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Linking the Essence of a Place Brand to Motivations to Visit

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This paper is dedicated to the late, much missed, Prof Johan van Rekom

Abstract

Current methods in destination branding seldom capture the essence of a brand in operationalizable terms. This research aims to apply causal maps to establish of the essence of a destination. Brand essence describes the cognitive features that cause affective attributes. The study applies cognitive causal modelling by employing a qualitative pre-study based on face to face personal interviews, Study 1 survey utilising a face to face questionnaire and Study 2 based on an online survey. Respondents for the pre-study and Study 1 were recruited using intercept sampling whereas the online sample was drawn with the help of an online consumer panel. The context (the Fens) has a difficult-to-define, almost ephemeral brand. For the Fens, countryside is the most causal attribute of affective outcomes of relaxed and friendly. The dimensions of brand essence reflect attributes that are liked by visitors, considered unique to the destination and have always been there, qualities that are highly useful in defining and promoting the differentiating features of the destination. The project will be developed to extend attention restoration and motivation theories by correlating motivations with causalities post-Covid. This future development will explore recovery from psychological distress during periods of extreme contexts and explore the influence of the changing context on motivations in choices of location to visit.

Keywords

Destination brand essence; cognitive causal modelling; causal maps; cognitive features; affective attributes

Introduction

Branding's significance in differentiating products, services, and increasingly places, highlights the need for unique added values to meet consumer needs and withstand competition (de Chernatony & McDonald, 2001). The concept, traditionally applied from an input perspective in product marketing, adopts an output perspective in tourism, focusing on how customers perceive and experience destination images (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Despite place branding's emergence as a significant field of study, particularly within tourism (Kavaratzis & Dennis, 2018), the challenge remains to leverage a destination's inherent attributes effectively (Gilbert, 1990). Recent decades have seen extensive research into how a destination's brand image affects loyalty, residents', and other stakeholders' perceptions, alongside brand equity (e.g., Kotsi et al., 2018; Frias-Jamilena et al., 2018). While quantitative studies often narrow in on specific attributes, potentially overlooking the brand's holistic aspect, qualitative research offers a more comprehensive view but lacks the comparative and statistical analysis advantageous for market segmentation and competitive positioning (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008). This paper aims to bridge that gap by exploring the causal foundations of destination brand image, a somewhat overlooked aspect in current literature (van Rekom & Verlegh, 2011), thereby contributing to our understanding of how affective attributes of a brand image are developed.

Literature review

The literature review delves into the essence of branding, specifically its application to tourism destinations and the significant role of cognitive and affective attributes in shaping destination loyalty and brand equity. A brand's essence, derived from its core features, plays a crucial role in attracting visitors and fostering loyalty, as established by Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou, and Kaplanidou (2015) and supported by a meta-analysis by Zhang, Fu, Cai, and Lu (2014), which finds positive impacts of these attributes on loyalty. The review acknowledges the distinction between cognitive (beliefs and knowledge) and affective (emotional responses) aspects of a destination's image and points out a research gap in identifying specific cognitive attributes that influence affective outcomes.

Further, it discusses the importance of considering various stakeholders' perceptions, including local entrepreneurs, visitors, and residents, in destination branding strategies, as these groups' understanding of brand image and brand equity can vary significantly. Unique attributes of a destination are highlighted as essential for creating memorable visitor experiences and enhancing brand equity, with local culture and products acting as key elements.

The review also touches on the role of information stored in visitors' memory, emotional connections to a place, and the perceived authenticity and personality of a destination brand in influencing visitation intentions. It introduces cognitive causal modelling, proposed by van Rekom, Jacobs, and Verlegh (2006), as a method to ascertain a brand's essence by exploring the coherence between its features and the causal relationships among attributes. This approach is rooted in cognitive

psychology, emphasising that attributes causing other attributes are seen as more central to a brand's essence.

Despite the acknowledged benefits of understanding causal relations between a destination's attributes, empirical research in this area is sparse, with van Rekom and Verlegh (2011) being one of the few to apply cognitive causal modelling to destination branding. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how attributes that cause or are caused by other attributes are perceived as central to a destination's brand. It posits that attributes viewed as long-established and unique are integral to the brand's essence and that these dimensions, along with liking, comprehensively cover the evaluations of a destination brand's essence. The following hypotheses propose a positive relationship among these dimensions, aiming to enrich our understanding of the causal nature of destination brand essence and its multidimensional evaluation by consumers.

