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AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON THE FACTORS AFFECTING WOM COMMUNICATION FOR BRANDING A TOURIST DESTINATION

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This research was conducted to investigate the multi factor process to create positive Word-of-Mouth communication in connection for improved destination branding. Destination brand personality and tourism services have a significant role in the domain of destination marketing. Although the concept of brand personality has been brought from the domain of tangible product marketing but it has an equally important role in tourism marketing as well. In the present study the author has proposed a structural framework that depicts the interrelationship among brand personality and tourism services the resultant overall satisfaction from destination brand experience; which in turn leads generate WOM communication- the most effective tool for tourism. The research was conducted with 406 Indian tourists sample collected from different parts of India. A structural equation modeling has been done to validate the proposed model. The outcome of this research paper should enable destination marketers and tourism brand managers to get a new direction in their thought, the outcome would also be helping further researchers to think in this direction.

Keywords: *Destination branding, Destination personality, Brand experience & satisfaction, Tourism services, Word-of-Mouth communication*

INTRODUCTION

Travel and tourism is one of the world's leading industries, or economic sectors, representing a major source of GDP, employment,

exports and taxes (WTTC, 2014). UNWTO-Highlights (2015) has publicized that International tourist arrivals increased by 4.4% in 2015 and contributing 9% of world GDP. Pike (2009) detected that 70% of worldwide travellers visit only 10 countries and the remaining countries are struggling to attract the outstanding 30% of total international arrivals (Morgan *et al.*, 2003). This has led destination marketers to attempt to differentiate their destinations from the competition through branding. When a prospective tourist plans for destination he or she considers many factors which are part of overall Service Expectations (Briggs *et al.*,2007; Dedeoğlu *et al.*,2015) , Service Quality (Murphy *et al.*,2007), Logistic and Communication(WTO,2007; Musa and Adamu ,2011), uniqueness of the destination (Xia *et al.*,2009) , destination cultural background (Clarke,2013; Dolzhikova-Polishchuk, 2014),quality of food & beverages(Mak *et al*.,2012) and hospitality and accommodations (Ip *et al*., 2011) etc. That is why the destination personality (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Murphy *et al.*, 2007) has become an important construct of tourism marketing. Destination image related studies (Pike,2002; Ekinci & Hosany, 2006;) have demonstrated that positive destination images and attributes have the pull capacity (Prayag *et al.*,2011; Kassean, 2013; Morrison, 2013) to attract the potential tourists. This research has used empirical data to propose an original and innovative framework within which three parameters, namely destination brand personality, tourism services and destination brand experience, together influence Word-of-Mouth (WOM) communication. Subsequently, the study investigates the process to create positive WOM communication in connection with destination branding in Indian context.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONSTRUCT OF THE HYPOTHESIS

In the current research, we have collected a set of destination personality dimensions from previous research work that seemed to be relevant to the potential characters of Indian tourist destinations, such dimensions have been chosen from previous international research work on brand personality (Phau and Lau, 2000; Sung and Tinkham, 2005) image attributes (Hosany *et al*., 2006; Stylidis *et al*., 2014). The factor representing in each dimension were selected to be applicable to a tourism destination of India , including uniqueness and adventure association with the place (different, new, rugged, tough, strong, innovative), natural beauty (amiable, friendly, pleasant), attractiveness of the place (elegant, glamorous, sophisticated), local artefact (reliable, dependable, well -made), lively (daring, spirited, lively) and cultural element along with local

people's attitude (authentic, genuine, real) and pleasant weather (serene, tranquil, calm).

