

Destination Personality: Cross-Country Comparisons

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Abstract

Destination personality has become an important construct as tourism managers attempt to understand people's choices and find ways to differentiate themselves in an increasingly complex marketplace. Traditional approaches have drawn on research undertaken in marketing and have used long lists of items to measure destination personalities. Best Worst Scaling (BWS) provides a new approach to such measurement that requires less time to obtain and that removes some of the response biases that impact on the results observed from such studies, especially when data are collected in more than one country. The present paper outlines a cross-country study in which BWS was used that provides real insight into three destinations' personalities and their differences in these different countries.

Keywords: Destination personality, cross cultural research

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Introduction and Literature Review

In the current volatile travel climate, travel destinations face increasing global competition (Ekinici and Hosany, 2006; Keller, 2003; Pike, 2005). Pike (2009) observed that 70% of international travellers visit only 10 countries,ⁱ leaving the remaining countries competing for the remaining 30% of total international arrivals (Morgan, Prichard and Pride, 2004). This has led destination marketers to attempt to differentiate their destinations from the competition through branding. Branding has a long tradition in marketing, where a strong brand has been linked to increased purchase intent (Cobb-Walgren, Beal and Donthu, 1995), sales, price premiums and customer loyalty (Aaker 1996) as well as reduced search costs (Assael 1995; Keller 1993) and perceived risk (Blain, Levy and Ritchie, 2005), all of which are relevant to destinations (Hosany, Ekinici and Uysal, 2006; Morgan, Prichard and Pride, 2004; Park and Petric 2006; Prebensen 2007). Thus, it is not surprising destination branding is a growing area of research (Hosany, Ekinici and Uysal, 2007).

Brand image and brand personality are key aspects of branding (Keller, 2003). While destination image has been the focus of tourism research since the 1970s, destination personality is a relatively new concept (Hosany, Ekinici and Uysal, 2006). In marketing, Aaker (1997, p. 347) defined brand personality as “the set of human characteristics associated to a brand.” Brand personality is thought to provide a connection between a brand’s emotional and self-expressive benefits, giving the brand a tangible reference point that is vivid, alive, and more complete than a generic offering (Aaker, 1996; Upshaw, 1995). Thus, brands can be characterised by personality descriptors, such as being youthful, energetic, extrovert or sophisticated (Keller, 2003). Following from brand personality literature, destination personality can be defined as “perceptions about a place as reflected by the associations held in tourist memory” (Cai, 2002, p. 273). As is the case with consumer brands, travel destinations are rich in symbolic values and personality traits (Ekinici and Hosany, 2006) and, consequently, are likely to also have their own personalities such as being stylish, creative, spirited or free (Morgan, Prichard and Piggott, 2003).

The concept of a destination personality has been supported by a number of recent studies (e.g., d’Astous and Boujbel, 2007; Ekinici and Hosany, 2006; Murphy, Benckendorff and Moscardo, 2007; Murphy, Moscardo and Benckendorff, 2007; Pike, 2009). However, uncovering a brand or destination’s personality can be a time consuming process, for which results do not often hold across consumer samples. In general, destination personality researchers have undertaken the arduous task of developing their own scales (e.g., d’Astous and Boujbel, 2007) or using an existing scale, such as Aaker’s (1997) brand personality scale (Ekinici and Hosany, 2006). Regardless of the source, brand personality scales most commonly comprise a long list of personality items measured on Likert-type scales, with anchors ranging from not descriptive at all to extremely descriptive. These items are factor analysed to develop a set of personality dimensions. However, researchers have found the factor structure changes across samples and, as such, does not seem to be generalisable (Austin, Siguaw and Mattila, 2003; Azoulay and Kapferer 2003). The lack of empirically driven consistency dramatically limits the use of brand-destination personality research to an exploratory analysis of the salient sample associations.

The Present Study

The current paper suggests a method of measuring brand personality based on a theoretically, or practically, relevant set of a priori determined personality dimensions. Alternatively, destination marketers can develop a relevant set of dimensions that capture their desired destination personality dimensions, as well as those of competitors, through initial qualitative research. Once developed, the same destination personality scale can be used to assess changes in a destination's personality over time.

