



## When tourists are your “friends”: Exploring the brand personality of Mexico and Brazil on Facebook

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### ABSTRACT

Adopting Aaker's (1997) framework, this study explored how popular tourist destinations, Mexico and Brazil, communicate their brand personality through Facebook, and which personality traits their Facebook “friends” associate with them. Results of computer-aided content analysis indicated that both countries' tourism promotion messages emphasize distinct brand personality traits. However, Mexico's public relations efforts were more successful than Brazil's in transferring projected brand personality to its Facebook “friends”.

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism promotion and destination branding are significant areas for public relations research and practice. Contemporary research focusing on the tourism industry has documented how public relations programs contribute to destinations recovering from crisis situations, and to building nation brands (e.g. Carden, 2005; Fall, 2004; Stafford, Yu, & Armoo, 2002; Tilson & Stacks, 1997). Yet, outside of these contexts only a few studies have analyzed the value of public relations efforts in tourism promotion and destination branding.

Branding allows destinations to manage their image and improve their economic performance by attracting international business and tourism (Aronczyk, 2008). As a “set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347), brand personalities can evoke different emotional responses in consumers and influence their opinions and purchasing decisions about a brand.

This study applied Aaker's (1997) brand personality framework to the context of tourism promotion and destination branding. More specifically, this study focused on two destinations selected from the United Nations World Tourism Organization's top destinations list (UNWTO, 2010): Mexico and Brazil, which have the largest share of international tourist arrivals in Latin America (UNWTO, 2010). Posts on the countries' official Facebook pages and responses from “friends” were analyzed for salience of brand personality traits. Lastly, a correspondence analysis was employed to explore the level of agreement in the brand personality traits communicated by the destination promoters and Facebook “friends”.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. *Public relations in tourism promotion and destination branding*

The travel and tourism industry makes use of public relations, marketing, and advertising strategies to promote destinations to publics around the world (Morgan & Pritchard, 2005). Within this strategic communication approach, public relations efforts involve identifying key publics; preparing a plan of action that can be constantly adapted to reflect shifting realities; and finally, monitoring feedback to measure if attitude or behavior changes are occurring in target publics (Tilson & Stacks, 1997). This approach can be viewed in efforts using Social media, where the focus is both on the communication of a predetermined image for the country, as well as in establishing dialog with tourists and potential tourists.

This mode of online communication is of great value for Destination Promotion Organizations (DPOs) because it facilitates two-way interaction with their various publics in ways that are not always possible offline (Bruell, 2008; Garcia, 2008; Pavlik, 2007). For example, DPOs can use online communication to reply to information requests and meet the individual needs of tourists (Palmer, 2002). Therefore, these platforms allow potential tourists to feel personally connected to a particular destination (Fall, 2004).

As Drury (2008) explained, while promoting a good or service through traditional media focuses on delivering a message, engaging publics via social media “is about building a relationship and conversation with your audience” (p. 275), and facilitating dialog with key publics (e.g. Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Smith, 2010). A dialogic public relations approach “elevates publics to the status of communication equal with the organization” (Botan, 1997, p. 197), which is conducive to building relationships with past, present, and potential tourists.

Information shared through social media and other online platforms can have a significant impact on how consumers shop for tourism destinations, because it provides them with access to different viewpoints and opinions (O’Connor, Höpken, & Gretzel, 2008). Similarly, because organizations and consumers can co-create content and meaning about the destination, social media can have an immediate and far reaching effect on reputation (Owyang & Toll, 2007). This is also true in the case of nation brands and tourism destinations.

### 2.2. *Destination promotion and branding*

Scholarly work in tourism branding has advanced knowledge of how governments and private companies brand and promote tourism destinations (e.g. Anholt, 2004; Cai, 2002; Papadopoulos, 2004). Recent research has also shown that countries have a brand image and reputation that influences public opinion of these nations (Anholt, 1998; Caldwell & Freire, 2004; Jain & Chan-Olmsted, 2009). Additionally, perceptions about a nation have been found to influence the success of their tourism and foreign investment (GfK Roper, n.d.).

Therefore, in managing their destination brands, countries are also concerned with positively affecting their reputation, i.e. “the aggregate of stakeholders’ images of a country” (Passow, Fehlmann, & Grahlow, 2005, p. 311). A positive country reputation is essential for building a good nation brand, which can influence the public’s intention to purchase a country’s products or travel to that country.

Fan (2008) explained that every country “has a current image to its international audience, be it strong or weak, clear or vague” (Fan, 2008, p. 5). In other words, international publics have formed an idea of a country’s reputation, and therefore it is in the country’s best economic interest to attempt to brand or manage its image. Country reputations are based on personal experience, such as experience from travel to the country or use of the country’s products; and second hand experience, obtained from word of mouth communication or information from the media (Yang, Shin, Lee, & Wrigley, 2008). Therefore tourism can be both a precursor to country reputation and a foundation for forming an opinion or attitude toward a country.

