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ONLINE IMAGE OF HOTEL BRANDS ON DIFFERENT LANGUAGE PLATFORMS

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ABSTRACT

As multi-national hotel companies expand to a foreign market and attract the local customers, their image messages are increasingly communicated in the native language of the foreign country. This study examined the online image messages projected by multinational hotel brands of three different tiers on two different language platforms. The two different languages represent the home and host countries of these brands. The results revealed differences in image messages between the two language platforms for each of the three hotel brands. The differences are associated with brand positioning, product development, market segmentation, promotion strategies, distribution channels, and pricing.

Key Words: online brand image, multi-national hotel brands, correspondence analysis, online language platforms

INTRODUCTION

Globalization permeates today’s hotel industry. It presents opportunities and challenges alike. On the one hand, hotel companies are able to rapidly expand across geographical boundaries to an increasingly number of emerging foreign markets. For some, foreign markets have become more profitable than their home markets. On the other hand, in the process of expansion these multinational hotel companies will encounter various local cultures and different market situations in the host countries. Do they enforce uniformity in products and service standards of their brands to maintain the brand consistency, or modify their products and marketing strategies to satisfy local customers? How do they communicate their brand messages with consumers in the host country, how do consumers in the host country form perceptions about their brands? And how do these perceptions affect their decision making? Answers to these questions become complicated in consideration of the new patterns of international travel. The image message of a hotel brand in a foreign market (i.e. its host country) is supposedly targeted at the local consumers. To the extent that such message influences the perceptions of a hotel brand held by these consumers, and they carry the perceptions wherever and whenever they travel, how would the perception affect their brand choice when they travel to the brand’s home country where the image message may or may not be different? This study attempted to gain initial insights into what image messages that hotel brands communicate in their home country in comparison to those in a foreign or its host country. The study chose the brands’ websites on two different language platforms as the media for communicating their image messages. The two languages represent that of their home and host countries, respectively.

The United States and China were identified as the hotel brands’ home country and host country because of the following reasons. First, they have different economic and political systems (Feng, Morrison, & Ismail, 2003), and people have different cultures and values. Second, more US-based hotel brands have expanded to China than other countries. They cover a range of brand tiers including, among others, Hilton (Hilton, Double Tree), Holiday Inn (Holiday Inn, Holiday Inn Plaza, Holiday Inn Express), Marriott (J.W. Marriott, Ritz-Carlton, Marriott Courtyard and Renaissance), Starwood (Sheraton, Westin, Four Points, Le Meridien, St Regis, W and Aloft), Super 8, Hyatt, and Days Inn (Days Hotel & Suites, Days Hotel, Days Inn, Days Inn Business Palace and Days Suites). Third, international travel between these two countries gets easier and become more bi-directional. The memorandum of understanding (MOU) between two countries, which took effect in June 2008, allows more Chinese leisure travelers to the United States. This study set three objectives: 1) analyze projected image messages of multi-national hotel brands projected on their websites of the English platform. Which targets consumers in the United States; 2) analyze projected brand images of multi-national hotel brands on their websites of the Chinese platform, which targets consumers in China; and 3) investigate differences and linkages between these two sets of image messages.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Because of the intangibility, inseparability, variability, and perishability of hotel services, there are numerous ways to evaluate customer perceptions of the hotel brand. These perceptions refer to service quality (e.g., Armstrong, Mok, Go, & Chan, 1997; Briggs, Sutherland, & Drummond, 2007; Hsieh, Lin, & Lin, 2008), evaluations of hotel attributes (e.g., T. Y. Choi & Chu, 2001; Dube & Renaghan, 2000), customer benefits (e.g., Dube & Renaghan, 1999), perceived value (e.g., Bojanic, 1996), and loyalty (Jones, Mak, & Sim, 2007). All these aspects could be part of the concept of hotel brand image, while a common definition of it remains unaddressed. In addition, existing techniques of measuring customer perceptions about the hotel brand primarily depend on structured close-ended survey questions and quantitative statistical methods. The application of qualitative techniques in hotel brand image has not obtained enough attentions, although qualitative studies have more advantages in looking at the holistic aspect than quantitative methods (Jenkins, 1999). This presents a challenge for studying hotel brand image in a new environment.

