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Local Stakeholders' Perspectives of WHS Status: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

World Heritage Site (WHS) status is a strong brand with exceptional quality and an excellent reputation that attracts tourists to visit. This study applies and adapts the brand knowledge model to examine local stakeholders' understanding of the WHS status as a brand (Keller, 1998). A case study approach was applied and a WHS in China was selected as the case. In total, 13 interviewees including local government employees, private business owners and residents, participated in the study. The study showed that the three local stakeholder groups were familiar with the WHS status and shared the importance of the WHS status as intended by the WHS program with tourists. However, local stakeholders emphasized the economic importance of the WHS status, and conservation was perceived as a tool to fulfill economic benefits. The results of this research suggested that the WHS status may not be a strong brand and challenges the standpoint of the WHS program.

INTRODUCTION

Brand equity is an indictor to measure the value of a brand and a useful tool to examine the performance of a brand over time (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1998; Pike, 2009). Keller (1998) proposed a brand knowledge model, in terms of brand awareness and brand image, which contributes to understanding consumer-based brand equity. In the current literature, some scholars argue that brand equity should also apply to understanding internal stakeholders especially in the service industry, as these stakeholders are vital to the brand's long-term success (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010; Miles & Mangold, 2004; Woodard, 1999). Tourism is considered as service industry, how local stakeholders understand the brand will influence tourist behavior and the credibility of the brand (Pike, 2009).

The WHS status is the brand of the WHS program, conservation is its essential meaning, and education and economic benefits result from the conservation efforts. It is accepted that WHS status has positive brand equity (Poria, Reithcel & Cohen, 2010). If this the case, local

stakeholders should be able to recall that the site has the WHS status, interpret the importance of the WHS status, deliver consistent messages intended by the WHS program to tourists, and show support for the core meaning of the WHS status brand.

Local stakeholders at WHSs are a heterogeneous group, their varying expectations and experiences at WHSs may influence their perceptions of the WHS status and the reputation of the WHS status. Hence, given the apparent gaps in current literature regarding local stakeholders' perspectives of the WHS status, **the overall purpose of this study is to understand local stakeholders' perspectives of the WHS status as a brand.** Three key research questions are addressed:

1) How did local stakeholders become aware of the WHS status? How did they gain that information?

2) Do local stakeholders use the WHS status? If so, how do they interpret it? Why do they interpret it in that way?

3) How is the WHS status understood by local stakeholders? What is the most important meaning of the WHS status from their perspectives and why?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The WHS status as a brand

The WHS program is an international movement to conserve and preserve heritage resources beyond national territories. Although the initial purpose of establishing the WHS program is to conserve sites with "outstanding universal value" (UNESCO, 2010), WHSs are widely used in marketing campaigns to promote tourism (Cellini, 2010; Li, Wu & Cai, 2008; Roders & van Oers, 2011; Smith, 2002; Yang, Lin & Han, 2009). Some WHSs were popular attractions before receiving the WHS status, many WHSs are becoming famous after receiving the WHS status, and tourism becomes a common and popular phenomenon at many WHSs (Hall & Piggin, 2002; Leask & Fyall, 2006).

In the field of tourism, a brand is applied to identify attractions, help attractions to gain an advantage over competitors (Cai, 2002; Qu, Kim & Im, 2010), and to build an emotional link between attractions and tourists (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2003; Murphy et al., 2007). Some studies have suggested that the WHS status is a 'top', 'iconic' and 'global' attraction brand which represents the quality to attract tourists and to promote tourism development (Boyd, 2008; Buckely, 2004; Cellini, 2010; Hall & Piggin, 2002; Peter, 2009; Rakic & Chambers, 2007; Roders & van Oers, 2011; Ryan & Silvanto, 2009; 2010; Smith, 2002; Yan & Morrison, 2007).