Destination attributes and tourists' satisfaction

Successful destinations have some important attributes such as Natural Attractions (e.g. mountains, lakes, beaches) (Reynisdottir *et al*., 2008;Weidenfeld *et al*.,2010), destination cultural background (Clarke,2013 Dolzhikova-Polishchuk,2014;), ancillary services complementary to primary tourism service (e.g. health care, post and telecommunication) (Ekinci *et al* ., 2006; Dedeoğlu *et al.,*2015), attractiveness (Prayag *et al* 2011), uniqueness of the destination (Xia *et al.*,2009) information about the destination and its image& uniqueness (Hosany *et al*., 2006; Stylidis *et al*., 2014). Activities and play (e.g. hiking, swimming, and skiing) and passive ones (e.g. sun bathing, wellness), logistic support (WTO, 2007; Musa and Adamu, 2011), Safety (Moutinho, 2000; Harper, 2006), quality of food & beverages (Mak *et al*., 2012) and hospitality and accommodations (Ip *et al*., 2011). Brand experience and satisfaction for tourism has been explained in different literature in different ways. But some points are very important, those are: exploring new things, pleasure and fun (Williams, 2006; Weaver, 2011), involving with Nature oriented activities (McIntosh and Siggs, 2005), fulfilment of expectation (Xia *et al*., 2009), value addition (McIntosh and Siggs, 2005), peace and relaxation (Mahika,2011), experimentation and activities (Richards, G., Wilson, J., 2003). Previous studies have been able to establish a significant and positive association in between tourism relation satisfaction and destination image (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Maria, 2014; Xia *et al.*, 2009). Satisfaction is recognized as one of the key judgments that tourists use to measure tourism services. Future tourism service buying intentions are very closely connected with destination brand experience and satisfaction (Maria, 2014; Yang *et al.*, 2015). The Destination Brand Experience will result into brand recall and advocacy (Abdelhamied, 2013; Kouthouris and Alexandris, 2005).

Word-of mouth (WOM) communication at tourism marketing domain

Consumer purchase decision is very much influenced by information sourced from WOM and the importance of WOM is increasing in leaps and bounds in the tourism sector too. According to the Keller Fay Group (2006),

3.4 billion conversations about brands take place every day. These conversations have a fabulous impact on behaviour of the buyers. Researchers have established that the impact of WOM communications is huge in the consumer community, nearly 70% of all purchase decisions (Balter, 2008) is supported with WOM communications, and this has become one of the primary driving force in two/thirds of all global businesses (Dye, 2000). Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication in the age of digitalized environment is the combination of traditional WOM and internet based social networking and communication through online communities. Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) and online reviews have also become the significant part of brand communication and that is becoming so popular in the field of marketing (Goldsmith, 2006; Hasegawa, 2014).

No search of a tourist destination starts from the blue; it is always presided by information from a friend, family or the like. Studies on WOM are plenty, but how to increase the positive force of this WOM in tourism is indeed very scarce. The present study is an effort to fulfil this gap.

Although the aforesaid studies tried to investigate the different perspectives and dimensions of destination branding, destination image (Hosany *et al*., 2006, 2007; Kotler & Gertner, 2004) destination brand selection behaviour (Abdelhamied, 2013; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Brakus *et al.*,2009) and destination brand personality (Ekinci & Hosany, 2006; Murphy *et al.*,2007) but there is less emphasis on intergraded framework.

In existing studies there are fewer evidences relating to the impact of WOM on destination brand selection behaviour (Ye *et al.*, 2011; Jalilvand *et al.*, 2012). Few recent studies (Pike,2005; Ekinci *et al*.,2006; Hosany *et al*.,2006; Zhu *et al*.,2009; Goyette *et al*.,2010; Saraniemi, 2010; Gartner *et al*., 2011; Qu *et al*.,2011; García *et al*.,2012; Sotiriadis *et al*.,2013; Pike *et al*.,2014, Gómez *et al*., 2015) have tried to explore the various dimensions relating to tourism destination branding, destination personality and the effect of WOM in tourism destination brand selection behaviour in an unintegrated manner. But evidences in the tourism marketing literature regarding, what actually leads to generate the voluntary positive WOM communication in the context of destination branding is remains scarce. This study wishes to explore the process of stimulating voluntary WOM communication for branding a tourist destination in the Indian context.

This gap has inspired us to develop the objective of the research:
The present paper wishes to propose a comprehensive model by finding the inter-related connection among Destination Brand Personality, Destination

Brand Experience, Tourism service; and their sum-total combined effect on generating Word-of-Mouth communication. This paper also wishes to give the overall perspective of how to generate a positive WOM for better tourist destination branding.

