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Exploring Destination Brand Communities: A Business Model For Collaboration In The Extremely Fragmented Tourism Industry

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Abstract

Intense global competition in the tourism industry forces destinations to develop strong, unique and competitive destination brands. This is not an easy task since the sector is extremely fragmented and many images are beyond their control. This working paper explores the concept of destination brand communities which provides a platform for facilitating connectivity, trust building and decision making amongst a wide range of tourism stakeholders and other related destination image producing industries, in order to develop and maintain a sustainable destination brand strategy. Furthermore, the destination brand community should try to emotionally connect with consumer communities in order to match its narratives with the hot buttons of the tourists, thereby creating significant pull effects. The final part of the paper addresses the design of the destination brand community in a polycontextual environment as it has to connect dispersed stakeholders with different backgrounds, cultures and interests. It is argued that destination brand communities should focus on making sense of mind space, social space, information space and material space in order to facilitate effective and efficient decision making.

1 Introduction

The tourism industry is more than ever aware of the need to collaborate, as tourism is becoming more international and most destinations have to compete at a global level (Riege et al. 2001). The competitiveness of a nation is mainly based on the quality and

reach of its images, which is strongly related to the exposure of local cultures and commercial brands produced by export industries. Destination Images are not solely based on tourism images. Recently, consumer products are increasingly using country-of-origin images as they have a substantial and pervasive effect on consumers (Verlegh, 2001). Furthermore, leisure products such as books and movies increasingly trigger consumers to travel to certain destinations (E.g.: Crocodile Dundee - Australia, The Beach - Thailand, Harry Potter - Great Britain, The Lord of the Rings - New Zealand). In order to come up with a supported, competitive and sustainable image, destinations should be able to coordinate this images to a certain extend. However, a lot of images are uncontrollable such as the images produced by the mass media on political, societal or economical events. For example, ever since 9/11 several Arabic countries (e.g. Dubai, Turkey and Egypt) have to deal with negative stereotyping which has resulted in decreasing number of tourists. In a world of almost uncontrollable mass-media images it becomes essential to coordinate and guide images towards desired customer segments as a way to counteract stereotyping.

To create a fair, rounded and attractive picture of a country in people's minds, a balance must be maintained between the different images. For example, *the Western consumer's albeit shallow knowledge of Japanese art, poetry, cuisine and philosophy, for example, functions as counterpoint to the commercial Japan of productivity, miniaturization, technology, etc. It helps to reduce the potentially threatening image of a highly, even aggressively efficient producer nation, by reassuring consumers that they are buying goods manufactured by real human beings, not automata. And Japanese pop culture provides the counterpart to the 'no fun' perception which might otherwise prevail, while also feeding imagery – and hence added attraction - directly into exported products* (Anholt, 2002:3).

However, from a supply-side perspective, destinations do not lend themselves easily to branding. First of all branding is based on a selection of attributes which is a difficult process in itself and needs to be regarded as a process that develops and expands overtime. It involves the inclusion and consideration of all stakeholders throughout the lifetime of destination and brand (Gnoth, 2002). Second, the majority of stakeholders are involved in the tourism industry which in itself exists of a myriad of players who often act in ignorance of each other. This results in a shortage of linkages between the different sectors, such as attractions, accommodations, transport and services (Gnoth, 2002; Riege et al., 2001). Third, the tourism industry mostly exist of SME's (Small and Medium Enterprises) which have only limited resources (money, manpower, time) available to collaborate. This often only allows them to engage in a small number of co-operative ties (Riege et al. 2001).

From a demand-side perspective, the potential tourist has to deal with an information overload on destination images from which it has to select. Also, the destination experience is mainly coordinated by the tourist him / herself who emerges as a channel captain selecting the different attributes. Finally, there's been a shift from "predictable" mass and conventional tourism towards alternative forms of tourism such as ecotourism, backpackers, active lifestyles, FITs (Free and Independent Travelers) and Wine & Food tourism. While tourists who still prefer mass tourism are predominantly lower income, those opting for alternative experiences are mostly in higher income brackets (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). Finally, Mowforth & Munt (2003) approach tourism as a commodity with both a symbolic or sign value and an exchange value. Travel has always been an expression of taste and a way of establishing class status. But, with the rapid growth in the numbers of people taking holidays, it has never been so widely used as at present. As a consequence tourism is used as a way to pursuit difference, diversity and distinction.