The Internet has dramatically changed the dynamics of the hotel industry (Jeong & Lambert, 2001). As it becomes more available to the public, hotel companies recognize the website as an important tool to achieve many purposes, such as reaching customers, communicating with them, and facilitating transactions. Numerous websites of hotel companies have been operated in recent years to accommodate the increasing demand for hotel e-business from the marketplace. Meanwhile, hospitality scholars express a concern that “hospitality companies still do not have adequate knowledge to build a useful site, and many hotels have placed a lot of information onto their websites but do not include relevant information or arrange the information in an appropriate order” (Chung & Law, 2003:120). Many studies have been conducted to evaluate the static and interactive functionality of hotel websites from the perspective of customers, including the evaluation of the hotel website performance (e.g., Law & Cheung, 2005; e.g., Zafiropoulos & Vrana, 2006), information quality and its effects on consumer satisfaction and web behavior (e.g., Jeong, 2004; Jeong & Lambert, 2001; Jeong, Oh, & Gregoire, 2003), evaluations of hotel website functions such as customer relationship building (e.g., Essawy, 2007), and permission marketing (e.g., Brey, So, Kim, & Morrison, 2007). Most of these studies focused on the empirical tests on customer perceptions of hotel website design and functions. Other aspects such as projected image remained unexplored.

While substance of extant literature has focused on quantitative measurements and techniques to conceptualize image structures in tourism and hospitality area, the use of qualitative approaches has been recognized as a useful tool because it is more conductive to reveal the holistic components and capture unique features (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991). Some previous studies have analyzed pictorial or verbal contents of promotional materials to extract information about the image projected by destinations (e.g., Mackay & Fesenmaier, 2000; O'Leary & Deegan, 2005). The prevalence of Internet use opens the door to online marketing of tourism and hospitality industry, and provides rich information available on the web. Qualitative assessments of online messages, such as content analysis, about image and other tourism phenomenon are gaining popularity. Stepchenkova and Morrison investigated the induced destination image of Russia by analyzing 212 websites of US and Russian tour operators (2006). The method of content analysis was applied in analyzing visitors’ responses to open-ended questions to examine Russia’s destination image among American pleasure travelers (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008). Govers and Go (2005) analyzed how Dubai destination identity is projected through the use of photographic imagery and narratives in an online environment. The effects of increasingly popular online virtual communities on destination image have also attracted the attentions of researchers. Douglas and Mills (2006) evaluated the perceptions of travelers to the Middle East and North African destinations through the content analysis of their Internet travel blog postings. However, most of these studies focused on analyzing destination image projected by official tourism organizations, travel companies or perceived by online bloggers. Investigations of online image of hotel brands remain scarce.

METHODOLOGY

The hotel brands and websites in this study were selected through Google from Dec. 15, 2008 to Dec. 20, 2008. Hotel companies that have brands in U.S. and China, and operate websites in English and Chinese were qualified for the first round of selection. A website in the .com domain is considered the English platform, and the one in the .cn domain is considered the Chinese platform. Brand of seven U.S.-based hotel companies were initially identified. They are Marriott, Starwood, Days Inn, Holiday Inn, Hilton, Hyatt and Super 8. After the screening of their websites on the Chinese and English platforms, three of them were chosen as cases of hotel brands in the current study. They are Holiday Inn, Hilton, and Super 8. Marriott, Starwood and Days Inn were excluded because their websites feature different brands. For Marriott and Days Inn, there are no specific Chinese websites for
individual brands. Hyatt was taken out of the pool, because its Chinese website is identical to the English website except for the homepage.

