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Do Destination Brands Really have a Personality? A comparison of two Coastal Tourism Destinations in Australia

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Introduction

According to Morgan et al (2003), the need for destinations to portray a unique identity is more critical than ever yet much of destination advertising remains blue seas, cloudless skies and endless golden beaches with less than memorable tag lines. They also emphasise that, in marketing terms, brands are meant to differentiate by inciting belief, evoking emotions and prompting behaviours, and that brands have social, emotional and identity value to the users.

According to Ekinci (2003), the words 'brand', 'branding' and 'destination image' have appeared in many academic references, with no apparent effort made to distinguish between destination image and destination branding. As a result he proposes a model which states that the process of destination branding begins when the evaluation of destination image includes a strong emotional attachment. Accordingly, only branded destinations are purported to be able establish an instant emotional link with their customers. He elaborates that successful destination branding involves establishing a mutual relationship between destinations and tourists by satisfying tourists' emotional and basic needs. In establishing this link between destination image and consumer self-image an important factor is Brand Personality – emphasising the human side of the brand image.

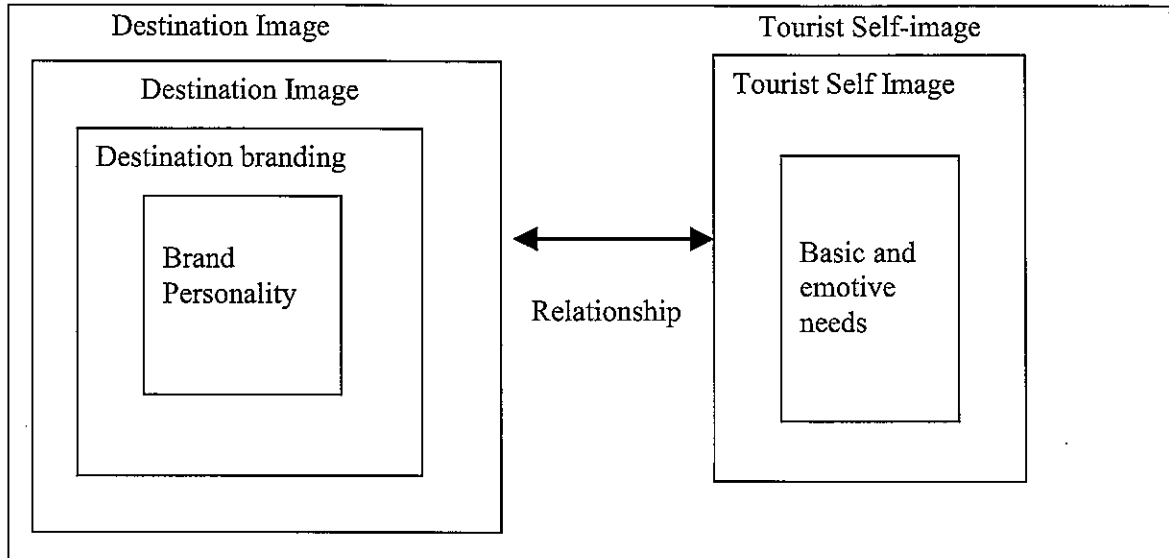


Figure 1: Destination Image and Destination Branding (Ekinci, 2003).

Aaker (1997) defines brand personality as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand.” Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) advocate a more precise definition – “the unique set of human personality traits that are both applicable and relevant to brands.” They argue that Aaker’s broader definition incorporates human characteristics that are outside the definition of personality and in fact measure other elements of brand identity, such as values and cognitive characteristics. However, there is general agreement on the fact that consumers can perceive brands as having personalities, and that there are five broad dimensions to brand personality – sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness (Aaker, 1997).

