WHO OWNS IT? WHEN COMMUNITIES BRAND DESTINATIONS

ABSTRACT

Destination branding is an important strategy to allow for differentiation from competitors. However, there has been little discussion in the literature regarding community involvement in destination branding. This study explored the perceptions of residents actively involved in tourism across two destinations: Pitlochry, and the Isle of Gigha. The chosen destinations allowed for different types of communities to be explored given the purely voluntary nature within one destination, and the inclusion of both volunteering and ownership by the community of the destination. Four key themes were identified and explored in relation to both destinations: surrogate council, motivations, funding of the groups, and community support. Further data collection across different communities will be undertaken throughout 2016 to explore this phenomenon further.
Keywords: *community destination branding; community ownership*

INTRODUCTION

Destination branding is an important strategy to encourage a destination to be differentiated in the mind of the consumer from competing destinations. This differentiation provides a competitive advantage in a saturated market where destinations are substitutable (Pike, 2006). However, many small communities do not feel they are competing with neighbouring destinations (or competitors), and struggle to make their voices heard amongst the array of communication. Additionally, an increase in tourism can provide enhanced economic development and prestige for a destination. As such, it is crucial to enhance the identity of a destination, thus improving branding, and potentially visitation. Given this need to enhance the identity of a destination, community ownership may potentially be an important omission from the literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Involvement of community members with destination branding within extant research has been limited, relating to input in the development of the brand (see Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2003). More specifically, Zouganeli, Trihas, Antonaki and Kaldou (2012) explored the positioning of a brand using residents' opinions, yet little has been considered regarding the involvement of community members who actively, and voluntarily, brand their destination. Despite longstanding efforts to consider community based initiatives further in regard to tourism planning (Jamal and Getz, 1995; Murphy, 1985) research on community involvement in tourism activities can often result in pessimistic conclusions. Generally, top-down approaches tend to be the focus, and the doubt of contribution and community cohesion is pulled into question (Campbell, 1999; Simpson, 2008)

Recent research suggests that communities require a reduction in organisational boundaries to enhance the integration of tourism, addressing broader, more holistic, community objectives and ensuring wider community culture and heritage and needs of stakeholders are preserved (Burns, 2004; Teo and Yeoh, 1997). However, although extant literature focuses on discrete community projects, it suggests that co-created approaches afford communities the ability to influence their own identity (Hamilton & Alexander, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

This study explores destination branding undertaken by communities across different levels of community ownership. Interviews were utilised, giving the researchers the ability to explore the phenomena and data in depth. Participants were selected given their involvement in tourism activities within their communities. 13 in-depth interview were conducted across two Scottish destinations: Pitlochry and the Isle of Gigha. Each of these destinations will be discussed, and with justification for their choice.

Pitlochry

Pitlochry, a highland town within the Perth and Kinross County gained notoriety as a tourist destination after Queen Victoria's visits. Her positive perception of Pitlochry resulted in the development of a train station in 1863, increasing tourism (David, 2009). Modern Pitlochry, with a population of 2500, is dependent on the income generated by tourism. The development of the Pitlochry Partnership, a community driven organisation, in 2007 assists in the promotion of the town as a whole, while also enabling membership from small businesses.

Isle of Gigha

The Isle of Gigha is the most southerly Herodian Isle in Scotland. This small island (7 miles long and 1 mile wide) has a population of approximately 100 residents. In 2001, the laird of the island decided to sell their estate, and after some discussion it was decided that the community would fundraise, and attain funding, to buy it out (Isle of Gigha, 2015). In 2002 a board of directors was entrusted with the running of the island, focusing on regeneration. "All major decisions [were] put to Trust membership [including residents] for a vote, ensuring inclusive management of the island" (Isle of Gigha, 2015). The aim of the trust is to continue regeneration, maintain older cottage houses, run the hotel, and maintain the wind turbines to ensure residents' liveability, and income for the Isle.

FINDINGS

Key findings were identified across four key themes. These include: surrogate council, motivations, funding of the groups, and community support.