Best-Worst Scaling (BWS), invented by Jordan Louviere, has recently grown in popularity as an alternative to ranking and rating scales across a range of disciplines, including psychology (e.g., Lee, Soutar and Louviere, 2008), management (e.g., Daly et al., 2010) and marketing (Auger, Devinney and Louviere, 2007; Cohen, 2009) and was seen as relevant in the present research context. BWS requires people to choose the best (or most descriptive phrases) and the worst (or least descriptive phrases) from subsets of a master list of phrases, such as personality aspects. BWS assumes respondents behave as if they examine every pair of items in each subset and choose the most distinct or maximally different pair (Marley and Louviere, 2005). The approach offers several advantages. As there is only one way to choose something as best (or worst), the method eliminates response style biases, such as end-piling, that commonly affect ratings scales in other traditional approaches (Lee, Soutar and Louviere, 2008). Further, the BWS approach provides a context to each answer, by asking people to make choices among relevant options that capture their trade-offs.

In the present study, we gathered a set of destination personality dimensions from prior research that appeared to be relevant to the potential personalities of three different tourist destinations (France, the USA and China). Eight such dimensions were chosen from past international research into brand personality (e.g., Aaker, 1997; Aaker, Benet-Martinez and Garolera, 2001; Austin, Siguaw and Mattila, 2003; Phau and Lau, 2000; Sung and Tinkham, 2005). The items representing each dimension were chosen to be relevant to a tourism destination, including Trendy (different, new, innovative), Likeable (amiable, friendly, pleasant), Sophisticated (elegant, glamorous, sophisticated), Competence (reliable, dependable, well-made), Ruggedness (rugged, tough, strong), Lively (daring, spirited, lively), Genuine (authentic, genuine, real) and Peaceful (serene, tranquil, calm). A partially balanced incomplete block design was used that meant respondents saw five subsets of the eight destination personality dimensions, each containing six dimensions, which were represented in the questionnaire by the items in brackets. The destinations (France, the USA and China) and the brand personality dimensions within each subset were randomised. This design resulted in respondents seeing each destination personality dimension three times and each dimension pair two or three times. Respondents were asked to pick the most and least descriptive terms for each of the three different destinations and best-worst ratio scores was calculated to produce trade-off scores that do not require ipsatisation using the procedure outlined by Lee, Soutar and Louviere (2008).

Since the present study targeted people in Australia, Germany, Brazil and South Korea, the initial questionnaire was developed in English and translated into German, Portuguese and Korean by bilingual translators living in each of the countries and back translated into English by a second translator (Brislin, 1970). The researchers and the final translator compared the English versions and resolved discrepancies in meaning.

Responses were collected over the Internet by a large online panel provider with members in Australia, Germany, Brazil and South Korea. The four countries were chosen to reflect a wide range of target markets in terms of their geographic and cultural distance. Respondents were recruited by email and paid by the panel provider in ‘points’ used for online purchases. The samples were chosen to be permanent residents of their country and to reflect the socio-economic characteristics of adults aged 18 to 65 years. The final samples were very similar in size, age and gender. The sample sizes ranged from 209 in South Korea to 220 in Germany. The average age ranged from 36 (Brazil, SD 11) to 40 (Australia, SD 11). Gender proportions ranged from 50% female (South Korea and Brazil) to 52% (Australia). All respondents were permanent residents of their country and a high proportion were born there (84% in Australia; 98% in Germany; 100% in Brazil; 99% in South Korea).

Results

The means and standard deviations of the eight dimensions in each country are shown in the Appendix. Figure 1 shows the overall (across country) means for each destination personality dimension for France, the USA and China. Initially, differences in brand personality for each destination were assessed using a repeated measures design and paired-comparison t-tests across all respondents from the four target countries. In each case, the differences were significant at least at the 0.001 level (France = 115.05; the USA = 84.70 and China = 43.11). Using $p < 0.001$ as a guide, given the large sample size, it was clear France was seen as significantly more sophisticated, the USA as significantly more rugged and lively and China as significantly more trendy, lively and genuine, than the other destinations.

