Non-utilitarian Tourism Destination Positioning Using Affective Images and Personality Traits

(Extended Abstract)

Ying Qu
Business School
Nankai University

and

Hailin Qu
College of Human Environmental Sciences
Oklahoma State University

Abstract

While utilitarian thinking no longer dominates current marketing academia and practice, the extant destination positioning literature has largely neglected tourists’ non-utilitarian consumption needs. This study addresses this academic lacuna by incorporating the constructs of ‘destination affective image’ and ‘destination brand personality’ into a non-utilitarian destination positioning case of Dalian as a marine city destination in the domestic leisure tourism market. A sequential process was used to develop valid measures of ‘destination affective image’ and ‘destination brand personality’ pertinent to a marine city travel context. Data were collected in Dalian and four close competitors in northern China. The key differentiating points identified from using each of the two constructs were used to formulate a suggested ‘un-utilitarian position’ for Dalian. Data confirmed the efficacy of the non-utilitarian destination positioning approach proposed.

Keywords: destination positioning, destination affective image, destination brand personality, non-utilitarian consumption needs.

Introduction and literature review

With the ever-increasing competitive nature of the tourism market, the efforts of destination positioning have been regarded as critical (Pike & Ryan, 2004). Destination positioning has been defined as a process of establishing and maintaining a distinctive place for a destination in the minds of travelers in the targeted markets (Kotler et al., 1993). However, the academic concern of ‘destination positioning’ to date has been relatively low (Crompton et al., 1992). More importantly, one salient deficiency was identified from the extant literature in this field that most applications determine the relative position of a destination through a comparison of cognitive attributes. Therefore, it is argued that the non-utilitarian consumption needs of tourists
largely have been ignored by the literature.

Consumer behaviors are fundamentally stimulated by two general categories of human needs: ‘utilitarian needs’ and ‘non-utilitarian needs’ (also termed ‘expressive needs’). Types of needs within the non-utilitarian category include both ‘socially expressive needs’ and ‘experiential needs’ (Maclnnis & Jaworski, 1989). Tourism destinations have been considered full of experiential qualities and symbolic values, and is therefore a suitable field for conducting non-utilitarian type research.

Two important constructs pertinent to the link between tourists’ non-utilitarian consumption needs and their destination choice behavior were identified from the literature: destination affective image and destination brand personality. Most tourism scholars support a two-dimension structure of destination image consisting of cognitive image and affective image. Destination affective image represents the ‘feelings’ or ‘emotional responses’ people hold about a destination (Pike & Ryan, 2004). Limited attention from tourism marketing has been paid to the affective components of destination image (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997), even though many studies empirically validated its positive effect on destination choice (e.g., Baloglu, 1999). Adapted from ‘brand personality,’ destination brand personality representing a set of human characteristics associated to a tourism destination (Hosany et al., 2006) has recently received attention in the literature. The value a brand personality holds on consumer behavior traditionally has been explained by the self-congruity theory. Specifically, research has demonstrated that destination brand personality is the core of the destination self-congruity effect and serves as a strong predictor of tourism behavior (e.g., Murphy et al, 2007).

![Diagram of the Non-utilitarian Destination Positioning Approach](image)

**Figure 1**

**Underlying Mechanism of the Non-utilitarian Destination Positioning Approach**

In response to the ignorance of tourists’ non-utilitarian consumption needs shown in current destination positioning studies, this study purported to addressing the largely untapped problem of ‘non-utilitarian destination positioning.’ This study
utilizes a combination of constructs of destination affective image and destination brand personality as differentiation indicators in a re-positioning analysis of Dalian as a marine city destination versus four competing destinations in northern China. A conceptual framework illustrating the underlying mechanism of this 'non-utilitarian destination positioning approach' is presented in Figure 1.

