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Aggravated Fragmentation: Resistant SMEs in the Heritage Tourism Industry

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Abstract

The provision of heritage tourism requires contributions from both public and private sector organisations. Furthermore, aspects of the tourism product are provided by a range of government bodies resulting in a multi-sector approach to heritage tourism (Panyik 2011). In addition, a range of SMEs make a vital contribution to the tourism provision. This can lead to fragmentation, a well-documented phenomenon in the industry, which is attributed to its unique structure (Gilmore 2003; Bornhorst et al 2010; Komppula 2014), requiring purposeful coordination and integration between stakeholders, which is a challenging task (Wray 2011). This research paper presents findings and theoretical insights from an investigation of strategic marketing planning practice of tourism organisations in a specific regional context (Northern Ireland). Specifically, the research detected that SMEs operating in the region did so in contention with the strategic framework provided by government, given distain for the overall strategic system in place. Their activity appeared to mirror consumer resistance behaviour, from a B2B perspective. Subsequently, the specific aim of this paper is to conceptualise the SME as a business consumer within the tourism industry infrastructure, identify the extent of business consumer resistance and, uncover the reasons and outcomes of SMEs engaging in resistive behaviour.

Introduction

Within a regional economy such as Northern Ireland, tourism acts as a key economic driver (Gilmore 2007) and given the geography of the region, heritage sites are core attractions in terms of the tourist product (Alvarez and Korzay 2011). On a regional basis, public sector organisations provide the infrastructure necessary to enable a region to develop as a tourist destination (Ruhanen et al. 2010), such as product development and destination level promotion (Hall 1999). SMEs play a central role in the provision of tourism (Thomas, Page and Shaw 2011), however their potential contribution will be dependent on the level of government support in place.

This research proposes that the SME operates as a consumer within the tourism marketing system. As such, the ‘product’ offered to them by public sector organisations, in terms of destination promotion and product service development, may not satisfy their requirements. As a result, this research intends to detect any levels of resistive behaviour demonstrated by the SME within the tourism system. As well as identifying behaviour, the research seeks to uncover motivations for such behaviours and subsequent outputs of potentially resistive behaviour. In addition, the research will consider the effectiveness and appropriateness of the tourism system in relation to the characteristics of the SME and the benefit of such behaviour to tourism marketing.

Conceptualising the SME as consumer with a heritage tourism context

Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are a key feature of the marketing landscape in the tourism industry; they represent the majority in terms of business structures (Morrison et al 2010) and they present a distinct set of characteristics. SMEs are arguably both the backbone of the tourism industry whilst simultaneously, presenting a ‘weak link’ in terms of constraining growth and innovation (Thomas, Shaw and Page 2011). SMEs may operate on an individual basis, without coordinating with complementary businesses within their region (Gilmore 2003).

Indeed, these characteristics can lead to duplicated and non-complementary business activities (Komppula 2014), which are not conducive to the competitiveness of a destination, but which actually contribute to the already existing levels of fragmentation (Sheehan, Ritchie and Hudson 2007; Wilson, Nielsen and Buultjens 2009). While such duplication is recognised within the literature in terms of industry heterogeneity, research to date stops short of identifying and conceptualising the implications of this heterogeneity and its negative impact on tourism development (Thomas, Shaw and Page 2011).

SMEs operating within a heritage tourism context often have “...a lack of sufficient financial resource, infrastructure and technical assistance,” (Cai, 2002 p.1354), and therefore makes the case for a level of public sector intervention in order to maximise business potential. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) concur and write that the high proportion of SMEs in the tourism industry results in owner managers who lack the skills and resources required to function efficiently and effectively, thereby calling for a level of intervention. Saxena and Ilbery (2008, p248.) point to an “...insufficient collaborative capacity to capitalise on cooperative marketing opportunities,” in rural regions, again highlighting the need for public sector intervention to provide the organisational and managerial infrastructure necessary for tourism activity.

Within the context of heritage sites, the tourism system can be viewed as a hierarchy of three distinct levels of management, as depicted in figure 1 (appendix 1). At Level 1 is the government level bodies, who are tasked with a range of responsibilities including providing

strategic direction (Kerr 2003; Vernon et al 2005; Wray 2011), a range of facilities and services, and executing a number of strategic marketing functions, including destination level promotion and the development of resources as visitor attractions (Alvarez and Korzay 2011; Greenley and Matcham 2007; Vernon et al 2005;).