Research Hypotheses

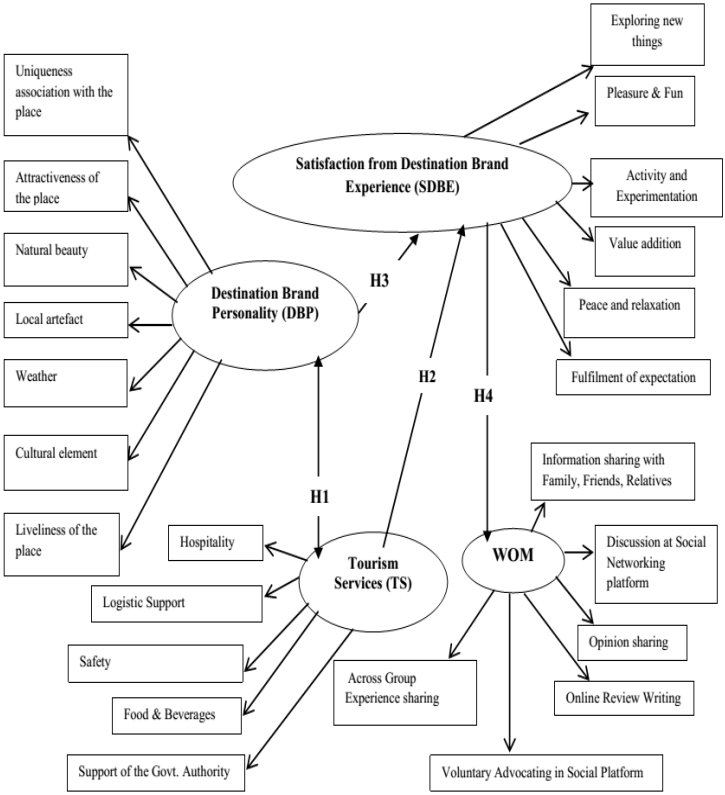
Hypotheses 1: Tourism services and destination brand personality are positively related.

Hypotheses 2: Tourism services will have a positive impact on Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience.

Hypotheses 3: Destination brand personality will have a positive impact on Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience.

Hypotheses 4: Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience will have a positive impact on WOM communication.

Figure 1. Proposed Hypotheses-based Model



METHODS

The present research is based on exhaustive literature review in finding the components directly and indirectly related to the proposed model. The research is based on empirical data, the population of this study is composed of all Indian tourists of age 18 years and above who participate in visiting different destinations for tourism purpose at least once a year. In this present study we have gathered the basic consumer contacts related data from the Indian and the international tour operators who are working in India, which has helped us to create a sizeable database of 4752 Indian tourists. 600

potential tourists were randomly selected from our harvested tourist's database by using the random number table. Sample responses were constructed using effective Web survey design (Dillman *et al.*, 2001; Porter *et al.*, 2003) by using a list-based sampling frame (Dominelli, 2003; Fahmy *et al.*, 2005). A structured online questionnaire (as prescribed by Dillman *et al.*, 2001) has been used as the tools of data collection. The entire data were collected in between May 16th to July 22nd, 2016. The responses were recorded using five-point Likert (1- completely Disagree, 5 – Completely Agree). In this process of data collection 406 valid samples were collected/ received across India covering both the tourists segments, first Indian tourists who visited international destinations along with domestic destinations and second the Indian tourists who visited only the domestic destinations of the tourist segments (The distribution of sample: 185 Indian tourists visited international destinations along with domestic destinations and 221 Indian tourists visited only the domestic destinations, mean age = 34.7 years, female =28.6 percent, average income=38,500 in Indian Rupees, average per-capita-per year tourists spending =26,800 in Indian Rupees , more than 68 percent of the tourist responders were graduate). The results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) have demonstrated the data fit related to the proposed model of the current research (covariance within constructs: e.g. Hair *et al.*, 2008). The sample size of the present research is meeting the basic criteria for CFA (Hair *et al.*, 2008). All factor loadings were having higher value (0.60 and above, Hair *et al.*, 2008) and are significant at the 0.001 level indicating convergent validity (Kline, 2005; Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The current research has been very much particular about the test of reliability and validity. The structural equation modeling was done to assess the hypothesized model using IBM SPSS AMOS (version-20.0), one step approaches and the method of estimation was maximum likelihood estimation (Ladhari, 2007) which is expected to be robust.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Structural equation modeling procedures

Structural model comprises of set of dependence associations involving the constructs in the proposed model. The hypothesized model projected the direct combined impacts of *Destination Brand Personality (DBP)* and *Tourism Services (TS)* on *Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience* (SDBE), which, in turn effect in generating WOM. Present

