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Research Paper

Examining the hierarchy of destination brands and the chain of effects between brand equity dimensions

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the customer-based brand equity for a tourist destination, and develops a model including the dimensions of this construct (i.e. awareness, image, perceived quality and loyalty). Accordingly, loyalty is considered the main dependent variable in the model developed here. A major contribution of this paper is that it takes into account the hierarchy of destination brands and analyzes not only the chain of effects between the dimensions of brand equity for a regional destination but also the influence of the country destination image (i.e. the country is considered to be an umbrella brand) on the perceived image of one of its regional destinations. Another significant contribution is made by examining the moderating effect of country familiarity on the relationship with both types of image. The empirical evidence obtained from a sample of 253 international tourists visiting a regional destination in Spain supports the hypothesis that loyalty towards a destination is positively influenced by the perceived quality of the destination, which in turn is directly influenced by the image and awareness of that destination. Additionally, the results support the idea that perceptions of a regional destination are positively influenced by the perceptions of the country destination in which the region is located. However, a moderating effect of country familiarity on the relationship with either type of image was not supported in this research. This could be because in a country where there are a lot of destination brands, being more familiar with the country does not necessarily imply a more accurate knowledge of its regional destinations.

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1. Introduction

Tourist destinations can be considered products (Boo, Busser, & Baloglu, 2009; Yoon & Uysal, 2005) that destination marketing organizations (DMOs) must adequately manage to attract visitors and build loyalty. To that end, in a global and competitive environment such as the current one, having a strong brand is a good strategy for achieving positive returns, providing the differentiation needed from competitor destinations and gaining competitive advantage (Hanna & Rowley, 2007; Pike, 2009). 'Place branding' is the application of product branding to places (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006). Despite the interest it has garnered, place branding is a relatively new research area (Cai, 2002) that is still considered to be in its infancy (Konecnik, 2006; Pike, Bianchi, & Kerr, 2010). Until now, the literature available has been greatly fragmented (Gertner, 2011), and concepts such as 'brand loyalty', 'brand equity', 'brand

architecture', which have an extensive background in the marketing literature (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Aaker 1996; Keller, 1993), have rarely been explored in the field of tourism (Dooley & Bowie, 2005; Harish, 2010; Pike, 2007; Konecnik, 2006).

Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2006) question whether city branding is a transitory marketing trick. Furthermore, they question if place branding may be impossible because places are not exactly products, and governments and users are not producers and consumers respectively. Their conclusion is that place branding 'is not only possible but that it is, and has been, practiced consciously or unconsciously for as long as cities have competed with each other for trade, populations, wealth, prestige or power' (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006, p. 188). With regard to this, Hankinson (2001) reviewed the practices of branding in 12 English cities and concluded that marketing tools were widely applied to places but also tended to be little understood. This calls for the creation of an integrated framework that clarifies all of the aspects of developing a place brand and gives guidance for managing it (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2006).

Place branding is based on the conceptual domains of tourism and urban policy. However, since 2000 there has been a growing contribution to the place branding literature from service

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marketing studies and, above all, corporate branding studies. The theoretical developments of both research lines have led to a richer and more useful theory of place branding (Hankinson 2009, 2010). In this regard, 'brand identity', 'brand architecture' or 'brand equity', among others, become interesting research fields. In the case of 'brand equity', Pike (2009) identifies this concept as a potential research gap, suggesting that further research in this area might usefully be extended to the measurement of re-branding and re-positioning strategies. Studies about destination brand equity are, however, scarce and are supported mainly in past research on destination image. Additionally, more diversified quantitative methods are required to successfully identify the elements and dimensions of brand equity (Chan & Marafa, 2013).

Taking into account its potential, the present paper took as its starting point the model of consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) developed by Aaker (1996) and Keller (1993, 2003) and applied in this case to a regional tourist destination. This model is based on the premise of developing an understanding of how marketing initiatives are impacting on consumer learning and recall of brand information (Pike, 2000). In particular, four dimensions related to perceptions and reactions of consumers to the brands are established: awareness, associations, quality and loyalty.

