Comparison of Resident vs Visitor Community Image

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ABSTRACT

The image held by visitors to a community helps direct planning and marketing efforts of destination marketing organizations. Resident attitudes toward tourism, place attachment and quality of life research have analyzed residents' feelings toward their community but never has an image analysis been conducted. The purpose of this study was to assess the image held by residents and visitors of a gateway community. Results revealed that visitors are significantly different and more positive in their image perception than residents suggesting that future research should focus on resident image to help direct future community planning.

Key Words: resident image, visitor image, QOL, resident attitude, place attachment

INTRODUCTION

Images and perceptions of a community have been described as a critical promotional tool for the tourism industry (Schofield, Philips, & Eliopoulos, 2005). Image, defined as the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions (Crompton, 1979), has been studied in the tourism industry to help destinations brand themselves (García, Gómez, and Molina, 2012; Hosany, Ekinici, and Uysal, 2006; Qu, Kim, and Im, 2011), as well as to understand what visitors think about a destination/community to guide marketing and planning decisions (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999 ;Caldito, Rivero, and Fernandez , 2013; Chen and Tsai, 2007; Crompton, 1979; Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, and Hou., 2007; Pike, 2002; Wang and Hsu, 2010). The volume of research related to the image visitors have of a destination is tremendous and continues to be a popular academic and practitioner topic for management decisions.

Interestingly, the images residents have of their own community have rarely been researched (Ramkisoon & Nunkoo, 2011). One study (Ramkisoon & Nunkoo, 2011), investigated local resident images and perceptions of their community in Port Louis, Mauritius. In this study, the authors proposed four city attributes that subsequently influenced residents' level of support for the tourism industry. These attributes, or predictors, were social attributes, transport attributes, government services attributes, and shopping attributes. Results showed that residents' perceived levels of shopping attributes, transport attributes and social attributes of the city tend to influence their image of their own town, and consequently for tourism support. These results provided important information to local planners for potential support for infrastructure and tourism development.

Another study which assessed resident (and visitor) image was designed to inform the development of Warrington, England. Shofield, Phillips, and Eliopoulos (2005) conducted a study in which resident perceptions of the suitability of their town for increased tourism development were measured (e.g., a day trip, an overnight stay etc.). Resident and visitor perceptions did not differ systematically, and both felt the town had potential. Socio-demographic and behavioral variables were further explored and were correlated with some differences in overall image of the town of Warrington. Both of these studies tied resident image of their town to tourism development but were restricted to tourism type image variables.

The closest tie to residents' image of where they live resides in the voluminous research on place attachment (Lewick 2010; Raymond, Brown, and Weber, 2010). While similar in concept, the constructs which define place attachment center on more general feelings towards their community, e.g., "I would rather live here than anywhere else," (Lee, 2013; Lewica, 2011; Theodori, 2001; Theodori and Luloff, 2000) and less on the specifics of why. Many researchers, however, have included quality of life (QOL) variables to elucidate the things that are important to their life's satisfaction. Quality of life (QOL) is a subjective, multifaceted construct, and is related to an individual's thoughts and feelings. One definition of QOL is satisfaction with life, and feelings of contentment or fulfillment with one's experience in the world (Andereck, Valentine, Vogt, Knopf, 2007). Aspects of QOL can be a

part of why people are or are not attached to their community. Similar research has focused on resident attitude towards tourism and how their quality of life is impacted by tourism (Andereck and Nyaupane, 2011; Andereck, Valentine, Vogt, & Knopf, 2007; Andereck and Vogt, 2000; Kim, Uysal, and Sirgy, 2013). All of these concepts dance around the idea that attachment, QOL, and resident's attitude toward tourism are somehow related, correlated, or predictive of local people and their support for tourism in their town.

Circling back to the topic of image, where does image tie in with this discussion? Image is the 'test' of what outsiders think of a community or destination. This, in turn, provides DMO's with data on how to market their area. If understanding visitor's and potential visitor's image is so important to a tourism destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999), one would surmise that understanding the image local people hold toward their community is equally important. Resident attitude research suggests that a positive feeling by residents toward tourism is necessary for a successful delivery of the tourist experience. A positive feeling towards one's community should correlate with one's image of the community. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to assess the image held by local residents of a community and compare that image perception to the image visitors have of that same community.