This study adopted a qualitative approach of content analysis, using CATPAC II software for English texts, and the combination of ICTCLAS and ANTCONC programs for Chinese texts. The CATPAC II software “is a self-organizing artificial neural network that has been optimized for reading text. CATPAC identifies the most important words in a text and determines patterns of similarity based on the way they are used in the text” (Woelfel, 1998, p. 11). It has been extensively used in tourism website content analysis recently (S. Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Douglas & Mills, 2006; Govers & Go, 2005; Stepenkova & Morrison, 2006, 2008). The combination of ICTCLAS and ANTCONC programs was employed for effective separation, identification, frequency, and clustering of Chinese characters and words. One step of breaking sentences into individual words has to be first carried out for content analysis of Chinese texts, as Chinese words are not separate with each other in sentences. ICTCLAS solves this problem by using spaces to break sentences into individual words. ANTCONC is for words identification, frequency and clustering.

To achieve the first and second objectives, pages from the three websites in English platform (www.holidayinn.com, www.hilton.com, and www.super8.com) and Chinese platform (www.holidayinn.com.cn, www.hilton.com.cn, and www.super8.com.cn) were analyzed. Web pages up to three layers linked from the homepage were collected, cleaned up, and stored for further content analysis as 211 plain text documents. English data were analyzed by CATPAC II and Chinese data were analyzed by ICTCLAS and ANTCONC. The analyses resulted in two lists of the most frequent words. In these procedures, the task was to choose the most meaningful words related to hotel brand image. The outcomes of these procedures are two sets of hotel brand image variables in English and Chinese. The set of Chinese variables were translated into English to facilitate the further examination between China website image and US website image in the third objective. For the third objective, the correspondence analysis was conducted to examine brand images projected on hotel websites of English and Chinese platforms. The outcome is three correspondence maps for the three hotel brands. The linkages and differences between these two sets of images are illustrated in these correspondence maps.

Prior to content analysis, a “smoothing out” procedure was needed to deal with misspellings, synonyms, and multi-word concepts (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008). The following technical operations were used in this study: 1) excluding certain grammatical words such as “is”, “it”, “the”, “but” among others; 2) replacing plurals with singulars; 3) recoding multi-word concepts with one word or a combination, for example, “priority club” was recoded as “priorityclub”. The cleaned textual data resulted from these steps was run in CATPAC program multiple times, to further eliminate such words that are frequently used in the text but not meaningful to result in explanation. For instance, “hotel”, “night”, “date”, “room” and other similar words were excluded. Similar steps were conducted in the content analysis of Chinese texts in terms of data cleaning and analysis.

In addition to calculating word frequency, both programs of CATPAC II for English texts and ANTCONC for Chinese texts are able to conduct word clustering. This procedure groups words with close meanings or used under the similar context. It allows researchers to check and understand utilization patterns and clusters of frequent words in the text, which also represent important points of the textual material to some extent. For instance, “meetings”, “events”, and “social gatherings” were grouped together as different target markets in this study.

RESULTS

The analysis resulted in top 30 most frequently used words or expressions for each hotel website of Chinese and English language platforms. Different word patterns were identified from word clustering. They demonstrated varied emphasis on brand image projected by Chinese and English websites of each hotel brand.

Case I: Holiday Inn

The Chinese website of Holiday Inn (www.holidayinn.com.cn) emphasizes four themes of the brand image. The first theme is the excellent function and convenience for business travelers. The related topics include reliable online service, such as “reservation”, “email”, “internet”, “guaranteed”, and “lowest price”; convenient locations, such as “center” (close to exhibit center, city center, district center, shopping center, convention center and so on), “distance”, “taxi” (availability and price from airport), “tourism attraction” (around the hotel), and “driving time” (for both taxi and self-driving); facilities for business travelers, such as “facility”, “meeting”, “business”, “center” (business center in the hotel), “Executive (suites)”, and “parking”; and brief introduction of the destination,
such as “introduction”. The second theme is about the promotion of priority club membership to cultivate customer loyalty to Holiday Inn brand, including such words and expressions as “priority club member”, “redeem”, and “reward”. The third theme refers to promotions that Holiday Inn is currently offering, demonstrated by such words as “offer”, “free”, and “special”. The fourth theme addresses the promotion of Holiday Inn and Intercontinental brands in China by using the words of “brand”, “China”, and “Intercontinental”.

