INVESTIGATING TOURIST CO-CREATION OF DESTINATION BRAND
EXPERIENCE THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING

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Abstract

Tourism services are by their nature highly experiential. This coupled with the increasing prevalence of web technologies provides exciting opportunities for tourism enterprises to enhance the tourist experience and to track consumer sentiments and trends. The focus of this study is on how the tourism brand experience is co-created through digital media. The Facebook pages of the Tourism Ireland (Irish international tourism marketing agency) US ‘Ireland Vacation Stories’ website provides data from personal narratives of US tourists who submit a personal story relating to their experience of the country during their visit. The empirical analysis focus is on the narrative themes emerging that relate to the Ireland tourism brand, and providing insight into how the tourist effectively co-creates the destination brand experience. The findings thus illustrate how the brand values being articulated in the narratives are reflected in the dimensions of brand experience. In doing so, the study sheds light on the practice implications for tourism destination planners, that emanate from tourist activity in uploading and sharing digital content related to their holiday experience.
Introduction

Branding is ubiquitous. From soft drinks to computer chips, the brand is all powerful. Branding can be applied to everything, including organisations, services, people, and of course, places (Healey, 2008). Tourism services are by their nature highly experiential, as the tourist is immersed in travel, activities, accommodation, cultural appreciation etc. as part of the holiday (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). This is already acknowledged in the services marketing literature, where consumer co-creation of the service is a distinguishing characteristic from manufacturing (see Lovelock and Wirtz, 2011). While digital media does raise challenges for tourism services providers in heightening competitiveness and providing a voice for tourist dissatisfaction, Web technologies provide exciting opportunities for tourism enterprises to enhance the tourist experience, and to track consumer sentiments and trends (Munar, 2011). However, there has been limited analysis of the process of consumer co-creation (Bogoviyeva, 2011). The focus of this study is on how the tourism brand experience is co-created through digital media. The Facebook pages of the Tourism Ireland US website will provide data from personal narratives of US tourists relating to Ireland. The empirical analysis will focus on how themes relating to the Ireland tourism brand emerge. This will provide insight into how the tourist effectively co-creates the destination brand experience through a process of articulation of brand values. Implications for the literature from these initial findings will be developed later in the paper.

Tourism brand experience co-creation

The tourism destination has by its nature multiple stakeholders (Munar, 2011). The somewhat unwieldy and fragmented characteristic of the tourism destination creates a number of challenges for the Destination Management Organisation (DMO) in branding the destination, which have been summarised by Pike (2005). For instance, communicating a simple message to the market about the destination, when tourism destinations are by their nature complex and multi-faceted in nature; dealing with a multiplicity of markets in order to satisfy all stakeholders; the inevitable political wrangling in the destination between competing stakeholders and balancing host population and DMO interests. Added to these challenges is that the DMO does not really control the destination brand (Munar, 2011; Brakus et al., 2009). This is because each consumer has a unique, personal relationship with the brand, as the brand can be seen to take on human characteristics, such as sophistication or excitement (Aaker, 1997). Two major implications of the consumer brand relationship is that the relationship is by necessity individual in nature, and therefore, brand meaning is individually created by consumers (Allen, Fournier, and Miller 2008) and must therefore be taken into account by brand managers (Coupland, 2005). Therefore, brand meaning is not set by the brand owner (the tourism enterprise or DMO), but in a joint process of co-creation between the consumer and the organisation (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003; Coupland, 2005).

However we know relatively little about the role of the tourism brand experience in the co-creation process. Tourism experience is “an individual’s subjective evaluation and undergoing (i.e., affective, cognitive, and behavioural) of events related to his/her tourist activities which begins before (i.e., planning and preparation), during (i.e., at the destination), and after the trip (i.e., recollection)” (Tung and Ritchie, 1369:2011). The affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions of tourism experience in this Tung and Richie (2011) definition are echoed in the
model of brand experience developed by Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009). Brand experience has been conceptualised and tested as having four dimensions by Brakus et al. (2009); sensory (how the brand is experienced by the consumer through his/her senses), affective (the consumer’s emotional connection to the brand), behavioural (consumer actions related to the brand), and intellectual (consumer thinking about the brand).

Any consumer interaction with the brand, from engaging with the brand through the Internet in advance of holiday reservation to the actual experience of the destination accommodation, leisure and other activities, is a brand experience (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). The necessarily subjective assessment of the tourism experience (Tung and Ritchie, 2011) is shared by tourists on social media (such as Facebook) and also via specific review sites (such as Trip Advisor), and the expression of the brand therefore results from consumer to consumer interactions and conversations relating to the brand (Munar, 2011; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Brakus et al., 2009). Online brand conversations can be within the context of a brand community which plays an important role in empowering the consumer, providing brand information and serving as a social context (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Brand community comprises a group or collective of consumers, not necessarily geographically close, who have a particular interest or affinity with a particular brand, with critical social relationships around which the brand community coalesces (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Brand meaning is co-created within the brand community through the social interactions, and this can be via electronic means also (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Carlson, Sutter and Brown, 2008).

