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Perceived Destination Personality Based on Visitors' Experience: A Case of Jeju Island, South Korea

Introduction

Tourism is the world's largest growing industry and one of the strongest drivers of international trade and prosperity (UNWTO and SNV, 2010). Given that tourism is a vehicle to ensure economic growth, destinations at various levels (e.g., a site, a city, a region, or a country) attempt to promote themselves by creating a strong, unique and favorable brand and, thus, to secure a competitive advantage. Tourism scholars have adapted and applied various branding components such as brand image (Hankinson 2005), brand identity (Konecnik and Go 2008), brand equity (Gartner and Ruzzier 2011) and brand personality (Ekinci and Hosany 2006) from mainstream business and marketing literature (Ritchie and Richie 1998). Among these concepts, brand personality has been shown to account for the emotional side of the brand, reflecting self-expression of consumers (Biel 1993). Considering that emotional experience or emotional connection of tourists to the destination has been advocated as an essential part of a destination brand (Pine and Gilmore 1999), it can be argued that emotional components of a brand, in other word, brand personality need to be examined and properly addressed for successful destination branding.

Therefore, to build a distinctive destination brand and develop marketing strategy for its promotion, understanding brand personality traits of the destination, as perceived by tourists, is necessary for effective brand building. In order to gain a better understanding of the brand personality of a destination, this study examines destination personality traits as perceived by the target markets. The study focuses on Jeju Island as the target destination. Jeju Island is UNESCO's only triple-crown winner (World Natural Heritage, Global Geopark and Biosphere Reserve) and has been designated as one of the New Seven Wonders of Nature (Jeju Special Self-Governing Province 2014), while it is also a premier tourist destination for domestic and Asian tourist markets. In South Korea, there have been calls for emphasizing Jeju Island's marketing strategy towards the Western market, that is, Europe and North America, in order to reduce high reliance on the Eastern market consisting primarily of tourists from China and Japan, which accounts for approximately 80% of the inbound travel market for Jeju Island (Tourism Knowledge and Information System 2013). It is, therefore, vital for Jeju Island to be able to determine its brand personality, as this step may facilitate an effective branding strategy that aid in better diversification of the market.

Literature Review

In the tourism literature, destination brand personality has been gaining attention from tourism researchers. Destination brand personality is considered to reflect tourists' emotions and perceptions, as well as the unique destination identity (Ekinci and Hosany 2006). Aaker (1997) proposed that brands can be perceived as having human personality and defined brand personality as "a set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (p. 347). Solomon (1983), in concurrence with Sirgy's (1982) self-congruity theory, proposed that consumers tend to identify themselves with the brand they buy. Moon (2002) maintained the self-congruity perspective and argued that consumers receive emotional rewards when congruity is perceived between self and the brand's personality. According to these views, consumers are more likely to choose a product from a brand which personality reflects their own personality (Zinkhan, et al. 1996). Adapting brand personality theories to tourism context, Ekinci and Hosany (2006) proposed that tourists project their personality to a destination of their choice by attributing

human characteristics to the destination. When the match between self-personality and destination personality is perceived, it affects the consumer's choice positively (Sirgy 1982; Sirgy and Su 2000).

The measurement of brand personality has been primarily based on Aaker's Brand Personality Scale (further BPS). Aaker identified five dimensions of brand personality as perceived by American consumers: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Additional BPS dimensions such as peacefulness, passion, and conviviality were identified when the scale was tested in different cultural contexts (Aaker et al. 2001; Ekinci and Hosany 2006; Sung and Tinkham 2005). It was also found that BPS can be perceived and evaluated differently by culturally different consumers. This is in line with the premise that visitor's backgrounds are important factors for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) when positioning and promoting their destinations (Reisinger and Turner 2002ab).

Thus, the objective of the study was to investigate destination personality of Jeju Island, as it is reflected in travel experiences of actual tourists to Jeju. The study used travel blogs of tourists of different cultural backgrounds. It is hoped that the study may assist South Korea DMO to formulate marketing strategies for promoting Jeju Island in culturally different markets.