The solution to coordinating destination images and attracting the right types of tourist is grounded in the idea to what extend destinations are able to deal with contested space,

that is being able to make sense of the different images / identities and different interests of suppliers (e.g., transnational companies (TNCs), small & mediumsized enterprises (SMEs), local governments and local communities) and different consumer groups. Building upon the concept of community, the research question of this paper can be defined as: *How can a destination brand community communicate one's identity in a global arena of contested space, under conditions of intense competition, scarce resources and fragmentation?*

Gnoth (2002) proposes supply-side driven tourism brand communities to develop, maintain and implement a destination brand among a wide array of stakeholders. A tourism brand community can be defined as a heterogeneous group of service producers who give a sense of homogeneity of experience to tourists through employing the same brand attributes during service production. In this paper we would like to refer to the term 'destination brand communities' instead of 'tourism brand communities' as the former one emphasizes the potential inclusion of other sectors beyond tourism, specifically those that contribute to the production of domestic commercial brands. Thus, a destination brand community can be defined as a heterogeneous group of destination related image producers who give a sense of homogeneity of experience to tourists through employing the same brand attributes during image production.

2 Destination Branding

The destination brand is developed around three kinds of attributes. First, around the attraction that exerts the pull to a destination. Secondly by branding the essential tourism services that facilitate the experience of the destination, such as transport, accommodation, restaurants shops and entertainment. The third level of brand extension branches out into non-tourism and other export industries that support the destination experience through primary and secondary products (Gnoth, 2002).

According to Riege et al. (2001) marketing efforts of a destination brand can be aimed at two sides of the tourism industry: the tourist demand side and the supply side. In the process, different types of projected and perceived destination images emerge (See figure 1).

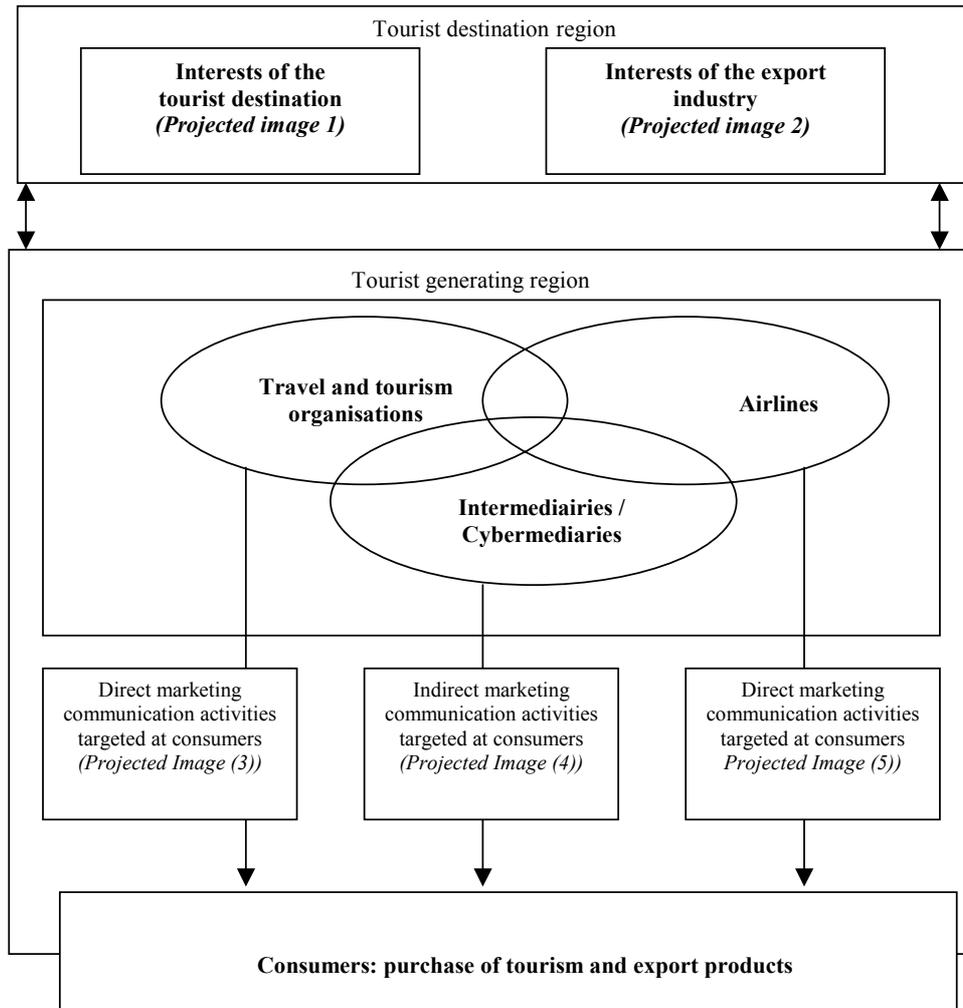


Figure 1: A Marketing Partnership-Based System In Travel And Tourism

Source: Based on Riege et al. (2001)

The projected images and the perceived images are usually not the same as a result of a lack of coordination among both supply and demand side. For example, tour operators have been instrumental in distributing information and contributing to the images that people hold about certain destinations, tour operators also have commercial interests. Because of the latter they might only pass on selected images to their clients. This may lead to unrealistic portrayals of place and result in destination images not supported or desired by the destination's host society. According to Gartner (1993), the image formation process can be viewed as a continuum of separate agents that act independently or in some combination to form a destination image unique to the individual. Table 1 shows the different types of agents.

