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Destination Brand Personality – Testing the Applicability of Aaker’s Brand Personality Dimensions to Tourism Destinations Using Confirmatory Factor Analysis

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

Brand is a term traditionally found in the marketing literature associated with consumer goods and can be defined as ‘...a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate products and represent a promise of value... [they] incite beliefs, evoke emotions and prompt behaviours’ (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; p249). Branding, as traditionally defined, is considered more difficult when applied to destinations and places (Hankinson, 2001). While research into destination branding is still in its infancy (Ekinici, 2003; Blain, Levy and Ritchie, 2005; Ekinici *et al.*, 2007; Pitt, Opoku, Hultman, Abratt, and Spyropoulou, 2006), it is one of the hottest topics amongst place marketing professionals and it has been suggested that places currently offer the greatest untapped branding opportunities (Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2004), specifically in the wake of increased competition.

Aaker (1997), in her foundation study on brand personality in the consumer goods market, defined brand personality as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand. She identified five dimensions of brand personality; sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness which are represented by a 42-item Brand Personality Scale (BPS) that is purported to be reliable, valid and generalisable. There are examples of the adoption of the BPS as an initial framework for the application of brand personality in tourism (Hosany *et al.*, 2006; Ekinici and Hosany, 2006; and Murphy, Benkendorff and Moscardo (2007a; 2007b, 2007c). These studies employed differing methodologies and yielded varying results, but none were able to fully replicate the brand personality framework in the tourism context. Murphy *et al.*, (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) suggested additional work may be needed to alter the existing framework of brand personality for the tourism arena given that Aaker’s dimensions were not replicated, and indeed the factor structure varied between destinations.

The aim of this present study is to systematically test the validity of Aaker’s 42 item brand personality scale as a measure of the brand personality of a tourism destination.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted in the Whitsunday Island region which is located on the central Queensland coast in Australia. It is one of 13 regions in the state branded by Tourism Queensland, the official DMO. Research assistants were employed to distribute a six page self-administered questionnaire to visitors to region, at the ferry terminal, on ferries and along the main street (Airlie Beach), over a period of four days in September 2005, resulting in 372 valid surveys and a response rate of over 80%. The overall focus of the survey was to explore the destination image and brand perceptions of the Whitsundays. Several open and closed ended questions were asked in relation to brand personality, travel motivation and self-congruity. In particular, respondents were asked to rate the degree to which they associated Aaker's 42 brand personality characteristics with the destination on 5 point disagree/agree scale, with a 'not applicable' option also provided. This option was specifically included to facilitate the elimination of items from the scale which respondents found difficult to associate with a tourism destination. The remaining items were included in a multi-step Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with the aim of testing the applicability of Aaker's scale to measuring the perceived brand personality of the Whitsunday Island region.

FINDINGS

For the purpose of this research the non-response frequency is the combined total of the not-applicable option and missing data frequencies. Any descriptors with a non-response rate of 20% or higher were excluded from the development of a destination brand personality measure. The following words received a not applicable/non-response rate of 20% or above: sincere, masculine, smooth, independent, contemporary, wholesome, rugged, feminine, technical, corporate, leader, confident, reliable, intelligent, western, and tough.

A series of congeneric one-factor models were used to test the degree to which the remaining brand personality items contributed to the overall measurement of the latent brand personality dimension to which they were originally allocated within Aaker's framework. The ruggedness dimension could not be tested on its own, as outdoorsy was the only item not eliminated due to high non-response. The competence dimension had only 3 remaining items and could therefore only be tested in conjunction with another dimension.

