

**EXAMINING THE STRUCTURAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DESTINATION
IMAGE AND LOYALTY:
A CASE STUDY OF SOUTH CAROLINA, USA**

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Abstract

The present study tests the structural relationship between tourism destination image and loyalty. Building on extant branding and destination image literature, this paper speculates that tourists' overall destination image has a significant and positive effect on their loyalty to the destination. Further, overall destination image is comprised of cognitive, affective, and conative components, while loyalty consists of an attitudinal and a behavioral dimension. An online panel survey on American travelers' brand perception of South Carolina, USA as a vacation destination showed that the image-loyalty link did exist. It confirmed that destination image plays a critical role in destination loyalty building.

Keywords: Destination image, destination loyalty, branding, online panel survey

INTRODUCTION

Destination branding has drawn wide attention in recent years (Cai, 2002; Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2004). Branding refers to the efforts "to create, maintain, protect, and enhance" (Kotler & Armstrong, 2001, p. 301) one particular brand to secure sustainable competitive advantage. Destination marketers traditionally do not consider tourism locales (e.g., tourist destinations, regions, and nations) brandable (Kotler & Gertner, 2004). It was generally believed that a destination is a product or "supra-product," where all travel-related services and goods offered by the destination collectively constitute one vacation experience for tourists (Ahmed, 1991; McCleary, 1987; Van Raaij, 1986). It was not until recent years, when an escalating variety and amount of new destinations participated in the competition for tourism dollars, that destinations tackled the idea of branding "to address potential intangibility and variety problems" (Keller, 1998, p. 14). Cai (2002, p. 722) defined destination branding as "selecting a consistent element mix to identify and distinguish it through positive image building."

Marketing scholars have long emphasized the importance of branding (Allison & Uhl, 1964; Gardner & Levy, 1955). Many have approached branding issues from a strategy perspective such as brand equity management (Aaker, 1991; , 1992), and brand extension (Broniarczyk & Alba, 1994; Keller & Aaker, 1992). Another group of researchers have attempted to investigate how customers process, utilize, and respond to brand-related information. Along this thread of research, two major research streams have emerged in both general marketing and tourism literature: customers' brand/destination image (or in a broader sense, brand/destination knowledge), and brand/destination loyalty. While numerous papers have been published on these two constructs, few studies have linked the

two constructs and empirically tested their relationship (Lessig, 1973), beyond intuitive assertions. Even fewer have tried to extend the discussion to a tourism destination context (Cai, Wu, & Bai, 2004; Chi & Qu, 2007). The present paper follows the consumer-based line of brand research, and attempts to associate tourism destination image with destination loyalty. Of particular interest is the effect of repeat visitors' destination image on their level of loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Keller (1993, p. 3) defined brand image as “perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory”, and suggested that there exist three major categories of brand associations: attributes (descriptive features characterizing a product), benefits (the personal values and meanings attached to the attributes), and attitudes (consumers' overall evaluations of a brand). Interestingly, similar conceptualizations of image components can also be found in the tourism literature. Gartner (1993, p. 193) posited that destination image is “formed by three distinctly different but hierarchically interrelated components: cognitive, affective, and conative.” Specifically, cognitive image refers to the beliefs or knowledge about a destination's attributes, whereas affective image is one's feeling and attachment to the destination (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). In Gartner's terms (1993, p. 196), conative image is “analogous to behavior” as it is the “action component” of image. A perusal reveals that Gartner's typology is parallel to Keller's attributes/ benefits/ attitudes categories (Cai, 2002). Further, the cognitive (beliefs) and affective (feelings) evaluations, and arguably together with the conative evaluations, form an overall image of the destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

Brand loyalty is one of the most fundamental research topics in the field of marketing (Sheth & Sisodia, 1999). Leisure and tourism scholars have also prioritized “loyalty” as a subject of special importance for research and practices (Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998). Until recently, the conceptualization of loyalty has been adopted from three major approaches: loyalty as customers' behavioral consistency, attitudinal predisposition toward purchasing a brand, or both (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; Morais, 2000; Rundle-Thiele, 2005). Day (1969) argued that genuine loyalty is consistent purchase behavior rooted in positive attitudes toward the brand. Many researchers have adopted this composite approach (Dick & Basu, 1994; Jacoby & Kyner, 1973; Petrick, 2004). Although some have proposed that the two-dimensional conceptualization provides inadequate guidance for practitioners designing loyalty programs (Rundle-Thiele, 2005), and loyalty may contain more dimensions (Oliver, 1999), recent empirical evidences have revalidated the traditional two-dimensional conceptualization of loyalty (Jones & Taylor, 2007; Li & Petrick, in press-b). The line of studies on tourist destination loyalty (Kozak, Huan, & Beaman, 2002; Niininen & Riley, 2003; Oppermann, 1999) has also followed this view.