Study Design

The data, that is, travel blog entries, were collected from www.travelpod.com. Travelpod is ranked as one of the most highly valued blogs and the most popular sites (Li and Wang 2011). Blogs written in English were collected using "Jeju" as the keyword. A total of 530 blog entries posted from March 23, 2000 to April 1, 2014 were examined and 276 were identified as valid data and retained (the other 254 entries were only tangentially related to Jeju). In the next step, the study operationalized personality dimensions based on self-reported tourist experiences in blog entries through developing a set of destination brand personality categories. Fifty blog cases were examined to identify the personality traits relevant to Jeju Island and to reflect culturally sensitive aspects of Jeju. Aaker's (1997) seminal paper and the research by Aaker et al. (2001) and Kim and Lehto (2011) provided theoretical groundings for category formation. As a result, 8 destination brand personality traits were established for coding: *Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, Ruggedness, Peacefulness, Uniqueness, and Traditionalism* (Table 1). Each blog entry was counted as one sample case and coded for presence (value of 1) or absence (value of 0) of each of eight personality traits according to the operational definition for each category (Table 1).

[Place Table 1 "Brand personality dimensions" about here]

The content was independently coded by two trained coders. Inter-coder reliability was checked and the obtained structured data was found reliable (Krippendorff's $\alpha > 0.900$). For each personality trait, the number of blog entries that reflected this trait was counted (Table 2). The two groups of blog entries were identified: West and East. The Western group contained blog entries written by tourists from Australia, Austria, Canada, France, Netherland, New Zealand, U.K., USA, and Spain (224 entries in total). The Eastern group included entries by tourists from Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore (43 entries in total). Further, the chi-square tests were performed to compare the frequency of mention of each personality trait by the two groups; this frequency was interpreted as level of salience of the corresponding personality trait to the particular cultural group. The chi-square results are presented in Table 3.

Results

As illustrated in Table 2, some destination personality traits of Jeju Island were more prominent than others. Specifically, it is shown that the predominant destination brand personality of Jeju Island is *Excitement* (60.7%) followed by *Ruggedness* (40.4%). The other traits mentioned in the blogs were *Traditionalism* (31.1%), *Uniqueness* (22.5%), *Peacefulness* (21.3%), and *Sincerity* (16.9%). However, there were relatively few observations of *Competence* and *Sophistication* in narratives of tourists' experiences written on travel blogs.

[Place Table 2 "Destination brand personality frequencies" about here]

Moreover, as shown in Table 3 and Figure 1, destination personality of Jeju is perceived somewhat closely by the two groups of tourists, from the East and the West, especially for the *Sincerity*, *Competence*, *Sophistication*, *Ruggedness*, *Uniqueness* and *Traditionalism* dimensions. However, differences were found between the two cultural segments for the *Excitement* and *Peacefulness* personality traits. As seen from the diagram, visitors from Eastern cultures seemed to mention *Excitement* (77.8%) more often than other personality traits. Rather than *Excitement*, other personality traits seemed to be expressed closely without predominant differences among personality traits: *Ruggedness* (46.7%), followed by *Traditionalism* (35.6%) and *Peacefulness* (31.3%). In contrast, there was not a predominant perceived personality of Jeju Island from the perspective of the Western market. Rather, visitors from Western cultures exhibited a fairly neutral perception of destination personality of Jeju mentioning *Excitement* (56.6%), *Ruggedness* (39.2%), *Traditionalism* (30.2%), and *Uniqueness* (23.4%).

Further, the Chi-square analysis revealed that for six out of eight personality traits, there were no statistically significant differences between Eastern and Western tourists. However, cultures differed significantly on two personality traits: *Excitement* (chi-square =4.673, $p<0.05$) and *Peacefulness* (chi-square=2.743, $p<0.1$), indicating that visitors from Eastern cultures emphasized the *Excitement* and *Peacefulness* of Jeju Island more than the visitors from Western cultures.

