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Assessing Convergence between Online Brand Identity and Online Brand Image in a Developing Tourism Destination

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**Note: This research study is currently in progress. Data collection and analysis will be completed by May 2018.*

SIGNIFICANCE AND OBJECTIVES

The growth of online platforms and virtual communities used by well-informed and demanding consumers has made social web communication an important tool for constructing, defending and cultivating the image of a brand. In the context of branding, Web is the place where the value proposition comes face to face with the public and where perceptions can be constructed, analyzed and measured. It is here that the two fundamental components of the brand – brand identity and brand image (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Kapferer, 1995) – meet and can be compared. Brand identity is the responsibility of the entrepreneurial sphere, which codifies and builds it via management actions and communicates it to consumers (Kapferer, 2008).

Consumers then decode the message and interpret it through a process of perception, thereby creating an image (Deagon, 2002). Thus, brand image is not only what we “see” or “read” about a brand but also what we “feel”. In this context, the correct choice and communication of a clear brand identity require suitable models of brand analysis with which to identify the cognitive determinants of the consumer, i.e. the elements that express the type and degree of knowledge of the brand. In this sense, information that can be extracted from the web (blogs, sites, social networks etc.) becomes highly important to the brand’s competitiveness, since it enables firms to identify and reduce, where possible, the gap between brand identity and brand image.

Some studies stress the importance of convergence between identity and image to the construction and enhancement of brand loyalty (Nandan, 2005; Davies and Chun, 2002; Dilip and Saikat, 2007). In this perspective, two questions warrant further investigation – is there convergence between what is communicated (the brand identity) and what is actually perceived

and transferred by third parties (the brand image), and in which areas does there exist a perception gap? To address these important questions, this research utilizes an operative framework – Assessing Web Convergence (AWC) – to detect and analyses the online brand image and compare it with online brand identity of a destination. The framework has been previously applied to large well-established destinations, and has been recommended for consideration for small or less well-known destinations. The operative process involves extracting information from the web, processing it by text mining techniques and interpreting it in order to monitor the level of convergence between online brand identity and online brand image. As such, the framework can play an important role in the branding process since it allows a destination to increase the flow of information on which to build or strengthen its identity by aligning its image with the developing reputation.

This study answers the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there homogeneity among the topics used to communicate online brand identity and online brand image?

RQ2: Does the convergence between online brand identity and online brand image show the effectiveness of web communication activities?

The empirical examination of users' perceptions of the destination was conducted utilizing a case study method of Cedar Falls and Waterloo metropolitan area in order to observe a) the identity that is transmitted by the Destination Management Organizations, and b) the image perceived and transferred by bloggers.

Methods and timetable

The operative framework – Assessing Web Convergence (AWC) – is based on three steps arising from the synergy of question answering and content analysis research techniques. In this research, it was applied using a case study methodology. Although this method does not allow generalization of the results, it is argued to be suitable for generating a qualitative information flow, albeit linked to the context of reference, which can facilitate learning (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

First step – extracting and interpreting information from the web. This step is intended to identify three variables corresponding to the following questions: What? (object of the investigation, in this case Cedar Falls and Waterloo), Who? (subjects to be investigated, in this case – the Destination Marketing Organizations, the first 100 travel blogs identified), and Where? (geographic area, in this case the virtual dimension or a selected number of blogs found using <https://www.google.com>). Second step – processing the extracted data. This step uses the logic of quantitative content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990) supported by text mining techniques (Feldman and Sanger, 2007). It aims to process unstructured (textual) information, extract meaningful numeric indices from the text and thus make the information contained in the text accessible to the various data mining algorithms. Third step – interpretative phase. The empirical aim here is to understand whether there exists a degree of communicational homogeneity that could generate groups of words that together represent specific themes of the destination's core communication and the bloggers' core perception. The framework suggests interpreting the words using the following questions: How? (i.e. how people speak in the pre-identified non-structured sources), Why? (i.e. the reason why people speak), and When? (i.e. when people speak). These make it possible to qualitatively and quantitatively determine the role of each word in the formation of the identity and the image. The resulting comparison allows to assess the level of convergence generated.