Marketing literature has shown sparse evidence that favorable image may contribute to loyalty (Aaker, 1992; Bloemer & de Ruyter, 1998; Lessig, 1973; Tidwell & Horgan, 1992). For instance, Lessig (1973) study on store image showed that image information could help predict store loyalty. An experimental study by Tidwell and Horgan (1992) revealed that brand loyalty is related to both consumers' self-image and their brand image/attitude. However, such work in a destination context is still lacking (see Cai et al. (2004) and Chi

and Qu (2007) for two notable exceptions). Further, the relationship between image and loyalty revealed in previous studies is not as consistent as one might expect. For example, Cai et al. (2004) only identified a significant and positive association between visitors' affective image and loyalty. Chi and Qu (2007) suggest that the image-loyalty link is mediated by tourist satisfaction. Bloemer and de Ruyter (1998, p. 503) concluded that "the exact relationship between store image and store loyalty has remained inconclusive."

Following extant literature on tourism destination image and destination loyalty, this paper speculates that tourists' overall destination image has a significant and positive effect on their destination loyalty. Further, overall destination image is comprised of cognitive, affective, and conative components, while loyalty consists of an attitudinal and a behavioral dimension. Since the attitude-behavior link has been well documented in the psychology literature (Ajzen, 2000; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), it is postulated that attitudinal loyalty will lead to behavioral loyalty. More formally,

Hypothesis 1a: Tourists' cognitive image significantly influences their affective image.

Hypothesis 1b: Tourists' affective image of a destination significantly influences their conative image.

Hypothesis 1c: Tourists' overall image is significantly and positively related to their cognitive image.

Hypothesis 1d: Tourists' overall image is significantly and positively related to their affective image.

Hypothesis 1e: Tourists' overall image is significantly and positively related to their conative image.

Hypothesis 2a: Tourists' overall destination image significantly and positively influences their attitudinal loyalty.

Hypothesis 2b: Tourists' attitudinal loyalty significantly and positively influences their behavioral loyalty.

METHODOLOGY

This paper reports empirical results of an online panel study designed to assess American leisure travelers' loyalty to the State of South Carolina (SC) as a vacation destination. This study utilized a relatively new survey approach, namely online panel survey. Online survey panels "are made up of individuals who are pre-recruited to participate on a more or less predictable basis in surveys over a period of time" (Dennis, 2001, p. 34). Most such panels are professionally managed by survey companies, and pre-grouped into different panels based on consumption attributes. Despite some concern regarding the validity of information collected from online panel studies, particularly the sampling bias issue (Duffy, Smith, Terhanian, & Bremer, 2005; McWilliams & Nadkarni, 2005), it has been concluded that online panel surveys is a valid and efficient research method, particularly when the representativeness of public opinion is not the primary concern of a study (Li & Petrick, in press-b).

To conduct online panel surveys, researchers need to specify characteristics of the people they want to study to the survey company. The survey company will then select people

from one or more of their panels, and invite them to participate. Online survey panelists are compensated for their participation, which hence generally result in prompt and complete responses. In this study, participants are SC visitors who are adult residents (aged 18 or above) of states east of Mississippi, and who have taken at least one leisure vacation in SC in the past three years.

Cognitive image was measured via a list of 24 image attributes based on extensive literature review (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2002; Li & Vogelsong, 2006), anchored by 1 (offers very little) and 7 (offers very much). Following Baloglu and Brinberg (1997), affective image was measured using four pairs of adjectives developed by Russel and Pratt (1980). Conative image was measured by a one-item scale on the respondents' likelihood of visiting SC again (Pike & Ryan, 2004), whereas overall image was measured via a single 10-point item asking respondents: "How would you rate your overall impression of SC as a tourism destination..." Attitudinal loyalty was measured using a four-item scale (Back & Parks, 2003; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000). Finally, behavioral loyalty was measured by proportion of brand purchase (Cunningham, 1956; Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004).

FINDINGS

The survey was conducted between May 30 and June 11, 2007. For the purpose of this study, invalid responses, multivariate outliers, as well as responses from first-time visitors were deleted. This results in an effective sample size of 529. This sample included 50.9 percent female respondents with an average age of 45.6, with the vast majority white (87.3%), employed full- or part-time (72.8%), and married (69.9%). Approximately half (54.9%) had a college degree or more, and 45.5 percent earned a household income between \$50,000 to \$100,000 in 2006. In the past three years, respondents had taken an average of 4.5 vacations anywhere in the world, among which 1.92 vacations were taken in SC. In their lifetime, they had made 8.74 leisure trips to SC.