METHODS

This study was conducted in the small unincorporated community of Gardiner, Montana. Gardiner sits on the northern boundary of Yellowstone National Park and is the world's first gateway community to the world's first national park. Gardiner was officially founded in 1880, but has served as the gateway to Yellowstone since the park's creation in 1872. Residents of Gardiner have catered to, and built a viable tourism economy around the needs of park visitors for over 140 years. It is solely a tourism community; no other economic pillar exists for Gardiner.

The survey instrument used for this study was constructed after a review of the literature on visitor image of tourist destinations. As discussed in the introduction, visitor's image of a destination is a well-researched area. Survey questions used in studies conducted by Etchner and Ritchie (1993) and Schalock (1996) were adapted for use in our study. Etchner and Ritchie (1993) identified two components of image, cognitive (tangible) and affective (intangible). The cognitive component can be interpreted as beliefs and knowledge about the physical attributes of a destination. The affective component refers to the appraisal of feelings towards the attributes and the surrounding environments. The physical (cognitive) components of image are much easier to assess. Pike (2002) found that just six of the 142 image research articles he found included the affective element. Similarly, we focused on cognitive aspects more heavily, using 14 cognitive variables and only 3 affective variables. The emotional component is very difficult to assess (White, 2004).

Respondents were asked to state their level agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. Four of the variables asked the residents, "Gardiner is…" while the nonresidents were asked, "In my opinion, Gardiner is…" of the same four variables: 1) a friendly community, 2) a fun place, 3) pedestrian friendly, 4) bicycle friendly.

With the remaining 13 variables, residents responded to the prompt, "Gardiner has…" while nonresidents responded to, "In my opinion, Gardiner has…" These 13 variables include: 1) a range of retail shopping opportunities, 2) unique and rich heritage, 3) exciting nightlife, 4) opportunities to experience local cuisine, 5) good signage, 6) places to purchase local arts/crafts, 7) new and different activities to do in town, 8) nice community/county parks, 9) acceptable traffic flow in the summer, 10) well maintained roads, 11) well maintained business and store fronts, 12) ample parking, and 13) ample sidewalks.

Resident data collection

Door-to-door survey collection with drop-off and pick-up was the method used for this study. According to Andereck & Vogt (2000) this method has proven to provide better sample sizes than traditional mail-back and telephone surveys when conducting research in small communities. For this study, two researchers first mapped out the entire community in order to reach every residential home in Gardiner. Since Gardiner is an unincorporated town, there are no town boundaries, therefore after consultation with the Chamber of Commerce Director and President, it was decided that the boundaries would consist of every home connected to the community water and sewage.

The process involved knocking on a door, explaining the project to the resident, handing as many surveys to the resident as there were adults 18 and over in the household, then returning to pick up the completed surveys

approximately two hours later. If no one answered the door, it was marked down and the researcher returned later to try again. Each residence was contacted a minimum of two times over a four-day period to make sure every opportunity was given for residents to complete the survey. After multiple attempts to meet with the resident who was not at home during the distribution times, the researchers resorted to hanging the survey in a plastic bag from the doorknob with an explanation of the study attached to the survey and a request for the resident to complete it, then hang it back on their doorknob for later pick-up by the researchers.

The door-to-door surveying took place on a Saturday through Tuesday in mid-June, 2013. In total, 308 households were mapped out for the population base. Seventeen of those houses were inaccessible due to "Do not enter" signs, dogs, and large privacy fences bringing the useable number down to 291 households. Seven outright refusals were encountered. There were 115 households with no answer after multiple attempts to find the owners at home resulting in 176 households contacted and completing the survey. This resulted in a 60 percent response rate (176/291). The total number of completed surveys for this study was 209 or 1.19 survey respondents per household.

Visitor data collection
Interception of visitors on the main street of Gardiner was the other method used for data collection for the study. The primary location for visitor interception was on the boardwalk immediately in front of the Gardiner Chamber of Commerce and Information Center on Park Street. The Park Street location provided the best spot in which to find visitors. Other sidewalks were tried, but the Park Street location provided the best sample size. Once stopped, the study was explained to the visitor who was then handed a clip board with the survey and pen. Visitors were told the survey would take approximately 4-6 minutes to complete. Since image is an individual perception, data was collected from all travel group members over 18 years of age. All data, therefore, was collected at the individual level.

