

The Effects of Brand Awareness on eWOM Intention: Perspectives in Community-based Festival Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This study aim to understand how tourists' festival experience influence destination/place brand equity building as well as moderate effect of brand awareness on eWOM intention. A web-based survey is prepared and is supposed to be performed in order to explore how tourists response eWOM dissemination. Based on customer-based brand equity (CBBE), moderate effect of brand awareness on eWOM intention is examined through second order structural equation modeling. Expected results provide insightful information about the importance of brand awareness in consumers' brand knowledge transaction and marketing performance. Expected results will clarify festival tourists' psychological characteristics in destination branding setting.

Keywords: Brand awareness, Brand equity, Community-based tourism, eWOM intension, Festival tourism

Introduction

Many rural communities harness local festivals as a tool for implementing destination marketing. The festivals can improve destination/place brand awareness and provide direct experience to visitors, helping form destination/place image. Destination marketers are aware of benefits of festivals in destination branding, and they formulate branding portfolio with local festivals. For example, there are about 300 local festivals in Indiana annually and each rural community holds multiple festivals on an annual basis so that marketers differentiate their tourism product (c.f. destination or branded place) from others. For instance, Tippecanoe County, Indiana annually holds nine festivals, each of which convey aspects of its place brand identity very effectively.

One of important tourism marketers' goals is to deliver destination brand identity and enhance destination brand equity, and marketing performance can be measured by two behavioral indicators such as revisit to destination and referral of destination choice. Especially, referrals of destination choice or sharing tourists' own experience about the destination have been regarded as most desired and influential marketing results to affect tourists' decision in choosing destination.

The advent of Internet and social networking sites (SNS) has given great opportunities and challenges to destination marketers. Virtually, marketers can perform destination marketing with low cost through Internet and SNSs when they have strong destination brand. Indeed, strong brand can be a key to survive in this tough marketing environment. Therefore, it is crucial for destination marketers to build strong brand by utilizing new e-marketing tool such as Twitter, Facebook, and MySpace.

Given that a community based festival is important marketing activities for destination brands and e-marketing is fundamentally changing destination marketing destination marketers are facing significant new challenges. For instance, to date there are limited academic or practical studies on the relationship between destination branding and e-WOM dissemination. The current study will address these challenges by answering the following research questions:

- 1) How does tourists' festival experience influence destination/place brand equity building?
- 2) When tourists receive e-WOM from disseminators, how is their customer based brand equity (CBBE) shaped in terms of brand awareness and brand image?
- 3) Does moderate effect of Brand Awareness on eWOM Intention?

Literature review

Development of WOM and eWOM

WOM related research topics were initiated in the 1940s and actively studied in 1960s (Arndt, 1967; Buttle, 1998; Dichter, 1966; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). According to the Arndt's definition, WOM is "face-to-face" and informal communication between customers about products, companies, and brand. Westbrook (1987) extended WOM's definition in post-purchase context, saying that "all informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services or their sellers." That is, WOM is an interpersonal communication between customers and its main contents are all about customers' experience and emotional response to product attributes. With

development of Information technology, eWOM has emerged into marketing strategies. For example, Buttle (1998) insisted that WOM can be delivered by electronic media such as website and virtual space, naming the new form of WOM as virtual WOM. As eWOM and WOM showed conceptual closeness in marketing, eWOM was regarded as extended form of WOM (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004).

eWOM and Consumer-based Destination Brand Equity

In relationship marketing, a brand community has attracted the attention of marketers because they realized that brand community can affect members' perceptions and behavior as well as maintain brand loyalty (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Andersen, 2005; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). With the popularity of the Internet as information searching tool and information distributor, traditional brand community evolved into a virtual brand community. Consequently, WOM communication has changed into eWOM communication, which can overcome space and time constraints for exchanging information (Andersen, 2005; McWilliam, 2000).

