

# **THE IMPORTANCE OF CELEBRITY ASSOCIATION IN TOURISM DESTINATION BRANDING: DETERMINING THE POWER OF THE JFK BRAND IN NEW ROSS (COUNTY WEXFORD, IRELAND)**

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**ABSTRACT:** Qu, Kim & Im (2011; 465) highlight many earlier studies which suggest that both brand identity and brand image are fundamental components for a successful tourism destination brand. Morgan, Pritchard & Pride (2003; 11) state that *branding is perhaps the most powerful marketing weapon available to contemporary destination marketers confronted by increasing product parity, substitutability and competition*. It is for this very reason that branding should constantly be reviewed and revised; therefore giving evidence that research must be conducted in this discipline in order to identify the current and future expectations of holiday makers. The review of the existing literature identifies that there is a dearth of research pertaining directly to the impacts of regional tourism destination branding (see Kotler & Gartner, 2002; Morgan & Pritchard, 1999). Moreover, there has been no specific study relating to New Ross's brand / image. In response, a tourist survey will be an initial attempt to fill this gap. The issues evolving from these and also the extensive literature review undertaken should highlight a number of implications for the future development of regional destinations. The findings should help develop a solid identity for the region in the national and international context. **Key words:** Celebrity association, New Ross, County Wexford, Ireland, JFK, Branding, Imagery.

**RESUMEN:** Qu, Kim & Im (2011; 465) destacan muchos estudios anteriores que sugieren que tanto la identidad como la imagen de una marca son componentes fundamentales para una marca de destino turístico bien sucedida. Morgan, Pritchard & Pride (2003; 11) afirman que *la gestión de marcas es quizá el recurso de marketing más poderoso disponible a los profesionales del marketing de destinos contemporáneos confrontados con la creciente paridad, sustitución y competición entre los productos*. Es por esta razón que la gestión de marcas debe ser constantemente revisada y corregida; dando de esa manera evidencia de que la pesquisa tiene que ser conducida en este tema en el sentido de identificar las expectativas actuales y futuras de los turistas. La revisión de la literatura existente reconoce que hay una escasez de pesquisa directamente sobre los impactos de las marcas de destinos en el turismo regional (ver Kotler & Gartner, 2002; Morgan & Pritchard, 1999). Además, no ha habido un estudio específico sobre la marca/imagen de New Ross. En respuesta, una encuesta a los turistas será una tentativa inicial para colmar este fallo. Las cuestiones que resulten de eso, así como la extensa revisión de literatura llevada a cabo deben realzar el número de implicaciones para el desarrollo futuro de los destinos regionales. Los resultados deben ayudar a desarrollar una identidad sólida para la región en

el contexto nacional y internacional. **Palabras-clave:** Asociación de celebridades, New Ross, condado de Wexford, Irlanda, JFK, gestión de marcas, imágenes.

**RESUMO:** Qu, Kim & Im (2011; 465) destacam muitos estudos anteriores que sugerem que tanto a identidade como a imagem de uma marca são componentes fundamentais para uma marca de destino turístico bem sucedida. Morgan, Pritchard & Pride (2003; 11) afirmam que *branding is perhaps the most powerful marketing weapon available to contemporary destination marketers confronted by increasing product parity, substitutability and competition*. E por esta razão que a gestão de marcas deve ser constantemente revista e corrigida; dando dessa maneira evidência de que a pesquisa tem que ser conduzida nesta disciplina no sentido de identificar as expectativas atuais e futuras dos turistas. A revisão da literatura existente reconhece que há uma escassez de pesquisa diretamente acerca dos impactos das marcas de destinos no turismo regional (ver Kotler & Gartner, 2002; Morgan & Pritchard, 1999). Para além disso, não tem havido estudo específico acerca da marca/imagem de New Ross. Em resposta, um inquérito aos turistas será uma tentativa inicial para colmatar esta falha. As questões que resultem disso, bem como a extensa revisão de literatura levada a cabo devem realçar o número de implicações para o desenvolvimento futuro dos destinos regionais. Os resultados devem ajudar a desenvolver uma identidade sólida para a região no contexto nacional e internacional. **Palavras-chave:** Associação de celebridades, New Ross, condado de Wexford, Irlanda, JFK, gestão de marcas, imagens.

