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How to capture tourists' love for a place: methodological and technological solutions

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How to capture tourists' love for a place: methodological and technological solutions

Context

In the last decade, the concept of brand love has emerged in academic literature. Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) define it as "the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name" (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006, 81). While tourists' emotions relating to destinations has been researched (Hosany and Gilbert 2010; Hosany et al. 2014), the specific concept of brand love has not been investigated for tourism destinations. This potential new area raises several methodological questions.

There is debate regarding how emotions can and should be studied. Interpretivist researchers maintain that emotions should be studied as "lived experience" and that this requires certain research strategies, such as live dialogue, narratives, taped musings, etc., in order to provide a "richer" picture of the situation (Sturdy 2003, 88). Thus, researchers in this field would advocate the use of qualitative methods. Indeed, when considering love specifically, some even go as far as to say that there is no way of studying it other than through language and how one speaks and writes about it because one knows emotions only intuitively and thus cannot use "precise terms" to communicate them (Sturdy 2003, 89).

In the business world, the exclusive use of quantitative methods in research on emotion has been questioned. Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, has said that research on emotion that is exclusively quantitative will not get at the true insights necessary (Roberts 2005). In spite of this, much of the work on brand love thus far has been largely or partially quantitative in nature (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012; Bauer, Heinrich, and Martin 2007; Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen 2010; Albert, Dwight, and Valette-Florence 2008; Sarkar, Ponnam, and Murthy 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). Many brand love studies have used survey or questionnaire methodologies. Furthermore, much brand love research has focused on consumer products with some exceptions that include service industries (Reimann et al. 2012; Tsai 2011).

Aim and Contribution

A potential expansion of the brand love concept could be "place brand love," and it will be argued that qualitative methods may be the most effective way to research this area in a tourism context and may serve as a catalyst to deeper insights than would be possible with quantitative methods alone. Additionally, it will be argued that when researching tourism destination brands specifically, when tourists reside in diverse geographical locations, flexibility and creative use of technology may result in a high response rate and respondent completion of research tasks.

The overall aim of the research was to explore the concept of brand love within the context of a tourism destination. Three main objectives emerged from this aim:

1) Examine the strength of the concept of brand love within the context of a destination
2) Examine how brand love is manifested in a variety of different tourism destinations
3) Develop, and analyze business implications of, a brand love model within the context of a tourism destination for use in both academia and practice

Methodology

A triangulation of methods (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson 2008) was deemed appropriate for the research due to the difficulty described above of accessing information about consumers' love for a brand and the need to incorporate various methods to gain the knowledge desired. A variety of methodological techniques, including semi-structured tourist interviews; volunteer-employed photography (VEP); and tourist collage creation, were implemented in the

research. A contrasting case study approach was employed, and three destinations in the United States were researched: Orlando, Florida; Las Vegas, Nevada; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. As with experimental research, replication of results across multiple case studies adds to the robustness of the findings (Yin 2009).

Adult residents of the United States participated in the research. Respondent ages varied (from 23 to 86 years old), and six to seven individuals participated for each destination for a total of 20 respondents. Both genders were represented (60% female, 40% male). Non-probability sampling in general, and purposive sampling in particular, is appropriate in qualitative research (Saunders 2012), and participants were selected through personal contacts in a snowball manner. Respondents were required to have been a tourist to the relevant destination for a non-business main purpose, and they needed to agree that they "love" the destination. World Tourism Organization definitions were used in order to determine whether individuals qualified as tourists (World Tourism Organization 2007).

Tourist interviews. Interviews were conducted in person when possible (usually at the participants' homes) or via Skype as a contingency. Interviews followed a semi-structured format and used, as a general guide, a list of questions informed by the literature, tested in the pilot study, and revised for the main study. Interviews lasted 45 to 75 minutes each.

Tourist photos: Volunteer-employed photography. The same respondents were asked to participate in a volunteer-employed photography (VEP) (Garrod 2008) activity during their next trip to the destination being researched. It has been suggested that sometimes emotions are difficult to express in words, and asking respondents to produce an image provides a "different way in" when investigating a research question and also engages the brain differently (Guillemin and Drew 2010, 178). Additionally, photography is a common way that tourists capture their relationships with places and thus is considered important to include in the research (Edensor 2000). Respondents were given the following instructions:

"During or after your upcoming trip to (destination), please return to me photos that you feel encapsulate and demonstrate your love for (destination). Please also provide a brief commentary with each photo including the main subject of the photo and the main reason it was taken."

