



Research Paper

Enduring travel involvement, destination brand equity, and travelers' visit intentions: A structural model analysis

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ABSTRACT

In the highly competitive tourist destination marketplace, destination marketers are constantly looking to enhance their brand equity by focusing on a number of key factors to strengthen their brand values. Because tourists' interests and involvement, adoption and visit intentions are fundamental elements to destination brand building, changes in these elements can serve as predictor variables for understanding the changes in destination demand. This paper examines the relationship among tourists' enduring travel involvement, destination brand equity, and visit intentions during pretrip information search. It was found that customer-based destination brand equity is a combination of key factors that can derive the overall utility that tourists place in the destination brand, some of which are impacted by enduring travel involvement. Furthermore, different facets of destination brand equity have positive impacts on destination visit intentions. This study provides new insights into the theory and practice of travelers' behavior and destination brand equity management. The findings are particularly valuable to destination marketers with direct or indirect responsibility to develop and protect the equity in their destination brands.

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1. Introduction

As the range of tourism choices expand and destinations become increasingly more competitive, more destinations adopted the idea of using a name or symbol to enhance their value. A valid reason for studying brand equity from a strategy-based perspective is that destination marketers can improve their marketing productivity by understanding the destination brand perceived by the consumers. The perceived value can then be developed into profitable brand strategies. Destination brand equity is the combination of key factors that can be described as the overall utility that tourists place in the destination brand when compared to its competitors. A number of practices to enhance the equity in destination brands have been employed, such as building stronger emotional attachment through destination imagery campaigns and destination loyalty programs.

Because people's interests in travel, adoption, and loyalty are fundamental elements to destination brand building, changes in these elements can serve as predictor variables for understanding the changes in destination demand (Lee, 2001). Consumers' interest and involvement in travel or enduring travel involvement explains their stable and continuing travel preferences, destination choices, and activity participation. Considerable resources are

expended on building destination brands, yet the literature is virtually silent on the concept of enduring travel involvement and investigating the impacts of tourists' involvement in travel on their perceptions of destinations.

This study intends to empirically investigate the relationship among tourists' enduring travel involvement, destination brand equity, and visit intentions during their pre-trip information search. Taking into consideration that enduring travel involvement and visit intention are both consumer-centered phenomena, destination brand equity is conceptualized and operationalized from the perspective of individual consumers or tourists.

2. Literature review

2.1. Enduring travel involvement

Developed originally in the practical arena of political persuasion (Sherif & Cantril, 1947; Sherif, Sherif & Nebergall, 1965), the concept of involvement has found its most recent application in the field of consumer research. Involvement has been defined and operationalized as a salient concept for understanding leisure, recreation, and tourism behaviors (Bloch & Bruce, 1984; Havitz & Dimanche, 1999). Most tourism studies have focused on examining tourists' involvement in activity context either with general travel experience (e.g. Gross & Brown, 2006) or with

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specific touristic activities, such as skiing and visiting parks (e.g. Dimanche, Havitz, & Howard, 1993), shopping (Hu & Yu, 2007), and gambling (e.g. Park, Yang, Lee, Jang, & Stokoswski, 2002; Lee, Scott, & Kim, 2008). The general view of involvement in tourism has been focused on examining temporary personal feelings of heightened involvement that accompany a particular situation, such as destinations (e.g. Gursory & Gavcar, 2003; Kim, Han, Holland, & Byon, 2009; Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2005; Lehto, O'Leary, & Morrison, 2004) or travel decisions (e.g. Cai, Feng, & Breiter, 2004). However, tourists' involvement with travel itself – an enduring commitment – and its impact on travel behaviors has received little attention.

According to Laurent and Kapferrer (1985), enduring involvement 'derives from the perception that the product is related to centrally held values, those defining one's singularity, and identity, one's ego'. The concept of travel involvement presented in this paper however, does not preclude the notion of the mobility paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006) which identifies the importance of systematic movements of people for a variety of reasons including work, family matters, leisure, pleasure, and politics. The mobility paradigm explores the movements of people, objects, and information and hypothesizes that travelers are more likely to be boundless than static. Consequently, travel, and its many forms, may involve complex and simple decision making processes. For purposes of this paper, the traveler negotiates a variety of and often complex relationships between people, materials, destinations, transportation, images, etc. (Sheller & Urry, 2006).