Literature review

From a customer-centered perspective, destinations must interact with the consumer. The interactive and dynamic dimension of user engagement is strengthened by the capacity of web tools (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2013; De Valck et al., 2009) for sharing, interaction and socialization of values and content (Tuten and Solomon, 2014). The main contribution of social networks is thus to enable participants to play the roles of cocreator, commentator and author (Kotler et al., 2010; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Pan et al., 2007). The users become creators of content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Muñiz and Schau, 2011), they are no longer passive (Li and Bernhoff, 2011) but rather influence each other and share their experiences (Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold, 2011).

In fact, the high power of persuasion of word of mouth communication (Buttle, 1998; Herr, Kardes and Kim, 1991) – which is greater than that of traditional communication tools – derives from the fact that consumers consider it to be an objective source of information, generally seen to be credible and reliable, since it serves to “amplify” the experiences of real individuals, who willingly transmit them to other subjects (Adjei, Noble S.t.M., and Noble C.h.H, 2010). Word of mouth thus has a significant impact, both positive or negative, on the assessment of the brand (Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012; Laczniak, De Carlo and Ramaswamy, 2001). Social networks have especially become a place where the value proposition finds itself face to face with the public, and where perceptions can be constructed, analyzed and measured (Tuten and Solomon, 2014).

Today most information is available in semi-structured or non-structured formats, especially on websites and social media (Walker, 2012). It is therefore fundamental to understand, highlight and extract the most relevant non-structured content – reflecting consumers’ intentions, behaviors and evaluations (Hays et al., 2013; Fotis et al., 2011; Xiang and

Gretzel, 2010) – in order to support web communication. Over the years, Information Extraction (IE) techniques based on text mining (Rajman and Besançon, 1998) have become increasingly sophisticated. They are useful for exploiting the information potential of semi-structured or non-structured sources, which is far greater than that of traditional structured sources (Walker, 2012).

Brand identity and brand image: the importance of convergence

Communicating the brand to the customers is essential to a destination's success, since it is through communication that it explains and promotes the value proposition that is offered (Lovelock, 2011). Communication consists of a sender, a message, and a receiver, where the sender represents the destination that communicates a *brand identity* (Kapferer, 2008) and the receiver represents the consumer who receives the company's message and forms a *brand image*. Traditionally, branding literature describes brand identity as the unique and essential idea of the brand (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2010). It is everything that makes the brand meaningful and distinct (Janonis et al., 2007): a unique set of brand associations that destinations aim to create or maintain in order to establish a relationship between the brand and the customer (Sääksjärvi and Samiee, 2011). It is a multidimensional concept encompassing destination's values and culture, as well as the personality and the basic promise of the brand (Aaker, 1997; Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). *Brand image*, on the other hand, is what consumers perceive, or brand associations held in consumers' memory (Aaker, 1991; Arai et al., 2013; Anselmsson et al., 2014). It is also seen as the perception of a brand that is formed in the process of decoding the facets of brand identity (Roy and Banerjee, 2014). In terms of competition, the management of these associations must be designed to promote the processing and recall of information, the differentiated positioning of the product and a willingness to purchase (Krishnan, 1996).

Brand identity and brand image are related, and in today's communications environment a strong brand can only be created and maintained by strengthening the linkage between identity and image (Nandan, 2005). The brand identity framework incorporates part of the brand image (i.e. self-image) which is therefore both the result and the interpretation of brand identity (Kapferer, 2008). Crucially, the convergence between the message communicated (identity) and its perception by consumers (image) serves to a) prevent crises of reputation and signal potential problems (Davies and Chun, 2002); b) avoid complacency on the part of companies regarding their brand values and their ability to differentiate themselves by using market positioning and unique selling propositions (Janonis et al., 2007); and c) harmonize the dimensions defining both concepts so that the company follows a good communications strategy (Roy and Banerjee, 2014). If the sender and the receiver do not share the meaning of the message, there will be no dialogue and companies will not succeed in influencing consumers' attitudes, knowledge and/or behavior (Fill, 1999).

Lastly, monitoring the convergence between the position sought by the management and the perception of the customer is a desirable goal for many destinations. By assessing the gaps between brand identity and brand reputation, managers can identify strategies to minimize incongruity and develop more powerful brands (de Chernatony, 2010).

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