Surrogate council

In Pitlochry, given council cutbacks, many volunteer groups have been developed to enhance the local area. However, the prominence of the Pitlochry Partnership and other groups within the community, results in expectations regarding issues that community members expect them to resolve. However, many issues (e.g. grass cutting; lamppost repairs; kerb beautification) should be addressed by a local authority:

> *"And so a lot of the challenge is trying to manage people's expectations of what the partnership is there for".*

Contrastingly on Gigha, self-management was the aim of the buyout, and the Trust was developed to allow for that. However, the perception is similar to that of residents of Pitlochry, in that the Trust is there and will deal with anything required.

> *"A lot of people treat* [the Trust] *like the landlord still. Of course the trust is not the landlord it is the instrument of the island and how it moves things forward... Now it's the people who tell the* [Trust] *what they want".*

While the Trust provides advice, the final say is the vote from community members. Concerns were raised in both communities regarding the reliance on groups. However, this was more evident in Pitlochry given the nature of the voluntary organisation, versus the development of a Trust in Gigha.

Motivations

While more general satisfaction was identified by some participants in Pitlochry, one suggested that without the benefit to his own business, he would be less likely to contribute. As such, his motivation was tied strongly to the enhancement of tourism to the town:

> *"I wouldn't do a lot of the stuff I did if I didn't get financial benefit of it myself. The more the town prospers the more people ring me up and want to stay at my guest house".*

Many of the community volunteers in Pitlochry were small business owners who ae reliant on tourism, suggesting a key motivating factor to the development of the group and wider community

Contrastingly, although participants on the Isle of Gigha were also interested local business success, businesses are tied to the Trust, and throughout the interviews it became evident that the aim was financial benefit for the wider community Island:

> *"Gigha is the brand and that is the way to look forward. And you never know we might get a tourist sign that says Gigha".*

One participant suggested that a more holistic 'Gigha' brand would be more potent than individual promotion of attractions. The implication is that a collective response could be attained through tourist signage for example both on the island and direct tourist from the mainland.

Funding of the groups
The free rider problem was mentioned within both sets of interviews. A free rider problem becomes evident when a group is formed to lobby for and provide a good which is of benefit collectively to all members, yet some enjoy the benefits without incurring any of the costs (Booth, 1985). As mentioned in Pitlochry:

> *" ...not everybody contributes. And yet the frustrating thing is the people who pay for it get the benefit and the people that don't, don't pay anything, and get the full benefit of it".*

In Gigha, the aim to set up one collective promotional fund or strategy, to encourage visitors to the island but allow businesses to contribute and promote themselves at the same time was also met with resistance. The first perspective was from a smaller organisations: *"I'm only a small craft business, what am I going to get out of it?"* While the proposal that a contribution could be made relative to percentage of earnings, the contrasting perspective was: *"I've got a successful business why should I pay more?"*

Community support
A volunteer interviewed in Pitlochry felt that the creation of these volunteer groups had led to *"social engagement"*, while one of the key actors in the development of the Pitlochry brand felt it ignited an enhanced *"sense of community"*. Contrastingly on Gigha, while the aim was to develop the financial sustainability of the Isle, community engagement was enhanced through discrete events such as reopening the Hotel:

> *"People were saying they were coming home from the mainland at night and seeing no lights on and that's the focal point of the island. And they were saying it was quite depressing some people said. So the community support for the hotel was terrific".*

DISCUSSION
This paper compares community destination branding within two Scottish communities: one in which a volunteer group strives to promote, and the other which is run using an appointed Trust giving voice to the residents (and volunteers.) On Gigha, a level of volunteering is needed from community members, as well as their votes as members of the Trust, to ensure the smooth running of the destination. This was evident in the coordination of a collective response to the so-called 'Gigha brand'. Similarly, the 'Pitlochry brand' was mentioned by key volunteers of the Partnership, further emphasising the centrality of the community role in brand development.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS
The involvement and ownership of the community in the branding process allows the identity of the destination to develop organically, whilst allowing benefits to filter into the community more directly. While these destinations differ in both organisational and volunteering structure they demonstrate how involvement of members of the community can drive tourism growth. This research is restricted to two communities, and primarily involved residents actively involved in tourism, future research

will explore a variety of other communities, different community projects, and differing perspectives within the community.

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