## INTRODUCTION

Van der Veen (2008) notes that many research studies have investigated the idea that celebrity can positively promote a variety of products and services (Atkin & Block, 1983; Freiden, 1984; Kamins, Brand, Hoeke, & Moe, 1989; Ohanian, 1991; Tripp, Jensen & Carlson, 1994). Such studies have recognised that the appropriate use of celebrity associations could work very well in product place tourism destination marketing campaigns (Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Misra & Beatty, 1990). It seems that this is due to the distinct celebrity related image which can complement those products and services (Khale & Homer, 1985; Langmeyer & Walker, 1991; McCracken, 1989; Simonin & Ruth, 1998). However, celebrity association has only recently started to appear in some tourism research (Chang, Wall & Tsai, 2005 as cited in Van der Veen, 2008).

O'Connor, Flanagan and Gilbert (2010; 39-40) suggest that visual and vocal imagery can be very dynamic in branding tourism destinations. Tourism Ireland Limited (TIL) presently markets not only Ireland's built heritage and natural environment but also its literary giants namely Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and W.B. Yeats. Celebrities connected with destinations can all boost the destination's profile such as Catherine Zeta Jones – Wales and *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) – Australia (Frisby, 2002; Nielson, 2001). The location of celebrities' homes and birthplaces now affords the incentive to visit some destinations (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004; 209). Winterset, Iowa, USA currently attracts over 30,000 tourists every year, purely because it is the birthplace of the actor John Wayne (O'Connor *et al.*, 2010) Celebrity association for tourism products is widely used in such related marketing campaigns, *taking advantage of the public's fascination with celebrities and the belief in a personal connection with them* (Glover,

2009; 16). Many Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) such as Tourism Australia have used its home-grown celebrities, such as Paul Hogan in the 1980s to promote Australia to the American market.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *Destination image*

Destination image has been a significant area of tourism research and scholarship since the 1970s and its importance is widely acknowledged in the literature (Chon, 1990; Gartner 1993; Gunn, 1972; Hunt, 1975; Pike 2002). One of the most comprehensive definitions of destination image is that put forward by Echtner and Ritchie (1991, 1993); they conclude that destination image comprises attribute, holistic, functional, psychological, common and unique components. While motivations may influence the consumer in establishing the need/desire to travel generally they do not impact on specific destination choice. Images form the basis of the evaluation or selection process and this provides the link between motivation and destination choice (Goodall, 1992). In practical terms this implies that destination image studies are a pre-requisite to a successful marketing and branding strategy (O'Leary & Deegan, 2003).

The distinction between organic and induced images as identified by Gunn (1972) is unique to the formation of destination images. Information for the majority of products and services is primarily commercial in nature; consequently, the role of outside influences in formulating product image is rather limited. Tourism images, on the other hand, are derived from a number of different sources, both commercial and non-commercial (for example, economic, historical, media, political and social). This is because there is a strong link between a country's tourism image and its national image (Watkins, Hassanien & Dale, 2006). It must be acknowledged, therefore, that destination images are formed from a wide variety of sources over which the tourism industry has little or no control. Goodall (1992: 10) states, however, that even though personal images are more often created as a result of the tourist's general media exposure, *it is during the formulation and reformulation of mental images held by holidaymakers that the demand and supply sides of the tourism industry are first drawn into explicit contact*. Herein lies the opportunity for the tourism industry generally, and the promoters of tourism specifically, to influence the consumer.

