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Experiencing the Event Brand: Examining the Branded Images for a New England Regional Fair

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Introduction. Brands and branding are critical to the understanding and perception of destinations and products and now events are even "branded." Some of these events have had a long history, and may or may not have been intentionally 'branded" but contain images and perceptions of a 'branded event" by different types of event consumers. Clearly different types of event consumers likely have different brand images of the same event or in this study - a regional fair. The difference between tourists' and locals' behavior, specifically behavior as a reaction to branding, has been studied extensively in regard to locations and destinations. Research regarding behavior in events is beginning to create both place and branding messages that appeal to different groups of visitors; but, it is limited to examining only the differences in brand perception/experiences. Consequently this study aims to look at the branded experience(s) of different attendees at an agricultural fair/event in order to more fully explain the impact of a brand on the personal experiences of the attendees within the event. This study will expand beyond intention to return to investigate how an experience associated with a brand impacts different types of people within the event, as well as after the event.

Purpose of the Study. Preliminary investigation into the fair research indicated a variety of needs of topic areas to be examined including refined examinations of branding and experience outcomes (Lillywhite, Simonsen & Wilson, 2013). This study's purpose is to examine the branded experience of the different attendees in order to determine familiarity with the branded place and experience meanings and the future intention to visit the branded place of a regional fair event. It will examine if different attendee groups seek and enjoy different branded experiences of a regional annual agricultural fair. Specifically, the connection to how the brand differs between different attendees groups will be examined to determine if the experiences associated with the brand captures similar/different meanings of place as measured by sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual dimensions (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantinello, 2009). This work will follow the brand modeling technique depicted in Beckman, Kumar and Kim's (2013) work on branding the downtowns of cities. However, their research examined the branded image of three downtowns, where this research will examine the branded experiences of one large event – a 98-year old annual regional fair called, "The Big E."

The dimensions of the brand experience will be examined to determine if they promote place/event dependence that leads to positive outcomes including intentions to return and word-of-mouth enhancements. Beckham et al. (2013); Brakus et al. (2009) and Parkerson and Saunders (2005) works will be the basis of the modeling of brand experience. The subsequent research objectives and questions will be followed:

1) To examine brand experience dimensions (i.e., sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual) and place/event experience dependence.

2) To examine whether the place and event dependence affects the overall feelings about the event and eventually the word-of-mouth. Does the branded experience exemplify the location of which the brand has been associated?
3) To investigate whether the factor and structural path models vary depending upon the attendees' event involvement (first timers vs. repeated visitors)?

Methods. The sample for this study was a part of a larger assessment of the Great New England State Fair called "The Big E." A regional fair was selected due to its variety of attractions of food, agriculture displays, entertainment, educational, and intellectual activities. The data were collected by a random distribution of event survey applications through web-based and social media fair registration processes and incentives were used to increase participation in the study. Data were collected over a 17-day period at the Exposition Center located in West Springfield, MA via the online survey platform, Qualtrics™. Utilizing fair survey attendees, the analysis of this study included nine (9) different data sections. Common questions included the: 1) impact of the attractions; 2) fair attendance factors and decisions; 3) nature of specific visit; and 4) attendee demographics. The brand experience component of the survey, consisted of the 27 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale of "strong agree to strongly disagree" as prescribed by Beckman et al. (2013).

Respondents: The study had a total of 3,274 completed (68.4 %) surveys and among those, we received a sub-sample of 651 (19.8% of total) completed for this branded experience portion of the study. After a thorough inspection on samples, we eliminated 92 incomplete surveys for purposes of modeling and comparisons. Our descriptive results demonstrated that we had significant female participants (over 80%) and well-balanced generational presence in both first timer and repeat visitors groups. In terms of first timers, we found that over 80 percent were non-locals, around 60 percent were married, and over 40 percent finished up to some college/technical or vocational school. In terms of repeated visitors, we had a balanced group of locals and non-locals, also, around 50 percent were married and 25 percent was singles. Furthermore, the representative group sample matched both the actual distribution of locals and non-locals and distribution of event day attendance and varied only by "0.1%".

Preliminary Results. To test the hypotheses, we adopted the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM hereafter) technique and used Mplus6 software. The Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA hereafter) results showed that the overall model fit is good ($\chi^2(df)$=203.04 (114), p<.000, CFI=.99, TLI=.99, SRMR=.02, RMSEA=.04). For first time visitors' group, we had reliability levels from 0.76 to 0.96 and average variance extracted was ranged between 0.61 and 0.93. In terms of repeated visitors' group, reliability levels ranged between 0.79 and 0.97; average extracted variance extracted was from 0.62 to 0.92. These figures explain that our factor structure has a good fit of the model, measurement reliability, and also convergent validity.

