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Research paper

Destination distinctiveness: Concept, measurement, and impact on tourist satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Identifying the distinctive, unique characteristics of a destination is necessary for tourism development and management. After exploring the concept of destination distinctiveness, this article presents a standardized method for identifying unique and distinctive place-based attributes of a tourist destination, by comparing supply and demand views. Using Dalat, a mountain city in Vietnam, as a case study, this research combines qualitative and quantitative data in an identification grid that comprises natural, human, infrastructure and facility factors to reveal the most distinctive attributes of the destination, which differ depending on the segment of tourists and can explain tourists' satisfaction and behaviors. The combination of the most distinctive attributes with a strong emotional component is important to the destination's positioning strategy.

1. Introduction

Tourism managers use a destination's unique and distinctive characteristics as attractors that increase tourists' attention to the destination and build its image in their minds. Indeed, 'uniqueness is particularly important due to its influence on differentiation among similar destinations in the target consumers' minds' (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011, p. 467). Many destinations build on their distinctiveness to attract tourists, from Singapore's cleanliness to Costa Rica's Amazonian jungles. Such characteristics can increase a destination's attractiveness and competitiveness, especially as 'travelers increasingly seek unique and meaningful travel experiences to satisfy their needs and desires' (Kim, 2014, p. 37). Destinations with unique features also tend to be perceived as beautiful and therefore exhibit strong pull motivation (Kirillova, Fu, Lehto, & Cai, 2014).

Although tourist advertising often cites such typical characteristics, little attention has focused on their role in destination management. Such features may help build a destination's image as unique (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Qu et al., 2011), explain place attachment and tourist involvement (Tsai, 2012), and contribute to memorable experiences (Kim, 2014). Because of their unique, distinctive nature, typical attributes offer potential sources of differentiation in positioning the destination brand. Accordingly, identifying a destination's unique and distinctive elements is a first, necessary step for a place marketing strategy that can encourage tourists to select it as a destination (Qu et al., 2011). Local distinctiveness is mentioned as one of the decisive

factors for a destination's evolution (Garay & Cànoves, 2011) and for the production of a distinctive and competitive place identity (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003). Such distinctiveness is also crucial for product development and particularly related to crafts, local foods and drinks (Haven-Tang & Sedgley, 2014; Lin & Mao, 2015) because it ensures to uphold the tourists' vision about the destination through their sensory involvement with the unique, distinctive and original place-based assets (Lin & Mao, 2015; Littrell, Reilly, & Stout, 1992; Sims, 2010). However, local distinctiveness is an elusive concept (Grant, Human, & Le Pelley, 2002) for academics and practitioners in tourism due to the overlap in meanings with other concepts such as authenticity (Camus, 2010), sense of place or place identity (Anggraini, 2017).

The UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) strongly recommends identifying positive elements for tourism product development (Mac Nulty & Cleverdon, 2011) and destination branding (Anholt, 2009). Identification of unique and distinctive characteristics helps destinations determine their key resources in distinction strategies (Richards, 2011). These elements may come from basic resources or living heritage, such as the diversity and abundance of foods that attract international tourists to Taiwan (Lin, Pearson, & Cai, 2010) or creative resources, especially in cultural tourism (Richards, 2011). However, prior literature lacks consistent and appropriate instruments to help destination managers identify distinctive local characteristics (Konecnik Ruzzier & de Chernatony, 2013). As a result, it reduces the ability of creating the uniqueness of destinations and leads to the serial

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reproduction of culture (Richards & Wilson, 2006). Similar to any perceptual process, the characterization of these typical attributes entails subjective appreciation, influenced by various individual and situational moderating factors, such as the status of and attachment to a specific destination, according to tourists and other stakeholders. Identifying and evaluating destinations' distinctiveness thus remains a critical issue for tourism research (Haven-Tang & Sedgley, 2014; Kumar & Nayak, 2014).

This research accordingly aims to explore the notion of destination distinctiveness by positioning it in relation with other related concepts and to identify distinctive attributes of a destination by comparing perceptions from the supply and demand sides. Specifically, this study pursues three main objectives: First, it seeks to develop a standardized method for identifying typical attributes of a tourist destination, from supply and demand points of view. Second, it explores the relationship between typical attributes (as assessed by international and domestic tourists) and tourists' satisfaction and their intentions to return or recommend. In line with these objectives, this study makes two significant contributions. From a theoretical perspective, this article advances the understanding of the notion of local/destination distinctiveness from the analysis of related concepts. The proposed identification scale helps distinguish a destination's distinctive and unique attributes from other attributes and reveals how they contribute to tourist satisfaction. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, from both supply (experts and local stakeholders) and demand (tourists) perspectives, offers more reliable results than conventional uses of expert perceptions. The elaborated instrument can also help destination managers exploit their distinctiveness and implement marketing strategies accordingly.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Local distinctiveness

Local distinctiveness is derived from the concept of local identity, originated from place identity theory developed by Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983). So far, the concept of local identity remains vague, unclear and ambiguous (Haschar-Noé, 2005; Higham & Hinch, 2009). Local identity refers to a set of social, geographical, historical, ethnic, natural ... characteristics, that allow identifying particularities of a territory (or a community) in order to distinguish that territory (or community) from others (Charlot, 2001, cited in Haschar-Noé, 2005). Local identity is a social and historic structure that has two functions: The first function is to create a sense of belonging to place (or a community) (Marques, Lima, Luísa, Moreira, & Reis, 2015) and the second is to distinguish it from other territories (or communities) (Haschar-Noé, 2005). Local identity emphasizes place attributes and their effects to individuals related to that place.