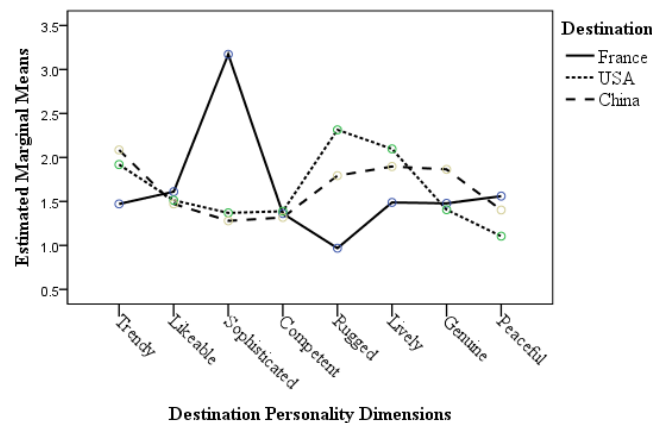


Figure 1: Overall Perceptions of Destination Personality for each Country

Figure 2 illustrates the means for each destination personality dimension for France, the USA and China by respondent country. As a repeated measures design produced a significant destination by brand personality by country effect ($F = 13.19$; $p < 0.001$), independent samples t-tests were used to see if respondents in the different countries perceived these most descriptive destinations’ personality dimensions as significantly different at the 0.001 level. German respondents perceived France as significantly less sophisticated than either of the other destinations. The South Koreans perceived the USA as significantly more rugged than did the Germans or Brazilians and the Brazilians perceived the USA as significantly less lively than the other destinations. The South Koreans perceived China as being significantly livelier than the other destinations, while the Australians and Brazilians perceived China as being significantly more genuine than did the Germans or South Koreans.

