Iranian sport tourism destinations brand equity from the sport tourist’s perspective

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was evaluation of Iranian sport tourism destinations brand equity from the sport tourist’s perspective. Statistical Society were 576 domestic and foreign customers and sport tourists. We use of researcher based questionnaire with high validity and reliability (α = 0.83). For data analysis were used descriptive statistics and inferential( One sample t-test). Statistical calculations were performed using SPSS 18 software (p ≤ 0.05). The results showed that the average dimension of awareness, perceived quality and loyalty in the out the 95% confidence level, is less than 3 and the difference of the mean is negative. But in the average dimension of destinations image in the out of the 95% confidence level, is greater than 3 and the difference of the mean is positive. Overall, customers and sport tourists was not loyal to Iranian sport events and sport tourism.

Key words: Brand Equity, Sport Tourism Destination, Iran, Sport Tourist

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of brand, branding and brand equity complements one another. Brand is defined by the American Marketing Association [AMA] as “a name, term, design, symbol, a combination of these, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers” (Pinho, 1996). In other words, brand is the final object that concentrates and materializes the other efforts of the brand management process (Gholizadeh Sarvari, 2012). It is generally accepted that a brand is a powerful means of differentiation, and that differentiation is a significant competitive marketing strategy (Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2008; Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005; Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007). Strong brand leads competitive advantages (Lee & Back, 2010), increase organization cash flow and accelerate liquidity (Miller & Muir, 2004), provide premium price, profitability and more loyalty for customers (Madden, Fehle, & Fournier, 2006), and also support brand extension opportunity (Yasin, Noor, & Mohamad, 2007). A powerful brand enjoys a high level of consumers brand awareness and loyalty besides forming the basis for building strong and profitable customer relationships (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). Although branding and brand management was available for many decades, but the brand equity is a key and fundamental concept for most organizations which are appeared in recent 20 years. Brand equity has been one of the main topics in academic research over the last few decades (Leone et al., 2006). Building brand equity is considered an important part of brand building (Pappu et al., 2005). Emerge of brand equity increases the importance of marketing strategies and provided focus point for researchers and managers (Chen, 2009). In the few last decades, brand equity concept has grown rapidly. One reason for its popularity is strategic role of that and importance in obtaining competitive advantage in strategic management decisions (Atilgan, Aksoy, & Akinci, 2005). Appropriate management of brand equity leads more loyalty, low risk of marketing activity and marketing crisis, flexible response to price fluctuations, more business support and cooperation, effectiveness of marketing communications, licensing opportunities, additional opportunities for brand extension, more attraction for investors, more supports from investors (Aaker & Biel, 1993; Keller, 2008), greater profit margins (Kim & Kim, 2005), ability to attract good employees (DelVecchio, Jarvis, Klink, & Dineen, 2007), protection of potential competitors entrance during outsourcing (Lim & Tan, 2009).