Table 1: Gartner's Typology Of Image Formation Agents

Type of Agent	Explanation
<i>Overt Induced 1</i>	Consists of traditional forms of advertising, used by destination area promoters in the form of television, radio, brochures, billboards, and print media advertising.
<i>Overt Induced 2</i>	Consists of information received or requested from tour operators, wholesalers, and organizations which have a vested interest in the travel decision process but which are not directly associated with a particular destination area.
<i>Covert Induced 1</i>	Consists of the destination images which are supported by the credibility of a celebrity spokesperson.
<i>Covert Induced 2</i>	A person influenced by this agent is not aware that destination promoters are involved in the development of the projected image. E.g. Articles, reports or stories.

Source: Gartner (1993: 197-201)

Looking at destination images from a demand perspective, brands are seen as images that reside in the mind of tourists / consumers. These images have both affective and cognitive components (Kim & Yoon, 2003; Baloglu, 1999). A case study by Kim & Yoon (2003) targeting Korean overseas travelers concluded that affective image components have more impact on developing destination image than do cognitive image components. Especially those items associated with internal sources of feelings about travel such as exotic atmospheres, relaxation, scenic beauty, good climate, and recommendations are primary components of developing destination image. Additionally, Decrop (1999) mentions contextual and dynamical influences which influence tourists decision making processes such as activities, interests, age, family, occupation & economic status, which in essence refer to the influence of peer groups and communities.

Govers & Go (2003) identify three gaps which have to be bridged between constructed, imagined and experienced image. The constructed image should be anchored to some extent on a true destination identity (Govers & Go, 2003; Go, Lee & Russo, 2003). This is where the first gap occurs. The true destination identity should be grounded in local heritage as it contributes to authentic stories which local residents can be proud of and which can create a distinctive and competitive destination brand. The second gap occurs when the imagined pre-visit image are not in consensus with the projected image, which occur because of different image formation agents. The third gap appears when the actual onsite tourism experience is not in line with the tourist imagined expectations. In order to minimize the size of the gaps destinations need to coordinate the different images produced and desired by the different stakeholders. Furthermore it implies the implementation of feedback mechanisms which include tourist's perceptions, needs and wants.

The lack of understanding of the experiential nature of tourism within the tourism industry can easily lead to a mismatch (Gretzel and Fesenmaier (2003) as cited in Govers & Go, 2003). Consumers build up emotional arousals and mental multi-sensory imagery, either historic (i.e. based on prior experiences), or fantasy imagery, based on what they (expect to) taste, hear, smell, see or feel when consuming experiential products. Yet, the way the tourism industry delivers its tourism product offering, such as for instance on destination marketing websites, is still focusing on functional attributes such as price, distances and room availability. The tourism industry should begin to understand the

value of narratives and the role of destinations as storytellers. People have the natural propensity to organize information about experiences in story format. It also suggests that people relate their interpretations of experience to others by narrating, or telling stories (Govers & Go, 2003). Therefore destinations should begin to look at the power of narratives and the need to target consumer communities which connect with these narratives.

3 Destination Brand Communities

Tourism partnerships often exist of informal, flexible networks based on trust, involving many stakeholders such as local governments, tour operators, intermediaries / cybermediaries and, increasingly the local community (Riege et al, 2001). It is believed that empowerment of the local community by implementing bottom-up development strategies, is essential for sustainable development of destinations and truthful, authentic and competitive destination branding (Go, Lee and Russo, 2003). Thus, a basic prerequisite for sustainable tourism is allowing individuals and communities an opportunity to be included and “connected”. Information technology makes it increasingly possible to connect distributed actors, for example through email, videoconferencing, websites, online discussion boards and virtual communities. The empowerment of local stakeholders requires a shift in the center of gravity of decision making from outsiders to host communities. Outsiders are found both within the private sector and the regulators; governments and public bodies may be less concerned with the local than with the regional / national relevance of tourism activity (Go, Lee and Russo, 2003).

