

The effect of stakeholder power on a destination branding process: The Gold Coast VeryGC brand

by

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*In loving memory
of Freaks*

Candidate's statement of originality

This work has not been submitted previously, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis is original and contains no material published or written by any other person except as acknowledged in the text.

Giuseppe Marzano

Dr Noel Scott
Principal advisor

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Publications by the candidate relevant to the thesis but not forming part of it

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Abstract

This study examines the effect of stakeholder power on a destination branding process. A greater understanding of the process of destination branding is important because the destination brand plays a significant role in the building of the image of a tourism destination and industry spends a large amount of money in the creation of a competitive brand. It is also important academically, and a long stream of literature has analysed the impact of the destination brand on the image building of the tourism destination. Nonetheless, while the theoretical debate in tourism has recognized the importance of how the image of the destination is created and how through the destination brand the marketing effort of tourism destination could be enhanced, less attention has been devoted to the understanding of how the destination brand is negotiated by stakeholders.

This study aims to challenge a conspicuous body of knowledge in tourism that consistently explains multi-stakeholder decision-making processes in tourism in terms of collaboration. The impact of individual interests and the understanding of how individual stakeholders push forward their own objectives in decision-making processes, even if they work collaboratively, is a significant area for research in urban planning and strategic management, but it is only an incipient topic in tourism. The tourism literature has recognised the existence of politics, parochialism and local interests in the process of destination branding. This research builds on this existing tourism literature and provides empirical evidence of the effect of stakeholder power on a destination branding process. The theoretical discussion about power as a characteristic of a collaborative process is used as one of the theoretical underpinnings of this study. Collaboration theory assumes that, whatever their power, stakeholders work towards a shared outcome. This study suggests that the existence of a shared outcome cannot be taken for granted, and that an understanding of stakeholder power and the individual interests stakeholders carry into a multi-stakeholder decision-making process may contribute to a better explanation of how collaboration (if it at all exists) may unfold.

Constructivism is the guiding paradigm of this study which uses a qualitative methodology to understand the effect of stakeholder power in a destination branding process. The Gold Coast VeryGC destination branding process has been selected as the appropriate case study for this research. Data has been collected mainly through semi-structured interviews that involved 42 stakeholders including all the top executives of Tourism Queensland and Gold Coast Tourism, two of key stakeholders of the VeryGC destination branding process. The

data analysis has been conducted by combining a strategy of relying on theoretical propositions together with a constant comparative analysis method.

The analysis of data collected through qualitative interviews provided this research with the ability of contributing both to theory as well to tourism policy and practice. Six theoretical contributions were identified. As its first contribution, this research was able to define in terms of four dimensions what complexity means in destination branding. Secondly, this research revealed that in collaboration is an emergent as opposed to an intrinsic characteristic of the Gold Coast VeryGC destination branding process. As its third contribution both to tourism as well as to collaboration theory, this study reveals that the role played by the convener of the VeryGC destination branding process is an example of collaborative thuggery. This study suggests that the understanding of the resources and the power they provide to the convener in a multi-stakeholder decision-making process, such as the VeryGC destination branding process, may help to explain how a convener can 'reincarnate' into a thug. Collaboration theory may therefore benefit from an understanding of the resources that the convener brings into a multi-stakeholder decision-making process. The fourth contribution of this study is the identification of the forms of power in evidence in the VeryGC destination branding process. The fifth contribution is an inventory of the resources that stakeholders carry within the destination branding. The final contribution of this study is to challenge the idea that multi-stakeholder decision-making processes such as destination branding are rational processes by showing that due to the impact of stakeholder power, the VeryGC destination branding process unfolded following a pattern different from what previously described by the literature

Key words: power, collaboration, stakeholder, destination branding, Gold Coast.

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