Tourism products and services will be delivered largely by private sector businesses (Komppula 2014) operating at Level 3, within the strategic framework set out by public sector bodies. The range of businesses provides the elements of operational visitor servicing required (Gilmore et al 2007; Greenley and Matcham 2007) and need to be interdependent and complementary (Komppula 2014). Level 3 must operate in conjunction with the public sector in order to achieve and provide a viable, holistic and streamlined service product (Bornhorst et al 2010). Operating between these two levels is quasi-public / private sector level, Level 2 Destination Marketing Organisations (DMO), which is consistently referred to as being crucial to destination competitiveness (Bornhorst 2010).

In order to develop and deliver the composite tourist experience, a series of interactions which require processes of integration and coordination are required. The coordination of relevant government bodies is an essential, yet challenging pre-requisite to tourism planning (Komppula 2014). If Level 1 is to provide a strong vision and direction for tourism development, involvement from local businesses is crucial to achieving a consensus-based development (Aas 2005; Panyik 2011). A precursor to the delivery of tourism is the development of the tourist product, which is ultimately the result of a series of interactions taking place within the tourism system, among a range of stakeholders, as presented in figure 1 (appendix 1) .

Defining consumer resistance

Consumer resistance concerns the interaction between consumers and producers within an industry or market place. Lee et al. (2011, p. 1561) define the consumer as "...a person, or persons, definable as a consumer or consumers, acting within, but sometimes attempting to escape, the marketing system". The term resistance is defined as, "forms of variable oppositional responses to a practice of dominance within the market place such as commercial pressure, influence, strategies, logic and discourses that are perceived by the consumer as dissonant and antagonistic to their beliefs". Roux (2007) considers consumer resistance as consumer opposition to or escape from a dominant force exerted by behaviours, actions or devices. Lee et al. (2011) however, see consumer resistance as opposing the products, practices and partnerships associated with a structure of dominance; consumer resistance is ultimately associated with power issues.

There are a number of reasons for resistance. Lee, Motion and Conroy (2009, p.170) discuss consumer resistance in terms of resistance against the marketing system, referencing Penaloza and Price (1993) "consumer resistance concerns counter culture attitudes and behaviours that question the current capitalistic system, reduce consumption and resist oppressive forces". Lee, Motion and Conroy (2009) further this argument, recognising that the reasons for resistance are not always adherent to avoidance of the consumption process; rather a sign of dissatisfaction with the offering in place, evident through unmet expectations, and a desire to fulfil consumption goals, which must be achieved through alternative methods because the current options do not satisfy the consumer.

The ever increasing levels of diversity and choice available to consumers in the consumption era leads to the presumption that there is the option of creatively pursuing individuated identities (Cheerier 2009; Holt 2002) serviced through alternative products. However it may be the case that the consumer must engage in the development of alternative products, rather than merely altering the consumption preference. Indeed, the decision to resist may not be

based on the luxury of choice but instead on an unsatisfactory product offering, coupled with a lack of alternative options, leading to a radical form of resistance (Penaloza and Price 1993).

Furthermore, resistive behaviour can take place across a continuum of individual to collective actions; an individual consumer may resist against a product or service by retreating from the consumption process, finding an alternative (Lee, Motion and Conroy 2009). However, Cova and Dalli (2009) contend that resistive behaviour is strongest when consumers engage in collective action. Consumers are empowered through combining resources and skills, using this power to attempt to manipulate and shape the actions of the producer, or failing this, to engage in their own production (Cova and Dalli 2009).

Forms of consumer resistance activity can create value and make a contribution to the overall market, becoming an integral part of the consumption and marketing process (Cova and Dalli 2009). Kozinets and Handelman (2004) regard resistive behaviours, even antagonistic ones, as constructive given that they have the potential to spur new business opportunities, and consequently increase market attractiveness. Furthermore, Cova and Dalli (2009) contend that consumers are well equipped to develop their own methods and approaches to interacting with the market, and in turn managing and distributing any economic benefits, thereby potentially adding value to the market.