[Place Table 3 "Frequency and Chi-square test of destination personality between Western and Eastern market" about here]

[Place Figure 1 "Destination personality comparison between Western and Eastern markets" about here]

Conclusions

This study serves as an exploratory study which provided both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to operationalizing the destination brand personality dimensions by using self-reported tourist experiences in blogs, which can be used as measurable dimensions in the future study. Additionally, the comparative analysis of different cultural settings brought better understanding of salience of Jeju's brand personality traits for tourists from different cultural backgrounds – East and West. Contrary to previous literature, differences in personality traits perceptions were not very pronounced among tourists from different cultures. It indicates that the core of Jeju's destination personality was perceived similarly by distinctively different cultures. This study's findings have shown that Western cultures do not single out a specific destination personality trait among other traits. On the other hand, Eastern cultures were shown to emphasize the exciting atmosphere of the

destination over other traits. Additionally, in line with Aaker et al. (2001), visitors from Eastern cultures emphasized the peaceful atmosphere of Jeju Island more than those from the West.

From a practical standpoint, the study offers marketing implications for managing Jeju Island's brand. The results may aid the DMO of Jeju Island in better understanding Jeju's personality as perceived by tourists and potentially assist in better positioning of the destination, as well as more effective marketing communications with target tourist markets. First, the results imply that six personality traits do not differ significantly in their prevalence between Eastern and Western consumers. Therefore, these traits might be suitable to be incorporated into any marketing initiative. In particular, DMOs should adapt their strategy for marketing to Eastern markets by emphasizing the peaceful (calm, relaxing, and other) and exciting (interesting, fun, and other) atmosphere to promote and maintain a sustainable influx of tourists from these markets. On the other hand, the results indicate that DMOs can be advised to incorporate the destination personality traits equally in their promotion of Jeju Island to Western markets rather than emphasizing a specific element.

People's perceptions or attitudes toward brand are important for strategic decisions (Aaker 1996). By utilizing a systematic analysis of blogs as a research mode, academics and practitioners may be able to capture the emotional connection of tourists with the destination in online narratives. The outcome of the analysis can offer guidance to marketers to utilize online communication channels to advance their marketing strategies.

A limitation of this study stems from the nature of the data. Blog data was collected in English, which limited the research to Eastern travelers who wrote about their experience in English. In other words, the sample may not be representative of the entire Eastern population of travelers who had written about Jeju. Also, since the data was collected in English, the Eastern sample was small and the Western sample was proportionately larger. Given this limitation, the results should be considered as tentative. Therefore, future research needs to adopt a rigorous sampling procedure to minimize discrepancies between the number of blog data entries among Eastern and Western cultures. For example, collecting Eastern blog data in one's native language may be suggested to provide a better understanding of cultural differences in the brand personality traits perceived by different target markets. Despite these limitations, there were enough blog entries written by visitors from both Eastern cultures and Western cultures to perform comparative analysis.

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Table 1. Brand personality dimensions: Operational definition

Personality	Descriptions	Examples
Sincerity (Aaker 1997; Aaker et al. 2001)	Description of local people's kind and friendly attitude toward tourists.	"The owner is very friendly aside for some stubbornness."
Excitement (Aaker 1997; Aaker et al. 2001)	Any descriptions refer to emotions (i.e., exciting, refreshing, happy, interesting) of tourist toward the activities and destination.	"This was very exciting for me since I had never hiked a volcano before."
Competence (Aaker 1997; Aaker et al. 2001)	Description related to high quality of tourism created resource and service that the tourism industry provides (i.e., development of infrastructure like load, accommodation, transportation and safety perception on destination).	"The north coast is heavily developed with urban and industrial stuff, but the highlands and south side are really nice"
Sophistication (Aaker, 1997; Aaker et al. 2001)	Description of destination, people and tourism created resource as luxurious, romantic, and charming.	"The lonely planet says that the hotel was built to resemble a luxury liner."
Ruggedness (Aaker 1997; Aaker et al. 2001)	Description of tourists engaging in outdoorsy and sport activities.	"With the hiking …… I feel good about the day I had. Tomorrow will be more of the same--hiking outdoors."
peacefulness (Aaker 1997; Aaker et al. 2001)	Description related to peaceful atmosphere such that tourists experience a relaxing and calm moment. This also includes the description of natural landscape.	"This place is very peaceful (more so if not for the tourists I guess). Listening to the waves hitting the rocks, the sea breeze gently blowing, it is a very relaxing moment."
Uniqueness (Kim and Lehto 2011)	Description related to unique features of the destination, which have an outstanding value.	"Manjang Cave where we walk .. the longest lava tube.. designated a world cultural heritage by UNESCO."
Traditionalism (Sung and Tinhkam 2005)	Any descriptions refering to tourists encountering traditional/local elements such as food, accommodation and life style. Description of everyday life and activities of local people is included in this category.	"I decided to check out the Jejumok-Gwana, the heavily restored/reconstructed traditional seat of Jeju government."

