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Internal Branding of Tourism Destinations: The influence of local people's brand identification on their customer satisfaction activities toward visitors, their intention of Word Of Mouth, and their participation in tourism activities

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Abstract

The application of branding to tourism is has been widely explored, but most are confined to tourism products in spite of the multidimensional nature of tourism destination branding. In fact, brands pervade almost all aspects of tourism products and services, tourist behaviors and choice, and destination images, and should be promoted via both internal and external marketing efforts. This is particularly important in service industries, where customers' experiences are created by interaction with employees and local customers. Tourism is unique in that when visitors come to a tourism destination, they encounter not only specifically designated service employees, but also the general local population. From the internal marketing standpoint, destination marketers need to take into account the role of local people in two distinctive ways. They should examine how to lead local people appropriate perception and behavior toward visitors, and they also need to motivate local people to use and participate in tourism and leisure activities to make a more salient tourism segment for many tourism destinations particularly in the post-September 11 environment of the economic downturn and decreasing number of tourists. Indeed, in terms of tourism destination branding, the role of local people in tourism destinations is essential, but has not yet been explored in tourism research.

Key words: branding, internal marketing, local people, brand identification.

Introduction

In the past decades, an increasing amount of research has examined the area of branding with a strong focus on consumer goods and grocery products (Aaker, 1997; Aaker, 2002; Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; de Chernatony, 2001; Keller, 1998; Kapferer, 1997). Similarly, the application of branding to tourism has also been widely explored by tourism scholars (Cai, 2002; Morgan et al, 2003, Kavartzis et al, 2005; Lee et al, 2006; Hosany et al, 2006), but most are confined to tourism products in spite of the multidimensional nature of tourism destination branding (Cai, 2002, p. 721; Hosany et al, 2006, p. 639). In fact, brands pervade almost all aspects of tourism products and services, tourist behaviors and choice, and destination images (Cai, 2002, p. 736; Hosany et al, 2006, p. 638), and should be promoted via both internal and external marketing efforts (Crick, 2003; Yi et al, 2004; Chun and Davies, 2006; Yaniv and Farkas, 2005). This is particularly important in service industries, where customers' experiences are created by interaction with employees and local customers (Crick, 2003, p. 162; Hazara, 2006). Indeed, in terms of tourism destination branding, the role of local people in tourism destinations is essential, but has not yet been explored in tourism research.

Tourism is unique in that when visitors come to a tourism destination, they encounter not only specifically designated service employees, but also the general local population (Crick, 2003, p.161). These local people are not paid directly for their role in enhancing the visitors' experience, but must behave appropriately because they play a critical role in that experience. Local people have the right to benefit from tourism by participating in its activities, but they also have responsibilities to the destination. Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and tourism service providers have generally focused on out-of-state and international visitors, but the current economic downturn and decreasing number of tourists resulting from the events of September 11, 2001, have turned their attention toward local people. Therefore, the local tourism segment has become a more salient market for many tourism destinations in the post-September 11 environment (Knopf and Andereck, 2006).

Accordingly, internal branding for local people has become important in creating awareness and maximizing the benefits of tourism to destinations in the long-term. Destination marketers are desperate for information about how local people recognize, understand, and identify a destination as a brand, yet there is little in the literature that explores opportunities for destination marketers to develop internal branding strategies in association with external branding management.

Conceptual Model

Since the relationship between a company and its customers is built primarily by the experience of consuming a branded product or service, understanding brand identification is crucial in building successful relationships between customers and the brands they use. Customers are attracted to a branded product or service that is connected to their social identity (Forehand, Deshpande, and Reed 2002; Stayman and Deshpandé 1989), a linkage which may come about because a branded product or service is a symbol of the customer's own personality traits (Aaker 1997), reflects a desirable self-image, or embodies the type of person that the customer aspires to think, feel and be like (Belk, Bahn and Mayer 1982). The influence of symbolic and identity-related preferences is often reflected in marketing practice and academic research. In an attempt to leverage the power of this relationship, marketers have often directed their branding efforts toward a product and service to reflect a particular social-identity-oriented lifestyle, hoping to encourage more favorable judgments from consumers who possess that social identity (Reed 2002; Reed, 2004). To make the brands appeal to social identity, persuasive marketing communications need to adopt strategies that can create a psychological connection between social identity and the brand or utilize a common theme shared by those who possess the same social identity.