Research design

The aim of this research is to investigate and detect behaviour akin to consumer resistance stemming from the SME in a heritage tourism context. Research was carried out using a qualitative method guided by a case study approach. Two individual regions were used as case studies, which represent two heritage-based tourist regions in Northern Ireland; the Causeway Coast and Glens and the Mourne region. In this respect, the selection of cases was purposive and criteria based (Wang and Ap 2013). Given that the research sought to examine processes of strategic marketing planning relating to heritage tourism, cases needed to be both rich in heritage and have a focus on tourism development. Furthermore, it was important that the case regions chosen provided adequate scope for investigation in terms of administrative structures and private sector businesses. The boundaries of the cases are within municipal borders, thereby providing a single unit of analysis for each case.

Overall, this research examined the tourism industry across three levels, which resulted in a three staged empirical approach, using different sources at each stage (Perry 1998; Yin 2014) as well as different methodological approaches, as demonstrated in figure 2 (appendix 2). The third stage of the empirical research, which is presented in this paper, involved SMEs. These were investigated using the in-depth interview, which allows in-depth insights to emerge (Yin 2014). In addition, representatives from business associations were interviewed as these are proactive in terms of tourism development and include SMEs within their areas. In total, 9 SMEs and 3 community associations (representing SMEs) were interviewed.

Findings

From a Level 3 perspective, a range of difficulties emerged in relation to strategic marketing planning. Typically, SMEs expressed dissatisfaction with the processes in place for tourism delivery and the outcomes of such processes, across several dimensions. Ultimately, SMEs aspire to improve the overall tourist product within their immediate and surrounding areas, and in order to do so, engage in 'resistive' behaviour, due to perceived failures in the system. Such deficiencies in the tourism system lead tourism providers to engage in independent tourism collaborations. This activity can be described as 'aggravated fragmentation' whereby the fragmentation already evident in the tourism industry is exacerbated.

Data analysis indicates four interrelated themes in terms of motivations for this type of resistance to the tourism system including; ineffective system, neglected / overlooked areas, Level 1 planning and Level 3 engagement. The findings of this research will be presented under each of these themes followed by a discussion of key issues.

Ineffective system

The key motivation behind resistive behaviour is the perceived gap in the provision by SMEs operating in both regions. The SMEs and private organisations who are involved in delivering tourism products and services to consumers believe that there is insufficient execution of strategic marketing functions. They react by engaging in independent marketing collaborations, which make attempts at product service development and tourism promotion. This behaviour is considered to be a stopgap, given no alternative, rather than as the ideal way forward and it occurs because the level of strategic leadership expected is not in place. For example, Chair Person 3 commented that:

“It’s a case of ‘innovation through necessity’. You can’t change the system, so the private and community sector are taking small, incremental steps, little by little because they can’t change the system and nothing ever changes.” (Chair Person, Business Association 3)

While SME Owner/Manager (O/M) 1 has a similar perspective:

“I was getting more from my own pro-activeness, dealing with organisations who don’t charge me anything, than the government bodies, who do charge me. I don’t know what they are doing [government level bodies]. I honestly have no idea what they are there for.” (Owner/Manager Visitor Attraction 1)

In this regard, the public sector is criticised by SMEs operating in the regions, for failing to implement marketing activities sufficiently in their areas. The current system is not working for the private sector and forces SMEs to proactively fill the gaps where the public sector fail, developing their own collaborative activities. While this is a positive contribution to the overall market, the negative element of this relates to the structure of the tourism industry and the fact that this type of behaviour creates further fragmentation, rather than contributing to a more cohesive industry.

Neglected regions

Within the scope of this study, several areas have been detected which are described by respondents as being subordinate to the focus of the tourism marketing system. The detected resistive behaviour occurs on two scales; in one respect the resistive behaviour occurs on a more localised scale, whereby the region in itself is a well-recognised tourist region, with a high profile tourist collateral, such as a World Heritage Site (WHS). The problem in this respect is that the main focus of tourist development, from the public sector, is focused on the areas immediate to the WHS, to the detriment of more peripheral areas, which are consequently overlooked.

