



The Role of Tourism Experiences in Attaching Consumers to Regional Brands

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Abstract

Purpose – This research aims at improving understanding of why and how the experience of visiting a region contributes to emotionally attaching tourists to place-based brands.

Design/methodology/approach – Using attribution theory, the paper presents a set of hypotheses regarding the mediating role of brand attributions in the relationships between tourists' experiences (pleasure, arousal, satisfaction) and their emotional attachments to place-based brands. The hypotheses are tested on a sample of 3,460 visitors to fifteen international regions using wine (i.e., regional umbrella brands such as Bordeaux, Rioja, Tuscany, Napa, and Western Hills) as an example category.

Findings – The results suggest that causal attributions fully mediate the influence of pleasure and satisfaction on brand attachments, whereas arousal has a direct effect; brand name strength, and place attachment enhance effects of the experience.

Practical implications – The attachment mechanism presented in this paper aids tourism and wine managers in their mutual attempts to provide consumers with memorable affective experiences and in attaching them to brands.

Keywords arousal, attachment, brand name strength, causal attributions, pleasure, tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

Consumers' affective experiences are important in a variety of contexts as their influence goes beyond immediate, short-term outcomes, such as evaluations, approach/avoidance, and spending. These experiences impact the longer-term relationship between the consumer and objects associated with the experience including brands (Brakus et al., 2009). Marketing practice also acknowledges such a link between affective experiences and attachment as managers directing and positioning regional brands (i.e., typical foods, arts and crafts, or apparel originating from a designated geographical place) realize that, as tourism destinations, their places provide an important means of attaching visitors to their brand (Iversen and Hem, 2008).

Previous research has examined relations between consumer affective experiences and their attachment to places in a tourism, leisure, and recreation context (e.g., Gross and Brown, 2006; Hammitt et al., 2006). This research has not examined, however, the impact of affect on consumers' attachments to brands when those are an integral part of this experience. Other research has examined the impact of consumer experiences on brand evaluation in retail environments, museums, brandscapes and other contexts where the experience is strongly associated with a focal brand (Hollenbeck et al., 2008; Kozinets et al., 2002). Whereas previous studies have focused on a direct relationship between consumer affect and post-visit brand attachment (e.g., Orth et al., 2010), our investigation examines the attributional process that explains such an association. This approach is consistent with the thinking of several researchers (i.e., Feeney, 2004; Gallo and Smith, 2001; Hammit et al., 2006) that cognitive mechanisms are important, as they can more fully explain the experience – attachment linkage. Previous studies, however, did not examine consumer relationships to wine brands. Our study synthesizes research by examining the impact of affect (i.e., pleasure, arousal, and satisfaction evoked during the visit to an international tourism destination) on consumers' attachment to regional brands with downstream effects onto brand loyalty and the willingness to pay a price premium. Brand name strength and place attachment are examined as possible moderators. Thus, this research seeks to build upon, integrate, and extend several streams of research by assessing the brand attachment implications of tourism experiences. These relationships are fundamental to the basic relationship between tourism managers, wine managers, and their customers.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Attachments

Consumers can become emotionally attached to brands (Thomson et al., 2005) and places (Giuliani and Feldman, 1993). Representing a developmental bond between an individual and a target (Bowlby, 1979), this attachment varies in strength and predicts an individual's commitment to the relationship target (Thomson et al., 2005). Determinants of diverging attachments include characteristics of the target, human use of and experience with the target, and social, psychological, and cultural interpretations and constructed meanings of people-target interactions (Robins et al., 2000). Research has further suggested that consumer affective experiences have the power to influence their attachments to targets prominently featured during these experiences (e.g., Gross and Brown, 2006; Hammitt et al., 2006; Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001; Orth et al., 2010). Affect is thus thought to modify behavior by creating an attachment to a target.

Affective Experiences

Affect experienced by consumers while visiting a place influences their behavior (Sherman et al., 1997; Michon et al., 2005). For example, store-evoked affect has a powerful impact on a variety of short-term outcomes such as product evaluations, approach/avoidance, and in-store spending (Chebat and Michon, 2003; Turley and Milliman, 2000). More importantly, affect evoked while visiting a tourism destination can create an attachment to that place (e.g., Gross and Brown, 2006; Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001). Researchers have most frequently conceptualized affect as pleasure and arousal (e.g., Chebat and Michon, 2003; Sherman et al., 1997), and have examined the impact of these reactions on satisfaction (e.g., Oliver, 1997; Sherman et al., 1997; Wirtz et al., 2000).

Attributions in Response to Experiences

Because the formation of attachments involves relational and motivational processes, attribution theory can be particularly helpful in understanding consumer perceptions of what part of the experience is responsible for the positive (or negative) affective outcome (Weiner, 2000). The central theme underlying attribution theory is that causal analysis is inherent in an individual's need to understand events (Weiner, 2000), such as why visiting a region generates pleasure, arousal, and satisfaction. For the present study, causal attribution (to brands) is defined as the cognition a consumer generates to infer the cause of a visit's affective outcome (e.g., "The region's wines played a key role in making the visit pleasant").

