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Research paper

Examining destination personality: Its antecedents and outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This study of Sardinia, Italy, an island destination in the Mediterranean Sea, examines the role of involvement on destination personality formation process. It further investigates how destination personality affects destination satisfaction and self-congruity, and how self-congruity affects destination satisfaction and destination loyalty. A total of 1266 usable questionnaires were collected via a field survey. Utilizing structured and unstructured research methodologies, three underlying dimensions of destination personality specific to the island of Sardinia were uncovered, namely conviviality, sophistication, and vibrancy. The proposed conceptual model was tested and the results reveal significant relationships between two involvement dimensions (pleasure/interest and sign value) and various destination personality dimensions. Destination personality dimensions were found to have a strong influence on destination satisfaction and self-congruity. Furthermore, the findings provide empirical evidence of the influence of self-congruity on destination satisfaction and destination loyalty. Destination satisfaction was also found to positively influence the two dimensions of destination loyalty: referral and revisit intentions.

1. Introduction

Individuals' perceptions of a destination's personality are one of the most critical factors that can influence travelers' decision making, including the destination selection process. Studies suggest that the creation of a unique destination personality profile enables destination marketers to differentiate their destination from its competitors' (Murphy & Moscardo, 2007), which helps to improve travelers' experiences and their post-visit evaluations (Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou, & Kaplanidou, 2015). Destination personality has therefore gained significant attention from tourism scholars.

Most of the previous studies that have examined destination personality have focused either on how destination personality influences travelers' cognition, affect and behavioral intentions (Papadimitriou et al., 2015), or the types of destination brand personality that have been promoted by destination marketing organizations through various media channels (D'Astous & Boujbel, 2007). However, individual factors that may influence travelers' perception of a destination's personality, such as involvement, have not been thoroughly investigated. Involvement with a product and/or service represents 'personal relevance and importance' of that product and/or service to the individual (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Since most travel decisions inherently contain significant risks, travelers are likely to be highly involved with

destinations they consider visiting. Such individuals are likely to pay significant attention to destination information during the information-search process and to process the information thoroughly so that they can minimize the risk of choice regret while maximizing symbolic and hedonic benefits (Murphy & Moscardo, 2007). Consequently, the level of involvement is likely to have significant impact on how individuals perceive the personality of a specific destination and their travel decision-making process. This study therefore aims to advance our understanding of the destination personality formation process by examining the impact of travelers' level of involvement with a destination on their destination personality perceptions.

Destination personality plays an important role not only in influencing travelers' image of a destination through reinforcing or adjusting their perceptions of a place (Kim & Lehto, 2012), but also in helping them to assess the congruency between their personality and the destination's, i.e. self-congruity (Sirgy & Su, 2000). Perceived destination personality helps travelers identify themselves with a destination's unique symbolic and emotional attributes, which may result in the formation of their strong emotional bond with that destination (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005). This may, in turn, strengthen their positive word-of-mouth and revisit intentions (Apostolopoulou & Papadimitriou, 2015). These are two essential indicators of destination loyalty.

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Destination loyalty is probably one of the most important determinants of a destination's success (Chi, 2018; Gursoy, Chen, & Chi, 2014). As stated by (Assael 1984, p.47) 'success depends not on the first purchase but on repurchase. It is unlikely that any brand can survive over time without some degree of loyalty'. Many tourism researchers have examined loyalty in order to better understand travelers' destination loyalty formation process and the factors that can influence loyalty to a destination (Chi & Qu, 2008; Chi, 2011, 2012; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Yolal, Chi, & Pesamaa, 2017; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Such studies have reported satisfaction to be one of the most critical antecedents of destination loyalty (Neal & Gursoy, 2008; Sun, Chi, & Xu, 2013; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010). Even though previous studies suggest that travelers' self-image congruence is also an important predictor of travelers' behavior including destination satisfaction and loyalty (Hosany & Martin, 2012; Sirgy & Su, 2000), empirical investigations on the influence of self-congruence on travelers' post-consumption behaviors have yet to generate adequate attention from tourism scholar. This study aims to address that gap by examining the effects of self-image congruence on destination satisfaction and loyalty.

As suggested by the theory of self-congruity, travelers usually pick destinations that possess destination personality attributes that are congruent with their self-image (Pan, Zhang, Gursoy, & Lu, 2017; Papadimitriou et al., 2015). In other words, individuals select destinations that reflect their social status, personality and lifestyle (Ekinci, Sirakaya-Turk, & Preciado, 2013). A significant match between self-concept and destination personality (i.e. self-congruity) can result in satisfaction and loyalty (Ekinci et al., 2013). In most cases, travelers go through a sequential process of choosing a destination whose personality matches their self-concept, then experiencing the tourism products and services on site before forming post-purchase evaluations.