Three image themes were identified in the English website of Holiday Inn (www.holidayinn.com). Promoting the priority club was positioned on the first place, with a great deal of membership benefits. The relevant words include “priority club”, “point”, “reward”, “earn”, “partners” (partners enrolled in the priority club rewards program), “bonus”, “member”, “airline”, “redeem”, and “benefits”. Reliable online service was the second theme of the English website, articulated by such words as “reservation”, “internet”, “web”, “guaranteed”, and “lowest price”. Holiday Inn also places efforts on promoting new products and activities online for American customers, which was reflected as the third theme by such words as “resorts”, “suites”, and “water”.

Case II: Hilton

The Chinese website of Hilton (www.hilton.com.cn) stresses four image themes. The first theme pertains to the introduction of Hilton hotels in big cities in China, including “Beijing”, “Double Tree”, “Shanghai”, “Sanya”, “Hefei”, and “Chongqing”. The second theme is about facilities and amenities to “meetings” and “banquets”, including facilities and services, such as “breakfast”, “restaurant”, “activity”, “executive suites”, “facility”, and “package rate”; amenities and service quality, such as “enjoy”, “service”, “experience”, “luxury”, and “professional”. The third theme emphasized by Hilton China is promotions that it is currently offering, reflected by such words as “free”, “special recommendation”, “RMB” (Chinese currency), “special offer”, and “more”.

The English website of Hilton (www.hilton.com) emphasizes more on the utilitarian and hedonic elements of the hotel brand image. With regard to the utilitarian element, two topics were discussed: 1) the target market of Hilton brand, including “meetings”, “packages”, “events”, “groups”, “social gatherings”; and 2) activities when staying at Hilton hotels, including “spa”, “golf”, “things to do”, and “breakfast”. Such words as “special”, “proud”, “favorite”, “hospitality”, and “available” demonstrate the hedonic element of Hilton brand image. In addition, Hilton loyalty program of Hhonors received considerable articulations on the English website, reflected by the words of “HHonors”, “offer”, “point”, “member”, and “register”.

Case III: Super 8

The focus of Super 8 website of Chinese platform (www.super8.com.cn) is the brand explanation and promotion, which seems to communicate the three image themes of increasing brand awareness, improving brand image, and expanding the brand scope in China. The first image theme is reflected by words as “China”, “US” (Super 8 is from the United States), “Olympic”, “Wyndham hotel corporation”, and “brand”. For the second image theme, Super 8 Chinese website explained brand meaning as “clean & friendly” and the hotel brand is positioned as “economy” and “chain”. Meanwhile, the specific slogan was designed for Super 8 China: “Wherever you are, Super 8 is always with you on the road”. In addition, they presented abundant information about their active involvement and support of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games to enhance their brand image. For the third image theme, one can find considerable franchising information from the Super 8 Chinese website. The related key words include “join in”, “US”, “franchise”, “establish”, “global”, “management”, “promotion”, “cooperation”, “the first”, “Wyndham hotel corporation”, “owner”, and “countrywide”.

Yet, the English website of Super 8 (www.super8.com) articulates four image themes. The first is about discounts reflected by such words as “rate”, “free”, “special offer”, “discount”; special offers include “breakfast”, “coffee”, “high speed internet”, “two” (a promotion program of “staying two nights and one night free”). The second theme pertains to attributes and affective elements of Super 8 brand image. Words used with regard to attributes are as follows: “airport” (location), “shuttle”, and “park”. Super 8 also demonstrated its brand affective elements by words of “best”, “rest easy”, “amenities”, “pride”, “advanced”, and “limited”. The third and fourth themes are about loyalty program of Wyndham rewards (“Wyndham reward”, “Point”, “enroll”, and “reward”) and reliable contacts including internet and telephone (“reservation”, “call”, and “guaranteed”).