We propose two factors influencing consumers' attributional responses to tourism experiences. First, affective experiences (pleasure, arousal, satisfaction) are posited to influence causal attributions. These attributional responses, in turn, are expected to affect consumers' attachments to brands. Therefore, this study suggests that attributions mediate the presupposed visitor experience – place-based brand attachment relation. Such a model is consistent with theoretical frameworks of relational exchanges which suggest that attributions mediate affective experiences' effect on a person's attachment to the focal object (e.g., Diamond, 2001; Babu, 2004). Additional support for the mediational role played by attributions in influencing attachments stems from preliminary findings in the literatures on tourism (Babu, 2004; Zins, 2002), brand management (Brakus et al., 2009), consumer affiliation behaviors (Menon and Kahn, 2002), store environments (e.g., Babin and Attaway, 2000), and satisfaction (Oliver, 1997).

The influential role of brand attributions on brand attachment is further consistent with well-established consumer-brand relationship models (e.g., Fournier, 1998). These models postulate a direct link between self-image support of a brand and the strength of the bond between consumer and brand. In other words, when consumers attribute support of their self-image to the brand, attachments tend to be stronger. Extending this notion to the current context, we posit that brand attributions will exert a positive effect on attachments. We expect this because as consumers link the positive nature of the affective experience to a brand (via brand attributions), their attachment should be positively affected.

Brand Name Strength and Place Attachment

Prior research advocates that the effects of consumers' positive affective experiences on brand attachments are likely to increase when prior positive brand impressions exist in consumers' memories (Hollenbeck et al., 2008; Kaltcheva and Weitz, 1999; McAlexander et al., 2002). Consistent with this notion, we expect that the strength of a brand name is likely to influence consumers' attributional processing of affective experiences. A more favorable (stronger) brand name is expected to increase the bonding effect of the tourism experience because impression-consistent information is typically attributed to the brand rather than deflected and discounted (Laczniak et al., 2001). Such a view is consistent with attribution research, which suggests that attributions directed at the focal object are likely to be generated by receivers

who have favorable associations with it (Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006). Given the cognitive process mechanisms of attributional biasing (Mezulis et al., 2004), and discounting (Posavac et al., 2004), receivers should attribute positive affect towards the focal brand when the positive experience is consistent with a favorable brand name. On the other hand, less positive affect is more likely to fit with consumers' associations for less favorable brand names and should attenuate attachments or at least leave them unaffected (c.f., Brakus et al., 2009).

Previous research further suggests that positive affective experiences are likely to be attributed to the region when prior place attachment exists (Gross and Brown, 2006; Hammitt et al., 2006). Consistent with this notion, we expect that the effect of consumers' existing bond with a region is likely to influence consumers' attributional processing of affective experiences. A stronger place attachment is expected to strengthen the brand attachment effect of the tourism experience because expectation-consistent affect is typically assimilated rather than deflected and discounted (Laczniak et al., 2001). Such a view is consistent with attribution research which suggests that attributions directed at the focal object are unlikely to be generated by receivers who have less favorable associations with it (Kaltcheva and Weitz, 1999). Given the cognitive process mechanisms of attributional biasing (Mezulis et al., 2004), and discounting (Posavac et al., 2004), receivers should attribute positive affect towards region-based brands when the positive experience coincides with a prior attachment to the place. On the other hand, less positive affect is more likely to fit with consumers' lesser attachments to places and should attenuate brand attributions (c.f., Brakus et al., 2009).

3. EMPIRICAL STUDY

Participants and Procedures

To test the hypothesized effects, we conducted an extensive field study. Participants were visitors to fifteen regional destinations in eight countries including Australia (Western Hills), Austria (Burgenland, Wachovia), France (Bordeaux, Burgundy), Hungary (Eger, Tokaj), Italy (Marche, Tuscany), Spain (Ribera del Duero, Rioja), Switzerland (Geneva), and the United States (Napa, Sierra Foothills, Sonoma).

We recruited a total of 3,460 male and female participants through intercepts at various tourist attractions in the participating regions. Participants received a variety of regional specialties for their collaboration. Because of missing data, 137 participants were dropped from subsequent analyses. Thus, the final sample size was 3,323 respondents (48.7% women and 51.3% men) who were on average 39.5 years of age ($SD = 15.8$), and traveled a mean distance of 737 miles ($SD = 1,823$). The use of such a heterogeneous sampling frame is recommended as theory test procedures require selection of respondent groups such that rigorous examinations can be conducted (Calder et al., 1982).

Participants were selected by convenience and intercepted by trained interviewers who handed them a paper questionnaire in the language of their choice (i.e., English, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, or Spanish). These questionnaires were created through translation and back-translation procedures to ascertain cultural equivalence (Douglas and Craig, 2007). Following interviewer instructions to answer all questions to the best of their knowledge, participants completed the questionnaire without further interviewer interference on experiential aspects of their visit to the region, attributions, brand attachment, place attachment, perceived strength of the place-based brand, and behavioral intentions. After completion participants returned the questionnaire into locked boxes, and were thanked and debriefed by the interviewers who then handed over the incentives.

