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The impact of brand authenticity on building brand love: An investigation of impression in memory and lifestyle-congruence

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how brand authenticity perceptions, impression in memory, lifestyle-congruence, and brand love interrelate with one another. It also examines the moderating effect of the need for uniqueness in the luxury hotel setting. Empirical data was collected from 412 American guests of different luxury hotel brands. The findings indicate that brand authenticity is a critical determinant of impression in memory, lifestyle-congruence, and brand love. Brand authenticity's relationships with impression in memory, lifestyle-congruence and brand love do not differ between high and low uniqueness perceivers. This study's findings could help managers understand perceived authenticity better as a key factor that positions luxury hotel brands and influences business performance.

1. Introduction

Consumers' pursuit of authenticity is growing (Gilmore and Pine, 2007), and their quest for experiences that are relevant, original, and genuine is increasing (Arnould and Price, 2000). Hotel brands' future success depends no longer only on being operationally strong but also on sustaining consumers' perceptions of the authenticity of their experience (Milman, 2013; Sedmak and Mihalic, 2008). Consequently, ensuring that a hotel has a character and personality emanating from every touchpoint is especially significant for luxury hotel brands (Russell, 2015). This distinctive role differentiates a luxury accommodation property from its competitors, making authenticity essential for hotel brands (Sedmak and Mihalic, 2008). In addition, USA is the leading player in the luxury hotel sector across the globe (Reportlinker, 2017) and it is going to remain the largest market during the forecast period from 2016 to 2021 due to the huge presence of luxury hotels (Zion Market Research, 2017).

To the best of our knowledge, while the construct of authenticity has been discussed in the hospitality and tourism literature (e.g. Cohen 1972; Stroma, 2007; Lu et al., 2015), research in a hotel setting is scant. This is the first gap this study aims to fill. In particular, previous research has operationalized authenticity in tourism and hospitality situations such as tourism destinations (Tasci and Knutson, 2004), different tourism activities (Steiner and Reisinger, 2006), theme parks (Milman, 2013), festivals (Chhabra et al., 2003) ethnic restaurants (Lu et al., 2015), rural tourism areas (Catrina, 2016) and fast-food brands (Schallehn et al., 2014) etc.

Luxury hotels value an experience that is consistent with their guests' lifestyle (Russell, 2015). Lifestyle marketing comprises consumers' being sorted into groups based on activities they like, how they prefer to pass their leisure time, and how they choose to spend their income (Zablocki and Kanter, 1976). Moreover, an important part of this perspective is to identify products/brands that consumers associate with a specific lifestyle (Solomon, 2015). Customs, values, and norms influence a consumer lifestyle, which encompasses all areas of an individual, including behavior, thoughts, work, leisure, clothing, food, and interests. Drawing on a socio-psychological approach, this paper conceptualizes authenticity as the degree to which consumers' personal identity is connected to their individual behavior through the influence of external social forces. When it comes to luxury goods/offers, consumer prioritize authenticity as a principal dimension (Jones, 2017). Moreover, the word luxury comes from the Latin luxuria and means extras of life (Danziger, 2005). Moreover, luxus which is the root of luxury means extravagant living (Li et al., 2012). Thus, among different accommodation options, a luxury hotel is the right place for guests to experience a sophisticated and excessive stay that is similar or dissimilar to their lifestyles (Curtis, 2001). After all, the luxury and affluent market is subdivided by lifestyle as well as other characteristics, showing the close connection of "luxury" and "consumer lifestyle" (Michman and Mazze, 2009). As such, understanding the impact of

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luxury hotel brand authenticity on consumer lifestyle-congruence is therefore imperative.

Authenticity is a mental state influencing consumers' memory (Di Betta, 2014). An authentic hotel experience leaves markers in guests' memory (Cohen and Areni, 1991) because this mental impression is based on the hotel's distinctiveness (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). According to script theory, the script is an experiential structure (e.g. an authentic hotel experience) saved in memory (Manthiou et al., 2017). Moreover, the luxury hotel setting is an outlet for travelers to dream of and fantasize about lifestyles (Curtis, 2001). The luxury hotel brand conveys characteristics such as status, image, and lifestyle (Tuominen, 1999). Recalling an authentic experience will therefore make hotel guests search for (in)compatibility with their lifestyle (Russell, 2015).

Integrity, commitment to quality, a sense of moral virtue, and an intrinsic love of the product motivate the consumers of authentic brands (Beverland, 2006). Consumers connect to brands emotionally, just as they do in their personal and interpersonal life (Langner et al., 2015). When consumers' personal identity and lifestyle fit products/brands, brand love emerges (Ahuvia, 2005). Moreover, consumers who have strong memories of an authentic experience will develop an attachment to it (Kim, 2010; Manthiou et al., 2014). Brand love could therefore be the result of an authentic offering.