Correspondence Analysis

A correspondence analysis of the top 30 most frequent words was conducted to examine differences and linkages between two sets of online brand images of the three hotel brands. Correspondence analysis is a technique
representing categorical marketing research data with a one-dimensional map. It is often used in marketing research to display such variables as customer preferences for different attributes in relation to their preferences for various brands (Whitlark & Smith, 2001). In this study, three correspondence maps were used to investigate differences of brand images represented by word frequency of Holiday Inn, Hilton, and Super 8 websites on Chinese and English platforms. Figure 1 provides graphical information on the relative proximity of the most frequently used words and two language platforms of Holiday Inn website, so do Figure 2 and Figure 3 for Hilton and Super 8, respectively. The results of correspondence analysis for these three hotel brands confirm findings presented in the textual content analysis.

As shown in Figure 1, online brand image projected by Holiday Inn Chinese website focuses on hotel attributes, including facilities and location of the hotel as shown in Circle A of Figure 1. On the other hand, its English website communicates the online brand image more from the perspective of cultivating customer brand loyalty, using words related to Holiday Inn Priority Club rewards program as shown in Circle B of Figure 1. Both Chinese and English websites share image messages with regard to reliable online service, the target market of meetings, discount information and the promotion of Intercontinental brand, as shown in Circle C of Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Correspondence Map for Holiday Inn](image)

Figure 2 maps different image messages from Hilton Chinese and English websites. The Chinese website focuses on specific hotels and banquet facilities. The English website places more emphasis on promoting the utilitarian and hedonic components of Hilton brand image to American consumers. Both websites highlight their promises of good breakfast, guest experience and meeting facilities as shown in Circle C in Figure 2. Figure 3 shows that Super 8 Chinese and English websites form two clusters that are separated by a great distance. This illustrates that online brand image projected by Super 8 Chinese website is very different from the English one. The image messages of the Chinese website are related to Super 8 brand meaning, slogan, and franchise as presented in Circle A. The image messages communicated by English website address aspects on value for money, facilities, and its brand affective elements, as shown in Circle B. The two websites do share the common image messages of discounts and promotions as shown in Circle C.
CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study investigated how multi-national hotel companies communicate the image messages of their brands on websites of two different language platforms. Specifically, it compared image messages of three hotel brands on their English website and Chinese website. Three hotel brands of Holiday Inn, Hilton, and Super 8 were studied as cases in current research. The results from both content analysis and correspondence mapping revealed differences in image messages between the two language platforms for each of the three hotel brands. This finding suggests that the hotel companies adopt different branding strategies in host country-China and home country-the United States. In all three cases, the differences are associated with brand position, product development, market segmentation, promotion strategies, distribution channels, and pricing.

It must be noted that as a midscale hotel brand, Holiday Inn has more image messages shared between its Chinese and English websites than the other brands. Holiday Inn’s common image messages include reliable online service, target market of meetings, discount information, and promotion of Intercontinental brand. The upscale brand of Hilton and the economy brand of Super 8 projected more different brand image messages on the two websites. This finding may suggest that that upscale brands such as Hilton or economy brands such as Super 8 are more uncertain than midscale brands about their respective segments of customers in China where the middle class is booming and the other two polar are less well-defined. While exploratory in nature, the findings of the study should contribute to the understanding of how multi-national hotel companies are communicating or struggling to communicate image messages of their brands in different countries. Globalization and advent of information technology do offer opportunities of international market expansion and penetration. The findings caution multi-national hotel companies to be careful of their global branding strategies in online environment. The study’s results provide a foundation for future studies to answer such questions as: do multinational hotel companies enforce uniformity in products and service standards of their brands to maintain the brand consistency? Or do they differentiate their branding strategies to satisfy local customers? And how such strategies affect consumers’ choice...
when they travel from one market (the brand’s host country) to another (the brand’s home country)? These questions warrant more empirical investigations.

This study makes a methodological contribution to conducting online textual analysis simultaneously on the two different language platforms of Chinese and English. As the Internet becomes increasingly prevalent in China, applications of online marketing, branding and transactions are expected to boom. The introduction of ICTCLAS and ANTCONC programs in this study should provide guidance for future studies involving analysis of texts in Chinese.

REFERENCES