researches have tried to validate the proposed model strongly with CFA outcomes; we have considered 24 independent variables or items. Each factor or the dimensions had a minimum of three items and maintained the minimum requirement for structural equation modeling (Hair *et al.*, 2008). The proposed structural equation modeling was tested (with AMOS, version – 20) using covariance matrix of the relevant indicators as input with maximum likelihood estimation method. All item loadings were having higher value (0.50 and above, Hair *et al.*, 2008) and are significant at the 0.001 level indicating convergent validity (Kline, 2005; Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The significance of the influences on WOM communication was assessed through *t-test* and *p-values*. The outcomes revealed significant positive impacts parting to the proposed model (Table-3). Statistical outcomes have demonstrated that there is a positive correlation in between *Tourism Services (TS)* and *Destination Brand Personality (DBP)* (Path Coefficient =0.84, t = 6.769, p-value < 0.05), *Tourism Services (TS)* is having a positive impact on *Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience* (SDBE), (Path Coefficient = 0.35, t = 2.464, p-value < 0.01). The result has established that *Destination Brand Personality (DBP)* is positively influencing *Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience* (SDBE), (Path Coefficient =0.67, *t* = 3.877, *p-value* < 0.05). The result has finally demonstrated significant positive impact of *Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience* (SDBE) on *WOM* generation (Path Coefficient =0.84, *t* = 3.40, *p-value* < 0.05)

Goodness-of-Fit Indexes for Measurement Model

The model fit indices also provide a reasonable model fit for the structural model. Chi-square statistic is 763.579 (Probability level=.000), χ 2 / d. f. is 2.207, The Normed Fit Index (NFI), Relative Fit Index (RFI), Comparative Fit index (CFI), Tucker Lewis Index (TLI), Goodness of Fit Index(GFI) and Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) are 0.818, 0.916, 0.953 0.892, 0.857, 0.828 respectively. RMSEA is 0.064 and the PCLOSE is 0.002 Hence it is concluded that the proposed research model fits the data reasonably (Crowley and Fan, 1997; Kline, 2005).

Normality and Reliability analysis

To achieve higher degree of multivariate normality, maximum likelihood estimation (Ladhari, 2007; Hayes, 1999) has been used in the data analysis process which is claimed to be robust (Ladhari, 2007) situations. From *Table-1* it is evident all item loadings were having higher

value (0.50 and above, Hair *et al.*, 2008) and are significant at the 0.001 level indicating convergent validity (Kline, 2005; Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). From *Table-1* it is also evident that all Cronbach's α coefficients of the construct met the minimum level of 0.60 (Fornell and Larker, 1981; Hair *et al.*, 2008) which is confirming the reliability of the model dimensions.

Table 1. Measurement Model Fit Indices

Items	Standardised Item Loading	Cronbach's Alpha
Attractiveness of the place	0.753	Destination Brand Personality (DBP)
Weather	0.729	0.749
Cultural element	0.687	
Natural beauty and Pleasant weather	0.689	
Uniqueness & Adventure	0.653	
Local artefact	0.748	
Liveliness of the	0.753	
Pleasure & Fun	0.732	
Explore New Things	0.658	
Experimentation	0.742	Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience (SDBE) 0.713
Expectation fulfilment	0.767	
Value addition	0.652	
Peace and relaxation	0.753	
Hospitality	0.752	
Logistic Support	0.642	
Safety and Hassles free Services	0.722	Tourism Services (TS) 0.718
Support of the Govt. Authority	0.764	
Food & Beverages	0.685	
Information sharing with Family, Friends, Relatives	0.704	
Discussion at Social Networking platform	0.751	Word-of-Mouth communication (WOM) 0.739

Opinion sharing	0.695	
Online Review Writing	0.682	
Voluntary Advocating in Social Platform	0.726	
Across Group Experience sharing	0.735	

Above table shows that out of 24 items, 14 variables indicated factor loadings greater than 0.70 and others are greater than 0.60 as a good rule of thumb (Hair *et al.*, 2008).

Table 2. Measurement Model Fit Construct wise

Construct	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability
Destination Brand Personality (DBP)	0.505	0.859
Tourism Services (TS)	0.510	0.838
Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience (SDBE)	0.517	0.865
Word-of-Mouth communication (WOM)	0.513	0.863

It is clear from the above table that all composite reliability values are meeting the minimum standard (with values 0.70 and above, Hair *et al.*, 2008; Bagozzi and Yi, 1988) along with the minimum criteria of average variance extracted for the convergent validity (AVE = 0.50, Hair *et al.*, 2008; Fornell and Larker, 1981).