Compared to other brands, the WHS status has considerable prestige in the tourism market since each WHS experienced intensive investigation during the nomination process and each WHS is carefully selected because of its unique cultural or natural significance. The importance of the WHS status can be understood from cultural, social and economic aspects. Culturally, the WHS program conserves and preserves sites with cultural or natural importance (Shen, 2010). In addition, each WHS provides the public with opportunities to learn about and understand diverse heritage leading to greater respect and appreciation. From an economic perspective, each WHS may receive international or national funding and assistance; at the same time, tourism at WHSs can generate economic benefits (Donnachie, 2010; Shen, 2010). In other words, the core meaning of the WHS status intended by WHS program is conservation and preservation, and education and economic benefits result from the conservation and preservation efforts.
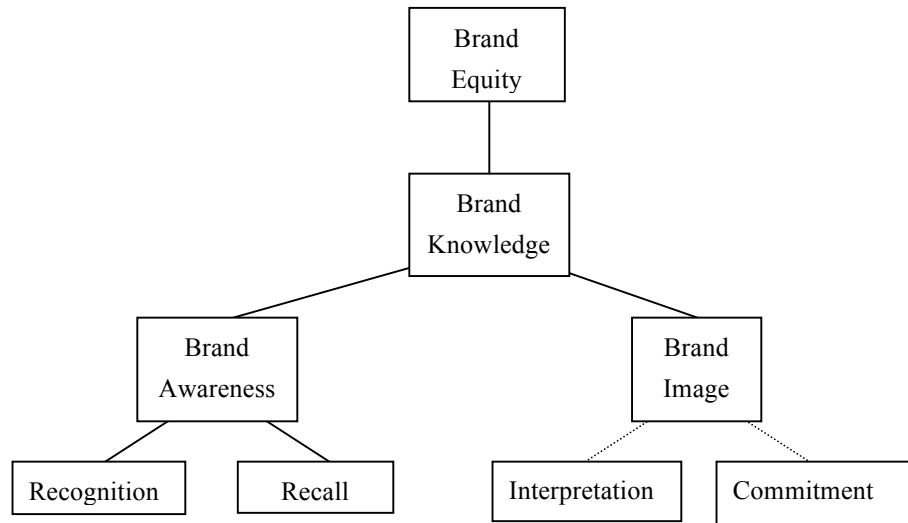
Brand equity and the WHS status

Brand equity is largely applied to describe how consumers perceive the brand, and the degree of their satisfaction (Keller, 1998; Poria, Reichel & Cohen, 2010; Peter, 2009). Keller (1998) proposed a brand knowledge model, in terms of brand awareness and brand image, which contributes to understanding consumer-based brand equity. For instance, if a brand has positive brand equity, consumers will have high brand awareness and positive image of the brand, and they are likely to purchase the products, to show their loyalty to the brand, and to change their behaviour related to the brand.

Torres and Tribo (2011) suggested that brand equity could be applied to understand internal stakeholders' perceptions of the brand. Frampton (2009) claimed that a successful brand tries to deliver a desirable value to consumers, to persuade their purchase, and to build their loyalty. If internal stakeholders deliver messages that are consistent with what the organization desires, this will have positive impacts on consumers' loyalty and maintain the credibility of the brand. On the other hand, if internal stakeholders transmit messages not consistent with the brand promises, internal stakeholders could create consumer dissatisfaction and damage the reputation of the brand. In particular, Pike (2009) implied that it is urgent to understand local stakeholders' perceived brand equity as they influence tourist behaviour and the quality of the brand.

Hence, in this study, the brand knowledge model was applied and adapted from past research to be relevant to internal stakeholders. In the present study, brand knowledge is made up of two components: brand awareness (recognition and recall) and brand image (interpretation and commitment). Figure 1 is the model from the internal stakeholders' perspectives.

Figure 1
Brand Knowledge Model from Internal Stakeholders' Perspectives

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                    ┌──────────┐
                    │  Brand   │
                    │  Equity  │
                    └────┬─────┘
                         │
                    ┌────┴─────┐
                    │  Brand   │
                    │Knowledge │
                    └──┬────┬──┘
              ┌────────┘    └────────┐
         ┌────┴─────┐           ┌────┴─────┐
         │  Brand   │           │  Brand   │
         │Awareness │           │  Image   │
         └──┬────┬──┘           └──┬────┬──┘
       ┌────┘    └────┐       ┌────┘    └────┐
  ┌────┴─────┐  ┌─────┴────┐ ┌─┴──────────┐ ┌┴──────────┐
  │Recognition│  │  Recall  │ │Interpretation│ │Commitment│
  └──────────┘  └──────────┘ └────────────┘ └───────────┘
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Note: 1. Adapted from Keller (1998, p.94);

      2. Solid lines represent original brand knowledge model;

      3. Dotted lines represent new components of the brand knowledge model.

Brand awareness

Awareness refers to internal stakeholders' knowledge of the brand, which reflects their ability to recognize the brand under different categories, their familiarity with the brand, and their emotional feelings toward the brand (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1998; Pike, 2009). Aaker (1996) suggested that brand awareness has two components: recognition and recall. Recognition occurs when internal stakeholders need some clues to retrieve the brand name. Recall, on the other hand, refers to an un-aided memory. In other words, recognition shows' internal stakeholders' familiarity of the brand, and recall reflects their emotional links to the brand (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1998). In the case of the WHS status, brand awareness examines local stakeholders' current knowledge of the WHS status, and high awareness of the WHS status happens when local stakeholders can not only recognize the WHS status among various tourism brands, but also recall the WHS status by mentioning it without being prompted.