The second aspect of this issue is that a tourist region (the Mourne) is deemed to be ‘neglected’ on a more regional scale, with the area not receiving the same level of development focus from public sector as other regions within Northern Ireland. This judgement is reinforced by a lack of investment and publicity from Government Level bodies with tourism responsibilities in these areas in terms of product development and destination level promotion. Despite the behaviour occurring on different scales, similarities can be drawn in terms of the motivating factors. As a collective group of consumers (of the tourism system), SMEs display levels of dissatisfaction with the extent of marketing activity directed at their areas; destination level marketing activity is poor. SMEs are not benefitting from the

same level of attention as other tourist areas within the region, which has a negative impact on business. A specific example of this is evident when CP2 states,

“Generally speaking we feel that Castlerock is overlooked, that’s our experience of all the tourist literature for this region. If you go onto the website and look for the North Coast, you’ll find that it mentions Portstewart, Coleraine, it doesn’t mention us.” (Chair Person, Business Association 2)

As a result, SMEs within these areas are engaging in resistive behaviour through collective action. The focus of this behaviour is on a lack of promotion at destination level, from the bodies responsible. This issue is echoed in several areas, and is attributed to a lack of engagement from statutory bodies that have tourism responsibilities to actual tourism providers operating within the regions. In short, the areas are ‘missed’ due to poor industry engagement and an over focus on the ‘major’ tourist draws. Again, this is pointed out by CP1, stating:

“Well the Tourist Board has been focusing on the Signature Projects [major tourism investment projects]. As a result of that, a lot of other worthwhile areas have fallen through the cracks, and there now needs to be a serious look at those places, in the interests of those businesses who do not live say five or ten miles from the Signature Projects.” (Chair Person, Business Association 1)

In these neglected areas, promotion is an issue; where organisations are working together in a ‘resistive’ fashion in order to do something to promote their immediate areas so that their local communities and businesses benefit from tourism. Independent marketing collaborations are emerging in the areas in question which attempt to develop area-level promotional collateral. Furthermore, community level groups are emerging in order to drive this process forward, and to apply for grants to fund such activity.

Level 1 Planning

Level 1 (government bodies) is heavily criticised because these bodies are described as being ‘out of touch’ from SMEs who are effectively their immediate customer base. Their activity is described by respondents as insular whereby they are only concerned with their own predetermined objectives. Furthermore, the core interests of Level 1 bodies are described as being the ‘major’ tourist attractions, at the expense of less developed, ‘underground’ or grass roots level tourism activity. A tourism operator, CP3, explains this issue:

“Promotion in the region is not reflective of what we have in the region because NITB and TIL (tourist board) aren’t talking to the industry. This is the biggest problem in tourism in Northern Ireland, the industry and the public sector who are tasked with promoting tourism do not actually talk to the industry, on the ground, on a regional basis.” (Chair Person, Business Association 3)

SMEs feel that the tourist system is not delivering sufficient marketing activity, or they feel that the current marketing activity carried out at government level is non-reflective of regional identities, and therefore marketing activity is mismatched, with implications for tourism delivery in heritage regions. This demonstrates a missed opportunity in the consultation process and neglects the potential of ‘grass-roots’ level contributions while also preventing localised, indigenous ideas from emerging, and failing to allow local knowledge and expertise to guide the strategic planning process. The impact of this type of behaviour is that the outputs of tourism marketing, such as promotional activity, are not reflective of the regions in question, the full spectrum of tourist products available is not promoted. Furthermore, products developed may miss out on rich contributions from key stakeholders,

or may overlook potentially valuable stakeholder contributions, for example insights from key people, such as residents who have an innate knowledge of the local area and history.

Interestingly, those SMEs which do engage in resistive behaviour in order to achieve some collective marketing activity are not always viewed as making a positive contribution to the industry. In fact they may be viewed negatively, from the perspective of Level 1 within the tourism marketing system. This may be due to the adverse relationship between the two sides, which inevitably leads to increased fragmentation and therefore further levels of resistance. In relation to this, CP2 suggests that:

“Cohesion is lacking, everyone is protecting their own area and they resent any form of criticism... We are seen as whippersnappers.” (Chair Person, Business Association 2)

Level 3 Engagement

Overall, SMEs referred to negative experiences in relation to consultation exercises, which are criticised for being time consuming, and do not influence strategic planning outcomes. These two factors create a vicious cycle of barriers; if the consultation exercises resulted in more consensual, action-orientated plans, SMEs may be more willing to get involved on a continuous basis. From a SME perspective, the mechanism is heavily criticised for failing to be action-orientated and for failing to comprehensively acknowledge and involve stakeholders. CP3 argues that:

“The industry have got to the stage where they are fed up, they’re sitting there and they are saying there is nothing being done here and everyone’s going, ‘oh yeah but you know we’ve got our document and we’re in the process of doing this’, when in reality nothing is happening.” (Chair Person, Business Association 3)