Collaboration should not only be restricted to actors operating on the supply side. Under the conditions of global competition and mass customization it becomes increasingly important for organizations and industries to use sense & respond strategies to identify the needs of the customers. *Rather than competing by forecasting customers' needs and then planning the year's production using inventories to match supply and demand, firms are relying on real-time sensors to continuously discover what each customer needs, sometimes even anticipating unspecified needs, and then quickly fulfilling those needs with customized products and services delivered with heretofore unavailable capabilities and speed* (Bradley & Nolan, 1998: 4). Also, because in most cases, the host population is relatively fixed, whereas the visitor population is continuously changing, it is important to capture visitor feedback at the point of experience (Go, Lee and Russo, 2003). This feedback can be received through simple comment forms or street interviews at the destination itself, but destinations and service providers are increasingly able to interact directly with customers through ICT by means of online-feedback forms, rating & ranking systems, customer relationship management tools, ambient intelligence or brand community strategies. The ability to build and sustain trust-based relations with customers and to gain reputation and credibility is critical in the new power relationships. Intermediaries embark on a virtuous spiral, where interaction with consumers results in the accumulation of knowledge, which materializes in better content integration, further enhancing trust and reputation. This process of interactive learning coupled with the proliferation of destinations and services, shifts the center of gravity and the power balance across the tourism “supply chain”, from the provider – intermediary relationship to the intermediary-customer relationship. Because of this shift destinations and providers have been at a considerable disadvantage and have prompted them to focus on the relay of information to the final consumer (or inevitably the intermediaries) rather than focusing on the creation of customer-focused content. According to (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003) they should develop their own content-based interaction with

customers, possibly enabling them to establish their own learning cycles and develop sustainable distinctive competitive advantage.

Customer Relationship Management can be defined as an integrated effort to identify, maintain, and build up a network with individual consumers and to continuously strengthen the network for the mutual benefit of both sides, through interactive, individualized, and value added contacts over a long period of time. Gilbert, Perry-Powell and Widijoso state that relationship marketing is most suitable in situations where the customer controls the selection of suppliers, there are alternative choices of suppliers, brand switching is common, and word-of-mouth is a powerful vehicle of promotion. The two latter points, in particular, hold true for destinations (Fyall et al., 2003). Through online Business-to-Consumer (B2C) communities, companies can extend their CRM initiatives to include interactions among customers, leveraging these interactions to attract and retain more customers, convert browsers to buyers, improve customer service, reduce support costs, increase revenue, and gain additional insight into their business (Wang et al., 2003). These kind of brand community strategies are focused on gaining feedback and providing a sense of belonging, which should result in brand loyalty. In its developed form, a destination may construct an extended community or group of communities, for which it will serve as a reference point. These communities may serve as extensions of the destination, and become colonies that revive destination-specific events (cultural, environmental etc.). However until now B2C communities have not been as successfully as researchers (e.g. Hagel & Armstrong, 1997) have predicted and a quick search on the internet shows that it's difficult to find destinations which are applying such strategy at the moment.

As mentioned earlier the destination brand community should also involve stakeholders / industries which are related to image formation, such as producers involved in country-of-origin products, visuals, product and package design, advertising, music videos, web design, television, and radio production, magazine and book publishing. These endeavours are effective in deepening and dignifying the brand print of the country. Although these stakeholders will not operate at the core of the community, developing and maintaining (weak) ties will nurture the destination brand community with fresh and creative ideas and the possibility of collaborations which strengthen the destination image.

4 The Destination Brand Community As Socio-Economic Business Model

The Destination Brand Community as socio-economic business model can involve a number of community types: Communities of interest, Business-to-Business Communities, Business-to-Consumer communities and Consumer- to-Consumer communities (see table 2).

Table 2: Types Of Communities

Type of Community	Definition
Community of interest	Forums for meeting people with common interest.
Business-to-Business community (B2B)	People of the same profession meet, interact on business-related issues, and carry out transactions.
Business-to-Consumer community (B2C)	Trustworthy environments where consumers are more willing to buy from the shop(s).
Consumer-to-Consumer community (C2C)	Individuals exchange and trade goods with no commercial intermediary being involved.

Source: Hummel & Lechner, 2002: 2

In all three transaction-oriented communities (B2B, B2C, and C2C) we find two kinds of contributions from members to the community. The first one is information, such as news or files, which is created by participants and shared or exchanged between participants. The second one is information that reflects the social atmosphere online. Examples are recommendations, reviews, ratings of buyers and sellers (Hummel & Lechner, 2002).

Following the argument in previous sections, the destination brand community exists mainly of B2B environment where destination management organizations are collaborating with local SMEs, transnational companies (Travel industry, Hospitality Industry), cybermediaries, intermediaries, (local) governmental organizations and (local) NGOs in order to develop a destination brand development strategy. The B2B community is basically a community formed by a variety of representatives from existing offline communities (Hummel & Lechner, 2002). In order to order to understand its role, the local community (or at least the local SMEs) should be made aware of the value of their cultural heritage and the possibilities to participate in the community. Education is a key factor that stimulates and empowers host communities in the wise use of their cultural heritage and ICT. (Go, Lee & Russo, 2003).