Brand image

A brand is shaped by consumers when they communicate with it (Frampton, 2009; Peter, 2009). A positive image leads to consumers' favourable links to the brand (Keller, 1998). Thus, internal stakeholders can ensure the quality of the brand is transferred to consumers. For the WHS brand to be strong, local stakeholder must not only understand the core meaning of the WHS status intended by the WHS program, but also support the WHS status and consistently delivery the core element of the WHS status to tourists. As demonstrated, the image of the WHS

status is exceptional quality and excellent reputation. In order to maintain such prestige, there are two elements that need to be considered from local stakeholders' perspectives: their interpretation of the meaning of the WHS status and their commitment to the WHS program intention.

Interpretation. As shown, consumers' view of the brand is gained through interaction with internal stakeholders. The way internal stakeholders interpret the brand will influence consumer satisfaction and the credibility of the brand. In particular, interpretation is widely used in tourism as a tool for managing attractions (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). The role of interpretation is to improve tourist experience, to provide opportunities for tourists to learn and respect the attraction, to achieve management goals of the attraction (e.g. sustainability, conservation, and entrainment), and to communicate between tourists and attractions (Moscardo & Ballantyne, 2008; Timothy & Boyd, 2003). The WHS status brand is considered strong when local stakeholders interpret the importance of the WHS status intended by the WHS program and share this with tourists.

Commitment. Commitment refers to the local stakeholders' degree of support for the brand and their consistency of brand use (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010). According to Frampton (2009), a high level of commitment to the brand by internal stakeholders can help customers to have greater brand loyalty, and "those who live the brand will deliver the brand" (p.64). In the case of WHS status specifically, a strong WHS status happens when local stakeholders have high level of commitment of the WHS status, show their respect and appreciation of the WHS status, and consistently deliver the core element of the WHS status intended by the WHS program to tourists.

To summarize, the success of the WHS status and positive brand equity of the WHS status occurs when local stakeholders recall that the site has the WHS status, interpret the importance of the WHS status, deliver consistent messages intended by the WHS program to tourists, and show their support to the core meaning of the WHS status.

METHOD

In order to test the model, a site where local stakeholders could be easily identified and addressed was needed. The case study approach was applied and purposive sampling was employed to select both the site and individual participants.

The study was conducted at a WHS in China. After consideration, Ancient Villages in Southern Anhui (2000) was selected as the case study location. Located in Yi County, Anhui Province, Xidi and Hongcun are two traditional Chinese villages representing centuries of rural settlement.

Three local stakeholder groups were included in the study: local government (People's Government of Yi County), private business owners, and residents who live within the site. The study involved two weeks of field research in the two villages. Local government representatives were approached at their offices and the site manger, administrative staff, and interpreters participated in the study. Private business owners were approached at their places of business and were invited to participate. Owners from accommodation, restaurants and retail stores were interviewed. Residents who had a connection with tourism and those that had no relation with tourism were included in the study by approaching them at their residences and asking them if they would be willing to participate in an interview. In total, 13 participants from the three local stakeholder groups were involved in the study. There were four local government representatives, three private business owners, and six residents.

The present study involved semi-structured face-to-face interviews and review of documents. Questions were open-ended in order to gain in-depth responses. Throughout the fieldwork, various materials were collected to see whether the WHS status was used and how the WHS status was used by local stakeholders.

After data collection, the researcher followed three stages of data analysis: transcription, coding, and interpretation (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). A local research assistant, who spoke English and Chinese, assisted with data analysis. The researcher transcribed all the raw data and the research assistant re-listened to tape-recorded interviews to make sure contents were accurate. Considering the study involved translation from Chinese to English and English to Chinese, back-translation technique was applied that the transcripts were translated from Chinese to English and then back into Chinese to ensure the participant's responses were accurately captured. In order to understand each stakeholder group and examine similarities or differences among the three local stakeholder groups, structure coding (MacQueen et al., 2008; Namey et al., 2008) and open-coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) were employed in the study. When interpreting the data, the researcher used categorical aggregation (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009) and cross-group technique.