In short, the processes in place are unsuited to the requirements of the SME as they do not encourage active participation. The consultation approaches utilised by Level 1 are described as ‘lip service’ by SMEs who state they have limited influence on strategic outcomes, thereby encouraging them to partake in their own development activities. Non-involvement in strategic planning is the foundation of the resistive behaviour as involvement in the mainstream marketing system proves to be a futile endeavour, resulting in strategic fatigue.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has uncovered forms of resistive behaviour concerning the SME operating within the tourism system. The resistive behaviour detected in this study is in response to an unsatisfactory approach to tourism marketing emanating from government (Vernon et al. 2005; Wray 2011). In particular, destination promotion was consistently unsatisfactory to SMEs operating in the two regions as it did not align with localised versions of identity (Saxena and Ilbery 2008). A further aspect was a failure on behalf of government to sufficiently promote the full entirety and diversity of regions, thereby effectively neglecting and overlooking some areas. The response by SMEs was to engage in their own collaborative marketing activities, making attempts at product development and destination promotion, however in practice, contributing to industry fragmentation. This aggravated fragmentation potentially adds value to the market (Kozinets and Handelman 2004) by broadening the product base and producing promotional campaigns, with potential to rejuvenate the market (Cova and Dalli 2009) and introducing products and services from a grass roots level, which are truly reflective of the regions they represent (Alvarez and Korzay 2011; Saxena and Ilbery 2008). The key issue and indeed complication is the integration of such behaviour into the strategic framework for tourism (Aas et al. 2005), enabling organisations (SMEs) to maximise their potential contribution to a holistic tourism system.

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Appendix 1

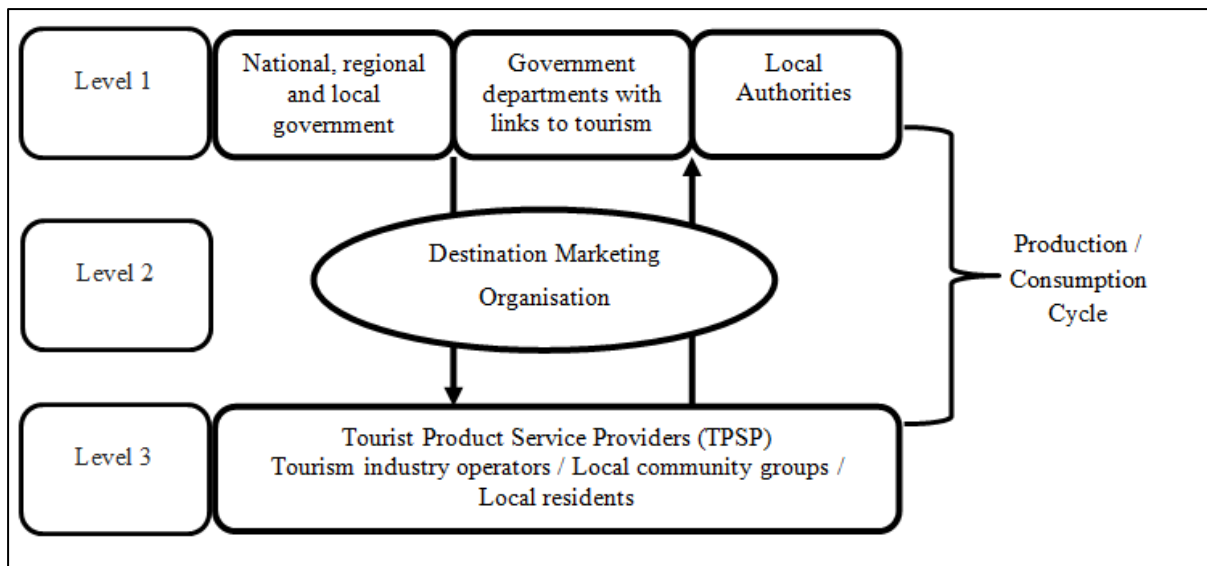


Figure 1 – Hierarchy of tourism management

Source: (McCamley 2014)

Appendix 2

	Source	Data Collection and Analysis	
Level 1	Government Level Bodies	Key strategic documents Attendance at industry events	Content analysis
Level 2	Destination Marketing Organisations	Key informants	In-depth interview
Level 3	Tourist Product Service Providers	SMEs / Community Groups	In-depth interview

Figure 2 – Research design

Source (McCamley 2014)