Research in the consumer behavior literature has begun to highlight the relevance and significance of employee identification as the idea of "internal branding" has emerged. Internal branding requires an internal marketing process to make branding strategy decisions consistent with employees' understanding of what their brand stands for (Vallaster, 2004). The importance of the internal branding process is more evident in service industries, where the service is directly delivered by employees, who are also internal customers (Crick, 2003; Yi et al, 2004; Chun and Davies; 2006). At tourism destinations, visitors interact with local people, as well as employees. Therefore, the tourism industry also needs brand support from local people in order to retain brand consistency for their visitors (Hazara, 2006).

Customers tend to be highly satisfied when the brand image is congruent with or helps them enrich or enhance self-image (Yi et al., 2004, p. 229). Similarly, local people and employees are likely to exert customer satisfaction efforts when they, too, identify with the destination brand. A series of studies have created a positive link between the brand identification of customers and their brand loyalty (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993), consumer satisfaction (CS) (Sirgy, 1982), and word-of-mouth (WOM) (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). This study applies these relationships to local people and examines their willingness to deliver WOM congruent with the brand identification of the city in which they live. Moreover, as customers are likely to attend only to those social categories and activities that are linked to their self-concept or social identity, this study asserts that local people who have more brand-based

identification with the place they live are more likely to participate in the tourism activities it provides.

Therefore, this study develops a conceptual model to reveal how the tourism destination brands can move beyond a collection of features and become deeply meaningful symbols to local people. To do this, this paper examines the influence of brand identification with the destination on CS activities toward visitors, the intention of WOM communication, and local people’s participation in tourism and leisure activities, focusing particularly on local people involved in the internal branding of the tourism destination where they live. (See Figure 1.)

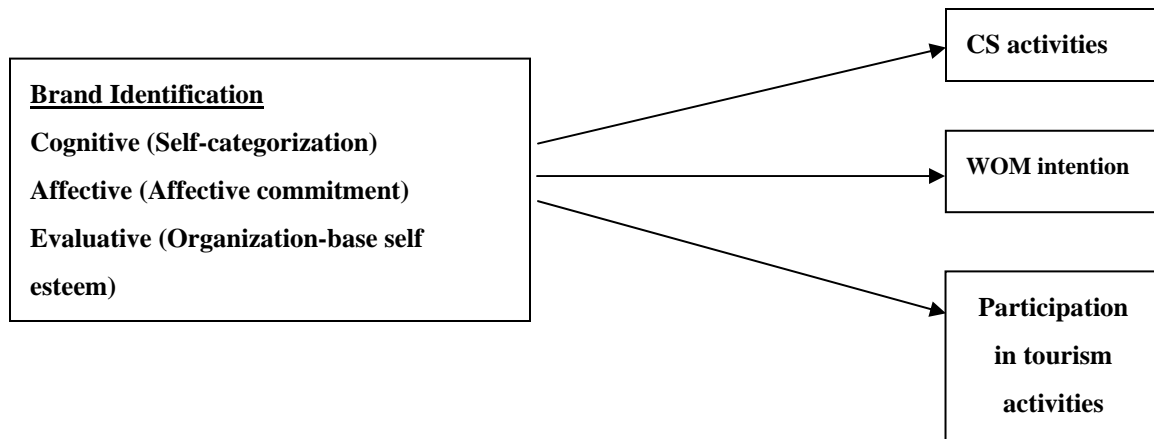


Figure 1: Relationship between brand identification and CS activities, Intention of WOM and Participation in tourism activities

Application of Results

This paper suggests that, as local people’s identification with the destination brand increases, their CS activities, their intention to WOM, and their participation in tourism and leisure activities also increases. Information on how local people identify themselves with the destination brand where they live will help DMOs and tourism service providers understand the importance of the internal branding process of local people within the general branding strategy. In fact, local people play multiple roles in forming a tourism destination brand because they not only share responsibility for it, but also consume its products and services. Therefore, it is important for destination marketers to consider how local people are enjoined to develop self-images that are deemed congruent with strategically defined objectives. This stresses that the alignment of both the external and internal perspectives of destination brand identification is necessary in order to ensure the brand-building process is successful. Specifically, it is suggested that tourism marketers should make sure that local people's identification with the

destination brand is considered in their destination branding strategy in order to achieve collaborative efforts for effective branding from them.

Conclusion

This paper examines the conceptual relationship of brand identification from the internal marketing strategy perspective, focusing on local people. Although this article does not empirically test the predictive power of the models, it suggests that there is a close relationship between the local people's brand identification of the destination and their customer satisfaction activities towards visitors, their intention for WOM and their participation in tourism and leisure activities. It is hoped that this paper will help the tourism industry understand the role of local people in the internal branding process of the tourism destination and will lead to measurement of the proposed model.

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