

Role of Stakeholders in Strategic Destination Branding

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Abstract: Being one of the largest industries, Tourism sector's contribution to the growth and development of economies is enormous. With evolving offbeat motivations among the tourists market and emerging varied tourists attractions, the nations are at the outset to position their destinations lucratively through strategic branding. In spite of understanding the market, it is also paramount for the DMOs to understand the role of stakeholders in branding process. This review paper has been intended to understand the significance of stakeholders based on the previous research works from destination management and branding literature. This paper helps the DMOs and other thereof in destination branding. Consistency in information and understanding the stakeholders perception of the destination image have been staunchly implied. It is important to note that, this paper is a qualitative research work and limited to the findings from previous researches.

Key Words: DMOs, Stakeholders, Destination Branding, Destination Image, Information

I. INTRODUCTION

With rising annual growth rate as 5.2% (Indian Tourism Statistics, 2019) of Foreign Tourists Arrivals in India, the country's tourism industry is at the outset to position the destinations holistically in global competitive tourism market, and strategic branding of the destinations is the finest way to reach the frontier. The Statistics (2019) also reveal that, India's share in International Tourists Arrivals and share in International Tourism Receipts (in US\$) is 1.24% and 1.97% respectively. Inculcating distinct competitive and comparative advantages, India is ranked 25th in World Tourists Arrivals and 13th in World Tourism Receipts. In this significantly developing context, the strategic positioning and branding process of the tourism perspectives of the country would not alone elevate the tourists inflow but perhaps, boost the local economies, foreign direct investments, open new entrepreneurial avenues and generate revenue for the government (Davis, 2002 and Shankar, 2019). Though the country possesses wide range of tourists attractions which acquire the density of tourists across the world, the dominant marketing power lies with the people associated with the destinations, or simply so called as the stakeholders. In other words, stakeholders play a vital role in branding the destinations (Hankinson, 2005). This qualitative review analysis intends to picturize the importance of stakeholders management in strategic destination branding process based on the previous research findings.

II. STRATEGIC DESTINATION BRANDING

Unlike corporate branding (Trueman, Klemm and Giroud, 2004), branding destination or place is more of the external execution (Pike, 2004) in the view of generating the revenues to those investors and the government (Morgan, Pritchard, and Piggott, 2002). Size of the market and the market characteristics, environmental forces such as political, geographical, economic, and technological that includes infrastructure etc., differ from corporate brand to destination brands. Branding – being perceived as a creative marketing process, perhaps complex, paves the way for addressing and formulating strategies that helps the tourism sector growth and development of the country (Gover, Go and Kumar, 2011). Since the industry inculcates the tangible and intangible attractions such as landscapes, historical monuments, infrastructure, heritage and culture etc., destination branding helps the government and the organizations on framing policies (Hankinson, 2007) and sustainable development (Kotler, Bowen and Makens, 2006). Moreover, branding helps the Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) to understand their target market needs and wants (Kotler and Keller, 2011) and satisfy those better than competitors.

Destination branding is largely focused on understanding the existing image & personality, reframe it and position the same in the global market with competitive and comparative advantage (Gilmore, 2002). Destination marketers effectively communicate the distinctiveness of the destination to the target market through lucrative strategic marketing tools (Blain, Levy and Ritchie, 2005). Destination branding inculcates the following elements.

- it involves collection of marketing activities and processes,
- like product branding, it imbibes the elements such as logo, symbol, name, or tagline,
- helps in identifying and differentiating destinations,
- promises to satisfy the tourists motives, needs, or wants and expectations, and
- delight the tourists with emotional association etc.

A. Destination Image

Branding destinations is considered as the strategic process as it requires effective image formation (Shankar, 2019) in the consistently changing complex environment (Virgo and de

Chernatony, 2006). Bigne, Sanchez, and Sanchez (2001) defined destination branding as *“the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination”*. The definition comprises of both the cognition process which inculcates the existing knowledge about the destination acquired through various means and the emotional connect with the destinations while experiencing the destination attributes. Attributes leading to image formation such as natural landscapes, mountain valleys, river banks or reservoir, infrastructure that includes historical monuments and buildings, religious spots which includes temples, holy places, churches, mosques, spiritual attractions such as yogic centers, historical and cultural spots, festivals and other factors would significantly induce tourists perception (Gallarza, Saura and Garcia, 2002). Destination Image is one of the predominant factors in branding places because it constitutes to five critical reasons viz; information process, differentiating and positioning, need to purchase and consume, develop positive feeling, and brand extensions (Aaker, 1991). Brand image, especially in terms of destinations is not easily conceived as it requires vast research outcomes on various perspectives of branding places, investments on tourism infrastructure and development policies, and strategic decisions by government and other bodies. Researchers argue that developing a positive image of the destination is highly impactful on tourists behavior (Johnson and Thomas, 1999). Significantly, either cognitive image – existing belief about the destination or affective image – feeling associated with the destination, influence the tourists decision making process (Kim, Lee, Uysal, Lee and Ahn, 2015) which in turn impacts the destinations' economy.

