nature as an attribute of the city provides some of the participants with peace, which at the same time helps them feel renovated and re-energized. Other participants, on the other hand, find wild nature thrilling, because it makes them feel like explorers and survivors against a non-controlled environment, which agreeing with Means End Chain theory, shows that the same trait can evoke different reactions and sensations in different individuals, due to the differences in their system of values and preferences.

6.5. Perceptual traits and affective traits of Stavanger

Findings show that, while some of the comments about the different assets of Stavanger were based on technical or practical aspects (for example, when it comes to the structuration of the city, which makes it easier to move around the centre), others were of affective nature. For example, when it comes to explaining feelings about Preikestolen as an attraction: “beautiful”, “spectacular”, etc.), comments are more opinative on abstract concepts than on technical ones. In relation to Belch & Belch’s perspective (2014), the appeal evoked by the words and images shown to tourists were, therefore, both emotional and rational, even though in the conversation with Lunde, assets and its uniqueness were remarked, but there were no comments on if there is some specific emotion or feeling that Stavanger wants to evoke in potential tourists’ minds.

In addition, some assets of the city evoked neutral or positive *perceptual* evaluations, but negative or neutral *affective* reactions, such as the Oil and Gas industry. The evaluation of this industry was both perceptual and emotional; being an industry of importance for the area, participants showed understanding of its relevance for the city –perceptual evaluation. At the same time, participants expressed affective evaluation of the same industry, showing, for example, their personal lack of interest on the topic, or their negative feelings about the oil industry in general. This can be linked to Baluglu & McCleary’s Path theory (1999), in which

it is pointed out that some evaluations of traits are based on technical aspects, and others, in emotions arise by those traits.

7. Discussion

7.1. Generalizability, reliability and validity of the findings

According to Kvale (1997), researchers must pose a series of questions once interviews have been made and findings are transcribed.

Firstly, it must be considered if the results are generalizable, and if so, to what population (Kvale, 1997). In this case, findings can be grouped and general conclusions can be made, but results are not generalizable to all tourists, nor to all Spanish tourist. To do so, the sample should have been much bigger, and the nature of the study would have been different.

Secondly, one must question the reliability of the findings. The more subjective, the more reliable the study is (Kvale, 1997). To examine the reliability of this study, considerations were made about how questions were formulated (examining that they had a neutral tone and were not leading the participants), and the transcriptions were examined in order to determine high fidelity to the meaning of the participants. Also, participants of the study approved the transcription prior the stage of the analysis, confirming that there were not misunderstandings and they were loyal to what it was intended to express in the interviews by each individual.

Regarding validity, a second look was taken to every step taken regarding the study's structure, theories, research questions and validity of the interview transcriptions, and the logic implicit and explicit in the links of every part of the study.

7.2. Ethical considerations

Kvale (1996) remarks the responsibility that any researcher has, not only towards the validity and reliability of the results of a study, but also towards the participants who make such study possible as a source of information.

For this reason, and in an attempt to conduct a responsible and ethical methodology of work, consent was asked from every participant, and confidentiality of their identities was provided to them. Participants were informed in detail about the nature of the study and its goals, and they were given the chance to ask questions at any time during the interview. The study does not include any personal information that could be used in the identification of the participants and only general background information was given about the participants as a group, not individually. In addition, as a manner of respecting and being faithful to the participants' true meanings, transcriptions were sent to them to be approved in order to avoid any subjective input in the translation of their words to the paper.

In this case, there is no underage participants so all participants decided individually that they wanted to voluntarily participate in the study.

7.3. Findings in relation to the research questions

Regarding the research questions, "How do potential tourists perceive Stavanger as a destination based on its official touristic web site?", and "How is Stavanger projected identity perceived by potential Spanish tourists?", findings provide answers to them. Participants provide opinions based on information that is used to promote Stavanger as a destination, and perceptions are analysed and organized in order to draw a general picture on how the city is viewed by the participants in the study.

The strengths of the paper are based on its contribution to research and the touristic sector in the city, and its support in previously conducted research in terms of identity, brand and pre-

consumption experience. As seen in this work, there is a lack of research on Stavanger city as a destination, and on perceptions prior-consumption in this area. At the same time, there is a big amount of research conducted on destination branding, perceptions from consumers, identity and tourism, that has not been applied previously to study the touristic perceptions in the city of Stavanger. Therefore, this work builds up on pre-existing research, using in an ambit that has not been researched previously from this perspective.

Considering limitations of the study, the impossibility of generalizing the results to all Spanish tourists is the most evident. However, because this work is of qualitative nature, and aims to explore, not to quantify, findings can be of use in further research on this topic.

Another limitation of the study is related to the geographical displacement that it was needed to conduct the interviews. Participants were interviewed in two stages: first, four of the participants were approached and interviewed on a trip to Spain in March 2016, and again, the rest of participants was interviewed on a second trip in May 2016. Because interviews were conducted with a limited amount of time, possibilities to meet participants more than twice to make clarifications were limited. Therefore, all communication regarding consultations of meanings obtained after making the transcriptions was done online.

The implication of the findings is of use, as said previously, for the scientific community as it contributes to tourism research. At the same time, this work contributed to the Tourism industry, since it provides explorative data that can be useful to conduct further research on how to approach potential tourists when promoting Stavanger as a touristic destination. This work can be used as an initial guide to re-address assets perceived as conflictive by potential tourists –such as its link with Petroleum–, and also to reinforce the assets perceived more positively by them. It also can be the start of a set of research papers on the main targets for

tourism promotion in this area, addressed by nationality, in order to create messages of particular interest for each country of origin of potential tourists.

On a larger scale, findings can be used to conduct further research on tourists' perceptions of Norway, and act accordingly to attract tourism and shape the country's branding.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, this project answers the question of how Stavanger is perceived by potential Spanish tourists. Through word and picture elicitation, participants' perceptions on the city are obtained. There is agreement among the interviewees on the main positive assets of the city: its nature and its culture, and regarding a conflictive topic related to the city (its link with the Oil and Gas industry). Although lack of previous knowledge of the city, most participants show having knowledge about Norway, which at times contradicts the assets promoted in the city.

Further research can use this explorative work in order to develop quantitative studies with bigger samples, in order to obtain a generalizable set of data that can help determine Spanish preferences when travelling to Stavanger and Norway. At the same time, further qualitative research can be conducted in order to determine if other nationalities agree or disagree with Spanish tourists regarding their impressions at a local level (Stavanger), and at a national level (Norway). Overall, both the local and national Tourism sector in Stavanger and Norway can benefit from learning about their visitors perceptions, in order to adjust the communication and promotion created for each group. At the same time, it can be of interest for the scientific community, and especially for Tourism research, to explore further the topic of this work; for example, possible relations between professed, projected and perceived identity in contraposition to tourists' motivation to travel. In addition, quantitative research could be conducted in order to determine generalizable tendencies on travelling preferences and destination images among nationalities.

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