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Following the theme: impact of marketing awareness on the consumption of themed drives

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Abstract
This study highlights the changes in tourist behaviour on themed drives dependent on marketing awareness. It uses network analysis to empirically test the structural configuration of trips by visitors who are aware that they are driving on a themed route and those who are not using the Grand Pacific Drive in NSW as a case study. Results indicate the lack of a focussed itinerary and resultant complex travel patterns of unaware visitors.

Keywords
impact, drives, marketing, awareness, consumption, following, theme, themed

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FOLLOWING THE THEME: IMPACT OF MARKETING AWARENESS ON THE CONSUMPTION OF THEMED DRIVES

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ABSTRACT
This study highlights the changes in tourist behaviour on themed drives dependent on marketing awareness. It uses network analysis to empirically test the structural configuration of trips by visitors who are aware that they are driving on a themed route and those who are not using the Grand Pacific Drive in NSW as a case study. Results indicate the lack of a focused itinerary and resultant complex travel patterns of unaware visitors.

Keywords: Marketing Awareness, Drive Tourism, Tourist Travel Patterns, Grand Pacific Drive, Network Analysis

INTRODUCTION
Many studies have identified self-drive tourists as independent and having comparatively flexible itineraries involving multiple destinations (Carson & Carton, 2011). As it is difficult to assess or predict their movement, the self-drive market demand is difficult to exploit (Carson & Carton, 2011). Themed drives are essentially routes branded along a theme (Keller, 2003), providing a focus on identified destinations enabling some level of predictability into market behaviour (Prideaux & Carson, 2011). This makes the role of route branding and awareness all the more central (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998). It is hence hypothesized in this study that visitors who are aware of the themed route branding would exhibit more emphasis on destinations and routes advertised and differ in their travel behaviour compared to the unaware visitors.

The self-drive tourists constantly make and change their itineraries based on awareness of the route mixed with their personal needs (Shih, 2006) resulting in varied travel patterns. Hence to analyse visitation of key destinations, it is important to analyse the structural characteristics of their route. This study uses network analysis to analyse the network characteristics of trips made by leisure visitors on the Grand Pacific Drive by comparing aware and unaware visitors. Very few studies have attempted to use this method to empirically analyse multi-city trip patterns and tourist behaviour (Hwang, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2006; Stokowski, 1992). Derived from ‘Graph Theory’, it provides for a quantitative evaluation of interrelationships amongst entities, in this case destinations.

Australia has more than 20 major and more than a hundred smaller tourist drives being promoted. Launched in 2005, the Grand Pacific Drive (GPD) is one of the major attractions in the New South Wales region. It is a scenic coastal drive that starts at the Royal National Park and ends in Nowra. It traverses the Sea Cliff Bridge, and includes the coastal towns of Wollongong, Shellharbour and Kiama. It provides access to around 38 tourist destinations including directly en-route and nearby destinations.
METHOD

The study relies on a survey of 182 visitors travelling on the GPD at different times during a week, collected in July and August 2013. The intercept survey was conducted at four destinations along the route, namely Otford, Stanwell Park, Clifton and Kiama. The sample includes both domestic and international visitors. A total of 78 visitors were completely unaware that they were driving along a route that was themed as the GPD while 104 indicated awareness. Of these 104 GPD aware visitors, 48 visitors had heard about it exclusively through word of mouth or their previous travel experiences and indicated no exposure to marketing materials. The marketing-aware sample was comprised of the remaining 56 visitors who had indicated exposure to travel brochures, visitor guides, information from visitor centre staff, tour guidebooks or/and online sources. The survey included a question that asked visitors to indicate the starting and end points of their trips as well as up to 5 additional stops. Of all possible destinations mentioned, only those 38 destinations that are in the vicinity or on the GPD were included in the analysis of the destination network.

RESULTS

The results of t-test analyses indicate significant (p<.05) differences between the travel itineraries and behaviour of marketing aware and unaware visitors:

Number of destinations: The average number of destinations per trip travelled by the marketing aware visitors is 4.17 compared to unaware visitors (3.49).

Length of stay: 33% marketing aware visitors stayed on the route for 3-6 days compared to unaware visitors (16%).

Day trips: 71% aware visitors spend between 4.5 – 7 hours on the route compared to 50% unaware tourist.

Satisfaction: On a scale of 1-5, 5 being extremely satisfied, 50% aware visitors were extremely satisfied compared to 28% unaware visitors.

Network analysis results:

The structural analysis of trips undertaken by both the groups revealed no similarities based on Quadratic Assignment Procedure (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). With less than 0.2% (highly significant, p<.001) of the links exhibiting an observed Pearson Correlation coefficient of 0.5 or higher, the network structures of the two groups can be described as significantly different.

The network graphs reflecting the trip patterns of marketing-aware visitors (Figure 1) illustrates a highly centralized network with only few destinations being highly connected whereas the network graph of GPD-unaware visitors displays a more complex, decentralized structure with a number of key destinations. This is also supported by the ‘In’ and ‘Out’ degree centrality scores.

Comparatively higher betweenness centrality scores were observed for most destinations for unaware visitors, meaning that all destinations have a greater likelihood to serve as hubs from which unaware visitors spread into different directions. This again indicates the lack of cohesion in the travel patterns of unaware tourists.
DISCUSSION

The network analysis (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013) of the trips reveals the key destinations as being Stanwell Park, Wollongong and Kiama, displaying high ‘In’ and ‘Out degree centralities for both aware and unaware visitors. However, it is observed that aware visitors have a more focussed itinerary, and as a result spend more time and money at focal places. Comparatively the network structure of unaware visitors is more complex due to lack of an informed itinerary. Unawareness thus also leads to increased stopovers, limited time spent on major destinations and thus impacts satisfaction.

Figure 1 Non-dichotomized Directional Network Graph
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Themed routes are a way to tap into the drive market and allow concentration of demand resulting in innovative development of unexplored destinations along the route. Use of network analysis highlights the key destinations along the route allowing the destination organizations to focus on targeted marketing and development. The study reveals the difference in network structures of destinations on a themed route, based on awareness of visitors. It highlights the importance of themed marketing in directing tourist flows as well as in influencing the tourist experience and resulting satisfaction.

REFERENCES