Table 1. Measurement items and properties

	Standardized Factor loadings		Reliability		Average Variance Extracted	
	First-timers (n=317)	Repeat Visitors (n=242)	First-timers	Repeat Visitors	First-timers	Repeat Visitors
Sensory			.86	.83	.67	.62
1. BIG E makes a STRONG IMPRESSION on my VISUAL SENSES	.79	.76				
2. Find the ACTIVITY at THE BIG E INTERESTING to my senses.	.86	.83				
3. This Big E fair appeals to all of my senses (smells, sights, sounds, tastes)	.80	.78				
Affective			.89	.93	.81	.87
1. I have STRONG EMOTIONS about THE BIG E	.89	.93				
2. THE BIG E generates EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES	.90	.94				
Behavioral			.91	.93	.77	.82
1. Allows me to engage in PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES & BEHAVIORS when I come here.	.85	.89				
2. Feel THE BIG E provides a TOTAL BODILY EXPERIENCE	.93	.96				
3. THE BIG E is ACTION-ORIENTED	.85	.87				
Intellectual			.96	.95	.93	.90
1. I engage in a lot of THINKING at THE BIG E	.95	.95				
2. Attending THE BIG E makes me THINK.	.97	.94				
Place Dependence			.91	.91	.77	.78
1. I get more satisfaction out of attending the Big E than any other fairs.	.85	.84				
2. Doing what I can do at the Big E is more important to me than doing it at any other place.	.84	.86				
3. I would not substitute any other fair for the types of things I can do at the Big E.	.94	.94				
Event Feelings			.76	.79	.61	.66
How you were FEELING at the time of attending THE BIG E this year, were you…....						
1. Happy:Unhappy *	.74	.86				
2. Involved:Bored *	.82	.76				
Word of Mouth			.96	.97	.90	.92
1. Will recommend THE BIG E to FAMILY MEMBERS	.91	.98				
2. Will recommend THE BIG E to ACQUAINTANCES	.94	.93				
3. Will recommend the BIG E to CLOSE PERSONAL FRIENDS	.99	.96				

* Reverse coded; Measurement Model Fit: $\chi^2(df)$=203.04 (114), p<.000, CFI=.99, TLI=.99, SRMR=.02, RMSEA=.04

Our SEM results showed that the structural model has good fit statistics for both groups (first timers: $\chi^2(df)$=304.41 (122), p<.000, CFI=.96, TLI=.95, SRMR=.07, RMSEA=.07; repeat visitors: $\chi^2(df)$=266.08 (122), p<.000, CFI=.97, TLI=.96, SRMR=.07, RMSEA=.10). From these results, we found that there were significant differences in branded event experience and its impacts on behavioral outcomes contingent upon visitors' involvement to the event. Our hypotheses were all supported in the first timers' structural model. However, we did not find

significant magnitudes of the effects from behavioral and intellectual to place dependence paths. Therefore, in the repeated visitors' model, we rejected hypotheses 3 and 4.

Figure 1. SEM Results of First Timer and Repeated Visitors Groups

First Timers   Repeated Visitors
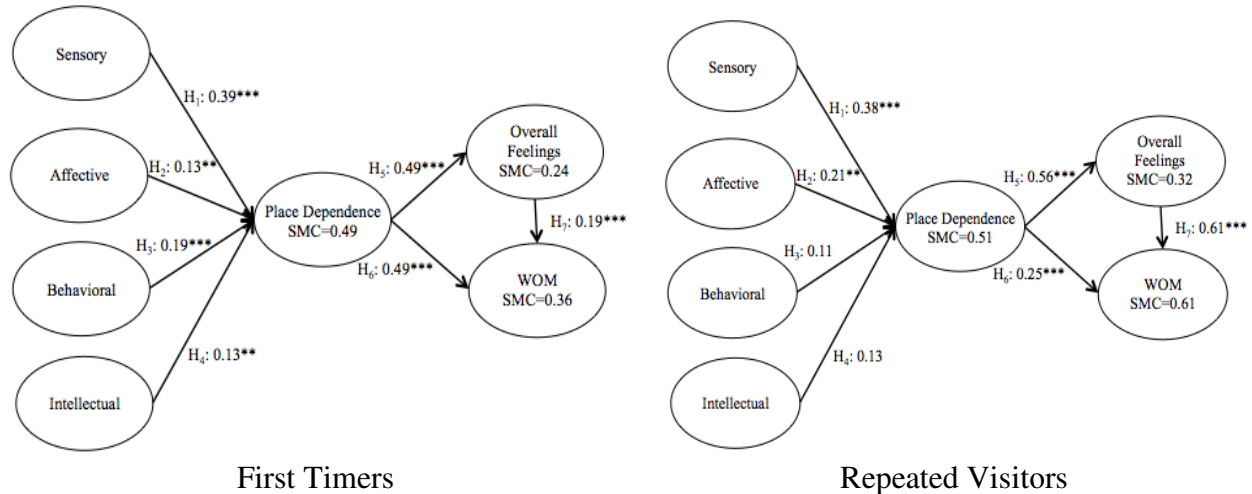
These results elucidated that first time event visitors were influenced by all dimensions of branded experience to form event place dependence. However, repeat visitors tended to be mostly influenced by sensory and affective aspects of the event. The study yields both academic and practitioner findings to expand the theory of branded experience and its application in special event and location settings.

Keywords: branded experience, regional agricultural fair, place marketing, visitor/attendee types.

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