



Branding destination co-creatively: A case study of tourists' involvement in the naming of a local attraction

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ABSTRACT

Destination branding has grown as a powerful marketing tool that helps a tourist destination distinguish itself from its competitors. This study showcases the branding process of a local attraction in Florida, USA, from the theoretical perspective of value co-creation. The attraction's owners, managers, tourism researchers, and, most importantly, actual and potential visitors were involved in this co-creative re-branding process. Beyond the immediate value of the study outcomes specific to this particular attraction, the case study offers a feasible model of co-creative destination branding which actively involves the perspectives of destination consumers. The study also demonstrates and offers some innovative methodological approaches in data collection and analysis that may assist decision-making within the co-creation research framework.

1. Introduction

Co-creation is a consumer-oriented marketing approach that enables consumers' active participation in product and service creation process jointly with the company or service provider (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Co-creative process leverages consumers' role as decision-makers and product information transmitters to other consumers. The notion of consumers being the co-creators of products originated from marketing studies which highlighted the additional value of involving consumers at different stages of product development (Vargo & Lush, 2004). Through the co-creation process, companies can better identify consumers' needs and wants, increase satisfaction, enhance brand loyalty, and ultimately improve the company's bottom line. The approach has been adapted to the contemporary tourism research and practice, where tourists – as the 'consumers' of tourism – are the co-creators of tourism products (Cooper & Hall, 2016). While there has been minor variations in the context or perspective of co-creation in tourism studies, the significant role tourists can play as co-creators is the common point. For instance, Prebensen and Xie (2017) view co-creation as the process of producing additional value for tourists through their agentic role in customizing and personalizing various parts of tourism products as well as their investment of knowledge and resources (i.e. money and time) to plan and organize their trips. From a more experience-centric perspective, co-creation in tourism can be viewed as the active

collaboration between tourists and service providers (Mathis et al., 2016) to design unique travel experiences which include tourists' engagement or interaction with various components and stakeholders, such as tour activities and local communities (Buonincontri, Morvillo, Okumus & van Niekerk, 2017; Prebensen, Vittersø, & Dahl, 2013). Irrespective of the differences in the conceptualization of co-creation, these studies are in consensus regarding the advantages of co-creation for tourist satisfaction. Nevertheless, the application of co-creation approach is still limited in tourism studies (Camilleri & Neuhofer, 2017; Neuhofer, 2017; Suntikul & Jachna, 2016), leaving much to be explored especially when it comes to its strategic utility for destination branding.

Destination branding, a powerful marketing tool that influences tourist destination choice, has received much attention from the industry and academia (Blain et al., 2005). Branding research has expanded to study brand equity, brand personality, brand identity and image as they apply to tourist destinations (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2016). While destination branding studies have largely followed the branding theories and concepts from marketing, complexity and multidimensionality of tourism products compared to many other consumer goods may call for significant conceptual modifications to the original theories as well as the subsequent strategies. Tourism products, to a large degree, are about experience and emotions, and destination brands strive to reflect that (Cai, 2002; Pine & Gilmore, 1999) by not only establishing unique and memorable associations with the

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destination (Blain et al., 2005) but also seeking ways to “consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination” (p. 337). Further, tourism product is not just different from consumer goods but from services (e.g., healthcare) as well due to its inherently hedonic nature (Arnould & Price, 1993; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Tourism focuses on delivering memorable experiences (Hemmington, 2007), and, in this sense, the brand's name, logo, and slogan constitute important assets through which a destination can communicate the emotional link tourists have with the destination (Im et al., 2012). Even though the entire brand equity cannot be reduced to a name, logo or slogan (Govers & Go, 2009; Hudson et al., 2017), a brand name can be an integral element that captures the brand identity (Keller, 2013; Kohli & Leuthesser, 2001) and hold brand equity (Kapfere, 2012). Kotler (1991) stresses the unique ‘vocal’ (p. 442) mission brand name has, while Keller (2013) suggests almost a *genesitic* role for the brand name which brings forth the characteristics, attributes, and benefit of a product and service (pp. 147–154). Round and Roper (2017) summarizes this power of the brand name in its three critical functions to communicate the brand value to the consumer – ‘denotation’ or performing as a representation of the brand, ‘connotation’ or indicating the brand associations, and ‘linking’ to other brands.