Braun (2002) states that many Small & Medium Tourism Enterprises (SMTEs) are still sceptical of network structures. Research indicates that SMEs still hesitate to invest their time and money in rapidly changing economy because. Fear of isolation, competitor use of the internet, alienating intermediaries, uncontrolled growth, lack of technology skills, and lack of a strategic sense of how to move forward act as significant uptake barriers. Because of this SMTEs tend to operate in isolation and many are still uncommitted to industry initiatives such as accreditation, training, marketing, and visitor satisfaction. Since joining an inter-firm network will constitute an enormous conceptual leap into the future for many SMTE managers, more attention will need to be paid to inhibitive uptake factors such as lack of infrastructure, fear of competitors, and lack of strategic direction in the new economy. With networking on the rise, the opportunity exists to cultivate a new ethos of connectivity, socialization, and trust between SMTEs, but such a collaborative or network culture would need to be fostered (Braun, 2002). The destination brand community should be aware of these issues and the need to position itself as a platform that facilitates connectivity and builds trust. The destination brand community should focus specifically at increasing awareness among SMTEs of the value of collaboration. Reasons for participating in the destination brand community are keeping up with the rapidly changing marketing trends, which is particularly useful for resource and time-

poor SMEs. Second, participating should contribute to the overall proliferation of the country but more importantly so the indirect exposure of the individual SMEs (Braun, 2002). However many B2B portals still lack information exchange or interaction between stakeholders, because of ignorance of technological, transactional and social needs (Braun, 2002). The next sections will give insight in integration of the different contexts (mind, social, material and information space) and processes of destination brand community.

At the moment destinations hardly use B2C communities to connect with customers. B2C communities are more used by intermediaries / cybermediaries (e.g. www.virtualtourist.com) which are often not specifically related to certain destinations. Reasons for the lack of destination related B2C communities might be the lack of understanding tourism as experience goods or the lack of understanding of customers as co-opting entities. The internet enables consumers to increasingly engage themselves in an active and explicit dialogue with manufacturers of products and services. This dialogue is no longer being controlled by corporations. Individual consumers can address and learn about businesses either on their own or through the collective knowledge of other customers. Consumers can now initiate the dialogue; they have moved out of the audience and onto the stage. With consumer behavior being increasingly unpredictable and consumers having an incredible broad choice of destination it becomes increasingly important to understand consumer identities or lifestyles, which provide important clues on how to match the narratives of the destination with those of consumers. On the internet virtual communities provide a 'sense of place' for consumers where they can express their lifestyles in a self organized way. As social, geographical and work mobility are central features of people's lives. *Sociologists say that in this sense we are all homeless because we have no fixed point as our emotional origin. This creates a hunger for communities which we can belong to. This community hunger has put a completely new twist on the old concept of the target audience* (Grant, 2000: 136). By tapping into C2C communities or Communities of interest, the destination brand community is able to connect, match and exchange narratives with specific consumer identities, e.g.: communities related to books, movies, sports, food and other lifestyles. This matching strategy will trigger the hot-buttons of individuals and designed experiences which they can't refuse. A Dutch cybermediary called 'tickets.nl' is already successfully implementing this strategy. The company offers tourism packages which foremost build upon consumer interests (music, sports and cultures) which are matched with events taking place all over the world such as the olympic games in Athens 2004 and a Madonna concert in Paris (www.tickets.nl). This approach implies a shift towards communicating narratives of destination with specific narratives of certain consumer communities.

The argument above might suggest that the destination brand community will have to deal with an enormous group of stakeholders. Research by Hummel & Lechner (2002) shows that with the number of members, the number of transactions and the quantity of information; too much interaction results in information overload, too much content of members make the community loose its focus and too many members loosen the social relations and diminish the motivation for many members to contribute. Similarly Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2000) argue that in complex environments organizations should organize themselves in networks of added value where each firm focuses on certain core competencies. Rapid adaptation requires that companies have a stable center.

Granovetter distinguishes two kinds of relations in a network: strong and weak ties. According to Hansen (1999) strong ties are needed when complex tacit knowledge needs to be exchanged and trust needs to be fostered. On the other hand weak ties can give access to new knowledge, enhancing the creative capacity of the community. The destination brand community should build enough social capital to cultivate a sense of community for the most important stakeholders and should prevent itself from becoming

a clique which inhabits the danger of alienation from alternative points of view. This means that communities should pay attention to the advantages and disadvantages of both strong and weak ties and the need to create a context which cultivates both. Thus, the destination brand community will mainly exist of a B2B community where strong ties are fostered in order to create trust and share perspectives on destination identity which should help identifying key-images and positioning of the brand. Market reach, matching and feedback, will be gained not only through tapping in each others offline community knowledge but also by tapping into C2C communities and communities of interest residing on the net.

