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When tourists are your “friends”: Exploring the brand personality of Mexico and Brazil on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Adopting Aaker’s (1997) framework, this study explored how popular tourist destinations, Mexico and Brazil, communicate their brand personality through Facebook, and which personality traits their Facebook “friends” associate with them. Results of computer-aided content analysis indicated that both countries’ tourism promotion messages emphasize distinct brand personality traits. However, Mexico’s public relations efforts were more successful than Brazil’s in transferring projected brand personality to its Facebook “friends”.

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1. Introduction

Tourism promotion and destination branding are significant areas for public relations research and practice. Contemporary research focusing on the tourism industry has documented how public relations programs contribute to destinations recovering from crisis situations, and to building nation brands (e.g. Carden, 2005; Fall, 2004; Stafford, Yu, & Armoo, 2002; Tilson & Stacks, 1997). Yet, outside of these contexts only a few studies have analyzed the value of public relations efforts in tourism promotion and destination branding.

Branding allows destinations to manage their image and improve their economic performance by attracting international business and tourism (Aronczyk, 2008). As a “set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347), brand personalities can evoke different emotional responses in consumers and influence their opinions and purchasing decisions about a brand.

This study applied Aaker’s (1997) brand personality framework to the context of tourism promotion and destination branding. More specifically, this study focused on two destinations selected from the United Nations World Tourism Organization’s top destinations list (UNWTO, 2010): Mexico and Brazil, which have the largest share of international tourist arrivals in Latin America (UNWTO, 2010). Posts on the countries’ official Facebook pages and responses from “friends” were analyzed for salience of brand personality traits. Lastly, a correspondence analysis was employed to explore the level of agreement in the brand personality traits communicated by the destination promoters and Facebook “friends”.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Public relations in tourism promotion and destination branding

The travel and tourism industry makes use of public relations, marketing, and advertising strategies to promote destinations to publics around the world (Morgan & Pritchard, 2005). Within this strategic communication approach, public relations efforts involve identifying key publics; preparing a plan of action that can be constantly adapted to reflect shifting realities; and finally, monitoring feedback to measure if attitude or behavior changes are occurring in target publics (Tilson & Stacks, 1997). This approach can be viewed in efforts using Social media, where the focus is both on the communication of a predetermined image for the country, as well as in establishing dialog with tourists and potential tourists.

This mode of online communication is of great value for Destination Promotion Organizations (DPOs) because it facilitates two-way interaction with their various publics in ways that are not always possible offline (Bruell, 2008; Garcia, 2008; Pavlik, 2007). For example, DPOs can use online communication to reply to information requests and meet the individual needs of tourists (Palmer, 2002). Therefore, these platforms allow potential tourists to feel personally connected to a particular destination (Fall, 2004).

As Drury (2008) explained, while promoting a good or service through traditional media focuses on delivering a message, engaging publics via social media "is about building a relationship and conversation with your audience" (p. 275), and facilitating dialog with key publics (e.g. Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Smith, 2010). A dialogic public relations approach "elevates publics to the status of communication equal with the organization" (Botan, 1997, p. 197), which is conducive to building relationships with past, present, and potential tourists.

Information shared through social media and other online platforms can have a significant impact on how consumers shop for tourism destinations, because it provides them with access to different viewpoints and opinions (O'Connor, Höpken, & Gretzel, 2008). Similarly, because organizations and consumers can co-create content and meaning about the destination, social media can have an immediate and far reaching effect on reputation (Owyang & Toll, 2007). This is also true in the case of nation brands and tourism destinations.

2.2. Destination promotion and branding

Scholarly work in tourism branding has advanced knowledge of how governments and private companies brand and promote tourism destinations (e.g. Anholt, 2004; Cai, 2002; Papadopoulos, 2004). Recent research has also shown that countries have a brand image and reputation that influences public opinion of these nations (Anholt, 1998; Caldwell & Freire, 2004; Jain & Chan-Olmsted, 2009). Additionally, perceptions about a nation have been found to influence the success of their tourism and foreign investment (Gfk Roper, n.d.).

Therefore, in managing their destination brands, countries are also concerned with positively affecting their reputation, i.e. "the aggregate of stakeholders' images of a country" (Passow, Fehlmann, & Grahlow, 2005, p. 311). A positive country reputation is essential for building a good nation brand, which can influence the public's intention to purchase a country's products or travel to that country.

Fan (2008) explained that every country "has a current image to its international audience, be it strong or weak, clear or vague" (Fan, 2008, p. 5). In other words, international publics have formed an idea of a country's reputation, and therefore it is in the country's best economic interest to attempt to brand or manage its image. Country reputations are based on personal experience, such as experience from travel to the country or use of the country's products; and second hand experience, obtained from word of mouth communication or information from the media (Yang, Shin, Lee, & Wrigley, 2008). Therefore tourism can be both a precursor to country reputation and a foundation for forming an opinion or attitude toward a country.

Similar to country reputation, a nation brand is a sum of the ideas or traits that stakeholders associate with a nation (Fan, 2008). As a strategic communication effort, nation branding "allows national governments to better manage and control the image they project to the world, and to attract the "right" kinds of investment, tourism, trade, and talent" (Aronczyk, 2008, p. 42). In a highly competitive environment, branding efforts are a way in which nations try to gain a competitive advantage in their tourism, investment, and business (Anholt, 2006).

Scholars have long been concerned with studying how brands distinguish themselves from competitors (e.g. Aaker, 1997; Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Guido, 2001; Freling & Forbes, 2005; Johar, Sengupta, & Aaker, 2005; Ramaseshan & Tsao, 2007). One approach has been exploring brands through an analysis of brand personality, or "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). In 1997, Aaker constructed a *Brand Personality Scale* (BPS), which categorized brands in five dimensions: *excitement*, *sincerity*, *competence*, *sophistication*, and *ruggedness*. Developed from a scale of human personality measures, Aaker's scale consists of 42 sub-traits corresponding to larger facets, or characteristics, which are part of each of the five dimensions (Table 1). This brand personality scale has been used in recent research exploring brand personalities and their influence on brand choices (e.g. Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; Fennis, 2008; Freling & Forbes, 2005; Keller, 2003; Murase & Bojanic, 2004; Opoku, Abratt, Bendixen, & Pitt, 2007).

Similarly, Aaker's scale has been applied to research about branding in tourism. For instance, Ekinci and Hosany (2006) investigated the brand personality traits that affect tourists' intentions to recommend a destination; Hosany, Ekinci, and Uysal (2007) explored the relationship between brand image and brand personality for tourist destinations; Pitt, Opoku,

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