H1: The more people believe that an attribute causes or is caused by the other attributes of a destination, the more they will perceive that attribute to be central to the destination.

H2: There is a positive, significant relationship among the proposed dimensions of peoples' evaluations of the essence of a destination brand, indicated by perceptions of a) long-established, b) uniqueness, and c) liking of individual attributes.

Study context

The Fens are a naturally marshy region in eastern England. Most of the area was drained several centuries ago, resulting in a flat, damp, low-lying agricultural region. The Fens are a fertile arable region for grains and vegetables, containing around half of the grade 1 agricultural land in England. Despite years of promotion, the Fens are still to develop a positive destination brand and the economic impact of tourism is low compared to, say, the nearby city of Lincoln. Of 34 visitor attractions in the Fens, only four have attendances over 60,000 per year.

Previous research on destination branding has predominantly focused on the national level (Pike, 2002). However, the case of the Fens illustrates that regions within a country can exhibit significant diversity, each possessing unique images and facing specific marketing challenges. The Fens stand out as a region offering attributes that attract visitors seeking tranquility and natural beauty, along with serene outdoor pursuits. Despite these appealing features, the area has yet to establish a strong brand identity, which is reflected in less than optimal visitor numbers, even after various marketing efforts. Nonetheless, there is a strong interest among local stakeholders to enhance the Fens' brand. This makes the Fens an ideal case study for exploring how to capture the essence of a destination's brand.

Method

This research aims to establish causal maps to understand the essence of the Fens as a tourist destination by analysing attributes that form its core in tourists' perceptions, aiding in its marketing and positioning. Recognising the importance of aligning destination imagery with visitors' preconceptions, this study leverages cognitive causal mapping, a method blending attribute-based comparability with qualitative

insights, as pioneered by van Rekom et al. (2006). This approach seeks to identify core attributes deemed intrinsic to the destination brand by eliciting perceived causal relationships among destination attributes. It highlights how these core attributes contribute to the authenticity and uniqueness of the area, differentiating the Fens from other destinations.

The methodology encompasses a preliminary qualitative study and two subsequent quantitative surveys. The initial pre-study involved forty respondents gathered through intercept sampling at key Fens locations, identifying ten attributes frequently associated with the destination. This qualitative phase aimed to pinpoint relevant Fens brand features to inform the hypothesis-testing questionnaire.

Study 1 utilised a questionnaire to measure how respondents perceive the causality between different attributes, adopting a layout facilitating the mapping of these causal relationships. The survey explored the impact of cognitive attributes on affective outcomes, drawing on previous research (e.g., Li et al., 2010; Styliadis et al., 2017). It included baseline questions to ease respondents into the survey, followed by inquiries assessing the perceived causality among ten identified attributes. This phase evaluated two distinct questionnaire layouts to optimise data collection while retaining methodological rigour. Significant findings from this phase underscored the cognitive-to-affective causality, affirming the study's hypothesis about brand essence. Further, Study 1 incorporated additional questions to assess the long-standing presence, uniqueness, and appeal of each attribute, aligning with van Rekom et al.'s (2006; 2009) methods. These inquiries helped refine the understanding of each attribute's contribution to the Fens' brand essence.

Study 2 sought to simplify the data collection process by employing an online consumer panel, eliminating the need for participants to draw arrows as in Study 1. This approach aimed to streamline the assessment of cognitive causal relationships while maintaining the integrity of the data collected. A commercial organisation experienced in academic surveys facilitated the selection of a representative subset of respondents who had visited the Fens, excluding local residents.

Comparative analysis of face-to-face and online survey responses revealed consistencies in identifying key Fens attributes, although some demographic differences were noted between the two sampling methods. Despite these variances, the core attributes identified — flatland, big skies, agriculture, and countryside — remained consistent, affirming their centrality to the Fens' brand essence. However, the correlation between causality perceptions gathered through different methods showed variability, necessitating further examination.

In summary, this study employs a mixed-methods approach to cognitive causal mapping, blending qualitative insights with quantitative analysis to elucidate the essence of the Fens as a tourist destination. By identifying and evaluating the core attributes through various survey methodologies, the research offers a nuanced understanding of how these attributes collectively contribute to the destination's brand essence, providing valuable insights for destination marketing and management.

Findings

The project will be developed to extend attention restoration and motivation theories by correlating motivations with causalities post-Covid. This future development will explore recovery from psychological distress during periods of uncertainty (e.g. global pandemic or other extreme contexts such as wars) and explore the influence of the changing context on motivations in choices of location to visit.

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