5 Designing Destination Brand Communities

The final part of this working paper addresses the design of the destination brand community in a polycontextual environment and the different processes. The design in particular concerns the supply side driven B2B part of the destination brand community. Further research should investigate more in-depth the demand side of the destination brand community: B2C, C2C communities and communities of interest.

Coordination within hybrid organizations is based upon different coordination mechanisms as opposed to traditional hierarchies. A hybrid organization is often a very loosely coupled organization operating in a complex environment. In order to keep the organization flexible and effective, Ciborra (1996) emphasizes the role of identity formation as a way of sensemaking in the organization. The idea is that the different members in the organization are able to act autonomously while residing in an almost constant organizational transition phase. The concept of community is firmly grounded in the concept of identity. Talbot defines the essence of the community as “a group of people bound together by certain mutual concerns, interests, activities, and institutions” (Moor, 1999).

The success of the destination brand community depends on the commitment and development of shared vision between the different stakeholders. This is a difficult process since all stakeholders operate in their own local context, holding different values and perspectives and only limited resources to interact with other stakeholders and develop a common ground, that is to say a sense of community. Modern communities are increasingly involving information space where dispersed individuals with similar interests can communicate in a flexible and cost efficient way (Baalen et al., 2003).

To develop, maintain and implement a destination brand among a wide array of stakeholders, is not a straightforward decisionmaking process. Weick (1993) identifies shortcomings of a focus on decision making and the need for sensemaking in organizations to deal with uncertainty and complexity. Decision making consists of a problem, a set of alternative solutions, an analysis of the effects of each solutions, and finally, the decision itself (Teisman, 2001). Decision making is built from clear questions and clear answers that attempt to remove ignorance. However, as outlined above, the tourism industry is very complex. Teisman (2001) proposes to see decision making as a quest. During this quest, the different actors are constantly making sense of their environment and themselves, adjusting their goals whenever necessary. Sensemaking is built out of vague questions, muddy answers and negotiated agreements that attempt to reduce confusion (Weick, 1993).

According to Long (1997) a community can be seen as a contested space where different stakeholders continuously negotiate their position, online or face-to-face. Using narratives, the group of stakeholders aims to develop a shared vision and to make sense of

their community as well as their environment. The identity should not be conceptualized a priori as cultural givens but as produced and transformed through the experiences shared and the struggles that take place between actors of various sorts. Hence, the destination brand community is constantly involved in a process where different stakeholders make sense of their destination and themselves. *“The challenges for all countries is to find ways of continually presenting and re-presenting their past cultural achievements alongside their modern equivalents in ways that are fresh, relevant and appealing to younger audiences”* (Anholt, 2002: 236).

6 Coordination In A Polycontextual Environment

The destination brand community brings together dispersed stakeholders (attractions, accommodations, tourism services, intermediaries, transport, export industries and tourists) which are related to the destination. In doing so the destination brand community has to deal with the challenges of a polycontextual environment. All stakeholders act in their own local context, where they develop common scripts for interacting, making their world understandable, and shaping it. Without efforts to facilitate interactions between the different local contexts it will be difficult to kick-start a collective process of sensemaking. To connect the different contexts, four spaces need to be bridged: mind space, social space, information space and material space (Go & Fenema, 2003). The individuals *mind space* is formed by the individual's interests as well as their cultural and organizational background. *Social space* is when two or more individuals meet in some format on a relational basis. *Material space* is where people meet in a physical environment. *Information space* facilitates flexible access to knowledge resources in the form of groupware and knowledge portals. Figure 2 depicts the destination brand community and its polycontextual environment.