It is essential for those involved in creating and projecting destination images to realise that the images people hold of regions cannot be neatly and exclusively classified into tourist images, sport images, or industrial images. Destination image managers cannot control the sources of image, nor indeed the manner in which targeted consumers

perceive projected images from any source. Tourism destination images, therefore, have to contend with a wide variety of alternative image forming agents, not only from other destinations but other sources of image, commercial and non-commercial, organic and induced. According to O'Connor (1993), tourism images of Ireland and the Irish people are just part of a panoply of other imagery, political and social, having disparate sources, and influenced by a number of factors such as historical relations with other countries, and contemporary media representations. However, it has been argued that tourist imagery is the predominant form of imagery relating to Ireland. Gibbons (O'Connor, 1993), for instance, claims that *the absence of a visual tradition in Ireland, equal in stature to its powerful literary counterpart, has meant that the dominant images of Ireland have, for the most part, emanated from outside the country or have been produced at home with an eye on the foreign (or tourist) market.* This suggests that the concepts of national and touristic images of Ireland are inextricably linked, as are the sources of these images (O'Connor, 1993).

### *Destination branding*

Morgan and Pritchard (2002) have focused on the challenges faced by tourism promoters such as ever-increasing competition, greater product parity and consumer choice and suggested that intangibles such as brand values, experiences, emotional benefits and celebrity will be the key differentiating factors. In this regard *branding is perhaps the most powerful marketing weapon available to contemporary destination marketers* (Morgan & Pritchard, 2002; 11). Increasing competition and substitutability of tourism destinations have heightened the need for destinations to focus on their unique attributes to differentiate themselves (Morgan and Pritchard, 2002; Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2002). Branding theories have been widely applied to product and services marketing (Blain, Levy & Ritchie, 2005) and only relatively more recently to the field of destination marketing with the first journal articles appearing in the 1990s and the first book in 2002 (Morgan & Pritchard, 2002). Pike (2009) published a review of 74 destination branding publications by 102 authors from the first 10 years of destination branding literature (1998-2007). He notes that common research themes include *reporting brand strategy development and aspects of both the supply side interest in brand development, and the demand side of market perceptions* (Pike, 2009: 859). The current research study will attempt to establish the brand strategy utilised by New Ross and assess both supply and demand side perspectives.

There are a number of factors to be considered when designing an appropriate destination image mix (Gartner, 1993) including available funding, the characteristics of the target market and timing. Moreo-

ver, the image formation process for country, state or regional destinations benefits more from induced agents such as traditional advertising, whereas specific products, such as resorts, rely more on organic agents (e.g. word of mouth). This implies that there is scope for destination promoters to significantly influence the image of their region in the mind of consumers. Destination branding involves combining elements associated with a particular region (e.g. industry, agriculture, sports, culture) in order to capture the core of the destination both symbolic and experiential to create something unique and capable of adding value to the visitor experience. According to Morgan and Pritchard (2002; 27), a good brand should be credible, deliverable, differentiating, convey powerful ideas, enthuse partners and stakeholders and resonate with visitors. However, the fragmented nature of the tourism product along with the issue of control and the multiplicity of stakeholders potentially involved presents multiple challenges to those involved in destination branding.

### *Celebrity association*

McCracken (1989) suggests that celebrity association has become a pervasive aspect of modern marketing. According to Glover (2009) the appeal of celebrity endorsement lies in the public's fascination with celebrities and the belief in a personal connection with them. While Van der Veen (2008) notes that celebrities can positively endorse products and services (Atkin & Block, 1983; Freiden, 1984; Kamins et al.; Ohanian, 1991; Tripp, Jensen & Carlson, 1994) the association of celebrities with tourism destination is a more recent phenomenon (Chang, Wall & Tsai, 2005; Glover, 2009). The benefits of using celebrities include capturing the audience's attention, adding credibility, aiding recognition / recall and enhancing brand image (Glover, 2009).

