

## ABSTRACT

The tourism industry has become one of the most profitable industries worldwide and is still growing today. Tourists are flying further seeking new experiences hidden in unique and authentic places around the world. This has given governments a chance to promote not only their popularized and generic tourist attractions but also more authentic Mexican culture destinations.

The purpose of this dissertation is to study the perceived image of Mexico as a cultural tourist destination and compare it to a project established by the Mexican Government to promote the cultural and historic heritage of small towns across the country, the Magical Towns Project. The study was carried out using a multi qualitative method comprising focus groups and projective techniques (collage techniques and word completion techniques) to study: the importance of marketing experiences; the sources used by Spanish people during the decision-making process; and the image characteristics attributed to Mexico and the Magical Towns regarding their cultural and historic heritage. Four focus groups were conducted. In order to explore and compare the value of using multi qualitative methods, two focus groups were conducted alone (group 1) and two were supplemented with projective techniques (group 2). In total 25 participants took part in the study ranging in age from 18 – 35 years old.

The findings showed that experiences are an important active factor during the decision-making process of choosing a destination, and that the source participants trusted the most was the word-of-mouth of other Spaniards, over and above that of Mexicans. Furthermore, with regard to the image perception of Mexico and its Magical Towns, themes concerning culture, places, people and infrastructure were found which may be used by marketing practitioners as the foundations for understanding the actual image of Mexico and how the Magical Towns project can be marketed internationally. From the projective techniques, a number of important factors emerged that were understood to influence the decision-making process of choosing Mexico as a holiday destination. The most salient factor was safety, and violence was also found to be important. However, these concerns were not perceived as part of the Magical Town experience.

The value of this research is the study of the characteristics that Mexico holds as a tourist destination, and that can be used to market both the image of the country as well as the Magical Towns project as an option for international tourists looking for personalised and unique experiences away from home. The study offers a new methodological approach to study experience marketing and the decision-making process tourists travelling to long-distance cultural destinations by combining focus groups with two projective techniques (collage and word completion).