Similar to country reputation, a nation brand is a sum of the ideas or traits that stakeholders associate with a nation (Fan, 2008). As a strategic communication effort, nation branding “allows national governments to better manage and control the image they project to the world, and to attract the “right” kinds of investment, tourism, trade, and talent” (Aronczyk, 2008, p. 42). In a highly competitive environment, branding efforts are a way in which nations try to gain a competitive advantage in their tourism, investment, and business (Anholt, 2006).

Scholars have long been concerned with studying how brands distinguish themselves from competitors (e.g. Aaker, 1997; Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Guido, 2001; Freling & Forbes, 2005; Johar, Sengupta, & Aaker, 2005; Ramaseshan & Tsao, 2007). One approach has been exploring brands through an analysis of brand personality, or “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). In 1997, Aaker constructed a *Brand Personality Scale* (BPS), which categorized brands in five dimensions: *excitement*, *sincerity*, *competence*, *sophistication*, and *ruggedness*. Developed from a scale of human personality measures, Aaker’s scale consists of 42 sub-traits corresponding to larger facets, or characteristics, which are part of each of the five dimensions (Table 1). This brand personality scale has been used in recent research exploring brand personalities and their influence on brand choices (e.g. Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; Fennis, 2008; Freling & Forbes, 2005; Keller, 2003; Murase & Bojanic, 2004; Opoku, Abratt, Bendixen, & Pitt, 2007).

Similarly, Aaker’s scale has been applied to research about branding in tourism. For instance, Ekinci and Hosany (2006) investigated the brand personality traits that affect tourists’ intentions to recommend a destination; Hosany, Ekinci, and Uysal (2007) explored the relationship between brand image and brand personality for tourist destinations; Pitt, Opoku,

**Table 1**  
Brand personality dimensions and traits by Aaker (1997, p. 354).

Competence	Excitement	Ruggedness	Sincerity	Sophistication
Reliable	Daring	Outdoorsy	Down-to-earth	Upper-class
Hard-working	Trendy	Masculine	Family-oriented	Good-looking
Secure	Spirited	Tough	Small-town	Charming
Intelligent	Cool	Rugged	Honest	Feminine
Technical	Young	Western	Sincere	Smooth
Corporate	Imaginative		Wholesome	Glamorous
Successful	Unique		Original	
Leader	Up-to-date		Cheerful	
Confident	Independent		Sentimental	
	Contemporary		Friendly	
	Exciting		Real	

Hultman, Abratt, and Spyropoulou (2007) explored how African countries communicated brand personalities online; and Jain and Chan-Olmsted (2009) studied how 12 nations communicated their brand personalities on tourism promotion websites.

The present study expanded on this previous research by studying the communication of brand personalities on social media sites, focusing on the Facebook pages of Mexico and Brazil. These countries were selected to allow for comparison within the same region and to explore the tourism promotion efforts of countries interested in targeting English-speaking publics by publishing English-language content on their Facebook pages (Embratur, n.d.; Mexico Tourism Board, 2009). These countries are also the two most popular Latin American tourist destinations accounting for a 6.8 percent share for Mexico and 3.2 percent for Brazil (UNWTO, 2010).

Aaker's (1997) BPS was adopted to explore: which brand personality traits do Mexico and Brazil convey on their official Facebook page (RQ1); what brand personality traits are associated with both countries in the promotional messages posted on their Facebook page (RQ2), and in the messages posted by their "friends" via Facebook (RQ3); and lastly, which brand personality traits transferred from promotional messages to the messages by "friends" (RQ4).

### 2.3. Tourism promotion efforts of Mexico and Brazil

According to the Ministry of Tourism of Brazil (n.d.), the United States, Canada, Mexico and 12 European countries account for 97 percent of international visitors to Brazil. Brazilian tourism offices around the world manage international tourism promotion, advertisement and marketing support for the country (Embratur, n.d.). The country's DPO employs a variety of communication strategies and tactics, including a Brazil Trademark intended to consolidate an image of a country that is credible, young, hospitable, and cheerful (Ministry of Tourism of Brazil, n.d.). The Brazilian Tourism Board maintains a website ([www.braziltour.com](http://www.braziltour.com)) and also reaches out to tourists via social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Similarly, the greatest number of tourist to Mexico comes from the United States and Europe (INEGI, 2009). Mexico is one of the most popular destinations in the world, ranking tenth in number of international arrivals (UNWTO, 2010). The country's tourism promotion is led by The Mexico Tourism Board, which employs marketing, advertising and public relations strategies to promote Mexico as a leading tourism destination (Mexico Tourism Board, 2009). The country has a promotional website ([www.visitmexico.com](http://www.visitmexico.com)), and has a presence in the same social networking sites as Brazil.

## 3. Methods

This study used computer-aided content analysis using Diction 5.0 to determine which brand personality traits were present in the messages from Mexico and Brazil and the posts from their Facebook "friends," i.e., the people they connect and share with via Facebook (Facebook Glossary, 2012). Diction 5.0 is a dictionary-based text analysis program that assesses texts according to defined semantic features. Computer-assisted content analysis has been found to be useful for analyzing large quantities of data, and is more reliable than human coding (Krippendorff, 2004).