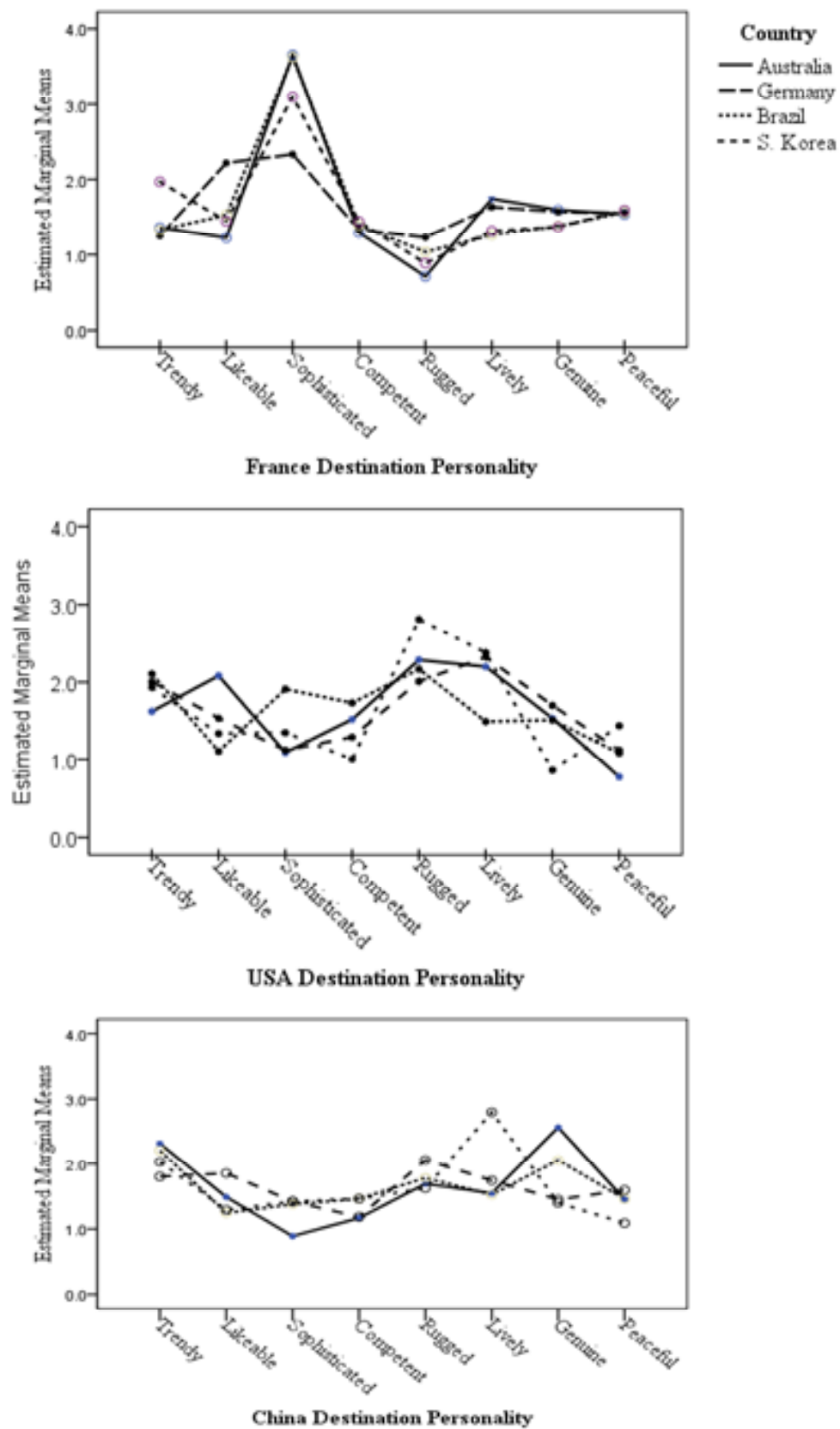


Figure 2: Market Level Perceptions of Destination Personalities

Discussion

Brand personality is a consumer construct that appeals to researchers (Aaker, 1997; Gardner and Levvy, 1955) and to practitioners (Plummer, 1985), especially as its importance has become more apparent (Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal, 2007). The application of brand personality to tourism, however, is in its infancy (Hosany, Ekinci and Uysal, 2006). Consequently, learning more about how people perceive destinations' personalities and identifying destination personality dimensions is fundamental to improving our understanding of tourists' destination choices.

Practically, people's perceptions of a destination are taken into account by governments when they make international policy decisions. For some countries, tourism represents such a major industry that these countries are dependent on their tourist agencies to be able to offer appropriate travel product and services to the rest of the world. Because people's preferences for travel destinations depend in good part on their perceptions of destinations, it is important to know these perceptions and to manage them well (d'Astous and Boujbel, 2007). Tourism agencies need insight into how people view their destinations in relation to other competing destinations so they can more effectively position local destinations and build sound marketing strategies that are consistent with such destination personalities (Kneesel, Baloglu and Millar, 2010). The present paper has suggested a different measurement approach that provides very useful destination personality branding in an economical and effective way. BWS offers a powerful alternative approach to measuring constructs such as destination personality and tourism researchers and managers should consider its use when undertaking such research.

Appendix: Means and Standard Deviations for each Country

Personality Dimension	China		France		USA	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Different, new, innovative	2.09	1.51	1.47	1.10	1.92	1.44
Amiable, friendly, pleasant	1.47	1.18	1.61	1.34	1.51	1.25
Elegant, glamorous, sophisticated	1.28	1.04	3.17	1.88	1.37	1.10
Reliable, dependable, well-made	1.32	0.99	1.36	0.93	1.39	1.12
Rugged, tough, strong	1.79	1.63	0.97	0.94	2.31	1.82
Daring, spirited, lively	1.90	1.45	1.49	1.12	2.10	1.43
Authentic, genuine, real	1.86	1.44	1.48	1.11	1.41	1.13
Serene, tranquil, calm	1.40	1.17	1.56	1.08	1.10	0.84

ⁱ In 2008, the top six countries that attracted international tourist arrivals and their corresponding tourism receipts were: (1) France (79.3 million, \$55.6 billion); (2) United States (58 million, \$110.1 billion); (3) Spain (57.3 million, \$61.6 billion); (4) China (53 million, \$40.8 billion); (5) Italy (42.7 million, 45.7 billion) and (6) United Kingdom (30.2 million, \$36 billion) (UNWTO, 2010).

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