The debate surrounding both regionality and seasonality in Irish tourism has been well-rehearsed. Fáilte Ireland (2012) has noted a recovery in tourist numbers; however, against a backdrop of rising international and national unemployment rates and constrained economies, it is not unreasonable to suggest that in some regional locations may be dis-proportionately affected. Tourism Ireland (2007) have articulated the issue by stating that the continued growth in short breaks and the demand for urban holidays will make achieving a regional distribution of visitors challenging. This underscores the critical importance of image differentiation and destination branding in the current climate particularly in the regional context. Celebrities from the world of entertainment (Eamonn Holmes), sport (Darren Clarke), gardening (Diarmuid Gavin) and food (Rachel Allen) have joined TIL for a recent (2011) marketing campaign to inspire the British market to visit Northern Ireland.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH USED

The current study will focus on the association between New Ross and President John F. Kennedy (JFK). New Ross is located on the River Barrow in the South East of Ireland and has a population of almost 8,000 people. The Kennedy Homestead is located near New Ross and is the birthplace of JFK's great-grandfather Patrick Kennedy. The research will attempt to establish the strength of the JFK brand and its incorporation in the New Ross tourism product in order to gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the brand currently in place. It will also identify the image that exists amongst its core tourism markets and determine how this relates to the current tourism product on offer. The research study is being supported by the JFK Trust<sup>1</sup>, The Kennedy Homestead and the JFK Arboretum. The findings may be incorporated into New Ross's marketing strategy / campaigns in order to communicate the new tourism brand in its target markets.

The review of the existing literature identifies that there is a dearth of research pertaining directly to the impacts of regional tourism destination branding (see Kotler & Gartner, 2002; Morgan & Pritchard, 1999). Moreover, there has been no specific study relating to New Ross's brand / image. The current research consists of a two-phase approach to investigate the topic under consideration. A survey of 207 tourists to New Ross was conducted during the peak season (July – September) in 2011, the primary aim of which was to determine the image that exists amongst visitors to the region and the extent to which they are aware of the JFK connection to the area. The second phase of the study involved a series of interviews with key stakeholders involved in tourism in the region. The interviewees that were chosen for inclusion in the study range from tourism providers, public representatives, to members of the JFK Trust. The choice was influenced by factors such as their relatively high profile, availability and cooperation. The issues evolving from the primary research and also the extensive literature review undertaken should highlight a number of implications for the future development of regional destinations. The findings from the survey will be presented in this research paper and should help develop a solid identity for the region in the national and international context.

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<sup>1</sup> The JFK Trust is a charitable trust which honours the historic legacy of JFK in New Ross.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

### *Sample profile*

In relation to gender there was a relatively even split between male and female respondents. In terms of visitor origin the vast majority were from Ireland (33%), the UK (20%), and North America (14%). With respect to party composition over half (55%) were travelling with other adults and 28% with children. The sample had a good representation of age groups similar to official statistics for the region. In terms of travel characteristics most of the respondents were on holiday (59%), 14% were Visiting Friends and Relatives, while 22% were in the area for a day which is understandable given the proportion of Irish respondents. Most respondents were travelling independently (87%), while almost half (45%) were staying in the area for a day or less.

### *Image development*

A significant proportion of respondents had previously visited New Ross (60%). When asked to describe their perception of the destination some of the images that were listed included;

- Beautiful town
- Friendly, local people
- Good tourist facilities
- Heritage linkages
- Interesting tourist attractions
- Large modern market town
- Old-fashioned town
- Port facilities and quay front very pretty
- Scenic countryside

In relation to image formation, respondents noted the importance of friends / relatives (23%), television (13%) and other media such as the internet (22%). When respondents were asked to indicate whether this image was different from what they anticipated prior to visitation almost one-fifth noted that it was. With the exception of one comment relating to the cleanliness of the area, all the statements were positive such as historic town, interesting destination, Irish ancestry outlet, smart town and harbour, and surprised by area attractions. The diverse range of image attributes and sources is consistent with the literature regarding tourism images and image formation discussed earlier in the paper (Gunn, 1972; Goodall, 1992; Gartner, 1993).