Enduring travel involvement is defined as the ongoing, ever-changing, unobservable state of motivation, arousal, or interest toward pleasure travel, evoked by a particular stimulus or situation (Rothschild, 1984). It is an ongoing commitment on the part of an individual with regard to thoughts, feelings, and behavioral responses to travel. In lay terms, for example, we often speak of people who are "really into travel." Enduring travel involvement is a person's baseline involvement, which is the default state reflecting the amount of interest, arousal, or emotional attachment one has with travel. It occurs even when the action of travel is not operative or one is not planning a trip or visiting a destination. Such interest in travel may arise from an individual's perception that travel meets important values and goals. Enduring travel involvement is the value that one prescribes to the pleasure of travel. The level of involvement is often based on the strength of the relationship of pleasure travel to individual needs, values, or self-concept. It is a function of past travel experience and the strength of values to which pleasure travel is relevant to an individual. Enduring travel involvement, therefore, can be seen as the intensity with which travel 'is embedded in and driven by the consumers' value system' (O'Cass & Muller, 1999, p. 402).

In a comprehensive framework of involvement, Rothschild (1975, 1979a, 1979b) has specified enduring involvement and two other types of involvement—situational involvement and response involvement. Enduring involvement is the ongoing concern with a product the individual brings into the purchase situation, while situational involvement is the degree of involvement evoked by a particular situation. Situational involvement is influenced by product attributes, such as air fare cost and similarity among destination choice alternatives, as well as situational variables, such as travel companions or length of trip. Response involvement is the consequences of the inner state of being involved, which often refers to behaviors (Pritchard & Brunson, 1999) due to their antecedent involvement.

Enduring travel involvement also differs from destination involvement. Destination involvement can be seen as the relevance of a travel destination to the individual. It is a tourist's evaluation of his/her engagement with a destination as central

aspect of his/her life providing both hedonic and symbolic value (Filo, Chen, King, & Funk, 2011). On the other hand enduring travel involvement reflects the perceived relevance of travel to the individual. As its name implies, enduring travel involvement levels are presumed to exist on a long term basis and its levels are reasonably stable. For example, an individual may be very involved in travel but only like to visit new destinations for vacation each year. Conversely, an individual may have low interest in travel, but he/she travels to New York very often because of the desire to view world-class Broadway shows. This study focuses on enduring travel involvement, a more permanent and traveler-based construct.

2.2. Destination brand equity

Much attention has been paid to the concept of brand equity in the marketing field (i.e. Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) and yet relatively little attention has been paid to brand equity and, in particular, destination brand equity in the field of tourism. This study proposes that a person's degree of interest in travel, *enduring travel involvement*, has a direct effect on their understanding and perceptions of the *brand-equity* of a destination.

This study conceptualizes brands and destination brand equity from the perspective of individual consumers based on what they perceive to know about the particular brand of a destination and its specific components. Kotler, Bowen, and Makens (2010, p. 239) define a brand as 'a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors.' Combined into knowledge, these individual and unique brand components are called the brand identity or the brand mark. From a marketing perspective, customer-based brand equity is defined 'as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand' (Keller, 1993, p. 2). In other words, it is the value that consumers apply to the brand based on the impact of the brand components compared to reactions to similar brand components of other versions of the product or service.

Tourist destination marketers are aware of the growing importance of brand equity in promoting their destination. Some marketing literature have indicated that the principles of product brands do not apply directly to services (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2003). The distinct components of a brand will vary depending on the product or service composition. Justifiably, the composition of what comprises destination brand equity is not thoroughly agreed upon (i.e. Boo, Busser, & Baloglu, 2009; Kim et al., 2009). The complex characteristics of a destination make branding and measuring the brand equity a challenge (Boo et al., 2009). Compared to consumer goods and services, destinations are far more multidimensional (Pike, 2005). Conceptually, a tourism destination-based brand is composed of both tangible and intangible elements (Aaker, 1991; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Boo et al., 2009). Tourists perceive these elements as a unique combination of functional (physical, measurable) and psychological (abstract) components of a destination brand. The attraction and value of a tourist destination brand may change depending on which product/service assets are recognized by tourists. The specific elements that compose a destination brand and the measurement methods being used are still relatively new and not without debate (Yoo, Donthu & Lee, 2000). For example, Kim et al. (2009) utilized six dimensions—awareness, preference, value, uniqueness, popularity, and price. Boo et al. (2009) employed three dimensions—awareness, image, and quality. Konecnik and Gartner (2007) used four dimensions—awareness, image, quality, and loyalty. This study chose to initially incorporate four generally agreed upon core dimensions and were subsequently reduced to three-destination experience, awareness, and loyalty. As Yoo et al. (2000) prescribed, the

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