Measures

Measures for independent variables included established multi-item batteries for pleasure and arousal (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974), satisfaction (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002), brand name strength (CITE) and place attachment (CITE). Dependent measures included multi-item measures of causal attribution (i.e. measures of the strength of place-based brand attributions), brand attachment (Bergami and Bagozzi (2000), loyalty (Sirgy et al. (1991), and willingness to pay (Thomson et al. 2005).

Closely following previous research (Laczniak, DeCarlo and Ramaswami, 2001; Lichtenstein and Bearden, 1986; Weiner, 1980), a multi-item scale was developed to assess brand attributions for the cause of the experience provided by the visit. Specific attributions were developed with the aid of Orth, Wolf and Dodd (2005) and Orth and Kahle's (2008) levels of benefits. Summary statistics, reliabilities, and fit indices for the study's constructs confirm reliability and discriminant validity (Bagozzi et al., 1991).

Results

Downstream effects of brand attachment on loyalty and willingness-to-pay a price premium were assessed using regression analysis. Attachment had a significant positive effect on loyalty ($\beta = .65$, $F = 207.7$, $p < .01$) and willingness-to-pay a price premium ($\beta = .26$, $F = 102.5$, $p < .01$), a finding that corroborates the importance of brand attachment in the investigated context.

To determine if the attribution variable mediates the relation between the tourism experience and brand attachment, we followed a two-step procedure (Baron and Kenny, 1986). The findings provide initial evidence that brand attributions account for all or part of the relation between pleasure and satisfaction and brand attachment. Given the marginally significant results for satisfaction and pleasure, we employed additional statistical methods to more formally assess mediation (MacKinnon et al., 1995). Specifically, to test whether brand attributions carry the influence of pleasure, arousal, and satisfaction to brand attachment we conducted Sobel tests (Preacher and Hayes, 2004). Consistent with MacKinnon et al. (2002) the results (z- and p-values) of the Aroian test corroborate our initial conclusion; they indicate that brand attributions fully mediate effects of pleasure and satisfaction but not arousal. The directional nature of the coefficient reflecting the influence of brand attributions on brand attachment supports the claim that brand attributions relate positively to brand attachment.

To test the claim that the name strength of a place-based brand will enhance effects of the tourism experience on brand attributions, we performed a series of moderated regression analyses for each of the affective experience variables (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Irwin and McClelland, 2003). Results indicate a significant effect of the Affective experience x Brand name strength interaction term for arousal on attachments but not for pleasure or satisfaction on brand attributions. Further, the significant interaction was in the predicted direction suggesting that brand name strength enhances rather than mutes effects from arousal on attachments.

Finally, we tested the claim that consumers' attachment to the tourism destination will enhance effects of affective experiences on brand attributions. Results indicate that the interaction between tourism experiences and place attachment is significant for arousal (on attachment) and satisfaction (on brand attributions). In addition place attachment has a direct positive effect on both brand attributions and brand attachment.

4. DISCUSSION AND OUTLOOK

This study develops and tests hypotheses relating to the attributional responses used by consumers when experiencing affect during their visit to international wine regions. In general, the results support the hypotheses and provide several key contributions.

First - except for arousal - causal attributions mediate the affective experience – brand attachment relation. Thus, not only infer consumers causal attributions when experiencing pleasure and satisfaction while visiting a destination, but they use these attributions to form subsequent attachments to regional wine brands. Second, the strength of the place-based brand's name influences consumers' responses to the affective experience. The examination of attributional mechanisms bridging two categories, namely, tourism destinations and regional wine brands, adds to our understanding of the attachment phenomenon. Third, this research found that different brand name strength and place attachments lead consumers to form differential attributions.

The findings also hold a number of implications for managers. First, managers of regional wine brands should be aware that visitors to their region actively process their experience and form strong brand attachments under certain conditions. For example, it appears that stronger attachments are formed for more favorable brand names, and when consumers are more attached to the place. Thus, it appears that brand managers may be well-advised to spend resources on building brand name recognition, and focus on visitors whose primary interest may initially lie more with the region than with regional brands. Second, these results also imply that consumers have the ability to extend their attachment from places to wines. Wine managers are therefore encouraged to join forces with tourism managers, as making visits pleasant, arousing and satisfying likely is beneficial to both constituents.

Third, results suggest that managers can enhance the potential effects of positive tourism experiences by gaining high levels of strength or equity for their brands. Such a view is consistent with theoretical notions (Keller, 2003) contending that high levels of equity allow consumer perceptions about a brand to be resistant to external forces. Previous research suggested that higher levels of brand equity may be gained by enhancing familiarity and reinforcing positive affect for that brand (Farquhar, 1989).

In conclusion, this paper represents an initial attempt to model a process consumers employ when experiencing pleasure, arousal, and satisfaction in tourism settings. The results indicate that such affect not only impacts place-based brand attachments directly, but also has an indirect effect through causal attributions made by consumers. In addition, the results highlight the usefulness of brand and place factors in influencing the effects.

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