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The impact of destination personality dimensions on destination brand awareness and attractiveness: Australia as a case study

Abstract

Destination personality refers to human personality traits associated with a destination. It has become an important construct, as tourism managers attempt to understand people's choices to find ways to differentiate their destination in an increasingly complex marketplace. The present paper outlines a study in which a destination personality scale was used that provides insight into different destinations' personality dimensions and the distinct influence of a destination's perception from the perspective of Chinese tourists. More precisely, the results of this study conducted in mainland China revealed that for the destination personality dimensions of Australia, the results suggest that sincerity, one destination personality dimension, has a more positive impact on perceived destination awareness and attractiveness from the perspective of Chinese tourists than the other three dimensions (excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness) do. Implications and future study directions conclude the study report.

Key words: destination personality dimension; destination awareness; destination attractiveness; personality dimensions; China; Australia

Introduction

Tourism destinations play an essential role in the current tourism academic field because of intense competition in global tourism markets. The idea of utilizing destination personality as a core strategy to differentiate one destination from potential competing destinations has attracted increasing interest from researchers globally. Although the importance of destination personality has been acknowledged, to date no empirical research has been conducted on the relationship between its dimensions and the awareness and attractiveness of a destination. More precisely, the underlying influence of each dimension on destination awareness and attractiveness has not been identified. Therefore, this study aimed to adopt the existing destination personality scale to identify whether tourists would have a distinct hedonic perception of awareness and attractiveness (destination equity elements) according to destination personality dimensions.

In this paper, the destination personality of Australia was examined in regard to its potential as a travel destination for individuals from Mainland China. Australia was chosen as it has abundant natural and cultural scenery and a more affordable exchange rate compared with the United States, Europe,

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and the United Kingdom (UK), making it potentially attractive to tourists from Mainland China. The survey was conducted in Hangzhou, Mainland China. A factor analysis method combined with a regression analysis was adopted to test the proposed questions. The results suggested that sincerity, one destination personality dimension, had a more positive impact on perceived destination awareness and attractiveness from the perspective of Chinese tourists than the other three dimensions (excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness) do.

Furthermore, this paper has theoretical and managerial contributions. From a theoretical perspective and to the author's best knowledge, no research has identified directly which dimension of a destination's personality has the strongest correlation with tourists' positive impressions; thus, one goal of the current research was to fill this gap. From a managerial standpoint, an essential way to create a distinct city identity and construct an attractive tourism destination relies largely on certain features, such as tourists' positive perceptions of the destination brand's attractiveness. Therefore, this study could help in developing practical marketing strategies for destination managers.

Literature review

Brand theory was rooted originally in the discipline of marketing where a strong brand can enhance purchase intent and customer loyalty and reduce production costs (Aaker, 1996; Assael, 1995; Blain, Levy & Ritchie, 2005; Cobb-Walgren, Beal & Donthu, 1995; Keller, 1993). Over the past few decades, scholars have found strong support that advantages brought about by branding strategy can be implemented in the tourism industry (Hosany, Ekinci & Uysal, 2006; Morgan, Prichard & Pride, 2004; Park & Petric, 2006; Prebensen, 2007). Thus, it is not surprising that branding will be a pivotal research area in future destination marketing (Hosany et al., 2006).

Although destination personality research is a new realm in branding theory, a handful of studies have contributed to the understanding and implications of this multifaceted concept (Caprara, Barbaranelli & Guido, 2001; Johar, Sengupta & Aaker, 2005; Sigauw, Mattila & Austin, 1999; Venable, Rose, Bush & Gilbert 2005). Inspired by the theoretical concept of brand personality, this stream of research has focused on distinctive aspects of brand personality dimensions instead of addressing them all simultaneously and testing whether certain dimensions may have a stronger influence on brand awareness or attractiveness than others do. The most cited definition of destination personality is "the set of human characteristics associated to a tourism destination" (Hosany et al., 2006). This definition is similar to that of Fournier (1998), who indicated that products that can reveal customers' characteristics might stimulate their sense of belonging in terms of human personality. It is understandable that destination personality in tourism appears to possess a position similar to brand personality in marketing to differentiate a destination from its rivals (Murphy, Benckendorff & Moscardo, 2007). Moreover, the more upper class the destinations are, the more the marketing strategy will base their brand identities on rich and distinct personalities (Blain et al., 2005). Successful implementations of this principle have been found in Spain (Gilmore, 2002) and the UK (Hall, 2004; Pride, 2002), supporting the view of Ekinci and Hosany (2006) that travel destinations hold personality traits that are revealed in symbolic values. Consequently, destination personality brings more emotional or even spiritual traits to the destination, thus forming a living and intimate identity in tourists' minds.

