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Research paper

Understanding destination personality through visitors' experience: A cross-cultural perspective

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ABSTRACT

Destination personality is an essential element of destination brands and closely connected to visitors' experiences and emotions at the destination. This study investigates the reconstruction of destination personality through tourists' written accounts in the situational context of Jeju Island, South Korea. Guided by the brand personality literature and a content analysis of tourists' description of their experiences on travel blogs, the study identifies a set of traits that describe the personality of Jeju Island and further compares personality perceptions between tourists from Eastern and Western markets. The results indicate that tourists' written accounts provide rich information to understand visitors' experiences and an emotional connection to the destination through which destination personality manifests itself. The findings also indicate that destination personality perceptions may vary according to tourists' cultural backgrounds. The results of the study may assist DMOs in developing marketing strategies that are adaptive to cultural differences among their origin markets.

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1. Introduction

Developing a strong, unique and favorable brand can secure a destination's competitive advantage, win the hearts of global visitors and gain a greater share in the global marketplace (U.S. Travel Association, 2009). Recognition of the significant role that branding plays in tourism marketing has led to substantial growth in the number of theoretical studies and practical applications of various brand concepts, such as brand image and brand identity, in the marketing literature relevant to destinations (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998). Several marketing scholars have emphasized the importance of emotional connection between consumers and the brand. A strong and positive brand personality has been demonstrated to result in a stronger emotional tie to the brand (Biel, 1993; Siguaw, Mattila, & Austin, 1999), which in turn increases consumers' loyalty (Freling & Forbes, 2005; Sung & Kim, 2010) and preference (Sirgy, 1982). Similarly, tourism scholars have emphasized the emotional experience and/or emotional connection of tourists to the destination as an essential part of the destination brand (Baker & Cameron, 2008; Ekinci and Hosany, 2006; Pritchard & Morgan, 1998). Because destination personality has a positive influence on visitors' intentions to revisit and recommend, as well as their destination preferences (Prayag, 2007; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011), interest in brand personality in the tourism context, known as destination personality, has increased (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006; Kim & Lehto, 2013). However, existing literature on how destination personality relates to other relevant constructs (e.g. culture) and the methodological tools used to investigate these relationships may be limited in scope (Baloglu, Henthorne, & Sahin, 2014; Gnoth, Baloglu, Ekinci, & Sirakaya-Turk, 2007; Hosany et al., 2006).

Examining destination personality through the perception of tourists may help clarify tourists' emotional connection to the destination. Capturing the perceived destination personality of actual and potential tourists can assist destinations in identifying which personality traits should be emphasized in destination management and marketing efforts to improve tourists' experience at the destination and increase tourists' satisfaction (Sahin & Baloglu, 2011). However, existing investigations of destination personality usually rely on pre-determined or structured dimensions, which have been criticized for their restricted explanatory power (Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000). Moreover, this reliance on pre-determined dimensions may indicate a conceptual problem with personality perception and its emotional components. Solicited opinions may not necessarily reveal how tourists perceive destinations, nor may they reflect which personality traits are

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attributed to a destination. In other words, personality perceptions and attributions generated in response to a survey or interview question may not necessarily mirror those originally experienced at the destination, nor will they reflect those occurring in response or reaction to the personal visitation experience. In contrast, tourists' unsolicited and freely expressed thoughts and opinions may yield valuable information regarding their original perceptions and attributions because they are a part of the tourists' response to their very visitation experience.

Notably, destination personality might be perceived differently depending on the cultural background of the tourists (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006). Marketing studies demonstrate that brand personality perceptions can vary across cultures (Aaker et al., 2001; Sung & Tinkham, 2005). However, cross-cultural differences in brand personality perceptions for destinations have not yet been investigated. Empirical research has emphasized that culture is an important factor in understanding tourists' behavior (Kozak, Crotts, & Law, 2007; Money & Crotts, 2003; Reisinger & Crotts, 2010). Similarly, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) recognize visitors' background as one of the key factors to consider when positioning and promoting destinations (Reisinger & Turner, 2002a, 2002b) This study therefore examines how perceptions of destination personality traits vary among different target markets with distinct cultural backgrounds.