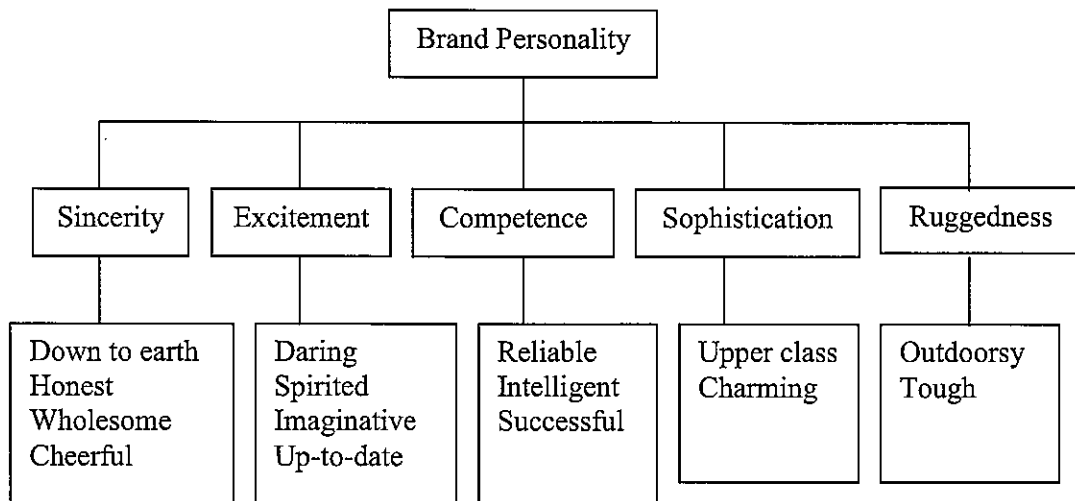


Figure 2: Aaker’s (1997) Brand Personality Dimensions

The literature provides several examples of destination branding efforts deemed to be successful, including Spain (Gilmore, 2002), Wales (Pride, 2002), Oregon (Curtis, 2001), Louisiana (Slater, 2002) and Britain (Hall, 2004). In most published accounts of the destination branding process, desired brand personality characteristics are identified. For example, Henderson (2000) discusses the New Asia-Singapore branding process and identifies the five personality characteristics comprising the brand; cosmopolitan, youthful, vibrant, modern Asia, reliability and comfort. There are a few examples of the application of Aaker's brand personality dimensions to tourism brands, in particular restaurants (Siguaw, Matilla and Austin, 1999) and up-scale hotels (Back and Lee, 2003). Hosany and Ekinici (2003) did test the applicability of Aaker's scale to tourism destinations and found three rather than five valid brand personality dimensions, competence, extroversion, and excitement. However, they did not provide evidence of whether or not respondents could differentiate destinations on the basis of their brand personality. Also lacking is evidence of an emotional connection based on tourists' perceived self-image and the 'brand personality' of destinations. In addition, there is little evidence in the destination branding literature of the application of the concept beyond the national level to include regional tourism destinations.

The purpose of this study was to explore the brand identity of two popular coastal tourism destinations in Queensland, Australia – Cairns and the Whitsunday Islands – as perceived by visitors to the North Queensland region. Both of these destinations have been 'branded' by Tourism Queensland. More specifically, this paper will explore respondents' ability to; associate 'personality' descriptors with tourism destinations, differentiate between destinations on the basis of their personality, and links between destination personality and self-identity.

Method

All surveys were distributed from 23-25 April 2004 in the North Queensland Tourism Region, which is bordered to the north by Tropical North Queensland (Cairns) and to the south by the Whitsunday region. The project was conducted with the assistance of a local ferry operator that takes passengers to nearby Magnetic Island, with previous research indicating that many of the visitors to the region take at least one day-trip to the Island. This location does not, however, allow for coverage of regional visitors who do not stay in Townsville. For this reason, a popular tourist ice-cream café located on the Bruce Highway 60km north of Townsville was also used as a survey location. The highway is the main route along the North Queensland coast and links Cairns and the Whitsundays. In addition to the cost savings of conducting the surveys locally, this approach also allowed for residents of the North Queensland region to be surveyed, an important local market for both destinations under study. Also, many international and domestic visitors to the two regions travel along the Bruce Highway and therefore the survey locations provided an opportunity to access a mix of visitors who had visited one, both, or neither of the destinations. A total of 480 surveys were collected, with a response rate of 62%. Of the surveys collected, 464 were usable. Three versions of the questionnaire were distributed, with 90 respondents completing the long version which included branding questions for both destinations, 187 respondents completing the version relating only to the Whitsundays, and 187 completing the Cairns-only version.