Technically, to form a deep and intimate impression of a destination for a tourist, a destination needs to attract positive awareness, which is related to the destination brand. More precisely, brand awareness is anything linked in memory to a brand (Aaker 1991), and refers positively to brand equity because it can indicate brand quality and commitment. At the theoretical level, the stronger the positive awareness a consumer has of a certain brand destination, the greater the brand destination equity will appear.

Brand awareness plays an important role in affecting consumers' decisions when considering a brand at the stage of planning, leading to priority behavior for the brand (Yoo, Conthu & Lee, 2000). Due to the importance of brand awareness, the present study seeks to explore the influence of different dimensions of destination personality on destination awareness, thereby offering some underlying tactics on how to construct brand awareness for a certain cultural group.

Numbers of scholars agree that brand attractiveness has an obvious impact on a brand's success; more precisely, it can build a close relationship with customers' potential decisions (Hayes, Alford, Silver & York, 2006; Kim, Han & Park, 2001). The consumers' perceptions of the brand's attractiveness appear to influence the closeness of this relationship to some extent. For instance, Weigold, Flusser and Ferguson (1992) suggested a favorable impact of brand attractiveness on attitudes towards advertisements and purchase intention. Drawing from the interpersonal relationships literature, Hayes et al. (2006) argued that from a business field perspective, the perceived brand attractiveness might influence the relationship between consumers and brands in meaningful and predictable manners.

Based on this evidence and on a similar function for destination personality in branding and given the important role of brand attractiveness, the current literature can be extended by examining whether certain dimensions of destination brand personality may hold more attractiveness than others do, thus affecting tourists' perceptions. In short, the study suggested that customers are likely to be drawn to an attractively branded destination. From a managerial perspective, the results of this research will shed light on how to manage the brand personality of a destination to achieve the desired level of brand attractiveness.

In the tourism literature, destination awareness and destination attractiveness have been identified as key components of destination loyalty. However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has yet investigated the relationship between destination awareness/destination attractiveness and the dimension of destination personality. Therefore, this study addressed the following research questions:

Question 1: Which dimension of destination personality has a stronger influence on destination awareness?

Question 2: Which dimension of destination personality has a stronger influence on destination attractiveness?

Methods

The measures for destination personality, destination brand attractiveness, and destination brand awareness were drawn from previous research. A brief explanation of how each of these measures was interpreted in this study is presented.

Destination personality scale

It is difficult to identify standard measurement scales of destination personality because of the ambiguous relationship of destination personality with other influencing factors that have attracted scholars' attention in destination branding theory (Bigne, Sanchez & Sanchez, 2001; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Murphy et al., 2007). In general, researchers either have used a measurement scale developed by themselves (e.g., d'Astous & Boujbel, 2007) or have adopted existing scales, such as Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale. According to a literature review, Aaker's scale (1997) has been tested across commercial brands within cross-cultural settings, thereby ensuring the scale's stability for measurement (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Siguaw et al., 1999). Regardless of the original source, brand personality scales, like other measurement items, comprise most commonly of a list of personality traits on Likert-type scales, with anchors ranging from "not descriptive at all" to "extremely descriptive". In this study, a factor analysis was conducted to develop a set of dimensions. Ekinici and Hosany's (2006) destination personality items were used, and these have already been tested for the validity of the scales applied to tourists. According to previous studies (Churchill, 1979; Ekinici & Hosany, 2006), not all items are producible for defining a tourism destination's personality.

Questionnaire

Initially, all original scales in English were translated into Chinese using a back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980). The respondents were asked to imagine Australia as if it were a person and then pick desirable items that could be used to describe Australia in their own way. These items were rated on a 5-point scale (1=extremely non-descriptive, 5=extremely descriptive) according to recent research on brand personality (e.g. Diamantopoulos, Smith, & Grime, 2005). Table 1 shows details of the 27 items. For recalling the image of Australia, the author adopted several pictures downloaded from the Australian government's tourism organization used for the promotion of tourism in Australia. These pictures can be found in Appendix 1.