FINDINGS AND DISSCUSSION

Brand knowledge model, the framework underlying the research questions addressed in the present study, identifies three themes: awareness, interpretation and commitment. Participants in the study were asked questions related to the WHS status, including whether or not they were aware that Xidi and Hongcun were designated as a WHS, how they came to know about the designation, how they interpret the WHS status, how the WHS status is understood, what is the essential meaning of the WHS status, and the importance of this meaning.

Local stakeholders' awareness of the WHS status

The results revealed that the WHS status was the first brand to the majority of the participants, all participants knew that the two villages of Xidi and Hongcun were titled as a WHS, 8 of 13 participants recalled the WHS status by themselves, and five participants shared their personal experiences regarded to the WHS status. For instance, even though the designation was in 2000, one participant still remembered that the local government organized a celebration ceremony after the designation.

The literature review showed that positive brand equity occurs when local stakeholders are familiar with the WHS status and have emotional link to the WHS status. The results illustrated that local stakeholders had high brand awareness of the WHS status.

Image of the WHS status from local stakeholders' perspectives

Some scholars have argued that high brand awareness does not result in positive brand image (Woodward, 1999; Peter, 2009). Two components can be applied to examine the image of the WHS status: interpretation and commitment.

Interpretation of the WHS status

Although local stakeholders had diverse interests, the results showed that the local government representatives, private business owners and the majority of residents described the two villages as sites representing unique Hui ancient residences that need to be conserved and maintained, and are worthy of visiting. Moreover, they stated that they would share their opinions of the WHS status with tourists when they have the chance to communicate with tourists. For example, local government applied interpretation services, tourist centres, and brochures to emphasize that the two villages exclusively represented Hui ancient residences. Private business owners and the majority of the residents insisted that it was their honour to introduce the two villages as a WHS and they felt that the two villages needed to be maintained and protected. If this is the case, the three local stakeholders shared the importance (uniqueness of the two villages and conservation) of the WHS status with tourists, which assured the quality of the WHS status. In addition, according to participants' responses, the educational role of the WHS status, that is, to increase public awareness of protection, was achieved by members of local stakeholders.

Meanwhile, the results also illustrated that economic benefits resulting from the WHS status was emphasized by the local stakeholders. The local government implied the economic significance of the WHS status, private business owners showed their economic interests of the WHS status, and residents emphasized economic return of the WHS status.

Commitment of the WHS status

The local stakeholders said that they did share the importance of the WHS status as described by the WHS program with others, however, the results showed that the messages local stakeholders deliver to tourists were inconsistent with the WHS program. For instance, one participant commented that they had to conserve the two villages to sustain the economic benefits. Therefore, local stakeholders' commitment to the WHS status was low and sometimes contradicted the standpoint of the WHS program.

According to participants' responses, there were three common meanings of the WHS status: fame, economic benefits and conservation. Moreover, each local stakeholder group insisted that conservation is the core meaning of the WHS status. It seems that their perceptions reflected the importance of the WHS status intended by the WHS program, however, the relation among three meanings need to be explored. Figure 2 illustrates local stakeholders' understanding of the WHS status.

Figure 2
Local Stakeholders' Understanding of the WHS Status
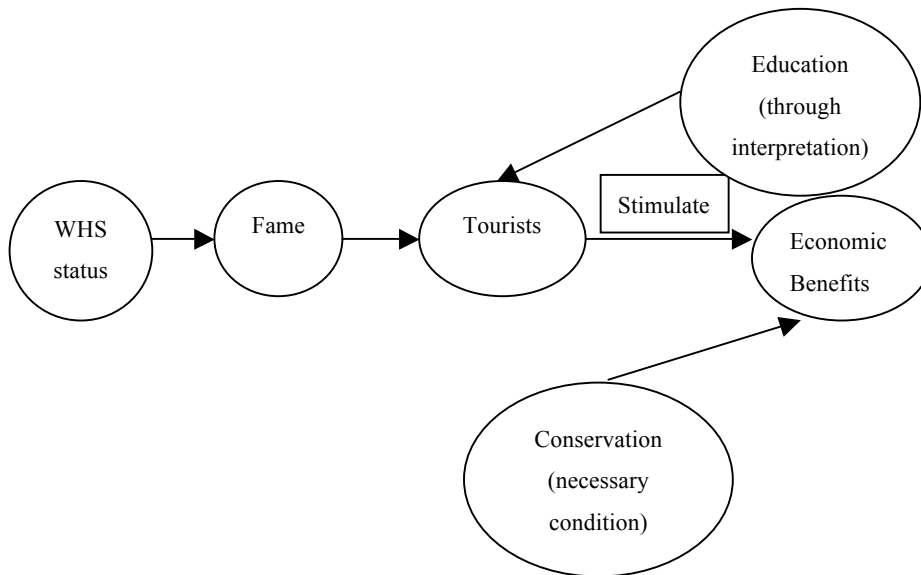
Note: From interviews Reponses and review of documents