Findings

There were more female (53.9%) than male (42.7%) respondents to the survey, and the average age was 38. The majority of respondents were Australian (70.5%), of which 69.5% were from the North Queensland Region and a further 11.8% from the rest of Queensland. Of the 29.5% of respondents from overseas, 43.9% were from the UK and 15.2% from the United States.

Table 1: Respondents Previous Travel Experience with Destinations

	Cairns (n=276)	Whitsundays (n=276)
% who have visited previously	74.6%	63.8%
# of previous visits (median)	5	2
Average length of most recent trip	5.4 days	4.2 days
Average Trip satisfaction	7.65 out of 10	8.71 out of 10
- paired comparison (t=4.484, p=.000)	7.51	8.69
- independent (t=2.290, p=.023)	8.18	8.79
% who are planning to visit	58.0%	46.5%
Why don't plan to visit	(n=96)	(n=129)
- too far from home/don't live in Australia	13.8	22.3
- other places to see/things to do	22.0	18.0
- too expensive/can't afford	8.3	12.2
- no time	8.3	8.6
- have already been there	1.8	6.5
- no particular reason	10.1	7.2

Three-quarters of the sample had previously visited Cairns, with 63.8% having visited the Whitsundays. On average, these respondents had visited Cairns 5 times before and the Whitsundays 2 times. More than one-half of the respondents were planning to visit Cairns in the near future and 46.5% were planning to visit the Whitsundays.

Importantly, average satisfaction on the most recent previous trip was 8.71 for the Whitsundays and 7.65 for Cairns. T-tests revealed that satisfaction with Cairns was particularly lower when compared to the Whitsundays when respondents rated both destinations in the same survey (7.51 vs 8.69) as opposed to the independent ratings (Cairns = 8.18, Whitsundays = 8.79).

Aaker's five broad dimensions of brand personality were tested using 20 statements from her brand personality scale – all the facet and factor names. The results indicate that at least 90% of respondents rated Cairns on each of the descriptors, and 88% rated the Whitsundays. The personality descriptors for which there was the highest proportion of 'not sure' responses were sincere and honest for Cairns and sincere, reliable, intelligent, competent and honest for the Whitsundays. Descriptors with lowest 'not sure' frequencies were exciting and cheerful, for both destinations. As was found by Hosany and Ekinci, the penta-factorial structure hypothesised by Aaker was not fully replicated. A four factor solution emerged from the combined ratings for both destinations (ie. respondents who rated the Whitsundays only plus those that rated Cairns only). The factors were named sincerity/ competence, sophistication, excitement and ruggedness. It is also important to note that individual personality descriptors did not always load on their intended factor, for example intelligence

falls under the competence dimension in Aaker's model but loaded on with the sophistication descriptors in this solution, although it did also load relatively highly on sincerity/competence.

Table 2: Factor Analysis of Brand Facets*

Brand Personality Facets	Factor 1 (sincerity + competence)	Factor 2 (sophistication)	Factor 3 (excitement)	Factor 4 (ruggedness)
Honest	.797	.265	.187	.183
Down to earth	.789	.035	.207	.296
Sincere	.777	.305	.030	.218
Wholesome	.767	.180	.326	.174
Reliable	.647	.515	.182	.120
Competent	.641	.360	.351	.108
Upper class	-.006	.785	.180	.203
Sophisticated	.235	.773	.208	.216
Successful	.347	.697	.211	.135
Intelligent	.483	.656	.055	.283
Charming	.358	.614	.170	.272
Up to date	.353	.577	.404	.070
Exciting	.125	.191	.833	.176
Cheerful	.377	.231	.741	.007
Spirited	.233	.298	.600	.482
Imaginative	.444	.430	.456	.320
Tough	.190	.131	-.017	.800
Rugged	.205	.417	.109	.680
Daring	.166	.159	.518	.631
Outdoorsy	.225	.190	.290	.538

n= (176, 70% of variance explained)