Table 1
Destination personality scale

Personality dimension name	Facet name	Traits
Sincerity	Sincerity	Down-to-earth, Family-oriented, Small-town
	Honest	Honest , Sincere, Real
	Wholesome	Wholesome, Original
	Cheerful	Cheerful, Sentimental , Friendly
Excitement	Daring	Daring, Trendy , Exciting
	Spirited	Spirited, Cool , Young
	Imaginative	Imaginative, Unique , Up-to-date, Independent, Contemporary
Competence	Reliable	Reliable, Hardworking , Secure
	Intelligent	Intelligent, Technical , Corporate
	Successful	Successful, Confident, Leader

Table 1 Continued

Personality dimension name	Facet name	Traits
Sophistication	Upper Class	Upper Class, Glamorous, Good Looking
	Charming	Charming, Feminine, Smooth
Ruggedness	Outdoorsy	Outdoorsy, Masculine, Western
	Tough	Tough, Rugged

Source: Ekinci & Hosany's (2006)

The above personality traits are originally adopted from Aaker's (1997) 42 personality traits that have been crossed out at this paper as they've been found not adoptable at destination realm, and Aaker's (1997) personality traits developed particularly for the business environment. While destination image has been the focus of tourism research since the 1970s, destination personality is a relatively new concept, and the application of brand personality to tourism is in its infancy (Hosany et al., 2006). Consequently, learning more about how people perceive destinations' personalities and identifying destination personality dimensions is fundamental to improving our understanding of tourists' destination choices.

Sample

From December 2011 to February 2012, participants were asked to take part in a survey in Hangzhou, Mainland China. To participate in the survey, the respondents were approached randomly around shopping complexes and train stations. This sampling method, widely conducted in main roadsides or other tourist-visited spots (Rey, 1983), was adopted in this study because of its timesaving and cost-effective characteristics. Two hundred and twenty-five questionnaires were distributed, with 215 collected, representing a response rate of 95.6%. Ultimately, 210 questionnaires were regarded as ideal.

The respondents were split almost equally between males (52.3%) and females (47.7%). In terms of age group, 16% of the respondents were between 15 and 24 years of age; 28% were between 25 and 34 years of age; 25% were between 35 and 44 years of age; and 31% were 45 years of age or older. The majority of the respondents' education level was below the university level, accounting for 37.4%, with those holding a bachelor's degree accounting for 33.5% and those with postgraduate or doctoral degrees accounting for 29.1%. Since this study focused on the attractiveness of Australia as a destination brand from the perspective of destination personality, no respondent had been to Australia before; at the same time, they expressed that they would consider Australia as their next outbound travel destination regardless of various motivations. These factors guaranteed that their perceptions and understanding about Australia would serve a useful purpose in launching Australia's marketing strategy for attracting Chinese tourists.

Destination brand attractiveness

Items used in the field of commercial branding were adopted for testing within the context of tourism. Kim et al. (2001) developed three items for measuring brand attractiveness. The measurement

of destination brand attractiveness was also measured with three items that have been widely used before (Sophonsiri & Polyorat, 2009) that also use a 5-point Likert scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. "Australia is attractive" and "Australia is favourable" are examples of this scale.

Destination brand awareness

This paper adopted a 6-item measurement scale to measure destination awareness (Sophonsiri & Polyorat, 2009; Yoo et al., 2000). Using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree, the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each of the six items. "I can tell unique specialty of Australia among other competing destinations" and "Some characteristics of Australia come to my mind quickly" were examples of this scale.

Exploratory factor analysis

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was undertaken to identify the a priori dimensionality of the destination personality scale. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity were used to assess the appropriateness of factor analyses to the data. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy (0.72) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.001$) confirmed the appropriateness of the EFA. A 4-factor solution was finally obtained. The acceptable eigenvalues (> 1) and a satisfactory total amount of variance (61.38%) provided strong evidence of construct validity (Churchill, 1979). After inspection of the item content for domain representation, 14 items were deleted. A final 4-factor model was estimated with the remaining 13 items.

Table 2 illustrates the 13-item factor structure.