In destination branding research arena, it has been found that though it is quite confiscated to understand the destination image without considering the affective perspective, many studies have been underlined on the basis of cognitive perspective (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993). This is because, cognition is complicated to be built in tourists perception and once built, the belief stays stringent for long time. Literature says that, there are fecund theories, studies and approaches in models creation considering destination image as the integral point of branding (Stepchenkova, and Morrison, 2008 and Byon, Zhang and Connaughton, 2010). Model creation in the destination image perspectives involve destination's image, personality, tourists' intention and attitude, satisfaction, and motivation factor even. Although, some research outcomes based on model creation supports the existing literature or add value or credibility to the literary evidence. Many research outcomes suggest marketers in advertising and promotional activities, branding strategies and market development processes. However, the need for further studies in this arena persists.

B. Destination Personality

Destination personality is a new concept, yet less researched (Hosany, Ekinci, and Uysal, 2006) and is considered as a strategic marketing tool to competitively position their cities in tourism market and also perceived as the building blocks for recognizing visitors' perceptions of destinations (Ekinci and Hosany, 2006). The personality aspects of the destination have been defined and viewed interchangeably in terms of destination image (Hendon and Williams, 1985). However, personality and image of the destinations are inter-related and considered as prior forces for branding (Hosany, Ekinci, and Uysal, 2006). In psychological perspective, the personality traits associated with the tourists spots play a significant role in image formation process in tourist mind and their choice process (Crockett and Wood, 2002). Marketing promotions themed on personality traits of places, executed through various medias and information platforms have resulted in positive outcomes of the destination branding (D'Astous & Boujbel, 2007). Some of the destination personality traits found from researches on various destinations are sincerity, excitement, and conviviality (Ekinci and Hosany, 2006).

C. Tourists Characteristics

As a primitive step, understanding the characteristics of the market is highly decisive for the marketers to formulate the strategies for branding the destinations because of its significance on tourists' perception. Image of a destination varies from tourists to tourists based on their socio-demographic characteristics (Gartner, 1989). Tourists lifecycle stages (Walmsley and Jenkins, 1993) – which is considered as the most influencing factor in segmentation and targeting of markets, and also reflects on behavior of consumers, gender (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999) – one of the highly considerable factors in consumer behavior research as many products of services are developed based or developed on consumers' gender differences and needs, nationality (Chen and Kerstetter, 1999) – which plays a vital role in marketing products and services, and routed through the nations' culture, subculture, norms, customs and rituals, education (Beerli & Martin, 2004) – the factor associated with the occupation influences consumer behavior in terms of information search, evaluation of alternatives, and decision making, occupation (Beerli & Martin, 2004) – the factor that indicates the economic efficiency of the consumers, and income (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997) – the essential influencer of consumers choice process has significant influence on the tourists perception on destination image and considered as the most critical factors in branding destinations (Hui, Wan, and Ho, 2007).

D. Information - as a tool

In this context, the communication process plays a vital role in destination branding process and so as in tourists decision

making process (Ho, Lin, and Chen, 2012). Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) have begun communicating and engaging with their market on digital platforms such as social media networks which includes Facebook and Twitter (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010) and other platforms that inculcate travel blogs, YouTube, Wikipedia and search engines (Zielstra and Hochmair, 2013). These digital platforms not only serve with intensive information (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006 and Papathanassis and Knolle, 2011) but also act as the influencing paradigms of tourists behavior. Also, enough evidence exists in the literature on how these information providing forces play a significant role in strategic branding process of the destinations in various perspectives.

Accordingly, the types of information in the market matters on image formation process (Burgess, 1978). Professional advice, Word-of-mouth – online and offline, rumors and other types of information have significant influence on branding process and so as in tourists choice making process (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001). Studies have also witnessed that the negative word-of-mouth spreads faster and has greater role on tourists behavior (Govers, Go and Kumar, 2007). Compatible use of emerging digitalized modes and types of information help the DMO marketers to brand their destinations effectively. Other sources of information such as movies, magazines, TV advertisements and other promotional tools do endure image formation process.

Thus, the integral aspects such as destination image, destination personality, market characteristics and information – sources and types play a vital role in strategic destination branding process from tourists perspective. However, the major role of such strategic framework lies with the stakeholders because the communication process of such image, personality and information is not a standalone marketing activity whereas colossal contribution is from stakeholders (Beritelli, 2011). Thus, the mandatory involvement of multiple stakeholders in branding the destinations has made marketing activity “politicized and highly complex” (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott, 2002).

III. ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS

Destination image is considered as the most relevant key indicator of brand perceptions (Aaker, 1991) and often analyzed on the demand perspective. However, supply perspective of destination branding process does stand on critical note. Tourism research flunk to produce more empirical inputs on the stakeholders role in destination branding (Wagner and Peters, 2009) but the challenges on branding places lies with them (Virgo and de Chernatony, 2006). The term stakeholder in tourism perspective denotes residents of the place, employees of DMOs, investors of tourism based businesses, travel intermediaries such as agencies, airlines, railways and other transport modes and even government of the state and central (Garcia, Gomez and

Molina, 2012). Some consider stakeholders are bodies – city or the government, accommodation providers and other DMOs (Sheehan, Ritchie and Hudson, 2007).