Little research, however, has focused on methodological aspects of destination branding practices concerning selection of brand names, logos, or slogans, despite the universal acknowledgement that destination brands should incorporate input from tourists as ultimate destination stakeholders (Cai, 2002; Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk, & Preciado, 2013). Existing studies have advocated incorporation of tourist inputs that reflect their expectations and experiences prior to the trip, during the trip, and after the trip (Manhas, Manrai, & Manrai, 2016; Oliveira and Panyik, 2015) but we are not aware of a study which would propose such a method and demonstrate its applicability through empirical testing. To fill this gap, this study offers a methodological approach to involve tourists in destination branding process. The co-creation approach focuses on just one, but tremendously important, step of branding process: creating a brand name that conveys the essence of brand value. In particular, the study contributes to the destination branding literature by offering and demonstrating some innovative methodological approaches in data collection and analysis conducive for decision-making within the co-creation research framework.

This study chooses a local attraction on the northeast coast of Florida as a specific site for a case to demonstrate the tourists' active involvement in model of co-creative destination branding. So far, branding studies in tourism have primarily focused on national, regional, and city level destination entities, while micro level destinations – defined as small geographical areas providing tourism activities (International Network on Regional Economics, Mobility and Tourism & UNWTO, 2012) or “destinations at a very local level” (Hernández-Martin et al., 2016 p.774) – like, for example, single attractions and festivals hosted in a place have not yet drawn much attention from researchers. However, all destinations, regardless of their size, want to effectively communicate to tourists what they have to offer and what experiences tourists may expect. Moreover, in branding a micro destination (a local attraction), the focus is not only on the attraction itself but also on what differentiates it from other places under the umbrella brand of a larger destination like city and region. For micro-destinations like local attractions, destination's brand name is indeed the primary element that helps to enhance tourists' awareness of the destination (Im et al., 2012) and build strong brand associations (Gartner and Ruzzier, 2011). Furthermore, brand names can be instrumental in rebranding strategies; in his argument for brands to change and evolve as a result of the dynamicity in society, consumer culture and the environment, Holt (2004) points to brand names, along with other associative elements, as the foci of change. This is in line with the consumer-centric view of brands which incorporates and reflects consumer perceptions (Heding, Knudtzen, & Bjerre, 2016). Thus, establishing or selecting a name to represent a destination brand that relates to a

diverse set of tourist perceptions of the destination should be one of the primary concerns for destination managers. Hence, this study using a particular micro-destination aims to provide an outcome that can be immediately applicable as a result of establishing innovative methodological approach.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

2.1. The concept of consumer co-creation

Contemporary consumption centers on consumer experiences with company products and services (Prebensen & Foss, 2011), so the traditional market paradigm separating consumer from production process and limiting them to consumption is no longer viable in a market with great product variety and heavy competition. The concept of co-creation – consumers partaking in the creation of products and services – was first discussed in consumer research in relation to the growing pressure from consumers to be engaged at various phases of a business system (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In the contemporary world, consumers have more choices of products and services than ever before, which give them more bargaining power (Cooper & Hall, 2016). One way of exercising this power is the demand of getting involved in product design, development, marketing, and distribution as a “co-producer” (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). As a result, companies have opened their doors wide to co-creation opportunities for consumers in hopes of meeting the consumers' desire for products and services to which they can relate and with which they can interact (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Suntikul & Jachna, 2016). By accepting co-creation, companies can navigate the needs and wants of consumers and improve their product and service quality accordingly (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

The use of co-creation in consumer research drew attention to the consumer as the key agent from the stage of product design to product consumption, but little has been done to explicate co-creation in branding (Hajli, Shanmugam, Papagiannidis, Zahay, & Richard, 2017; Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009). Although co-creation for brands may be neglected, research has considered branding and brand as it applies to consumer experience and value. In de Chernatony and Riley's (1999) definition, brand is a “functional and emotional value” that promises stakeholders “a unique and welcoming experience”. Brands have been characterized by consumer perception of the promised experience. Likewise, Keller and Lehman (2006) mentioned that creating key brand associations in the consumer mind helps distinguish a product from the competition. Further, given that consumers build a relationship with the brand (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002), researchers have found that brand perception varies among consumers depending on consumer personality and consumer emotional connection to brand.

A number of studies examined consumer involvement with the brand and their influence on brand evolution from a brand community perspective (Brodie, Illic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; McAlexander et al., 2002; Hajli et al., 2017). Muniz and Guinn (2001) define brand community as “a specialized, nongeographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand” (p.412). Brand communities are a part of the co-creation process because consumers share their opinions and stories about brands with other consumers and management in the business community (Payne et al., 2009; Hajli et al., 2017). Through this interaction, companies learn what consumers think of the brand, and this in turn reflects in developing and improving the brand. Because consumers help building the brand identity, their brand loyalty might increase (Hajli et al., 2017; Vargo & Lush, 2004). This interactive process of branding is conceptualized as co-creation. More recently, brand co-creation research has focused on online communities because the internet provides space for interaction that is easily accessed and allows discussion and feedback (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Hajli et al.,

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