This study aims to answer this question by focusing on the case of Jeju Island, a popular tourism destination in South Korea. Jeju Island is the only site to receive three UNESCO distinctions (World Natural Heritage, Global Geopark and Biosphere Reserve). Because of this unique recognition, Jeju has been dubbed the only 'triple-crown winner' and has been designated as one of the New Seven Wonders of Nature (Jeju Special Self-Governing Province Travel, 2014). Jeju is a premier tourist destination for both domestic and international tourists from Asia. In South Korea, some have called for a shift in the island's marketing strategy to incorporate Western markets, particularly Europe and North America. The Eastern market consists primarily of tourists from China and Japan, who account for approximately 80% of the inbound travel market for Jeju Island (Tourism Knowledge and Information System, 2013). A new marketing strategy that focuses on the West may reduce reliance on the Eastern market and diversify the island's tourism inflow.

In this context, the brand personality of Jeju Island can be a vital area of research for Jeju's DMO because it potentially allows for better understanding of visitors' experiences at Jeju Island and, consequently, may guide the development of an effective branding strategy and aid in diversification of origin markets. Thus, this study investigates the destination personality of Jeju Island from the perspective of its tourists. It examines tourists' written accounts (blog entries) about visiting Jeju to identify the experiences and emotional states associated with visiting Jeju and understand how the island's destination personality develops through these experiences. Through content analysis of tourists' written accounts, the study identifies personality traits pertaining to Jeju. The study also compares the experiences of two culturally distinctive groups of tourists — those from the East and West — by the intensity and co-occurrence of personality traits reflected in their accounts. Practical implications of the findings are discussed from the perspective of Jeju's DMO branding effort.

2. Literature review

2.1. Destination personality

Destination branding gained attention in the late 1990s as an area of study because of its potential as a powerful marketing tool, which was found to influence travelers' decision-making processes and behavior (Blain et al., 2005; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002; Pike, 2005). The pioneers of brand study in tourism, Ritchie and Ritchie (1998) defined destination brand as 'a name, symbol, logo, word mark or…; furthermore, it conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; it also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience' (p. 103). Consistent with this definition, the perspective of destination brand reflecting the tourist experience and memory association into a destination brand (Cai, 2002; Berry, 2000) has been emphasized. Some scholars propose that a destination brand should include an emotional appeal and promise a memorable travel experience (Blain et al., 2005; Cai, 2002; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998), suggesting that brands should reflect the emotional experience and emotional connection of tourists to the destination. A considerable amount of literature posits that brand personality captures the emotional side of a brand (Aaker, 1996, 1997; Biel, 1993; Donahay & Rosenberger, 2007; Keller, 2003; Weiner, 1986). Similarly, destination brand personality in tourism reflects tourists' emotions and perceptions as well as the unique destination identity and image (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Hosany et al., 2006; Kim & Lehto, 2013; Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou, & Kaplanidou, 2015).

Initially, Biel (1993) suggested that brand personality evokes the emotions of the brand. Aaker (1996), following Biel's (1993) stance, stated that 'brand personality can provide a link to the brand's emotional and self-expressive benefits as well as a basis for customer/brand relationships and differentiation' (p. 112). In this vein, Aaker (1997) asserted that brand personality can capture the emotional link between the consumer and the brand due to its pervasively symbolic, holistic and emotion-evoking nature. The author (1997) went on to propose that brands can be perceived as having a human personality, and defined brand personality as 'a set of human characteristics associated with a brand' (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). In concurrence with Sirgy's (1982) self-congruity theory, Solomon (1983) proposed that consumers tend to identify themselves with the brands they purchase. Moon (2002) also supported the self-congruity perspective and argued that consumers receive emotional rewards when congruity is perceived between self and the brand's personality. According to these views, consumers are more likely to choose a product from a brand whose personality reflects their own personality (Zinkhan, Haytko, & Ward, 1996). Given the importance of consumers' emotional connection to a product, it could be argued that brand personality is an essential component of a brand because it reflects how consumers feel (Keller, 2003) and, thus, should be highlighted in brand strategy (Wood, 2000). It should be noted that emotional connection does not fully explain destination personality, but rather destination personality is one significant brand component that reflects or captures emotional elements. Therefore, while this study acknowledges that personality is not reducible to emotional connection, destination personality is envisioned as a proxy for emotional connection when understanding this connection is of primary concern.

Brand personality in the tourism context was first adopted by Ekinci and Hosany (2006), who defined destination personality as 'the set of human characteristics associated with a destination' (p. 128). It has been suggested that when tourists perceive similarity or 'match' between destination personality and their own personality, this match could result in stronger emotional ties to the destination and lead to positive evaluation of the destination and higher intentions to travel by tourists (Bekk, Spörrle, & Kruse, 2015; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Sirgy, 1982; Sirgy & Su, 2000). For example, Hosany et al. (2006) stated that 'the emotional component of destination image captures the majority of variance on

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