The sophistication dimension was the only one which produced adequate goodness-of-fit measures without modification but using the Bollen-Stine bootstrapping procedure to adjust for non-normality of the data distribution (chisq=7.7, Bollen-Stine $p=.095$, CFI=.985, SRMR=.0240 and RMSEA=.095 with 90% confidence interval that falls below .05). When the competence dimension was tested alongside sophistication, the two dimensions were highly correlated and items were eliminated to produce one dimension (see Figure 1). The measures of fit for this combined dimension were acceptable (chisq=11.424 with a Bollen-Stine $p=.283$, CFI=.989, SRMR=.0240 and RMSEA=.064). For the sincerity and excitement dimensions, further elimination of items using the modification indices was necessary to produce a model which adequately fit the data. The measures of fit for the resulting sincerity dimension were acceptable (chisq=.958 with a $p=.966$, CFI=1.00, SRMR=.0101, and RMSEA=.000) (see Figure 2). As indicated in Figure 3, the modified version of the excitement dimension was the only

one on which the lone outdoorsy item loaded with an acceptable goodness-of-fit (chisq=17.951 with a Bollen-Stine $p=.248$, CFI=.980, SRMR= .0317 and RMSEA= .057)

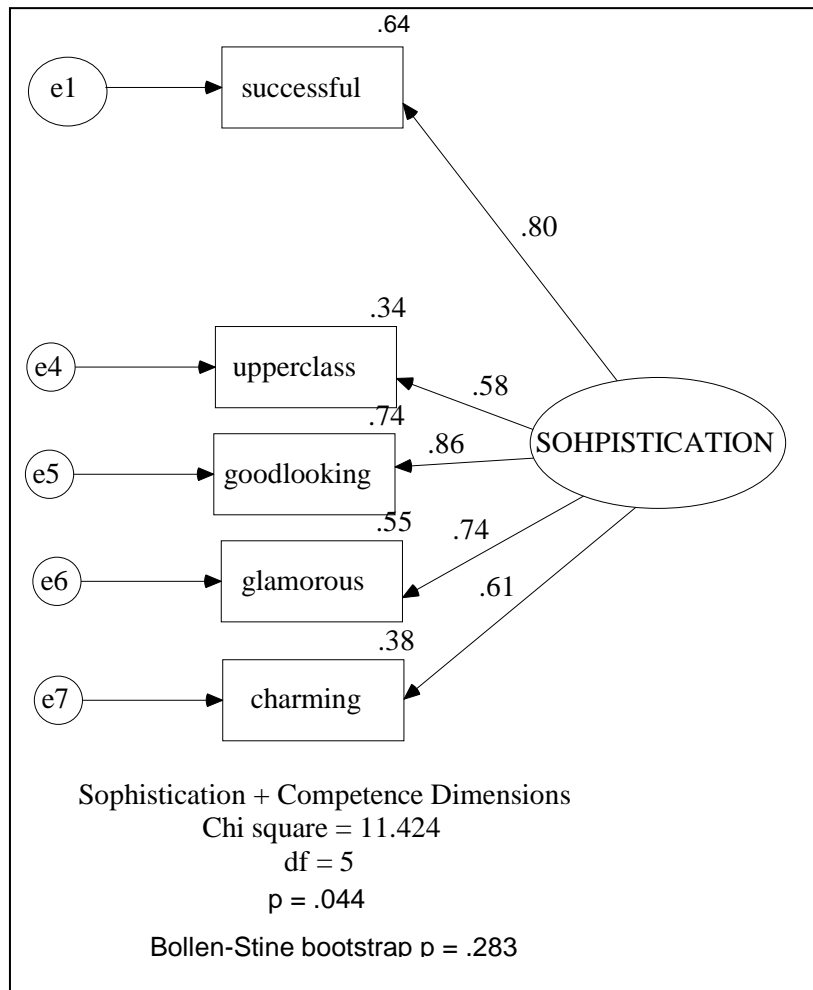


Figure 1: Sophistication and Competence Dimensions

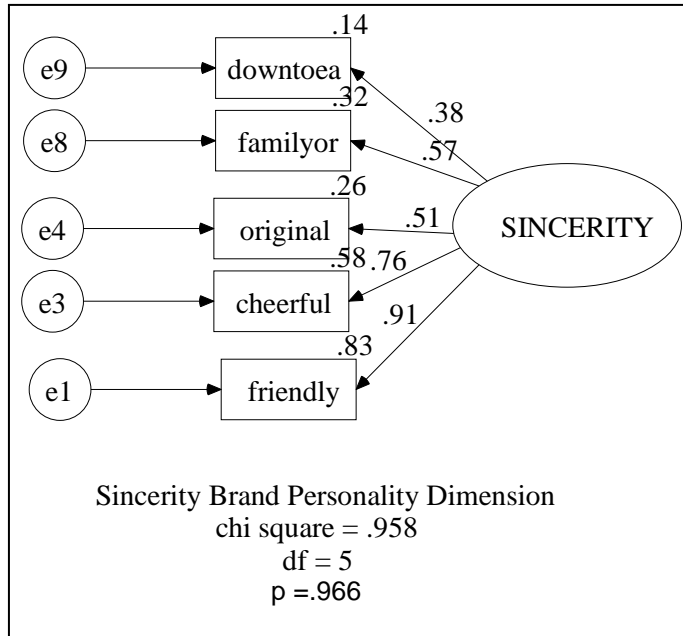


Figure 2: Sincerity Brand Personality Dimension

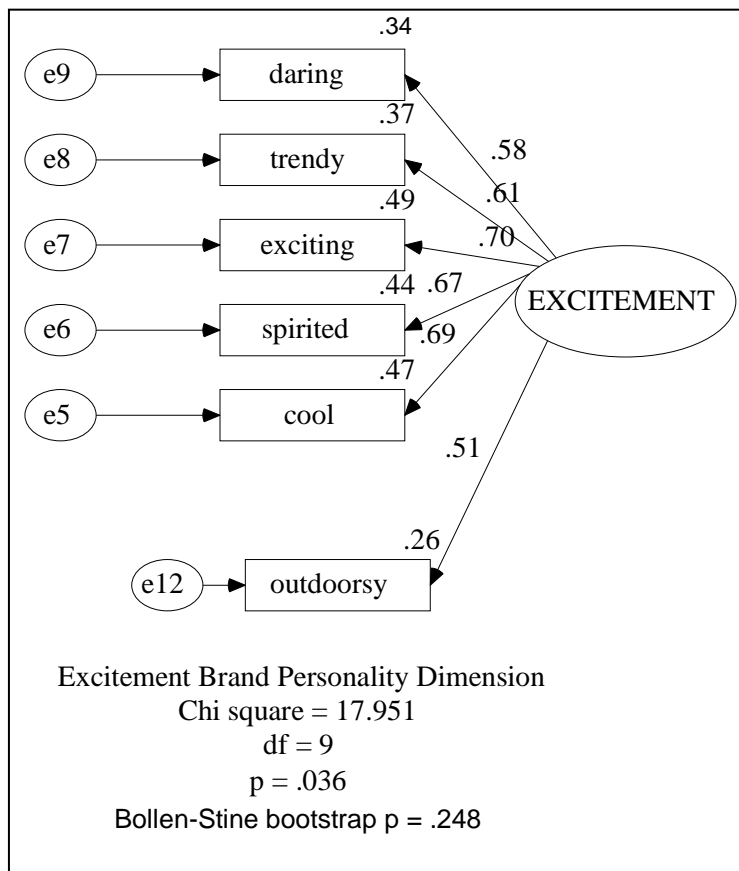
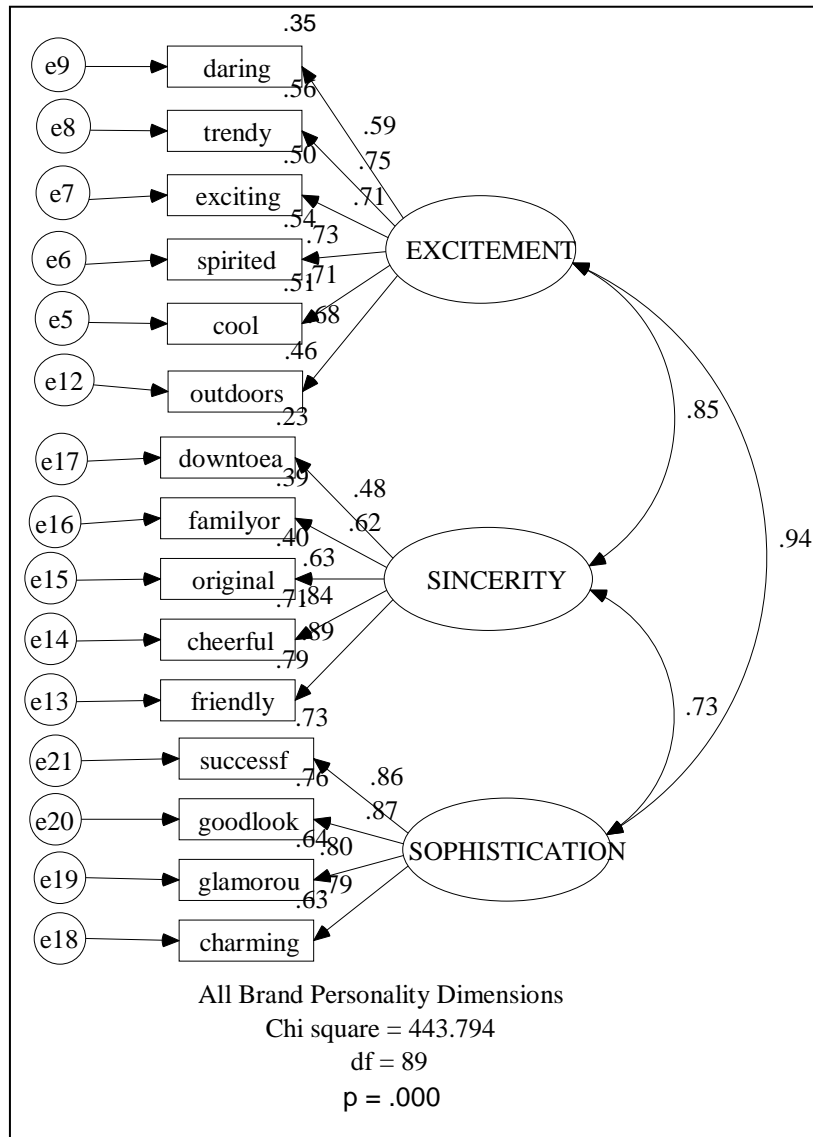