Table 2
Exploratory factor analysis of destination personality

	Factors and items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
	Sincerity				
C1	Reliable	0.73			
C2	Friendly	0.82			
C3	Wholesome	0.68			
C4	Sincerity	0.72			
	Excitement				
E1	Daring		0.68		
E2	Spirited		0.82		
E3	Imaginative		0.74		
E4	Exciting		0.56		
	Sophistication				
S1	Charming			0.70	
S2	Good looking			0.65	
S3	Secure			0.74	
	Ruggedness				
R1	Outdoorsy				0.66
R2	Tough				0.75

Table 2 Continued

	Factors and items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Eigenvalue		2.56	2.06	1.75	1.51
Variance %		20.80	16.75	12.20	11.63
Cumulative %	Variance	20.80	16.75	12.20	61.38

Findings

The results indicate that only four dimensions are available for the destination personality in the current study. The first factor was labeled sincerity, and it explained most of the variance (20.80%). Excitement was labeled as the second factor, within which the items were the same as those in Aaker's (1997) study. The excitement dimension explains 16.75% of the total variance. The third factor was labeled sophistication and accounted for 12.20% of the total variance. The final factor was labeled ruggedness, and it represented 11.63% of the variance. All factors had relatively high reliability coefficients, ranging from 0.56 to 0.82. Thus, these results indicate the validity of the scale (Churchill, 1979).

Multiple regressions

A regression analysis tested the differences of perceptions on brand attractiveness and brand awareness according to brand personality dimensions. According to Nunnally (1970), for all scales, Cronbach's alpha should be higher than 0.70. The results presented here meet the requirements for further analysis. Table 3 displays the means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of the variables α . Table 4 shows the results.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics and reliabilities

	Mean	SD	α
Excitement	3.61	0.69	0.86
Sincerity	3.48	0.62	0.83
Sophistication	3.54	0.66	0.89
Ruggedness	1.54	0.87	0.90
Destination awareness	3.47	0.83	0.82
Destination attractiveness	3.47	0.70	0.73

Table 4
Multiple regression results

Independent variable	Destination awareness		Destination attractiveness	
	β	t-value	β	t-value
Sincerity	0.36	2.66*	0.28	3.13**
Excitement	-0.03	-0.35	0.07	0.75
Sophistication	0.05	0.78	0.03	0.46
Ruggedness	0.02	0.10	-0.03	-0.35

Note: *: $p < 0.5$; **: $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

To understand the influence of the dimensions of destination personality on destination awareness (Q1), destination awareness was regressed on the sincerity, excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness dimensions of the destination personality. Table 4 shows the multiple regression results. The results reveal that only sincerity ($\beta = 0.36$, $t = 2.66$, $p < 0.5$) influenced the destination awareness. Interestingly, the results for Q2 also revealed that sincerity ($\beta = 0.28$, $t = 3.13$, $p < 0.01$) influenced the destination attractiveness, whereas the others did not.

Conclusion and discussion

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the dimensions of destination personality by extending Ekinci and Hosany's (2006) conceptualization in a Chinese context. Ekinci and Hosany (2006) initially adopted Aaker's (1997) conceptualization of brand personality to tourism destinations in Britain. We examined two key research questions that pertained to destination personality: (Q1) Which dimension of destination of destination personality has a stronger influence on destination awareness? (Q2) Which dimension of destination has a stronger influence on destination attractiveness? We now discuss the implications of our study and consider further research areas.

The results of the study indicate that tourists ascribe personality characteristics to destinations, and that destination personality can be described in four dimensions: sincerity, sophistication, excitement, and ruggedness. These dimensions distinguish this study from Ekinci and Hosany's (2006) three-dimension findings. The dimensions were found to be reliable and valid, with sincerity and excitement as the two main factors. This finding is in line with previous research on the application of the BPS, in which the sincerity and excitement dimensions were found to capture the majority of variance in brand personality ratings (Aaker, 1997; Benet-Martinez & Garolera, 2001; Rojas-Méndez, Erenchun-Podlech & Silva-Olave, 2004) and hospitality field ratings (Siguaw et al., 1999).

Theoretical implications

In addition to the above findings, and to the author's best knowledge, a lack of detailed recognition exists of which destination personality dimensions are more powerful in influencing destination awareness and attractiveness. Moreover, although considerable studies have been conducted within a Western context, related studies in the Eastern world are fewer and lack consistency (Polyorat et al., 2008); more specifically, no study has conducted such research in Mainland China. It is important for key destination marketing organization managers to understanding tourists' perceptions of potential destinations, in particular, whether the current marketing strategy has attracted their attention or has conveyed the appropriate message. Since research examining the impact of each dimension of brand personality is scarce, and no research has identified directly which dimension of destination personality contributes the most to a positive impression, one goal of the current research was to fill this gap.