In summary, this study aims to: (1) gauge the predictive role of involvement in destination personality formation, (2) assess the impact of destination personality on self-congruity and destination satisfaction, (3) and provide empirical evidence of the influence of self-congruity on tourists' destination satisfaction and loyalty. The paper is organized as follows: a comprehensive review of relevant literature is presented next, followed by a detailed discussion of the methods used by this study. The findings will then be reported and, finally, the theoretical and managerial implications of the study will be presented.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1. Destination personality

The term 'destination personality' is adapted from brand personality, which is defined as a set of human-like characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker, 1997). Accordingly, destination personality refers to a set of human-like characteristics associated with a destination (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). Aaker (1997) conceptualizes brand personality as a multidimensional cognitive construct and has developed a five-dimensional measurement scale: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Since then, the brand personality scale (BPS) has been widely applied in a number of product/brand settings across various cultures (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; Swaminathan, Stilley, & Ahluwalia, 2009; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Aaker's BPS has also been used to measure personality of destinations, such as countries, cities, regions, and landscapes (Baloglu, Henthorne, & Sahin, 2014; Ferrandi, Valette-Florence, & Fine-Falcy, 2015; Gómez Aguilar, Yagüe Guillén, & Villaseñor Roman, 2014; Kim & Lehto, 2012; Xie & Lee, 2013).

In spite of its robust factor structure, there is a dearth of research in tourism field that can fully replicate all five dimensions of Aaker's BPS. While some previous studies only confirm some of Aaker (1997) brand personality dimensions (Murphy & Moscardo, 2007), others have identified alternative personality traits that uniquely describe destinations (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006). These inconsistencies in

destination personality traits are mainly attributed to the fact that tourism destinations offer intangible, experiential, and symbolic products (Papadimitriou et al., 2015), while BPS was originally designed for tangible consumer products/brands. Realizing the need for a destination-specific personality scale, a number of tourism scholars have developed scales to measure destination personality dimensions (Hosany et al., 2006; Kumar & Nayak, 2018; Sahin & Baloglu, 2011). While these studies have confirmed some of the dimensions proposed in Aaker (1997) scale, they also identified personality dimensions that are specific to the destinations under study. Examples of these new dimensions include conviviality, vibrancy, peacefulness, conformity and tranquility.

This study follows the approach utilized by other tourism scholars to identify personality traits that are specific to the destination studied, namely Sardinia. Based on the literature review and focus group findings, destination personality of Sardinia is examined as having three dimensions: conviviality, sophistication and vibrancy. Conviviality describes the hedonic nature of Sardinia, especially the jolly and humorous atmosphere tourists feel while at this island destination. Sophistication derives from Aaker's original scale, which relates mainly to such qualities as being authentic and emotional. Vibrancy focuses on the active and adventurous aspects of the destination.

Studies clearly indicate that a distinctive destination personality can influence travelers' attitudes (Kumar & Nayak, 2018), their preferences (D'Astous & Boujbel, 2007), and intentions to visit a destination (Papadimitriou et al., 2015; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011). Upon attributing positive personalities to a destination, travelers form favorable attitudes (Aaker, 1997; Kumar & Nayak, 2018) and preferences toward that destination (D'Astous & Boujbel, 2007), which can result in high level of satisfaction (Chen & Phou, 2013; Papadimitriou et al., 2015).

2.2. Involvement

While individuals can easily differentiate two similar destinations based on their perceptions of the destinations' brand personality characteristics, studies also suggest that significant variations exist among individuals' destination personality perceptions (Murphy & Moscardo, 2007). This perception difference can be explained by a number of factors but individuals' level of involvement with a destination is likely to be one of the most critical factors causing those variations. Involvement is an unobservable internal state that reflects individuals' perceived importance, arousal, interest, and drive induced by a particular stimulus or occasion (Bloch, 1982; Mitchell, 1979). Level of involvement with a product/service is found to be a critical determinant of individuals' levels of knowledge about that product (Cilingir & Basfirinci, 2014). Involvement is also reported to have significant influence on information-search behavior and information processing, as well as on purchase and post-purchase evaluation behaviors (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985).

Involvement with a product/service refers to perceived personal relevance of that product/ service to an individual (Zaichkowsky, 1985). It is often associated with an individual's personal interest, excitement, and enthusiasm for a product/service and is related to individuals' personal values and perceptions of importance (Jamroz, Backman, & Backman, 1996). Given that involvement is studied as a psychological state of motivation, arousal, or interest an individual exhibits towards tourism destinations or recreational activities (Laaksonen, 1994), it is not surprising that level of involvement with a destination can influence how travelers view that destination (Prayag & Ryan, 2012).

This study examines involvement from three perspectives: pleasure/ interest, sign, and risk probability. Pleasure/interest is considered as the most important dimension of involvement (Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003) and reflects the hedonic or pleasure value tourists attribute to a specific destination (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985). Sign refers to the symbolic value manifested by a destination (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Tourism

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