Being diverse in nature (Gartner and Ruzzier, 2011), stakeholders influence on tourists behavior is high (Pike, 2005) and hence it is essential for effective stakeholders management in DMOs which in turn emphatically impacts the strategic segmenting, targeting, and positioning of the destinations. Thus, understanding the stakeholders expectations becomes primitive in strategic branding (de Chernatony and Riley, 1999). In government perspective, effectively communicating the vision of the policies formulated determines the effective stakeholders management (Pike, 2005 and de Chernatony & Riley, 1998) as policies consist of many economic benefits (Balmer, 2001) and derive destinations’ core competence.

Stakeholders act as the first confronters of tourists who better understand the market, needs or wants, characteristics and behavior etc., and thus, image formation in tourists mind has high relevance to how stakeholders perceive the image of the destinations (Heding, Knudtzen and Bjerre, 2008). However, strategizing the internal and external stakeholders perception of image representing the destinations not only results in financial outcomes to the thereof but also benefits widely (Pike, 2005 and Spithoven, 2000). Hence, focusing on the stakeholders perspective in strategic destination branding is highly lucrative. Researches in tourism have also been performed on distinct stakeholders such as host communities (Bitsani and Kavoura, 2014), government & NGOs (Simpson, 2008), travel intermediaries (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001) and other secondary stakeholders etc. (Dodds and Ko, 2012). Some studies have viewed the stakeholders significance in marketing (Hult, Mena, Ferrell & Ferrell, 2011), in understanding their perception of brand image and in sustainable development (Byrd, 2007).

Travel agencies which work on different modes of transports such as roadways, railways, airways and waterways bridge the gap between tourists and tourism destinations. Despite cognitive image, travel agencies have direct impact of affective image – being formed by experiencing the destination because affective image tend to be varying (Kim, McKercher and Lee, 2009). Consistent message communicated by such travel agencies in roads the choice set of tourists in choosing the destination to tour. Thus, either positive word-of-mouth or negative word-of-mouth from these intermediaries reflects the tourists density (Chaudhary, 2000). Residents of the destination is one of the key factors on branding. Either image or personality of the destination has relative proportion on the people or residents. For eg; a destination is also measured on convivial trait – friendly, down-to-earth and respectful people (Ekinci and Hosany, 2006). It also indicates as to how the residents conduct and transact with the tourists. Thus, local residents have huge

contribution in destination position and branding processes (Bitsani and Kavoura, 2014).

Tourism based businesses and other entrepreneurial efforts in the tourists spots have also been shaping up the image aspects of the destination. In this context, unethical business practices constitute to the destinations reputation and image (Rittichainuwat, Qu and Brown, 2001). For example, local food (Hall and Sharples, 2008), though a factor for attraction but executed by the local businesses reach huge potential tourists through any positive means of message (Thao and Swierczek, 2008).

Government initiates and policies facilitate the destination development in lucrative phase though it is a complex process (Mason, Grabowski, and Du, 2005). Government bodies execute transactions which benefit the tourism industry and the economy (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2006) and formulate policies in timely manner (Edgell, Allen, Smith, and Swanson, 2008). Governments do concentrate on the destination development process such as cleanliness, safety, accessibility, infrastructure, and other factors etc., These factors tend to affect the image formation process of the destinations in tourists mind.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the intensive literature review, it has been found that building a destination brand strategy involves critical factors such as understanding the market needs or wants and perception, assessing the attributes and communicating the distinctiveness of the destination. Though tourists are the target consumer in tourism market whose perception reflects on the branding process (Hui & Wan, 2007), stakeholders such as local communities (Bitsani & Kavoura, 2014), tourism-based businesses (Dodds and Ko, 2012), NGOs and Government bodies (Simpson, 2008) play a significant role. Since destination image is the integral aspect of strategic branding (Echtner, 1991), analyzing it from the tourists perspective – though highly essential (Mayo, 1973) would not suffice the efficiency in formulating strategies where as analyzing holistically including the stakeholders perspectives results impeccably (Virgo and de Chernatony, 2006). The review also points out that the destination branding, and image studies started in 70's (Hunt, 1975) and yet in extreme progress and development. Majority of the studies have been focused on tourists behavior in distinct views. However, studies considering stakeholders as the research sample unit have been found relatively less (Wanger and Peters, 2009). Even though, tourists perception or the image aspects perceived by tourists significantly brunt tourists awareness, choice process, decision making and post experience behavior (Kim and Lee, 2015), it is highly commendable to the applicability of stakeholders because they serve the market. Also, spread of information is the clout of destination brands. Tourists favorable and unfavorable intensions leverage the positive and negative word-of-mouth respectively and vice

versa (Kotler, Bowens and Makens, 2002). With emerging digital marketing tools and techniques, DMOs can strategize the framework on effective branding process to compete in global competitive tourism marker with the view of communicating the core distinct value of the destination through stakeholders.

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