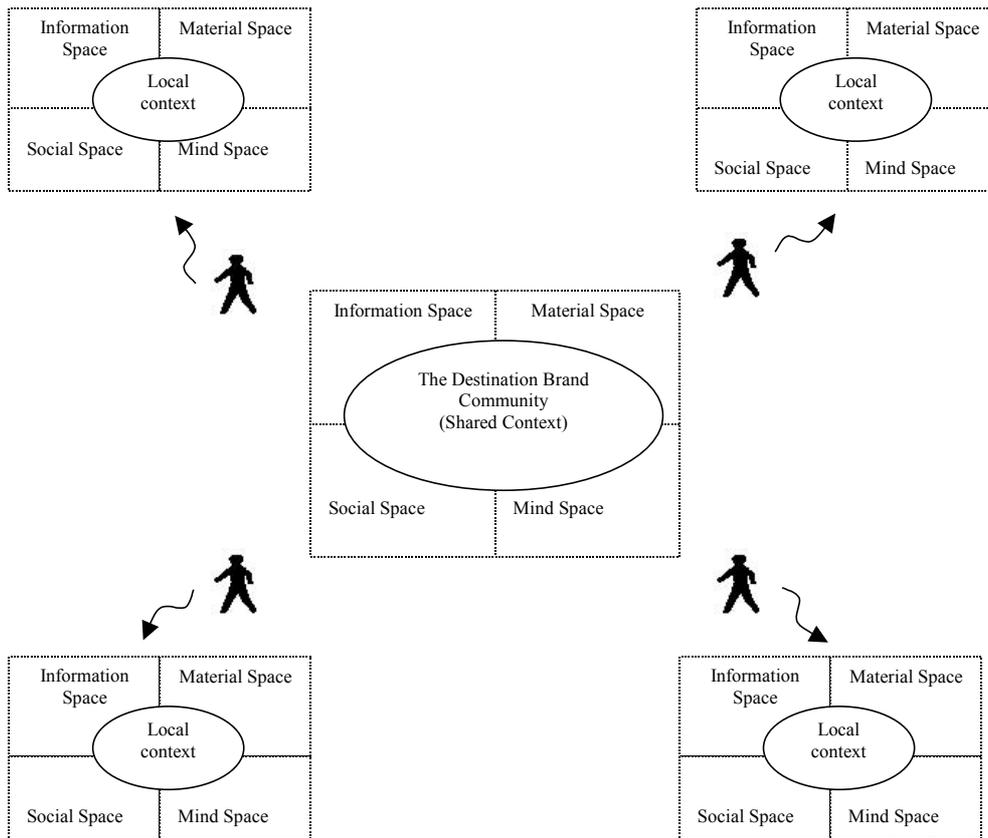


Figure 2: *The Destination Brand Community And Its Polycontextual Environment*

Source: Based on Fenema & Go (2003)

7 Mind Space

Destination Brand Communities should create a clear identity, which provides clear guidelines with regard to the goals and relationships between the different stakeholders (Riege et al., 2001). To provide value for participation, the identity of the destination brand community should be closely aligned with strategic priorities of the different stakeholders (Wenger et al., 2002).

Collaborative possibilities are often complicated by the existence of diverse organizations and other publics who often hold widely different viewpoints and strong vested interests. Difficulties in achieving a collaborative solution are directly related to the differences in value orientation between the stakeholders (Jamal & Getz, 1995). Two main barriers stand in the way of initiating knowledge sharing and symphasizing among stakeholders: awareness and interest barriers (Boone, 1997).

Awareness barriers lead to passive rejection of the initiation to share knowledge, because of ignorance of sender or receiver. For example, as explained earlier, tourism organizations that are not familiar with collaboration may be reluctant to join, out of fear of losing control over the image formation process. They might also feel that the resources they possess could be better utilized by adopting a more familiar strategy, even though that strategy may have produced less than optimal outcomes in the past (Jamal & Getz, 1995).

Interest barriers arise if the member perceives the value of knowledge sharing to be less than the costs or has personal objections to share knowledge (Boone, 1997). For example, local governments might also perceive risks in collaborating together, since they too are often involved in competing with each other for scarce funds, and for attracting private investments. Concerns about loss of control over decision making may also prevent local authorities from entering into collaboration (Jamal & Getz, 1995). However, in an extremely competitive global market place tourism organizations need to realize that competitive and co-operative strategies are complementary rather than contradictory (Riege et al., 2001)

8 Social Space

A strong community fosters interactions and relationships based on mutual respect and trust. Social space refers to the development of interpersonal relationships that reinforce commitment and trust between individuals. Reciprocity is of major importance within a community. Without it, the community is unlikely to sustain. In contrast with social relationships, community members participate on behalf of staggered and generalized reciprocity. This means that actors put effort into the community and expect to get something in return, but they do not know when, and from who (Baalen et al., 2003).

Inclusion of all key stakeholders is needed to make a brand sustainable and of high quality. Because of resources at the individual and collective level the community should facilitate flexible participation. Some stakeholders, especially the SMTEs, will be skeptical about participating in the community. However, to include them in the community, even in a marginal way gives them the opportunity to participate more actively whenever they want. The levels of participation are very organic as stakeholders are constantly evaluating their goals and looking for new ways in which the community can contribute to their individual needs and those of the collective. Rather than force participation, successful communities “build benches” for those on the sidelines, for example through a (digital) newsletter or website with the latest news (Wenger et al., 2002).

Empirical research shows that connecting a diverse array of stakeholder groups, many of whom would not have communicated otherwise, helped them to finally recognize their common interests and to realize the advantages to be gained working together as opposed to competing with each other. The participants gained a greater strategic knowledge of their geographic area and the factors which might affect the long term sustainability of the regional industries (Williams et al., 1998).

9 Information Space

Economics involved in producing public goods and offering help to others change dramatically as one moves to an online environment. For example, the costs of communicating and coordinating the actions of a group are often much lower than face-to-face communication. Also the value of a piece of information or advice that is offered to a group can be amplified because of the fact that an unlimited number of people might use or make copies of the information provided (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003).