On the basis of the theory of uniqueness, consumers choose various activities, actions, and consumption patterns to show how they differ from others (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). This dimension of uniqueness is important in the luxury sector because it relies on the assumption that exclusivity and rarity enhance the desire for a brand (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Moreover, in the definition of "luxury" uniqueness is connoted, meaning "a pleasure out of the ordinary allowed to oneself "(Dictionairy.com, 2017). Therefore, uniqueness is of interest to most luxury customers including hotel guests and the luxury hotel setting is the right place where this need or desire of being different can be satisfied. Consumers with a high uniqueness need will appreciate products/brands/experiences more than those who regard these as common or normal, and the opposite is true for consumers with a low uniqueness need.

This study highlights the effects of brand authenticity on consumer memory, lifestyle-congruence, and brand love in the luxury hotel context. An empirical model integrates these theoretical concepts, with brand love being the outcome of this appraisal. Moreover, the need for uniqueness as a moderator provides another perspective to comprehend this luxury experience. The specific objectives of this study are (1) to investigate relationships between brand authenticity, impression in memory, lifestyle-congruence, and brand love in the luxury hotel setting, and (2) to assess the moderating function of the need for uniqueness in the relationship of brand authenticity with (a) impression in memory; (b) brand love, and (c) lifestyle-congruence.

Theoretically, there is a need to further understand guests' authentic experiences as a key driving factor of their engagement through memory impression and lifestyle-congruence. This study enhances the theoretical body of authenticity literature by providing a deeper understanding of authentic experiences associated with luxury hotel brands. Moreover, our work highlights the need of research using authenticity as a theoretical construct in the tourism and hospitality sector because of its connection with mental influences such as memory. This point of view has received little research attention (Di Betta, 2014). From the managerial perspective, our framework calls for a closer examination of hotel authenticity by managers because this construct may have considerable and immediate effects on marketing outcomes. Moreover, this study inspires luxury hotel industry practitioners to develop ways of providing guests with authentic and memorable experiences by examining brand–lifestyle congruence, which will ultimately impact their attachment to the brand. Moreover, in a luxury setting, brand authenticity narrates customers' identity; a close observation of this concept is therefore useful for identity-related brand management. Furthermore, managers can segment luxury hotel consumers according to their desired uniqueness levels.

2. Literature review

2.1. Brand authenticity

Authenticity expresses all that is genuine, unadulterated, without hypocrisy, and honest in terms of superficial characteristics and in-depth features (Relph, 1976). Authenticity is mainly described in terms of sincerity, innocence, and originality (Fine, 2003). It is identified by notions such as being natural, honest, and simple (Boyle, 2003). According to Gilmore and Pine (2007, p. 5) "authenticity has overtaken quality as the prevailing purchasing criterion, just as quality overtook cost, and as cost overtook availability." Authenticity's importance is therefore obvious in experiential settings, e.g. in luxury accommodation, and can be regarded as a key factor in a hotel brand's success.

In this study, brand authenticity is depicted from a socio-psychological perspective that regards authenticity as self-fulfillment (Guignon, 2004). Personal identity, various external forces, and social pressures that impact this identity are the main drivers of authentic consumers (Erikson, 1975). Gilmore and Pine (2007, p. 96) pointed out that authentic brands are based on two assumptions: "(1) being true to yourself and (2) being who you say you are to others." Thus, authenticity is viewed as the degree to which people are true to their identity while influenced by social confrontations (Schallehn et al., 2014).

In the hospitality and tourism literature, authentic experiences have been conceived as a driving force that prompts consumers to travel to distant places and perceive distant times (Cohen, 1988). For example, Steiner and Reisinger (2006) explored the concept of existential authenticity and affirmed that it can be fabricated by means of different tourism activities. Goulding (2000) identified three different types of visitors based on how they perceive authenticity: existential, aesthetical, and social. Milman (2013) explored the role of staged authenticity on guests' experience in a theme park, as well as the variables that may predict a guest's perceived level of authenticity, realism, and truth when experiencing "reproduced" landmarks. Chhabra et al. (2003) focused on staged authenticity at a festival by using the case of the Grandfather Mountain Highland Games in the state of North Carolina. Their study disclosed that strong perceptions of authenticity can be achieved even when an event is staged in a place far from the cultural tradition's original source − in this case, the Scottish Highlands. Lu et al. (2015) revealed that, in ethnic restaurants, consumers' authenticity perception is a critical determinant of brand equity, which in turn has a significant impact on consumers' brand choice intention. Even though authenticity has not been ignored in the hospitality and tourism research, it is still understudied in the hotel sector. Specifically, the perceived authenticity of a hotel brand has not been thoroughly examined, which is an oversight, given that the relationship between brand authenticity and its antecedents and outcomes can be industry-specific (Schallehn et al., 2014). Since a high degree of brand authenticity signifies a brand positioning that coincides with customers' identity and leads to favorable outcomes, a close examination of this concept in the hotel context is much needed for identity-based brand management.

2.2. Impression in memory

Memory is one's ability to consciously recollect past events, behaviors, and experiences (Schacter et al., 1993). Bartlett (1995) describes memory as an imaginative reconstruction or construction built from our attitude's relationship with a mass of organized past reactions or experiences. It is common in image or language form. In an individual's mind, memory works like a computer: Data is input, processed, and output for later use in a revised form (Johar et al., 2006). There are different types of memories in literature: 1) episodic memory describes events that are personally relevant, with people remembering them

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