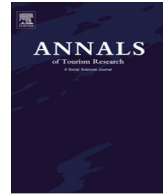




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Destination brand experience and visitor behavior: Testing a scale in the tourism context



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ABSTRACT

Destination branding has developed considerably as a topic area in the last decade with numerous conceptualizations focusing on different aspects of the brand. However, a unified view has not yet emerged. This paper examines destination branding via a new conceptualization, destination brand experience (DBE), which provides a more holistic and unified view of the destination brand. It examines the direct and mediated role of DBE components in determining revisit intentions and word-of-mouth recommendations. The findings suggest that DBE is an important determinant of all study outcomes, but that there is a strong mediating role of satisfaction and distinct variation in significant DBE components, with sensory DBE playing a leading role. The paper concludes with implications for research and practice.

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Introduction

A brand can provide a significant means of differentiation and thus competitive advantage for products and services (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Gardner & Levy, 1955; Keller, 1993). This is important whether the product or service is a razor, breakfast cereal, insurance policy, or a tourist destination. While branded consumer products have a longstanding academic

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literature, the literature on destination branding is of much more recent origin. The destination is also a complex product, not least because it is an amalgam of different tourist products and is “also a perceptual concept, which can be interpreted subjectively by consumers, depending amongst other things, on their travel itinerary, cultural background, purpose of visit . . .” (Buhalis, 2000, p. 97). More generally, as noted by Govers, Go, and Kumar (2007), tourism is a consumption experience that “designates those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one’s experience of products” (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982, p. 92). Destination branding is a powerful marketing tool that can build a positive image and emotional links with visitors and underpinning destination branding are the perceived experiences that a visitor will have at a destination (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2004). For the purposes of this study, destinations are considered as “a defined geographical region which is understood by its visitors as a unique entity, with a political and legislative framework for tourism marketing and planning” (ibid, p. 98).

To understand, explain and predict consumer behavior with respect to destination brands, many mainstream marketing concepts, theories and frameworks have been applied. These have included those on: destination image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Kotler & Gertner, 2004), customer-based brand equity (Boo, Busser, & Baloglu, 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007), destination brand personality (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007), and destination brand identity (Cai, 2002; Govers & Go, 2004). However, these brand conceptualizations have been criticized for being incomplete, generalized, and for not capturing the full range of experiences impacting on the consumer from brand stimuli (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). Recently, a new conceptualization has emerged—that of brand experience, which provides a more complete evaluation based on sensory, affective, intellectual and behavioral dimensions of the brand (Brakus et al., 2009). While brand attitudes are general evaluations, brand experiences “include specific sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses triggered by specific brand stimuli. For example, experiences may include specific feelings, not just an overall *liking*.” (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53). This broader conceptualization has yet to be applied to tourism research. The contribution of this paper is to apply this new theoretical concept to destination brands to focus on the concept of destination brand experience (DBE).

The purpose of this study is to determine whether DBE is a significant determinant of visitor outcomes including satisfaction, intention to recommend and intention to revisit a destination. In particular, we are interested to determine which elements of DBE impact on visitor outcomes by using an experience model and a range of destinations. The study focuses on purposive sampling of three locations (a semi-rural region in Denmark and two very different cities in Sweden) for data collection and utilizes partial least squares path modeling for its analysis.

Literature and hypotheses

Approaches to destination branding

Within the burgeoning literature on tourism marketing, numerous conceptualizations have been applied to understand and explain tourist behavior, most of them adapted from the mainstream marketing literature (e.g. Aaker, 1997; Keller, 1993). Within this developing literature base, one key strand of literature is that on destination branding. Table 1 provides an overview of key branding concepts adapted from the marketing literature and applied to the tourism context. In each case the original concept name and early marketing sources are provided along with the name and a selected definition of the adapted concept in the tourism research literature.

Much of the research in the area of destination branding has focused on destination image, but not necessarily traditional branding (Baloglu, 1996; Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001), although more recently some authors have attempted to integrate destination image with other branding concepts (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2007; Nandan, 2005; Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011). Recent evidence suggests complex, nested brand associations in tourism. For example, Deng and Li (2014) use image transfer theory to empirically demonstrate that brand associations from events transfer to destination image, while Nicolau and Mas (2014) use associative network theory to show that some

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