The two villages of Xidi and Hongcun were designated as a WHS because of the uniqueness and cultural significance of the site which has made the two villages well-known and continues to attract tourists. Tourism stimulates economic development, which brings considerable economic benefits to the local government, private business owners and residents. Hence, the most important and direct impacts of the WHS status have become economic benefits. At the same time, local stakeholders realized that conservation maintains the quality of the WHS status and generates more economic benefits. In other words, from local stakeholders'

perspectives, economic benefits have been the main outcomes of the WHS status, and conservation has been a necessary condition to achieve and sustain such economic benefits.

To summarize, although local stakeholders held high awareness of the WHS status, interpreted and delivered the importance of the WHS status to tourists as intended by the WHS program, they did not deliver a consistent message to tourists. According to brand knowledge model described in literature review, although local stakeholders had high awareness of the WHS status, their understanding of the WHS status could damage the credibility of the WHS status and have negative impacts on the image of the WHS status.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE STUDIES

Conclusion

This study applied and adapted the brand knowledge model, based on brand equity theory, to examine local stakeholders' perspectives of the WHS status.

This case study suggested that the WHS status at the two villages did not have positive brand equity when considering local stakeholders' perspectives. As demonstrated in literature review, the core element of the WHS status intended by the WHS program is conservation. In this study, the three local stakeholders emphasized the economic importance of the WHS status, which, if this is the message conveyed to tourists, may damage the image of the WHS status as exceptional quality and excellent reputation, challenge the standpoint of the WHS program as a conservation effort, and lead to tourist dissatisfaction that lower their willingness to visit WHSs, and their negatively affect loyalty to the WHS status. More specifically, although the local government, private business owners, and the majority of residents claimed that conservation was the essential meaning of the WHS status, they believed that conservation was a necessary condition to allow for economic benefits in the long term. In other words, from local stakeholders' perspectives, conservation was the tool to fulfill economic benefits.

Implications and future studies

The current study is exploratory in nature, but it provides some insights and contributes to current literature, which could lead to further studies. Firstly, the study explored a brand knowledge model from internal stakeholders' viewpoints. In the service industry, consumer satisfaction and loyalty to the brand are not only influenced by brand equity directly (e.g. quality of the products), but also affected by internal stakeholders' behaviour (e.g. interaction with staff, service quality they receive) (Torres & Tribo, 2011). Unfortunately, research about internal stakeholders' knowledge of the brand is less common in the current literature. This study focused on this missing part and adapts the consumer-based brand knowledge model. In order to keep the credibility of the brand and improve the image of the brand, internal stakeholders have to share

the brand value with consumers through contact and communication, and they have to show their willingness to support the brand. This brand knowledge model can be further expanded and examined by scholars and marketing mangers. For example, in future studies, more elements of brand equity such as brand association, brand identity, and brand positioning can be added to the model to provide rich understanding.

Secondly, this brand knowledge model is applied in the field of tourism. Tourism is a competitive market, destinations and attractions use branding to attract tourists and gain a competitive advantage in the tourism market. As shown in literature review, although the World Heritage Committee uses induced image to promote the WHS status as exceptional quality and excellent reputation, tourists will have their own complex image after visitation which will influence their satisfaction, repeat visitation and their loyalty toward the WHS status (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Local stakeholders' understanding of the WHS status is one component affecting the tourist experience, tourist satisfaction and tourist loyalty. Therefore, the model can be used by DMOs, marketing managers and scholars to examine local stakeholders' contributions to branding destinations and attractions.

Thirdly, the study applied the brand knowledge model to measure the effectiveness of the WHS status as a brand from local stakeholders' perspectives. For the WHS status to be an effective brand, local stakeholders would need to share the importance of the WHS program with tourists, and also show their support for the WHS status. WHS managers and scholars can apply this brand knowledge model to examine how local stakeholders look at the WHS status in particular and the WHS program in general at other WHSs.

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