*JFK association with New Ross*

The main aim of this paper is to investigate the importance of celebrity association with a destination, focusing on the connection between New Ross and JFK. It is worth noting that over 70% of respondents stated that they were aware of the link between the area and JFK, notwithstanding the fact that only one-third received any tourist information that mentioned the association. Furthermore, most of the information that referred to JFK was actually sourced in JFK related attractions as opposed to tourist information centres, accommodation providers, guidebooks, etc. The attractions linked to JFK in the New Ross area include the Dunbrody Emigrant Ship, the JFK arboretum, the JFK monument and the Kennedy Homestead, and three-quarters of those surveyed indicated that they visited one or more of these attractions while in the area. Of interest also in the context of this research is that half of the respondents had also visited JFK related attractions in the USA: Arlington Cemetery, Washington D.C.; Dealey Plaza, Dallas, Texas; Hyannis Port, Cape Cod, Massachusetts; JFK's Birthplace, Boston, Massachusetts; Newport, Rhode Island; St Matthews Cathedral, Washington D.C. Most respondents are convinced that tourism stakeholders should use the JFK linkage in its promotional material (87%), with over one-third noting that the JFK connection to the area was a factor in their decision to visit the area.

These findings highlight the potential of leveraging brand equity from the JFK connection to Ireland, and specifically New Ross as the ancestral home. It is timely given that 2013 is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of JFK's visit to Ireland and in the context of The Gathering: a year-long programme of events throughout 2013 developed by Fáilte Ireland to provide a significant boost in visitors to Ireland. The JFK@50 committee in New Ross are organising four key events for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations;

1. A national commemoration event in New Ross;
2. The inaugural Kennedy Leadership Summer School;
3. An exhibition from the JFK Museum in Berlin;
4. An aural project, in conjunction with Boston College.

As identified by the research while the JFK image is not the sole or dominant component of the New Ross brand it provides an important 'hook' in relation to genealogy and the diaspora as it helps to animate the Irish emigration story in a meaningful way for visitors that will allow them to engage and fully experience the destination. Thus, while not a panacea for all the challenges posed to a regional destination such as New Ross, it can provide a tangible reason for visitation as it provides a context for historic attractions such as Dunbrody Famine Ship, the Kennedy Homestead and the JFK Arboretum.



## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Ireland has been the subject of the tourist gaze since Victorian times. As far back as 1894, the first issue of *The Irish Tourist* expressed the hope that Ireland would *attract multitudinous visitors to annually sojourn at our health and pleasure resorts and thus leave us with that historic plethora of wealth which might act as a panacea for Ireland's ills* (as cited in O'Connor, 1993: 69). The image projected by a tourism organisation can rarely hope to become the definitive image, however, its objective can undoubtedly be to reinforce pre-existing favourable images and/or neutralise any negative images. Thus, while the role played by the promotional activities of Fáilte Ireland<sup>2</sup> and TIL is difficult to gauge, there is little doubt that it is potentially significant.

The use of celebrity association as a destination motivator through branding enjoys huge popularity mainly because they tend to exert a positive image on a destination such as New Ross. Recently, celebrity association has been established as one of the most popular tools within advertising. It has become a trend and perceived as a winning formula for product marketing and brand building. It may be easy choosing a celebrity but it can be difficult to determine a strong association between the product and the endorser. From a theoretical perspective, the research finds that the celebrity endorsement strategy has become an important component of a marketing communications strategy for destinations in today's competitive global tourism environment.

This research may be of interest to those involved in tourism in New Ross and Ireland as a whole, as it measured the tourism brand which currently exists and the image which tourists have of the area. It could also be useful to those in the international tourism industry such as the USA where the 'celebrity-led' image is now becoming a significant element of their tourism destination campaign. Therefore, this research will contribute significantly to the existing knowledge base on using celebrities (in this case JFK) to brand an international tourism destination such as New Ross.

The findings will help in determining the best course of action in relation to maintaining a positive growth curve and a more sustainable tourism industry for the area. Strategic direction will be determined through the findings from the research conducted on visitors as well as through the review of the literature on best practice with regards to destination branding and imagery. The second phase of the study will establish the supply side perception of the New Ross tourism brand through the key stakeholder interviews and will provide further insights into how such destinations may benefit from celebrity association.

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<sup>2</sup> Fáilte Ireland is the state body responsible for domestic tourism marketing in Ireland.

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