Local distinctiveness connects directly to the notion of place identity, a component of place attachment that refers to the congruence between the place's symbolism and image and tourists' self-concept (Tsai, 2012). Place identity is a process of building the identity of an individual based on the perception of physical environment around it. Korpela (1989) emphasizes the connection between place and identity by describing place identity in terms of "cognitions of those physical settings and parts of the physical environment, in or with which an individual – consciously or unconsciously – regulates his experience of maintaining his sense of self". Place identity is determined not only by the physical components, but also by the sense and association developed between people and the place. The first principle of place identity - distinction / differentiation - concerns the sense of personal distinctiveness or uniqueness (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996; Wang & Xu, 2015). This principle predicts that people, when experiencing (physically or culturally) a distinctive or unique place, would exhibit more place identification (Wang & Xu, 2015; Wang, Chen et al., 2015), thus expressed stronger emotional attachment with that place (Proshansky

et al., 1983). As a result, the place's typical attributes represent input to tourists' cognitive identification process. In turn, place identity can increase a person's feelings of belonging to a tourist destination, and the tourism setting enables him or her to affirm this identity (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Therefore, place distinctiveness is the basis for a consciously individual cognition process of a specific place.

Previous research usually regards local distinctiveness as antecedents of place attachment and analyzes its components such as place identity, place dependence, affective attachment, or social bonds (Gross & Brown, 2008; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Ramkissoon, Smith, & Weiler, 2013; Tsai, 2012; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010). For instance, Gross and Brown (2008) find that food and wine, as specific features of Australia, predict both dependence and identity components of place attachment. Uniqueness as a functional attribute significantly contributes to the holistic experience, which helps maximize tourists' enjoyment during their stay and long-lasting place attachment. The functional attributes of a destination should characterize not only its practical utility but also its uniqueness, providing the value that tourists regard as essential and non-substitutable for fulfilling their substantive needs and desires. Functional attachment is embodied in a destination's physical characteristics and strongly related to the perception that the setting possesses unique qualities (Prayag & Ryan, 2012). Therefore, the nurturing process of place attachment starts from the effective management of a destination's distinctiveness, in addition to other emotional and symbolic attributes (Tsai, 2012). Ram, Björk, and Weidenfeld (2016) also find a close relationship between authenticity and place attachment. Overall then, the need to identify and preserve a destination's unique features is crucial (Gross & Brown, 2008) and deserves more concrete exploration.

Local distinctiveness is also related to authenticity, which remains a critical issue for academics and tourism stakeholders and reflects 'a concept that encapsulates what is genuine, real, and/or true' (Castéran & Roederer, 2013, p. 153). It is mostly mentioned in relation to a particular thing or experience (Chalmers & Price, 2009). An object or experience can be authentic but not necessarily distinctive or unique of a place. Furthermore, authenticity can be approached in several ways: objective authenticity is based on originality and the genuineness of objects and sites, as verified by experts (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010; Ram et al., 2016); constructive authenticity is determined by the tourist and is subjective, negotiable, and contextual (Ram et al., 2016); and experiential authenticity refers to the subjective tourism experience (Wang, 1999). Referring to food products, Camus (2004) proposes three main components: origin, uniqueness, and projection. An authentic product first is determined by its origin, but it also is exclusive in nature, with no possibility of imitation. The uniqueness of the experience is an existential component of authenticity (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010) that implies that no equivalent exists elsewhere or that it exists in multiple copies. Finally, the projection dimension implies individual identification with the genuine product or experience at that place, such that unique and distinctive features of the place enhance its authenticity. The 'terroir', or specific attributes of a place that confer unique characteristics on products originating from that place, constitutes the crossroads of natural and human factors that give identity to a product or experience, which in turn become sources of value and differentiation (Camus, 2010) for a destination.

Local distinctiveness includes special social, economic or unique environmental characteristics of a place that makes it special, different from anywhere else (Grant et al., 2002). Uniqueness, distinctiveness, originality or rarity with enduring value, are, therefore, key features of local distinctiveness. With these features, a destination can differentiate itself and construct a local identity (Korpela, 1989; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996), which then shapes the destination's image and influences tourists' behavior (Kim, 2014). The dimensions of the destination, which include the specificity and importance of social or physical features, highlight the characteristics of place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010) and create memorable and unique experi-

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