**Methodology**

Survey sites include Dalian and four marine cities in northern China. These cities represent its competitors in the domestic leisure tourism market: Qingdao, Weihai, Yantai and Tianjin. The target population of this study is all of the domestic leisure tourists who actually visited any one of the five destinations from May 28th to July 5th, 2010. Employed university students or travel agency personnel collected surveys by distributing self-completion questionnaires to conveniently approached domestic visitors at each selected tourism attraction from the five cities. A total of 630 usable questionnaires were collected across the five destinations. Five versions of the questionnaire encompassing four parts were applied. Part I included the cover letter; part II and part III measured the affective image and brand personality domestic visitors held about the five corresponding destinations they visited using 33 items and 16 items, respectively. Ratings were collected using 7-point Likert-type scale formats. Part IV dealt with demographics information. The final versions of the ‘destination affective image’ and ‘destination brand personality’ scales were determined through a sequential process: (1) initial item pools developed by an extensive review of literature on destination image and destination personality; (2) surveys conducted to a snowball sample of 20 previous tourists who had visited a marine city destination in last year; (3) in-depth interviews with an expert panel of eight tourism specialists; (4) a pilot test with a convenience sample of 50 domestic leisure tourists visiting Dalian from April 10 to April 18, 2010.

**Data analysis and results**

To identify the underlying dimensions of ‘destination affective image’ and ‘destination brand personality’ perceived by domestic leisure tourists in a marine city travel context, a series of exploratory factor analysis were undertaken on the 33 affective image items and 16 personality items respectively, aggregating all respondents. Principal Components Analysis, with a varimax rotation, derived a five-factor solution and a four-factor solution, respectively. The derived affective image factors were named ‘Feelings of un-spoilage, cleanness and excellence,’ ‘Feelings of development, affluence and modernization,’ ‘Feelings of high-quality tourism attractions and services,’ ‘Feelings of exotic and interesting atmosphere,’ and ‘Feelings of leisure, relax and romance.’ Drawing on the labels of Aaker (1997)’s BPS, the emerged personality domains were named ‘Fashion+Competence,’ ‘Sincerity+Friendliness,’ ‘Sophistication,’ and ‘Brilliance’. 
To determine the differentiating ‘affective image’ and ‘personality’ domains most useful for Dalian’s non-utilitarian positioning, a series of independent t-tests were undertaken on the ‘grand mean scores’ of the derived factors. After one affective image factor (‘Feelings of development, affluence and modernization’) and two personality factors (‘Fashion+Competence’ and ‘Brilliance’) were identified as promising in this respect, independent t-tests were conducted to the ‘specific items’ constituting the three differentiating factors. Dalian received significantly higher ratings than any of its competitors were on two items that were identified as key positioning points from the ‘destination affective image’ construct: ‘it’s an urbanized and commercialized place’ and ‘it’s a modern and trendy place, assimilating many new elements.’ Likewise, the ‘successful’ and ‘contemporary’ items from ‘Fashion+Competence’ domain and the ‘accomplishment’ item from ‘Brilliance’ domain were found to be the appropriate positioning candidates encompassed by ‘destination brand personality’ construct.

Conclusions

The major theoretical contribution this study makes to the extant literature is the introduction of a ‘non-utilitarian destination positioning approach,’ taking affective images and personality traits as positioning comparison indicators. Data validated the efficacy of both constructs (destination affective image and destination brand personality) as a differentiation basis among tourism destinations.

Based on the statistically identified key differentiating affective image and personality items, the ‘non-utilitarian positioning strategy’ for Dalian as a marine city destination in its domestic leisure tourism market is suggested as: “a successful, modern and trendy city.”

Since 1999, Dalian has tried to brand and promote the destination as ‘A Romantic City’ (Liu, 2002). The results from the study, however, found the affective image factor consistent with this theme (‘Feelings of leisure, relax and romance’) does not differentiate Dalian from other marine cities. It may indicate that after a longer period of ten years the market position Dalian occupies has been changed. This is further reflected through the basically align positioning candidates that were identified from the destination brand personality construct. Thus, the new suggested ‘non-utilitarian positioning strategy’ for Dalian from this study, has practical significance in inspiring Dalian’s tourism authorities to reconsider the appropriateness of their current marketing efforts and make certain adjustments.

The primary limitation of the current study rests on the convenience sampling method. However, the derived data adequately served the primary focus of this study that was on validating the efficacy of the ‘non-utilitarian destination positioning approach. Another limitation originates from the specific marine city travel context. Future studies are encouraged to test the current approach in other travel contexts.
References