Visitor interception took place on random days throughout the months of June, July, August and September. Visitors were intercepted randomly across the busiest tourist months for representative data collection of visitors to Gardiner. Of the 1,997 visitors approached, 1,656 completed the survey for an 83% percent response rate (1,656/1,997). This study is limited to people who got out of their vehicle and walked along Park Street.

RESULTS

A t-test was conducted on each variable using the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances to determine if significant differences existed in the image of Gardiner between residents and nonresident visitors. T-tests showed significant differences between residents and visitors on every cognitive image variable (Table 1). Visitors rated 13 of the 14 cognitive variables higher in their image perception of Gardiner than residents. Only the perception of Gardiner having a unique and rich heritage was rated higher by residents.

Table 1
Cognitive image differences between residents and visitors of Gardiner, MT

Cognitive Image Variables	t	Sig.	Mean difference	Std. error difference
Unique and rich heritage	4.043	.000	.297	.074
Good signage	-8.569	.000	-.609	.071
Acceptable traffic flow in the summer	-13.474	.000	-1.140	.071
Well maintained roads	-21.175	.000	-1.701	.080
Ample parking	-19.421	.000	-1.610	.083
Ample sidewalks	-15.091	.000	-1.320	.087
Well maintained business and store fronts	-12.699	.000	-.884	.070
Nice community/county parks	-4.877	.000	-.405	.083
Places to purchase local arts/crafts	-2.917	.004	-.212	.073
Opportunities to experience local cuisine	-5.864	.000	-.441	.075
A range of retail shopping opportunities	-15.832	.000	-1.110	.070
Pedestrian friendly	-7.570	.000	-.601	.067
Bicycle friendly	-6.789	.000	-.598	.088
New and different activities to do in town	-10.648	.000	-.779	.073

The three affective image variables were also significantly different between residents and nonresidents (Table 2). Residents were less likely to agree on each of these variables than the visitor showing that visitors are less critical than locals.

Table 2
Affective image differences between residents and visitors of Gardiner, MT

Affective Image Variables	t	Sig.	Mean difference	Std. error difference
A fun place	-2.410	.009	-.177	.068
A friendly community	-3.821	.000	-.217	.057
Exciting nightlife	-3.623	.000	-.283	.078

DISCUSSION

Results show that visitors and residents of Gardiner, Montana, have distinctly different images of the community. In all but one case, nonresidents were more positive in terms of image than the residents. Residents only had a higher level of image on the variable "Gardiner has unique and rich heritage."

Many reasons could be contributing to these differences. First of all, residents live in the community with what it has to offer each and every day. If a resident is unhappy about something in town, they are reminded each time they need that service or product. For instance, if there are only so many restaurants in town and they want to try something new, they cannot. A visitor, on the other hand, does not eat in Gardiner as much and can easily try different restaurants. They could be more easily satisfied because their needs are temporary, and less enduring compared to the needs of residents. Secondly, visitors are on vacation. Vacations bring out the 'happy' and 'positive' feelings most of the time. Studies of satisfaction levels of visitors show that the majority of responses to satisfaction variables are very high. Little variance exists.

Finally, in the case of Gardiner, many visitors are only there for the sleeping and perhaps eating component of their visit. The rest of the time is likely spent in Yellowstone. Their needs are minimal and therefore their image or perception of Gardiner is either good or neutral.

This first ever exploratory research comparing the image of a gateway community by residents and visitors has provided a very interesting dichotomy. If only visitors were asked the image questions, community leaders could pat each other on the back for a job well done. Visitors have a good image of the community. However, the people who live in Gardiner do not necessarily agree with that assessment. As discussed in many resident attitudes toward tourism studies, support for the tourism industry is paramount for the industry to succeed into the future. Therefore, taking care of the residents should be first and foremost in the planning and development of tourism. We suggest that a new paradigm is needed. Common sense tells us that if residents have a good image of their community, it will also have a good visitor image. Therefore, rather than ask residents' attitudes toward tourism, the questions should also reflect their image perception of their community. In the case of Gardiner Montana, it is clear that changes could be made for the benefit of the residents which in turn will benefit the tourism industry.

It is up to the leaders of Gardiner to use this information to orchestrate changes in the community that best reflect residents' needs. Gardiner is in a unique position, as the original entrance to the world's first national park, to take control of what they like about their town and make sure the positive qualities of the people and place are sustained and improved for the future generations of both visitors and residents.

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