Destination Brand Equity

While branded consumer products have a longstanding academic literature, the literature on destination branding is a relatively recent phenomenon (Buhalis, 2000). The extension of the brand concept from products to service industries such as tourism, offers implications for resort and travel destination
management (Boo, Busser, & Baloglu, 2009; Buhalis, 2000; Kayaman & Arasli, 2007; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998). In this respect, Destination branding is considered a vital aspect of current destination management practice, as broadening tourist opportunities and travel locations have resulted in the increased substitutability and lack of differentiation amongst some destinations (Pike, 2009). According to Pichard and Morgan (1998), destinations can be branded as as people and products. In this case unlike the goods and services, the name of a destination brand is relatively predetermined by the existing name of a location. The power of branding is in making people aware of the destination and then linking positive associations (Gholizadeh Sarvari, 2012). Tourism regions or destinations are considered as key elements of national or international tourism activities. Each region has its own tourism attractions and therefore theoretically there are many tourism destination options for potential tourists to choose. These tourism regions are called tourism destinations when they have sufficient resources, infrastructure and adequate service for tourism activities and tourists. Hereby the achievement of these factors increases the chance of appreciation (Crompton, 1992). A brand equity of destination can be positive or negative and is considered an important part of the decision making process of costumers when they consider their destination alternatives. As many of the researcher has explained brand equity of destination as is an important determinant and also plays an important role in destination selection process (Boo et al., 2009; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Recently, the growth potential of tourism regions begin to be bound to service capacity of business, leisure and recreation interests (Hall & Weiler, 1995). Sport tourism as a strong and dynamic part of tourism has begun to be one of the most important factors in tourism destinations. This fact has also begun to attract academicians. The researches done in recent years in this subject can be summarized as sporting events (Burgan & Mules, 1992), Sport tourism and destination management (Chernushenko, 1996), Travel flows for specific sport activities (Priestley, 1995), Niche sport markets, Inherited sport facilities and sport tourism resources (Gammion, 2002). Sport and tourism industries are parallel to each other in terms of the development process in the last 50 years. They both are democratizing, easy to participate and have increased freedom (Standeven & De Knoop, 1999). They both become a social event globally and have been subject to the forces of globalization (Higham & Hinch, 2003). Today, sport and tourism are concerned with the important economic activities in the developed and developing nations (Swart & Bob, 2007). Based upon the world tourism organization estimates, 43% of the world jobs will be associated with the tourism industry by 2010. For example, from 1997 to 2005, sport tourism brought about an annual increase in gross domestic growth (1.3%), which resulted from economic activities with regard to holding big sport competitions, and unemployment declined by 1.9% on annual basis (Kasimati & Dawson, 2009). Thus, sport can considerably influence sport-based services and products in terms of functional and visual dimensions. The corresponding studies indicate that sport tourism is the most developed sector of the tourism industry (KiM & Chalip, 2004) such that it is regarded as a world multibillion trading element, producing 4.5 trillion dollars for tourism industry and world tour (Tassiopoulosa & Haydamb, 2007). Hence, it is considered as one of the effective factors highly influencing national growth and revenue in the 21st century (Icoz, Gunlu, & Oter, 2010). Moreover, for tourism industry, sport, clubs, teams, sport events and facilities have become attractions. Beyond that, individual sport stars are also among attractions for tourists. Sport's development as a tourism attraction creates new opportunities for sport clubs or athletes, and managers to increase their market share. The aim of investments done in a destination for sport tourism is not only for the development of local community in sports but also to attract tourists and change the image of the destination and become a popular brand (Gratton, Shibli, & Coleman, 2005). Studies have proven that Iran is among the top10 countries from the viewpoint of tourist attractions and has the greatest natural variety and diversity, while now Iran's share of this market is insignificant and only about 0.1% of its gross domestic product. Specially, The present natural sport attractions in Iran are widespread and generally related to hiking, nature tourism, hunting, fishing, winter sports (such as skiing, skating, snowboarding), beach and water sports (such as swimming, boating, surfing, diving), desert, camel riding, nature therapy, mud therapy, spa therapy, mountaineering and caving and adventurous sports (Koozehchian, Ehsani, & Adabi Fierozjah, 2010; Zeytonli, Honari, & Farahani, 2011). However, in Iran, in spite of its numerous capacities in attracting various tourists and considering the importance and necessity of developing tourism of the country, there has not yet been any systematic research on customer-based brand equity for a sport tourism destinations and lack of analytical model for evaluation of brand equity in sport tourism destination’s from the sport tourist’s perspective and unfortunately, the tourism industry and as a result the sports tourism of the country has not found its true place. thus, it is essential for managers and experts in the country to develop and promote this industry.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is evaluation of brand equity in Iranian sport tourism destination’s from the sport tourist’s perspective. This study’s type is descriptive-analysis and the method of the research was qualitative. Qualitative research is a type of research that seeks answers to a question; is systematically conducted and involves the collection of evidence. Primarily, literature study is done by examining secondary resources.
Hereby, theoretical data about research subject are collected and theoretical background of the study is prepared. The target population was inbound sport tourists who were able to read, write, and speak persian, Arabic, Russian and English and visited Iran in international fair sport events, during a seven-month period of research in between November 2012 and may 2013. Statistical Society were 576 foreign and resident customers and sport tourists. The sample method used in this study is Simple Random Sampling. There is not any scale prepared directly about the subject. So, question scales are prepared by examining previous studies on the subject (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007 and Boo et al., 2009 survey). The survey questionnaire consisted of two major sections. The first section included questions relating to tourist characteristics to identify the socio-demographic characteristics. This section helps to gather information about gender, age, education, marital status, residential location, occupation, length of stay. The second section is the model of CBBETD, adapted and modified by the researcher. This section concludes dimensions of brand awareness, image, perceived quality and brand loyalty. Thirty-four questions were adopted and modified in this section, including 5 items for brand awareness, 13 items for image, 9 items for perceived quality, and 7 items for brand loyalty. A five-point Likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, and 5= Strongly Agree) was employed to measure brand equity of sport tourism destinations. Prepared questionnaires (in persian, English, Arabic and russian). Its validity coefficient confirmed by experienced university faculty professors. A pilot test was performed to assess how well the survey instrument captured the constructs it was supposed to measure, and to test the internal consistency and reliability of questionnaire items. The first draft of the survey instrument was distributed to 30 randomly selected visitors who were resided in sport tourism destinations. Cronbach's alpha was used to verify the internal consistency reliability. The CBBETD model's dimensions including brand awareness, image, perceived quality and brand loyalty show a significant internal consistency of .85, .82, .79, .77, respectively. Total reliability of questionnaire was Cronbach alpha(83%). For data analysis were used descriptive statistics and inferential (t test). Statistical calculations were performed using SPSS 18 software (p ≤0.05).