Table 3: Respondents Brand Personality Ratings for Each Destination

Brand Personality Facet (1=not at all, 5=strongly, 6=not sure)	Cairns Mean* (SD)	% not sure	Whitsundays Mean* (SD)	% not sure
Sincere	2.60	9.7	2.96	12.3
Down to Earth	3.03	4.7	3.36	5.4
Honest	2.88	7.8	3.18	9.5
Wholesome	2.94	6.3	3.53	7.8
Cheerful	3.67	2.8	4.20	3.9
Exciting	3.67	2.2	4.10	3.9
Daring	3.34	4.1	3.44	6.5
Spirited	3.43	4.3	3.73	4.7
Imaginative	3.24	4.1	3.65	4.3
Up to date	3.51	5.6	3.69	8.0
Competent	3.33	6.7	3.67	11.0
Reliable	3.23	6.9	3.56	11.9
Intelligent	3.05	6.9	3.18	11.2
Successful	3.46	4.7	3.73	7.5
Sophisticated	3.12	4.3	3.25	6.3
Upper class	2.82	4.5	3.12	4.5
Charming	3.01	4.3	3.58	5.2
Rugged	2.88	5.6	3.12	6.5
Outdoorsy	3.62	2.8	4.05	5.0
Tough	2.79	5.6	2.70	5.8

The personality descriptors most strongly associated with the destinations were cheerful (Whitsundays = 4.20, Cairns = 3.67), exciting (Whitsundays = 4.10, Cairns = 3.67), and outdoorsy (W = 4.05, C = 3.62). Weakest associations occurred for tough (W = 2.70, C = 2.79), and sincere (W = 2.96, C = 2.60).

Independent t-tests for significant differences (comparing those who rated Cairns only vs. those who rated Whitsundays only) indicate that the Whitsundays was perceived to be significantly more wholesome (3.45 vs 2.99), cheerful (4.22 vs 3.81), exciting (4.09 vs 3.80), imaginative (3.64 vs 3.32) and Upper Class (3.01 vs 2.73). Many more significant differences were found when comparing the personality associations for the two destinations for respondents who completed the combined survey (ie. rated the two destinations side by side). These respondents were significantly more likely to perceive the Whitsundays as sincere, down to earth, honest, wholesome, cheerful, exciting, spirited, imaginative, competent, reliable, intelligent, successful, charming and rugged, outdoorsy and tough.

Table 4 – Tests for Significant Differences in Brand Personality Associations between Destinations

Brand Personality Facet (1=not at all, 5=strongly)	Cairns	Whit	Paired T-test (respondents who rated both destinations)	Cairns	Whit	Indep t-test (respondents who rated only one destination)
Sincere	2.69	3.31	3.675*	2.58	2.81	-1.475
Down to Earth	2.67	3.38	3.364*	3.14	3.36	-1.493
Honest	2.58	3.51	4.867*	2.96	3.04	-.515
Wholesome	2.85	3.60	4.672*	2.99	3.45	-3.09*
Cheerful	3.26	4.19	4.861*	3.81	4.22	-3.537*
Exciting	3.25	4.11	4.066*	3.80	4.09	-2.232*
Daring	3.10	3.33	1.045	3.44	3.45	-.087
Spirited	3.06	3.82	3.598*	3.54	3.63	-.704
Imaginative	3.09	3.68	3.536*	3.32	3.64	-2.34*
Up to date	3.48	3.84	1.863	3.51	3.60	-.708
Competent	3.19	3.86	3.344*	3.37	3.54	-1.349
Reliable	2.93	3.69	4.165*	3.35	3.50	-1.144
Intelligent	2.66	3.39	3.444*	3.15	3.06	-.687
Successful	3.11	3.81	3.301*	3.56	3.64	-.574
Sophisticated	3.02	3.44	1.864	3.14	3.13	.108
Upper class	3.06	3.30	1.105	2.73	3.01	-1.956 *
Charming	2.72	3.92	5.919*	3.13	3.39	-1.846
Rugged	2.66	3.36	2.923*	2.95	3.06	-.759
Outdoorsy	3.02	4.17	6.079*	3.81	3.96	-1.04
Tough	2.41	2.92	2.287*	2.91	2.70	1.39