In fact, widespread availability of Wi-Fi enabled smartphones allows tourists to communicate with friends and family about their holiday experience, by uploading images and text, often through a personal profile on a social networking site, such as Facebook (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Kaplan and Haenlin, 2010). This user generated content (UGC) relates to text, images and video uploaded by online users (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Essentially, the DMO does not have control over the destination image or the experience, but seeks to influence the image formation through the branding process (Munar, 2011). The tourists play their part by perpetuating the brand images generated by the DMO in their general online discourse (Munar, 2011). Therefore, it is essential that the DMO is aware of these digital narratives, and in particular, how the tourist is co-creating the tourism brand experience through UGC.

Method and Analysis

Qualitative research which seeks to ‘...capture data on the perception of local actors “from the inside”...’(Miles and Huberman, 1994:6) is appropriate for this study, which aims to investigate the perceptions of US visitors to Ireland relating to the multifarious aspects of the Irish tourism experience, which can provide insight into consumer co-creation of destination brand experience. Within case sampling (Miles and Huberman, 1994) is therefore applied, with the specific case context being the ‘Ireland Vacation Stories’ page on the Tourism Ireland Facebook site in the US market. The ‘Ireland Vacation Stories’ site (see Fig. 1) invites US visitors to Ireland to submit a personal story relating to their experience of the country during their holiday. Because these are stories, and not just short posts, and because the site attracts mostly US visitors to Ireland, in post evaluation mode after their Irish holiday, this site is appropriate to explore tourist experience of the Ireland tourism brand. For the purpose of this exploratory study, the first twenty five of the
‘Most Popular’ stories were selected for analysis. The QSR NVivo programme was employed for qualitative data management. Initial exploration of the data within NVivo, including the review of word frequencies, led to a process of conceptualising, where the data was decomposed and allocated meaningful names or tags, followed by a comparative analysis, where subsequent similar data was attached to the same name (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). The dimensions of brand experience identified by Brakus et al. (2009) will be used as a framework for investigating how contributions to the social media site contribute to brand experience co-creation.

**Indicative Findings**

The analysis of the narratives resulted in a number of themes emerging from the data, and these have been labelled as Sense of Home; Timelessness and Heritage; Friendly People, and Special Place. A number of selected quotations from the ‘Ireland Vacation Stories’ will be used in this section to illustrate the nature of these themes.

**Sense of Home**

Sense of Home is an awareness among the correspondents (many have Irish family roots) that Ireland is ‘home’ (though a feeling also shared by a correspondent with no Irish blood). Some of the correspondents were on personal quests to Ireland, to track the genealogical history relating to their families. The importance of this sense of home in Ireland is evident from this quotation:

> I met the young fellow who lived there and told him of my quest. He immediately invited me in for dinner with his wife and children. Later he took me the mile to the old homestead where family still lived, but was not at home. He then told me where to find more of the family and the result was that I was able to reunite two branches of the family that had been out of touch for nearly 100 years.

(Narrator 2: 28.10.11)

There are multiple references to ‘home’ in the stories submitted, and again this links to the Irish descent of the writer, who yearns for the ancestral home:

> Many years ago, when I was a teenager, my Dad and I dreamed about taking a trip back to the home of our family. He had heard many stories from his grandmother about the beauty and simple life in Ireland. She told him about the struggles too, but mostly about how much she missed her home.

(Narrator 10: 25.10.11)

**Timelessness and Heritage**

Timelessness, a sense that Ireland has in some ways stood still as an experience emerged as a feature in a number of the accounts, the feeling that Ireland is a place of antiquity, perhaps best appreciated through the older people in the host population:

> From the time we landed, the trip was magical, even the air smelled different. We drove from town to town getting to know the people, the places and the whole thing was like stepping back into time

(Narrator 3: 26.10.11)

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1 A small number were excluded for various reasons such as clearly not posted from abroad, or test entries.
This sense of timelessness is linked to the visitors’ encounter with heritage, with accounts telling of experiences from traditional music to folklore to Newgrange (Stone Age Passage Tomb). This quotation is illustrative of the impact of Ireland’s heritage on the tourists, with an expressed desire here to get into the ‘very heart’ of Ireland to experience artefacts of the country’s ancient history:

There was only one thing about visiting Ireland. I cannot find for the life of me a tour that goes to the very heart of the country, the soul of the country…the old history that made Ireland Ireland.

(Narrator 2: 29.10.11)

**Friendly People**

The friendliness and hospitality of the host Irish population was a frequent theme emerging from the narratives. This was expressed through stories illustrating kind acts by locals:

The woman had no idea who we were or where we were from. Strangers in that little village, we were nonetheless invited in for a cup of tea by a lady who appeared to be alone in her little home.