Figure 3: Excitement Brand Personality Dimension

Once the modified dimensions were combined into a full CFA to test for discriminant validity several issues were identified (see Figure 4). In particular there was

a high degree of correlation between the dimensions, especially between sophistication and excitement, and excitement and sincerity. The standardized residual covariance matrix highlighted a number of items with very high residuals and the modification indices indicated several items that may load on more than one dimension, in particular, trendy, original, and glamorous.



While further eliminations and modifications of the model were attempted, any successful result would bear little resemblance to Aaker's original brand personality framework, indicating that, in this particular instance, the model is not a valid measure of brand personality perceptions and raising serious concerns about the applicability of the framework in the tourism context.

APPLICATION OF RESULTS

While the results of this study are limited to perceptions of the regional, coastal destination under study and cannot be generalized to all tourism destinations, some important concerns were raised with respect to the ability of Aaker's brand personality framework to translate to the measurement of destination brand personality. Firstly the high levels of non response to several items highlights the fact that many respondents found it difficult to associate some of the brand personality items with a destination. As well, the results of the CFA confirm that the 5 dimensions of the original model cannot be replicated and that in fact the dimensions do not demonstrate discriminant validity from one another. This creates a particular problem if brand personality factors are to be included in full structural equation models.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight the need to advance the measurement of brand personality as it relates to tourism destinations. This area of research is of increasing importance, given the rapid adoption by tourism destination marketers of the branding concept and the substantial investment of DMO's around the world in creating destination brands in an attempt to differentiate themselves from competitors. Work must be done to generate a tourism-destination specific set of brand personality items which can then be tested across various samples and destinations with the aim of developing a valid and reliable destination brand personality scale. Results to the open-ended questions in this study which related to destination image and personality and both typical visitor and typical resident personality, provide some contribution to the development of new brand personality items, however, much more systematic research needs to be conducted to facilitate scale development.

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