A structural equation modeling (SEM) procedure was employed to analyze the data. Missing values were estimated using mean substitution (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). To address multivariate nonnormal distribution, the authors decided to use nonparametric bootstrapping (Byrne, 2001; Kline, 2005), based on 500 bootstrap samples. The structural equation modeling procedure was conducted in several stages:

Stage 1: Identifying Underlying Dimensions of Cognitive Image

An exploratory factor analysis was performed to determine the underlying dimensionality of cognitive image, employing principle axis factoring extraction method with oblimin rotation. Using pattern matrix for interpretation, the author retained all items with primary loadings greater than .40 and with no cross loading exceeding 0.40 on two or more factors (Chi & Qu, 2007; Costello & Osborne, 2005). A three-factor 20-item solution was reached, explaining 63.9 percent of the total variance. These three factors are attractions, entertainment, and culture and history. Table 1 presents the EFA results.

Stage 2: Measurement Model and Construct Property

In light of the EFA results, the author averaged the items in each of the three dimensions of

cognitive image to create an index for each dimension. The measurement model was assessed using confirmatory factor analysis, where all multi-item factors involved are assumed to covary with each other (Kline, 2005). The goodness-of-fit statistics, with χ^2 (41, N=529) =187.029, $p<0.001$, CFI=0.973, GFI=0.936, RMSEA=0.082, indicated a satisfactory fit. The measurement model was then used to assess the psychometric property of cognitive image, affective image, and attitudinal loyalty.

Stage 3: Testing the Hypotheses

The final phase of the analysis included the simultaneous estimation of the measurement and structural models. Again, the goodness-of-fit statistics, with χ^2 (73, N=529) =352.532, $p<0.001$, CFI=0.956, GFI=0.913, RMSEA=0.085, indicated a satisfactory fit. All hypotheses were supported.

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

The present study tested the structural relationships between tourism destination image and loyalty. Building on extant branding and destination image literature, it was hypothesized that overall destination image would positively influence tourists' attitudinal loyalty, which then lead to behavioral loyalty. An online panel survey on American travelers' brand perception of South Carolina as a vacation destination showed that the image-loyalty link did exist. It confirmed that destination image plays a critical role in destination loyalty building.

The fierce competition in destination marketing today has made it imperative to retain tourists and encourage repeat visits. This study empirically evidenced that a tourist with a more positive image of a destination could be more loyal to the place, and hence more likely to come back. Traditional wisdom holds that building positive image will help a destination enter potential tourists' choice set, and favorably position itself against its competitors (Crompton, 1992). This study suggests that destination image building is also important in bringing tourists back.

The conceptualization of destination image and loyalty in this paper may provide a general guideline for destination brand management. Specifically, destinations are recommended to focus their marketing efforts on improving the strength, favorability, and uniqueness of brand associations to build positive destination image (Keller, 1999). Destination marketers are also reminded that successful image promotion is not only about demonstrating facts (cognitive image) to the customers, but also about creating emotional attachment (affective image) and facilitating travel decisions (conative image).

The present paper suggests positive image may contribute to increased brand loyalty. Admittedly, the other way around, i.e., higher level of brand loyalty leading to a better destination image might also make conceptual sense. Previous studies have showed that committed customers are more likely to attend to information related to their favorite brand, and are more likely to interpret such information positively (Hofmeyr & Rice, 2000). Following this logic, one may assume that loyal tourists may hold a more positive destination image as a result of selective attention and distortion of destination information (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2006), as well as

efforts to reduce cognitive dissonance. If that is the case, then the proposed model could well be a recursive one. The author hence suggests future research to look into the potential reciprocal effect loyalty has on destination image.

Finally, the present study made a meaningful link between destination image and loyalty. Nevertheless, the loyalty literature has suggested numerous constructs as antecedents of loyalty (Jones, 2003; Li & Petrick, in press-a). For instance, Li and Petrick, based on the investment model from social psychology, suggest that brand loyalty was determined by customers' satisfaction level, investment size, and quality of alternatives. How destination image fits in that picture remains to be investigated. That is, the effect of image on loyalty building needs to be further determined when all other major determinants are also presented. Future research is warranted to continue exploring the role of image as to reach a more comprehensive understanding of tourist destination loyalty building.

TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1
THE HYPOTHESIZED MODEL OF DESTINATION IMAGE AND LOYALTY

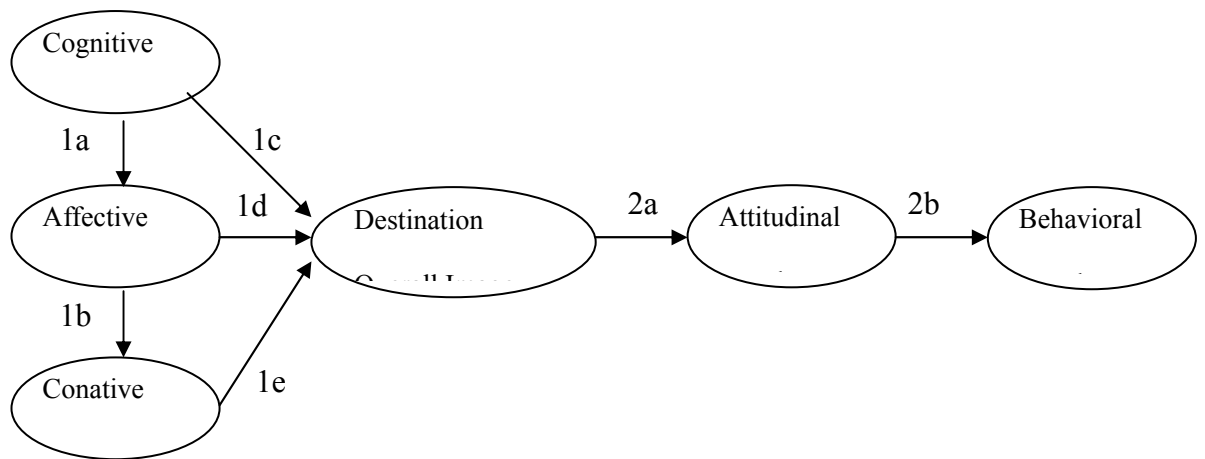


Table 1
UNDERLYING DIMENSIONS OF COGNITIVE IMAGE

	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained (%)	Communalities
<i>Factor 1: Attractions</i>	11.304	56.520	
Good value for money			0.607
Pleasant climate			0.548
Quality of infrastructure (e.g., roads, airports, water, etc.)			0.543
Easy access / Convenient transportation			0.564
Suitable accommodations			0.689
Relaxing atmosphere			0.758
Personal safety			0.695
Family oriented activities			0.538
Natural attractions and scenic beauty (such as lakes, rivers, and mountains)			0.504
Unpolluted/Unspoiled environment			0.662
Cleanness			0.752
Friendly people/Hospitality			0.716
Good customer service			0.757
Originality			0.665
Factor 2: Culture and History	1.418	7.088	
Historical landmarks and sites			0.696
Arts and cultural attractions			0.699
<i>Factor 3: Entertainment</i>	1.108	5.539	
Beaches and coastal areas			0.463
Good nightlife and entertainment			0.578
Shopping opportunities			0.675
Tourist information			0.668

Table 2
STRUCTURAL MODEL ANALYSIS

Direct Effects	Std Path Coefficient	Standard Error	Critical ratio (t-value)	p
Cognitive image --> Affective image	0.804 (0.803)	0.042 (0.055)	18.519	***
Affective image --> Conative image	0.687 (0.685)	0.046 (0.075)	18.463	***
Cognitive image --> Overall image	0.323 (0.321)	0.086 (0.121)	5.962	***
Affective image --> Overall image	0.281 (0.283)	0.102 (0.153)	4.648	***
Conative image --> Overall image	0.29 (0.288)	0.051 (0.078)	7.558	***
Overall image --> Attitudinal loyalty	0.563 (0.562)	0.037 (0.043)	14.164	***
Cognitive image--> cimage1	0.953 (0.954)	0.028 (0.034)	27.978	***
Cognitive image--> cimage2	0.654 (0.654)	0.047 (0.052)	16.238	***
Cognitive image--> cimage3	0.765 (0.764)	0.036 (0.046)	20.092	***
Attitudinal loyalty--> attloy1	0.854 (0.854)	-	-	***
Attitudinal loyalty--> attloy2	0.937 (0.938)	0.037 (0.035)	31.525	***
Attitudinal loyalty--> attloy3	0.959 (0.959)	0.034 (0.038)	32.625	***
Attitudinal loyalty--> attloy4	0.92 (0.9191)	0.034 (0.038)	30.057	***
Attitudinal loyalty--> Behavioral loyalty	0.264 (0.261)	0.01 (0.011)	6.104	***
Affective image--> aimage1	0.873 (0.873)	-	-	***
Affective image--> aimage2	0.922 (0.922)	0.035 (0.065)	30.498	***
Affective image--> aimage3	0.772 (0.77)	0.046 (0.061)	22.365	***
Affective image--> aimage4	0.887 (0.886)	0.037(0.065)	28.107	***

*** $p < 0.001$

Note: Bootstrapped estimates are listed in parenthesis

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