Table 5 - Congruence Between Holiday at Destination and Self-identity

Statement (1= strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree)	Cairns	Whitsundays
A ...Holiday is consistent with how I see myself	3.33	2.74
A...Holiday is consistent with how I would like to see myself	3.43	2.76
A...Holiday is consistent with how I believe others see me	3.48	3.15
A...Holiday is consistent with how I would like others see me	3.59	3.06

Respondents who compared both destinations were significantly more likely to agree that a Whitsundays holiday is consistent with how they see themselves (2.74 vs 3.33 on a scale where 1= strongly agree to 5= strongly disagree), how they would like to see themselves (2.76 vs 3.43), how they believe others see them (3.15 vs. 3.48) and how they would like others to see them (3.06 vs. 3.59).

Table 6 - Differences in Congruence with Self-identity for Respondents who Rated Only One Destination

Statement (1= strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree)	Cairns Mean	Whitsundays Mean
A ...Holiday is consistent with how I see myself	3.33	2.74
A...Holiday is consistent with how I would like to see myself	3.43	2.76
A...Holiday is consistent with how I believe others see me	3.48	3.15
A...Holiday is consistent with how I would like others to see me	3.59	3.06

Table 7 - Differences in Congruence with self-identity for respondents who compared both destinations

Statement (1= strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree)	Cairns	Whit	Paired t-test
A ...Holiday is consistent with how I see myself	3.63	2.81	-3.891 (.000)
A...Holiday is consistent with how I would like to see myself	3.71	2.67	-5.301 (.000)
A...Holiday is consistent with how I believe others see me	3.72	3.16	-3.00(.004)
A...Holiday is consistent with how I would like others see me	3.83	3.05	-4.146 (.000)

Similar findings exist when comparing those who rated only the Whitsundays to those who rated only Cairns. There was significantly stronger agreement that a Whitsundays holiday is 'consistent with how I see myself', 'how I would like to see myself', and 'how I would like others to see me'.

Table 14 – Differences in Congruence with self-identity for respondents who rated only one destination

Statement (1= strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree)	Cairns	Whit	Indep t-test
A ...Holiday is consistent with how I see myself	3.17	2.76	2.817 (.005)
A...Holiday is consistent with how I would like to see myself	3.29	2.82	2.970 (.003)
A...Holiday is consistent with how I believe others see me	3.38	3.16	1.409 (.160)
A...Holiday is consistent with how I would like others see me	3.47	3.07	2.566 (.011)

Application of Results

The results provide some evidence of the successful application of brand personality to tourism destinations. The vast majority of respondents were able to rate the destinations using personality descriptors. An important finding is that there was greater differentiation between the destinations when they were compared jointly as opposed to independently. Also important, while the Whitsundays received more favourable personality ratings and self-congruity ratings, it also received significantly higher satisfaction ratings. These positive links, however, did not translate into greater intention to visit.

Conclusions

This study has provided some useful insight into the applicability of brand personality concepts to tourism destinations. While it is evident that respondents demonstrated some ability to associate personality traits to two different tourism destinations, there is also some evidence that brand personality models developed in the consumer-goods field are not entirely applicable when applied to tourism destinations. In this case, the sincerity and competence dimensions were not clearly separated by respondents. There is also some evidence that respondents could differentiate destinations with respect to these personality dimensions, particularly when forced to directly compare two destinations. Also important to note is that more favourable destination brand personality ratings were associated with more favourable self-congruity ratings for the Whitsundays, a tentative indication of the link between brand-personality and self-identity. However, further research needs to be conducted to investigate the link between brand personality and actual visitation, given the lower intention to visit results for the Whitsundays. This investigation would need to include detailed consideration of the constraints which influence actual travel behaviour, such as cost, travel distance etc. Further studies should also include the more comprehensive list of brand personality traits associated with Aaker's scale in an effort to refine and adapt the scale to tourism destinations.

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