Instructions regarding the commentary were based on insights from MacKay and Couldwell (2004). As a contingency, respondents who were not planning a trip to the given destination within the appropriate time frame for the research were instructed to use photos from one or more previous trips.

Tourist collages. Again for purposes of triangulation and the potential difficulty of emotions to be expressed verbally, a second visual method, collage creation, was used. This technique has been used in brand research and tourism research alike (Koll, von Wallpach, and Kreuzer 2010; Prebensen 2007), and results suggest that collages can tap into knowledge in different and more ways than other (primarily verbal) techniques such as free association and storytelling. Further, the technique appears to be effective at revealing information about consumer-brand bonds and relationships. It is also most effective with experiential brands, such as tourism destination brands, as opposed to common household products, etc. (Koll, von Wallpach, and Kreuzer 2010).

Projective techniques such as collage creation capture, "the tendency to imbue objects or events with characteristics or meanings which are derived from our subconscious desires, wishes or feelings" (Gordon and Langmaid 1988, 94). These types of techniques, such as word and picture associations, can help researchers access emotional reactions to brands and discover

participants' feelings about brands which can sometimes be hard to articulate (Gordon and Langmaid 1988).

Respondents were asked to participate in a focus group made up of others involved with the research for the same destination. They were asked to bring with them a few hard copies of photos of previous vacations to the destination being researched. In situations when respondents lived in geographically dispersed areas, the focus groups were conducted in a mixed in-person and virtual format through the use of Skype or Google Hangout. Respondents were provided with a variety of magazines on topics such as tourism and travel, entertainment, general interest, etc., (these were mailed to the virtual respondents ahead of time) and paper, glue sticks, tape, scissors, markers, and pens (the virtual respondents provided these themselves). In situations when respondents could not gather together at a specified time for a focus group, they were given magazines and instructions and asked to create a collage when their schedules allowed.

Respondents were instructed to create a collage that demonstrated and encapsulated their love for the destination and to use the materials provided to do so. They were asked to also identify in writing on the back of the collage each image used and to state why they chose those images. Other studies have asked participants to identify pictures to aid in interpretation (Koll, von Wallpach, and Kreuzer 2010) or to explain their choices (Prebensen 2007). Respondents were allowed to talk with each other while making their collages, and, after the collages were finished, each respondent was asked to present his or her collage to the others. During presentation and discussion, the respondents held up their collages to the computer camera.

Key Findings

Thematic analysis of text and content analysis of images were utilized to make meaning of the data. The theoretical contributions of the research were made possible by the employment of a triangulation of qualitative methods. For example, a key contribution of the research was the suggestion that there may be more than one type of "place brand love" related to the various words for "love" in the Greek language. Tourists love destinations in different ways and for different reasons, and, while brand love is a useful starting point to help explain tourists' relationships with their favorite destinations, it does not have full explanatory power due to the complexities of places and people's relationships with them. The nuances of these different types of love can be fully appreciated only by reviewing all sources of data in conjunction with each other and would not emerge with quantitative methods alone.

Technological flexibility resulted in a high response rate for the research. All twenty tourist respondents completed their interviews and collages, and eighteen provided photos. The other two did not provide photos because they did not travel to the destination in the appropriate timeframe and also did not have photos from previous trips.

In general, the use of a variety of technologies (e.g., Skype, Google Hangout, cell phone photography) did not pose problems in conducting the research. Respondents who participated virtually said they felt comfortable and included. Minor technological "glitches" were resolved or overcome, and the integrity of the data was not compromised. Respondents seemed to appreciate the flexibility afforded to them regarding how to complete the research tasks.

Contribution to Applied Tourism

Emotions and destination brands are both complex concepts. This research presents a potential solution to research tourists' love for destination brands using a triangulation of qualitative methods and flexible use of technology. Practitioners could apply these methods to their own destinations to tap into what drives their most loyal visitors to return and increase visitation and revenue through application of the insights.

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