

Study of Customer Based Brand Equity in promoting Sri Lanka as a Wedding Tourism Destination - With Special Reference in Southern Region

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INTRODUCTION

Wedding tourism is a recently emerging tourism market which is still in its development phase when compared with sun-sea-sand and culture or nature tourism segments. After realizing the real potential benefits of this niche market, most of destinations commenced promoting wedding based tourism. Destination marketers used to market and branding destinations as perfect places for destination weddings and honeymoons.

As described by Ching, wedding destinations can be defined as the places where newly married couples make visits to feel each other without any disturbance from other common family bonds. It makes them feel very closer to their hearts and gives them lifelong pleasures. Ching further pointed out that the tropical beach is the ideal location sold by the industry for the wedding away because of its own discourse and ideology as an iconic tourist destination.

And also, Ching emphasized that the increasing popularity of the destination wedding demonstrates an attempt by couples to negotiate and even change the meaning and purpose of the wedding ritual; and, as a result, the wedding itself is taking on new meaning. In this context, wedding destinations add new meaning to the newly wedded couples beyond conventional framework. According to Abad & Hossein (n.d.) that many researchers have shown interest in brand equity concept and tried to use different approaches to measure it in various industries.

This is because of the necessity in today's marketplace to develop, maintain and use product branding to acquire a certain level of competitive advantage. Strong brand offers advantages such as competitiveness position in the markets, more brand loyalty and better reaction toward increase in price by customers. A brand could be defined as a "name, sign, symbol or design, or combination of these, intended to determine the goods of an organization and distinguish them from those of competitors" (AMA, 2013).

Hotel guests rely on brand names to reduce the risk associated with staying at an otherwise unknown property (O'Neill & Xiao, 2006). Thus, a brand is something for consumers to feel good about (Vaid, 2003), and successful brand organizations promote themselves as such. This has been further clarified by Clifton, Simonn & Ahmad (2003) and according to them

brands offer potential guests the perception of reliable quality service and memorable experience.

A brand is seen as a guarantee of consistent quality and can be used to attract and better satisfy clients and enhance brand loyalty and equity. When selecting the hotels, a strong and unique brand reduces the perceived risks and search cost. This is also a fragment of brand equity and thus, enhancing the brand equity is becoming prominent trends (Chieng & Goi, 2011; Wood, 2000). According to existing literature, it is clear that brand equity concept is playing major role in hotel industry.

As described by Ngarachu (2015) that wedding tourism is a developing service product in the tourism industry and it is creating an extremely competitive market segment as destinations and their service providers hope to gain a share of this niche segment. To be competitive, destinations need to be innovative in responding to the growing demands of tourists. The wedding tourism product is one such demand. Wedding tourism, that is, travelling internationally for the purpose of getting married or celebrating a wedding (Acorn Consulting Partnership Ltd., 2008) has become increasingly popular in recent years (Major, McLeay & Waine, 2010, p. 249).

Dimensions of customer-based brand equity for a tourist destination were identified by Konecnik & Gartner (2007) and Pike (2007). Initially this CBBE concept introduced by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), and they conceptualized the Brand equity in different ways. Furthermore, Konecnik (2005) and later Konecnik & Gartner (2007) has been developed and extended this concept as Customer based Brand Equity for Tourists Destinations (CBBETD). However, to integrate, the CBBE model has to be more complete, the major problem is that the CBBE model has still not been investigated and applied in any studies of the wedding tourism segment.

Thus, the main advantage of this academic study is to apply the conceptual model of CBBE to the wedding tourism industry & offer very voluble insight of relationship among CBBE dimensions. Therefore, this research study is focused to identify whether customer based brand equity (CBBE) model would help to measure customer satisfaction levels of Southern region as a wedding destination and to find out major influencing factors that lead to retention and attraction of wedding customers to Southern Region of Sri Lanka.

OBJECTIVE of the Study

The main research objective of this study is to examine what factors determine and enhance the present promotional strategies for a wedding tourism destination with special reference to the Customer Based Brand Equity in the context of Southern Region in Sri Lanka. Even though, wedding tourism is a growth market, an empirical studies shows that there is a huge research gap in Sri Lankan context to examine the effectiveness of wedding tourism. Therefore, this research also examines whether customer based brand equity is an effective method in promoting wedding tourism in Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

The main aim of this study is to investigate wedding and honeymoon tourism influence on the branding of Southern region of Sri Lanka. In order to answer research questions, quantitative research approach was chosen. Questionnaire is distributed among 100 randomly selected past wedding couples and 80 couples were responded. Primary data is collected from distribution of a survey questionnaire among sample

In the present study, it was obviously impossible to ascertain the exact number of people in the world who satisfied the basic criteria (Wedding and Honeymoon Couples). A finite number could not therefore be achieved in the sampling frame. It was therefore decided that the most appropriate sampling method for the present study was judgmental sampling (Purposive) method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This studies examined Customer Based Brand Equity within a Wedding tourist destination context. In this final chapter will discuss about the implications and findings to both academics and practitioners.

The sample of past wedding couples studied in this research has indicated that the majority of them were familiar about the Southern Regions a wedding destination. Both male and female customers were responded to the survey.

Table 01: The relationship between brand equity and brand dimensions-(Coefficients)

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.368	.301		-1.222	.226
	Avg_BA	.270	.088	.233	3.075	.003
	Avg_BQ	.223	.069	.219	3.242	.002
	Avg_BL	.213	.071	.210	2.986	.004
	Avg_BI	.375	.062	.439	6.049	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Avg_BE

The result of this regression analysis is indicate that; There is a significant correlation of brand awareness $p = 0.003$ ($p < 0.050$), brand quality $p = 0.002$ ($p < 0.050$), brand loyalty $p = 0.004$ ($p < 0.050$) and brand image $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.050$) collected with customer brand based equity for promoting wedding tourism destination. Null hypothesis is rejected and alternative hypothesis is accepted.

Therefore, there is a relationship between wedding destination brand image, brand awareness, brand quality and brand loyalty on customer based equity for promoting wedding tourism in Southern Region of Sri Lanka.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study examined brand equity dimensions within a Wedding Tourism Destination context. Different dimensions of customer-based brand equity influences wedding destination promotions and its effect is extended to products associated with a wedding destination. Specifically, brand image, brand awareness, brand quality and brand loyalty of destination were positively related with promoting for wedding tourism.

This study only looked at the associations between the degrees of influence that the dimensions of brand equity of influencing factors had on wedding destination promoting. But other possible promotional tools, promotional strategies and also segmentation and positioning strategies were not analyzed due to time restraints and the narrow focus of the study. Future researchers can use these other models and strategies as a basis for their studies as well.

KEY WORDS

Customer based brand equity (CBBE), Wedding tourism, Destination branding, Brand equity, Destination marketing, Niche market

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