The findings of this study, where only four dimensions were affected, are in line with Caprara et al.'s (2001) argument that in a certain context, personality dimensions can be identified using a smaller number. The findings of this study confirm the findings of Ekinci and Hosany (2006), revealing that

the BPS can also be applied to tourism destinations. The evidence of a 4-factor rather than 5-factor solution is consistent with Caprara et al.'s (2001) study, which had 3 factors. Thus, it may be possible to describe product or brand personalities using less than 5 factors according to the products' characteristics.

Furthermore, because tourism products, unlike commercial goods, are said to be rich in terms of experience attributes (Otto & Ritchie, 1996), the main objective for such consumer is to fulfill their hedonic motivation. Consequently, sincerity and excitement have emerged as important factors. According to Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), these two dimensions are connected closely to hedonic elements, such as satisfaction and enjoyment, and this is in line with the conclusions reached by Ekinci and Hosany (2006).

Another finding of interest is that the brand personality adjectives are located under different dimensions to those in Aaker's (1997) study (as cited in Ekinci and Hosany, 2006). For example, adjectives, such as reliable, shifted from the competence dimension of Aaker's (1997) study to that of sincerity in this study. Moreover, the adjective 'secure' shifted from the competence dimension of Aaker's (1997) study to that of sophistication in this study.

The present study also contributes to the cross-cultural destination literature by examining the destination personality construct in China. This study provides empirical evidence regarding the relative importance of four dimensions of destination personality in China.

Managerial implications

The effect of brand personality on consumers' behavior has been acknowledged as one important marketing competition strategy, more effective than price reduction (Batra, Lehmann & Singh, 1993; Simoes & Dibb, 2001; Sirgy, 1982). From a practical standpoint, these findings offer important implications for the development of destination marketing strategies. As an essential way to create a distinct identity and achieve competitive strength among similar competences, these findings will result ultimately in desirable consumer outcomes, such as positive perceptions of brand attractiveness or destination attractiveness in this study.

To enhance a destination's attractiveness, management may need to focus on certain dimensions of destination personality. Taking Australia as an example, managers should consider the dimension of sincerity (i.e., competence), such as trying to convey the image of reliability, wholesomeness, friendliness, or sincerity in their marketing strategies (e.g. imagery and advertising), when intending to expand the Chinese market (Batra, Donald & Singh, 1993; Levy, 1959; Plummer, 1985). In other words, marketing practitioners should pay attention to the selection of the destination personality dimensions they want to focus on to make the best use of their limited resources.

The findings from this research also provide some guidelines for international marketing decisions. Traditionally, many global tourism-marking companies wishing to expand their market outside their home countries have utilized standardized marketing strategies widely (Witkowski, Ma & Zheng, 2003). This research has extended the findings of Ekinci and Hosany (2006) with the collection of data from an Asian country, China, to uncover Australia's destination personality perception from the perspective of Asian consumers.

Furthermore, the findings of our study suggest that destination marketers could differentiate their places based on personality characteristics over and above perceived images. Thus, one area of future research could be the positioning of tourism destinations using the personality dimensions found in this study.

Limitations and future research areas

This study's findings are specific to one culture (Chinese nationals) and cannot be generalized to other tourist populations. Moreover, investigations of the relationships among perceived destination personality, destination awareness, and destination attractiveness were performed at the pre-consumption stage, which means the magnitude of the effects may be different when evaluating the during-travel stage or post-purchase stages. Thus, further research should investigate whether repeat visitors' perceptions of destination personality are different from those of non-visitors' perceptions.

Furthermore, this study did not account for the effects of tourists' motivations for travel. Travel motivations might lead to distinct perceptions of one destination's personality because the focus area may differ, generating different results (Oh, Uysal & Weaver, 1995; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Therefore, other research methods (e.g., in-depth interviews, focus groups, or projective techniques) could be included in future research to elicit destination-specific personality characteristics (e.g., travel motivation types, personal social needs/ challenges) that impact tourists' perceptions. Different research methods may provide additional explanations of the outcomes.

Future research could also replicate this study in other countries with different cultures, religions, levels of economic development, and degrees of exposure to globalization, which in turn, would contribute to refining the destination personality scale validated in this study and might enable possible comparisons with our findings.

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