Brand research has been studied extensively on center around two dominant brand equity theories, which are Aaker's brand equity model and Keller's consumer based brand equity model (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 2003). Aaker's model involved five key constructs such as brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand association, brand awareness, and market behavior as company's market performance. Keller's brand equity model used two key constructs like brand awareness and brand images. He named brand equity as brand knowledge (Keller, 1993). According to Keller's model, brand awareness is most important component of brand equity and brand associations build brand image. eWOM communication can be seen as a mode to transfer consumer-based brand equity to eWOM receivers, and a marketing tool to improve brand equity. Two conceptual research models are as follow:

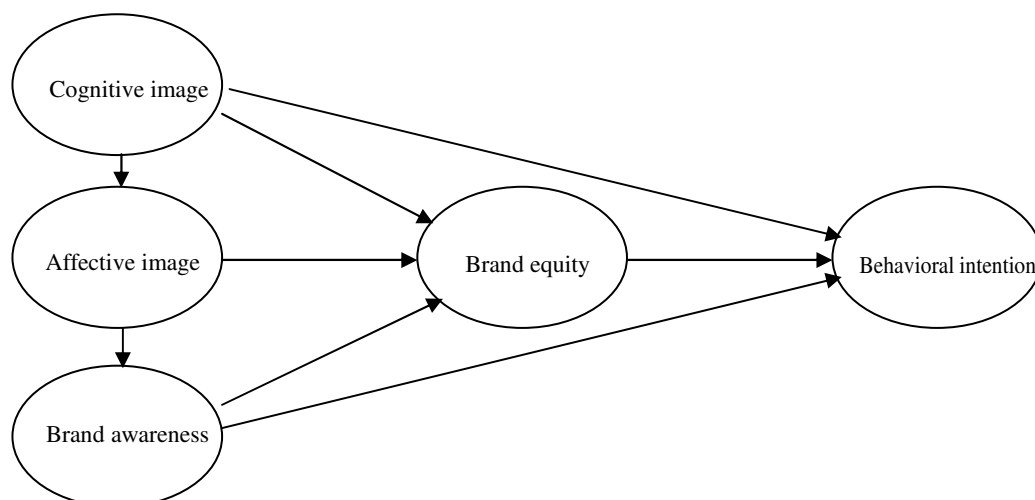


Figure 1 Exploring the Relationship among Brand Image, Brand Awareness, Brand Equity, and Behavioral Intention

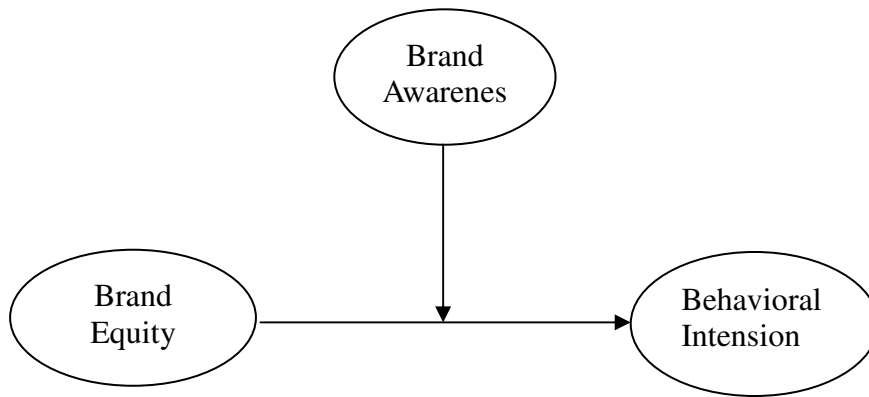


Figure 2: Moderating Effect of Brand Awareness on Behavioral Intention

Methodology

A web-based online survey questionnaire is developed, and measurement items are based on previous festival tourism setting. In order to measure community-based brand equity, Keller's CBBE framework is used. The framework consists of mainly two parts. The first is measuring brand image, and the second is to measure brand awareness. Measurement items for brand image is reinforced by Gartner's image formation process (Gartner, 1994). The process help the researchers to distinguish different kind of brand image such as cognitive image, affective image and conative image. The survey consists of mainly four parts, which examine destination brand image, destination brand awareness, behavioral intention, and demographic variables. A pilot survey is also scheduled, and it will be executed during 2010 February. Online survey questionnaires will be randomly distributed through festival association website and public e-mail address lists. After research surveys, structural equation modeling will be performed in order to test hypothetical relationship between key constructs. Especially, moderating effects of brand awareness is extensively examined.

Expected contribution

This study will provide information about festival tourists' response to eWOM marketing, and examine moderate effect of brand awareness on tourists' behavioral intention. Expected results will clarify festival tourists' psychological characteristics in destination branding setting.

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