(Narrator 14 9.7.12)

This particular story is quite typical, and is striking in its evocation of the willingness of the local people to move beyond everyday courtesy, to take time out to actively be of benefit to the tourist. It is this perceived ability of Irish people encountered to engage in a hospitable and frank way with the tourist, which created a strong impression on the tourist:

We stopped at one of many beautiful spots and we all got out to see a lovely waterfall near the side of the road. I was so enchanted by the scenery that I somehow didn't notice everyone else getting back on the bus. I turned around just in time to see it pulling away. As I was running in vain to try to catch the bus, frantically waving my arms and trying not to panic, a local and his family drove up behind me. He knew immediately what had happened and just got out to open the passenger door for me, telling me in his reassuring brogue that it would be no trouble at all to drive me to meet the bus at its next stop.

(Narrator 11: 17.10.11)

**Special Place**

Perceptions of Ireland as a special place, a place of great natural beauty, and a distinctive place, were apparent in the narratives:

When I think of a place I could live, if I didn't live in the most wonderful place of all. the Great USA it would have to be Ireland!!!!!

(Narrator 5: 30.10.11)

Most of the personal accounts investigated in the limited sample came from returning US visitors to Ireland. In cases where the US citizen had not, as yet, visited Ireland, perceptions of the Ireland tourism brand were based, not on actual physical experience, but other sources such as friends and acquaintances and brand communications:
We met a friend from Ireland on-line approximately 2 years ago. He has been here to the United States to visit us twice and we are hoping to be able to go to Ireland this year to be with him and meet his family. The pics of Ireland are so beautiful and this has definitely been one of my bucket list places, God and money willing, lol

(Narrator 13: 8.2.13)

**Discussion and Research Direction**

This study is a response to a call for more research to investigate the implications of tourist activity in uploading and sharing digital content relating to holiday experience, for the tourism destination planners (Munar, 2011). It also contributes to an emerging understanding that industry needs to understand the process of Word of Mouth (WOM) marketing online (Kozinets et al., 2010). It would appear from the findings that the characteristics of brand community identified by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) are evident; consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility. ‘Consciousness of kind’ is apparent from the sense in the narratives that the tourist feels a connection to the community of US tourists with family and emotional ties to Ireland. The second feature of ‘rituals and traditions’ is also very evident in the actual process of telling stories about the Ireland brand experience. Finally, a sense of moral responsibility is apparent from the helpful points and advice offered in some of the narratives. This study has proposed the question; how does the tourist co-create the destination brand experience? This initial exploration of personal narratives created by US visitors has highlighted a number of themes: Sense of Home; Timelessness and Heritage; Friendly People, and Special Place, which essentially can be seen as the values of the brand emerging. De Chernatony (2010) has highlighted the importance of congruence between employees’ values and brand values, critical for building a service brand from the inside out. With the widespread access to digital communication, customers are increasingly articulating the brand values. Mapping the brand values espoused by the narrators onto the dimensions of brand experience identified by Brakus et al. (2009) provides some insight into how the tourists through the digital narratives are co-creating the Ireland brand experience (see Fig. 2 below). Each of the brand dimensions reflects the brand values of the Ireland brand articulated by the tourist: e.g. the intellectual dimension of brand experience is captured in the observations of the tourist about the Timelessness and Heritage of Ireland; the affective dimension is a response to the Friendly People value highlighted; the sensory dimension is echoed in the Sense of Home, and the behavioural dimension is reflected in the Special Place brand value. We must also not forget the importance of the marketing communications from the DMO, which influence the brand formation process of the tourists (Munar, 2011). In the context of Tourism Ireland, it is interesting to see that some of the brand values highlighted in their brand communications, such as Place and People are finding some echoes from the tourist narratives, which may be evidence of the influence of destination brand communications (Munar, 2011). Of course, as the data has been sourced from US travellers to Ireland, many of whom have Irish roots, the importance of ‘home’ as a dimension of the Ireland tourism brand experience is particularly marked, and this would not necessarily be of such importance in other overseas markets. The model presented in Fig. 2 may provide a framework for further analysis of the use of digital narratives by tourists to co-create brand experience. A large scale, preferably longitudinal, study would facilitate a more detailed exploration of the complex nature of tourist co-creation of the tourism brand experience.
References


Fig. 1: ‘Ireland Vacation Stories’ on Tourism Ireland (US) Facebook site

(image reproduced with permission of Tourism Ireland)
BRAND VALUES ARTICULATED IN DIGITAL NARRATIVES

- Sense of Home
- Timelessness and Heritage
- Friendly People
- Special Place

MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS FROM DMO

DIMENSIONS OF BRAND EXPERIENCE

SENSORY
- Appreciation of the physical beauty of the scenery

INTELLECTUAL
- Cognitive awareness of the timelessness and heritage dimension of Ireland

AFFECTIVE
- The emotional impact of the perceived friendliness of the host population

BEHAVIOURAL
- Intention to visit Ireland as a life wish

Fig. 2 Brand values and the co-creation of destination brand experience