Table 3a. Testing of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	Correlation	t-value	Result
H1: TS <--> DBP	.122*	.841*	6.068	Acceptable

(: $p < 0.01$; **: $p < 0.05$)*

Table 3b. Testing of Hypotheses

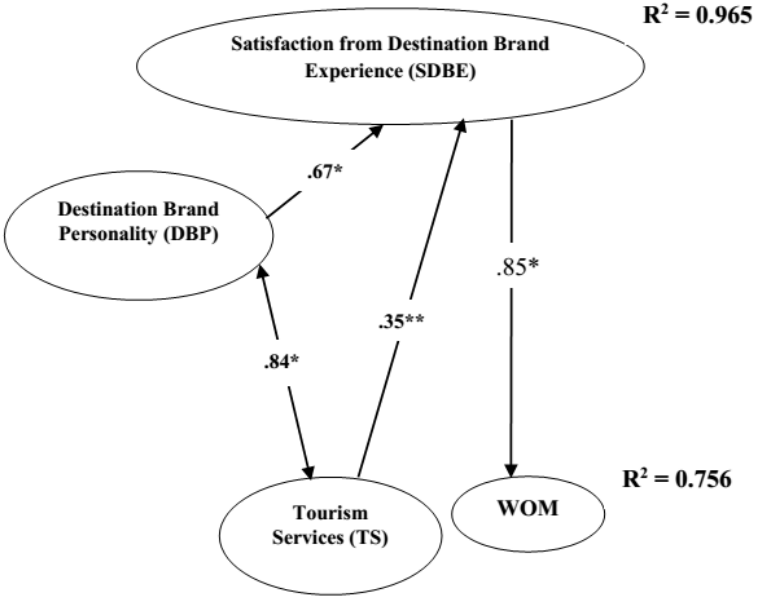
Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	t-value	Result
H2: TS → SDBE	.35**	2.464	Acceptable
H3: DBP →SDBE	.67*	3.877	Acceptable
H4: SDBE → WOM	.85*	3.40	Acceptable

(: $p < 0.01$; **: $p < 0.05$)*

Table 3c: Squared Multiple Correlations (output)

Dependent Variables	R square
Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience (SDBE)	0.965
Word-of-Mouth communication (WOM)	0.758

Figure 2. Standardized Model with Path Coefficients



Analysis of measurement model

Present study has critically identified the most important items relating to the construction of four major dimensions pertaining to destination branding such as *Destination Brand Personality (DBP)* and *Tourism Services (TS) on Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience (SDBE),* and *Word-of-Mouth communication (WOM).* The outcome of the present study has on one side demonstrated that (*Table-3a, Table-3b, and Table- 3c*), there is a strong positive correlation in between *Tourism Services* and *Destination Brand Personality*, on the other side the data analysis results (*Table-3b, and Table-3c*) have established a significant relation that is *Destination Brand Personality* and *Tourism Services* are jointly having strong positive impacts on *Satisfaction from Destination*

Brand Experience. The present study also aimed to explore the impact on WOM generation from satisfaction drawn from destination brand experience. The outcomes (*Table-3b, and Table- 3c*) of the present study has established the significant positive impact of *Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience* (SDBE) on *WOM* generation. Thus this paper for the first time has come up with an integrated model that can be used a road map for future destination branding and WOM generation.

CONCLUSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

Our model has demonstrated a strong positive correlation between Tourism Services and Destination Brand Personality; it has also depicted that Destination Brand Personality and Tourism Services are jointly having strong positive impacts on Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience, which in turn leads to Word-of-Mouth (WOM) communication- the most effective tool for tourism. In this world of cut throat competition augmentation of service is increasing every minute. Augmentation in all its aspects of a service is often not possible neither it is financially viable. The present model has proved statistically that the overall feel-good factor for the place will be enhanced and hence a more positive Word-of-Mouth shall be generated in the days to come, which is another significant contribution to destination branding and marketing literature as this issue had not been investigated earlier. As we all know that it is only the satisfied customers who promote positive WOM communication, so it has become very important to study the factors that lead to WOM communication. This paper has attempted to figure out in threadbare detail the factors and its influence on WOM communication. Positive feedback from tourists is just not a linear function of a few simplistic factors; it is a complex structure where one road leads to the other. Here this paper has presented a map to show where and how different roads lead to positive WOM. In today's world holidays are few and hence the age old wanderlust among people is going down and as because holidays are few the competition is yet fiercer because in a given year for a tourist it is a choice of either this or that place and surely not both. Hence the brand value of a particular tourist destination has become more important than ever before. The connectivity of the tourist and the destination brand needs to be strong and positive, which is the resultant effect of destination brand personality and tourism services. It is always true for all that a good experience always leads to better Word-of-Mouth communication. But what actually leads to this Word-of-Mouth communication? The tested model in this current study clearly shows that

combined effect of Destination *Brand Personality* and *Tourism Services* together leads to 'feel good factor' or *Satisfaction from Destination Brand Experience* of the tourists. satisfaction of the in turn leads to a positive and strong WOM, which may in turn influence the potential travellers in visiting a specific destination and hence business.

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