The aim of destination branding is to stimulate intent to visit and revisit the place, which are indicators of brand loyalty (Pike & Bianchi, 2013). Loyalty is thus the highest-level construct (Pike, 2000), so in this paper it will be considered to be the main outcome variable. The paper then proceeds to make an empirical analysis of the causal relationships or chain of effects existing between the four dimensions of CBBE. Furthermore, and taking into account the brand architecture and the hierarchy of destination brands, the paper explores the influence of the image of a country as a tourist destination on the image of its constituent regional destinations. More concretely, the study examines the case of Spain, which is one of the most important tourist destinations in the world. It is a country with a 'house of brands' strategy in tourism (Dooley & Bowie, 2005; Harish, 2010) because each of its regions promotes its own destination brand. With this in mind, the study carries out empirical research with international tourists visiting Spain and focuses on the relationship between country destination image and regional destination image, assuming the existence of a hierarchy of brands among different territorial entities (Cubillo, Sánchez, & Cerviño, 2006).

In addition, it is important to indicate that individuals usually have a different image of countries, regions and cities (Kapferer, 2000), based on their experiences and information about each territorial entity, but those images are interrelated among them (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2007). In particular, when evaluating a specific foreign destination (for example, a region located in a specific country), the familiarity of tourists with the country may play a key role in the formation of their regional destination image, especially when they have little information about the regional destination. Under these circumstances, it is expected that the relationship between the country destination image and the regional destination image is moderated by country familiarity (Balabanis, Mueller, & Melewar, 2002). This paper will take into account Information Processing Theory and the Theory of Attitude Stability in order to better understand how, in terms of reliability and strength, the perceptions of the country as a tourist destination are shaped by the familiarity of tourists with the country. This information will enable a better explanation of the moderating influence of country familiarity on the relationship between country destination image and regional destination image.

This research therefore aims to make two main contributions to the study of destination marketing: (1) the development of an integrative model that considers not only the chain of effects

between the dimensions of customer-based brand equity for a regional destination but also the role of country destination image in the formation of a regional destination image insofar as the country brand may act as an umbrella brand in the mind of the tourist; and (2) the examination of the influence of country destination image on regional destination image by considering, as a moderator variable, the level of familiarity of the international tourists with the country under investigation.

2. Literature review and research hypothesis

2.1. Customer-based brand equity of a place

'Place branding' is becoming a focal area for marketers, with a growing number of academic works, particularly in the field of destination and tourism marketing (Kaplan, Yurt, Guneri, & Kurtulus, 2010). Thus far the topic has been partly covered by studies about destination image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Pike & Ryan, 2004; San Martín & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2008) but place branding is a complex and extensive field of research and it cannot be limited only to destination image studies (Kaplan et al., 2010). The effectiveness of place brands can be measured by CBBE (Im, Kim, Ellio, & Han, 2012; Konecnik, & Gartner, 2007; Konecnik, 2006; Pike et al., 2010): a multidimensional construct initially proposed by Aaker (1996) and Keller (1993), initially in the field of goods and services but lately extended to territories.

Despite its potential to be applied to tourist destinations, the study of brand equity has only recently attracted the attention of academic researchers (Boo et al., 2009), with relatively few works testing the CBBE model in relation to destination branding (Pike & Bianchi, 2013). According to Aaker (1991), CBBE can be defined as 'a set assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product to a firm and/or the firm's customers'. In addition, four dimensions of CBBE are well established in the literature (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Konecnik, 2004): awareness, image, quality and loyalty. Brand awareness refers to the ability to recognize or recall that a brand is a member of a product category. Brand image consists of the beliefs and attitudes in relation to the perceived benefits of a brand. Brand quality is the judgment of the overall excellence or superiority of a brand relative to the alternatives in the market. Brand loyalty is considered the commitment of individuals with regards to a determined brand over time.

In the context of tourist destinations, brand awareness can be conceived as the presence of a destination in the minds of people when a given travel context is considered; brand image represents the set of associations or impressions attached to the destination, composed of a variety of individual perceptions relating to several attributes of the destination; brand quality is concerned with perceptions of the way in which the destination attempts to meet tourists' functional needs, a holistic judgment made on the basis of the excellence or overall superiority of the service (Bigné, Sánchez, & Sanz, 2005); and brand loyalty, which represents the core dimension of the CBBE concept (Aaker, 1996) and the main source of customer-based brand equity (Keller, 2003), is usually measured in tourism research by intention to return to the tourist destination and willingness to recommend it to other people (Chen & Myagmarsuren, 2010; Pike, 2007; Prayag, 2012).

Destination image is therefore central to brand evaluation and brand equity but other dimensions are also necessary to truly measure CBBE (Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). The study by Konecnik and Gartner (2007) was one the first on destination brand equity. In that paper, the authors analyzed the concept of CBBE as a whole, although they proposed that future research should study the direction of the relationships among its

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