RESULTS

According to the study results, The mean age of respondents was 31, 70.3% of respondents (N=405) were male and 29.7 % of them (N= 171) were female. 38.2% of respondents (N=220) were single and 61.8% of them (N= 356) were married. Distribution of respondents by educational level shows that the majority of respondent were bachelor (40.8%). 20.1% of respondents had primary, secondary and diploma degree, 25% of them had master's degree and 14% were PhD and PhD student. Moreover, 34. % (N= 196) are sport management experts and sport and physical education executives & 5.6% (N= 32) are Experts of tourism and executives & 29.9% (N= 172) are athlete & 15.8% (N= 91) are coach and referee & 14.8% (N=85) are team managers. Table 1 – 5, presents results brand equity of Iranian sport tourism destinations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Brand Awareness</th>
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<tr>
<td>Brand Awareness</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iranian sport tourism destinations has a good name &amp; reputation</td>
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<tr>
<td>I can easily name famous Iranian sport tourism destinations</td>
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<tr>
<td>When I think about sport tourism destination, Iranian sport tourism destinations comes to mind immediately</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iranian sport events is very famous and I can easily name famous Iranian sport event.</td>
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<td>Average Dimention of Brand Awareness</td>
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<th>Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Brand Image</th>
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<tr>
<td>Brand Image</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iranian sport tourism destinations has beautiful scenery and nature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iranian sport tourism destinations offers good nightlife and variety entertainment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iranian sport tourism destinations has good climate and pleasant weather</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iran has safe and secure sport tourism destinations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iran has friendly personnel and people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran has modern sport training camps for sport tourism like football and...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran has good beaches and summer sport tourism destinations, for like swimming and diving and ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran has proper mountains and winter sport tourism destinations for sport tourism, like ski and ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran has proper desert and wilderness sport destinations for like rally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iranian sport tourism destination is proper for hosting mega sport events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iran has attractive sport product and events (sport teams, events, conferences, exhibitions, etc) to attract tourists</td>
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<tr>
<td>The overall image that I have towards the Iranian sport destination is good</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average Dimention of Brand Image</td>
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Destination Branding is one of the aspects of marketing that has evolved most rapidly in recent times. Indeed, the very idea of utilizing the concept of branding in a destination context is a relatively recent phenomenon – at least in a formal sense. In tourism marketing, destination branding has become a powerful force for transmitting a favorable brand image to target market and good night life and variety entertainment. (M= 2.3073), has not a high quality of accommodations (M= 2.7101), has not high quality of infrastructure (M=2.7188), have not readily available travel information (M= 2.2431) and Iranian sport tourism destinations have not excellent sport event facilities for hasting mega sport events( M= 2.9422). But According to Table 2 and 5, The results showed that the average dimension of image (3.1278), in the out the 95% confidence level, is greater than 3 and mean difference is positive. from the sport tourist's perspective, Iranian sport tourism destinations is a safe destination and has a beautiful scenery, nature, pleasant climate and proper natural sporting attractions.

Tourists are becoming increasingly sophisticated and discerning, and destination choice is now a considerable indication of lifestyle and a way to express identity. Thus, destinations have been required to find new ways to differentiate themselves from the competition and to establish connections with consumers. Nowadays sport event and destination as a major introduced channels destination and important impact on identify tourism destinations to target markets and tourists. Branding destination with sport event helps cities
attract tourists or funds in the increasingly competitive environment. So, Iran needs to position itself better in the market by incorporating an appropriate brand equity because sport tourism destination branding influences not only the destination selection process but also future tourist behaviors such as the intention to revisit the destination and to spread positive word of mouth. The results of the study suggest that brand experience is a complex concept that must be carefully managed to provide different types of brand experiences for different nationalities. This study is limited in that it focused on a some sport tourism destination in Iran. It is also limited in terms of the sample size and the number of respondent nationalities examined. Future research will seek to test the brand experience scale for different brand destinations and for different visitor nationalities. We hope to collect larger samples and to further test for the effect of different respondent characteristics on brand destination experiences.

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