Information space is able to support both social and mind space. By putting community related information on the internet (as website content or database documents), members

can catch up with the latest news whenever they want, (e.g. when they missed out in previous events). Discussionboards and who-does-what facilities make dispersed “invisible” members visible, bringing the community alive in an online environment. Online-transparency will also help community members identify new opportunities and support groups. By connecting the community with customer communities or online feedback systems it will become clear how the tourists perceive a particular destination, which can be a trigger to adjust the brand.

10 Material Space

Material space facilitates gatherings where the community members can communicate face-to-face with each other. Face-to-face contact is the richest form of communication, providing space for stakeholders to build trust and share complex knowledge through (informal) discussions, and brainstorm sessions (Wenger et al., 2002). Furthermore, a new community needs time to establish an identity and develop group norms. This is best achieved when stakeholders share experiences face-to-face (Gillen, 2001). For this reason physical encounters usually precede virtual encounters.

11 Processes Within The Destination Brand Community

Within the community two kinds of roles can be identified that are to a great deal occupied with the act of sensemaking in the community: the sponsor and the coordinator. The *sponsor* defines the architecture and the standards (e.g. protocols) around which the community is organized and is concerned with the long-term strategy of the community (Sawhney & Prandelli, 2000).

The obvious choice for the role of *coordinator* is the destination management organization whose main task is to identify potential members and to connect them with each other around shared values. Coordinators break down the boundaries between the different stakeholders, who are most of the time used to hierarchical decision-making. The coordinator is involved in creating a mind set among the different stakeholders where tourism managers must begin to think laterally, forging partnerships to achieve organizational and collective goals (Selin & Chavez, 1995).

Boer et al. (2002) propose different ways to facilitate communal sharing. One can try to change the existing relational model of the stakeholder or one can try to redesign the facilitating technology (website, database) in order to fit the relational model, or a combination of both. The first situation requires a change of culture, which is a time consuming process, whereas the second situation requires a fundamental reconsideration about the functionalities of the technology. Obviously, in practice it is not an either or choice, but a combination of both (Boer et al., 2002). A technological solution can be the implementation of a “gated” domain which is based on membership. Membership emphasizes boundaries that delimit “us ” from “them ” and that create the form of emotional safety that encourages self-disclosure and intimacy. Membership enhances a member’s confidence and creates a sense of entitlement. It also serves to build loyalty to the group (Kim, 2003). Membership is most of the times voluntary, but there’s some selection and the members are bound by a common license. Intellectual property is maintained within the community and there is no requirement to share openly everything (Sawhney & Prandelli, 2000).

To make it easy for community members to connect with peers, coordinators should be opportunistic about chances to interact and try to integrate community meetings with other meetings when possible. Also, stakeholders with closely aligned interests should be encouraged to work together as a single sector in order to make effective use of limited participant time and resources (Williams et al., 1998). This way the community minimizes the effort of community members to participate.

The coordinator has to create a rhythm of activities. Regular meetings, videoconferences, website activity, newsletters and informal lunches provide the heartbeat of the community. When that beat is strong and rhythmic, the community has a sense of movement and liveliness. However, if the beat is too fast, the community feels breathless: people stop participating because they are overwhelmed. When the beat is too slow, the community feels sluggish, and has a big chance to die (Wenger et al., 2002).

Finally, coordinators should provide a clear procedural framework at the start of negotiations, set a firm deadline for tailoring this framework to the needs of the participants, and ensure that all parties abide by the customized process once it has been formally approved by the participants (Williams et al., 1998).

12 Conclusion, Limitations & Recommendations

Intense global competition in the tourism industry forces destinations to come up with innovative business models which are able of connecting and coordinating a wide range of stakeholders in order to develop strong and sustainable destination brand strategies. This working paper dealt with the concept of destination brand community which is a relatively undeveloped research subject in both tourism and information management studies. It aimed to give a multidisciplinary overview of issues related to tourism, marketing, organization and information technology management. For quite some time destinations are aware of the disadvantages of the extremely fragmented industry. As ICT enables new forms of collaboration, both researchers and practitioners should engage in a quest for developing new business models. This paper hopes to spark the interest among researchers in the field of virtual collaboration and e-commerce to get involved in the complex, yet exciting field of tourism. Many fundamental issues have been addressed in this paper but, as may be clear, many issues need further investigation. For example, the understanding of destination brand communities as being composed of B2B, B2C, C2C communities and communities of interest brings to surface the component based nature of the destination brand community. Kumar et al. (2003) argue that the use component-based-concepts at the levels of business, organizations and technologies should make it easier for organizations to create alignment. Further research on the individual destination brand community components is needed as well as ways to connect them.

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