Table 2. Destination Jeju: Frequencies of brand personality traits

Personality	Frequency	Percentage
Sincerity	45	16.9
Excitement	162	60.7
Competence	21	7.9
Sophistication	11	4.1
Ruggedness	108	40.4
Peacefulness	57	21.3
Uniqueness	60	22.5
Traditionalism	83	31.1

Table 3. Frequency and Chi-square test of destination personality between Western and Eastern markets

	East (N=43)		West (N=224)			
Personality	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Chi-Square	Sig.
Sincerity	7	15.6	38	17.1	0.065	0.799
Excitement	35	77.8	127	57.2	6.635	0.010*
Competence	2	4.4	19	8.6	0.874	0.350
Sophistication	3	6.7	8	3.6	0.889	0.346
Ruggedness	21	46.7	87	39.2	0.868	0.351
Peacefulness	14	31.1	43	19.4	3.072	0.080**
Uniqueness	8	17.8	52	23.4	0.685	0.408
Traditionalism	16	35.6	67	30.2	0.505	0.477

*p<.0.10, **p<.05

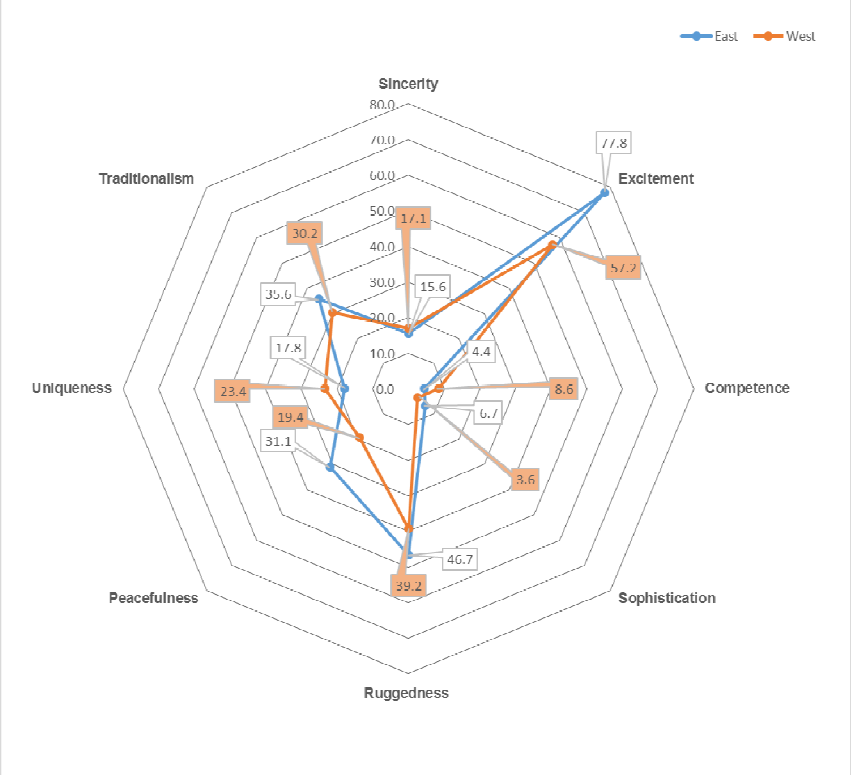

Figure 1. Destination personality comparison between Western and Eastern markets