### 3.1. Data source and sample selection

The data source for this study were the messages posted on the official Facebook page of Mexico ([We Visit Mexico](http://www.WeVisitMexico.com), n.d.), and Brazil ([Visit-Brazil](http://www.Visit-Brazil.com), n.d.), as identified on their government sponsored tourism website. Data was collected for a period of four months (October, 2009–January, 2010), which was the extent of data available on both Facebook pages at the time of data collection (February, 2010). This procedure resulted in a sample of 32,779 words for Brazil and 20,996 words for Mexico (Brazil fan posts: 10,108 words; Brazil promotional messages: 22,671 words; Mexico fan posts: 11,631 words; Mexico promotional messages: 9335 words).

**Table 2**  
Brand personality traits on the official Facebook page of Mexico and Brazil.

	Sincerity		Sophistication		Ruggedness		Competence		Excitement		Row Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Mex.Friends (n = 11, 631)	56	0.58	34	0.29	37	0.32	29	0.25	61	0.52	217	1.86
Mex.Promo (n = 9, 335)	33	0.36	10	0.11	20	0.21	17	0.18	44	0.47	124	1.33
Brz.Friends (n = 10, 108)	3	0.03	4	0.04	0	0	0	0	4	0.04	11	0.11
Brz.Promo (n = 22, 671)	125	0.55	128	0.56	51	0.22	24	0.11	75	0.33	403	1.77
Column total	217	1.42	176	1.00	108	0.75	70	0.54	184	1.36	755	5.07

### 3.2. Operational measures and data analysis

The five traits corresponding to Aaker's BPS framework (Table 1) were operationalized following the approach used by Pitt et al. (2007) and Jain and Chan-Olmsted (2009), in which a list of synonyms was constructed using the online version of Encyclopedia Britannica's thesaurus function ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)), and used to create five custom dictionaries on Diction 5.0. The textual information extracted from the websites was then imported into the program for analysis.

Following the computer-assisted content analysis, correspondence analysis was employed to explore the interrelationship between brand personality dimensions and textual data from the official Facebook page. Correspondence analysis is a type of multivariate statistical method that presents a visualization of main dimensions of a two-way or multi-way contingency table of data, facilitating interpretation and understanding of patterns in the data (Bendixen, 1995; Hill, 1974; Hsieh, 2004). It examines simple two-way or multi-way tables in which each cell value represents some measure of correspondence between the row and column variables and is often used to represent categorical research data with a low-dimensional map (Inman, Venkatesh, & Ferraro, 2004; Whitlark & Smith, 2001).

Correspondence analysis is useful in exploratory studies such as this one, as it generates graphical representation of the results based on the cross-tabulated frequency counts of the variables being examined, thereby facilitating easy interpretation of data that would otherwise be difficult to examine (O'Brien, 1993).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. RQ1: which brand personality traits were conveyed on Mexico and Brazil's official Facebook page?

As shown in Table 2, each country's promotional messages contained brand personality traits (Mexico:  $n = 124$ , 1.33%; Brazil:  $n = 403$ , 1.77%). However, while "friends" of Mexico included in their messages words that are synonyms of the five brand personality traits ( $n = 217$ , 1.86%), Brazil's "friends" used them sparingly ( $n = 11$ , 0.11%). In terms of frequency of occurrence, the most frequently present brand personality trait in messages for both countries was *sincerity* ( $n = 217$ , 1.42%), followed by *excitement* ( $n = 184$ , 1.36%), *sophistication* ( $n = 176$ , 1%), *ruggedness* ( $n = 108$ , 0.75%), and *competence* ( $n = 70$ , 0.54%).

### 4.2. RQ2: what dominant brand personality traits are associated with Mexico and Brazil in the promotional messages posted on their Facebook page?

As Table 2 shows, the most frequently present brand personality trait in Mexico's promotional Facebook messages was *excitement* ( $n = 44$ , 0.57%), followed by *sincerity* ( $n = 33$ , 0.35%), *ruggedness* ( $n = 20$ , 0.21%), *competence* ( $n = 17$ , 0.18%), and *sophistication* ( $n = 10$ , 0.11%). In Brazil's promotional messages, the frequently observed brand personality trait was *sophistication* ( $n = 128$ , 0.56%), followed by *sincerity* ( $n = 125$ , 0.55%), *excitement* ( $n = 75$ , 0.33%), *ruggedness* ( $n = 51$ , 0.22%), and *competence* ( $n = 24$ , 0.11%).

### 4.3. RQ3: what brand personality traits are associated with Mexico and Brazil in the messages by their "friends" posted on their Facebook page?

"Friends" of Mexico most often associated the country with the brand personality trait *excitement* ( $n = 61$ , 0.52%), followed by *sincerity* ( $n = 56$ , 0.48%), *ruggedness* ( $n = 37$ , 0.32%), *sophistication* ( $n = 34$ , 0.29%), and *competence* ( $n = 29$ , 0.25%). In the case of Brazil, *ruggedness* and *competence* brand personality traits were absent in the messages posted by "friends". "Friends" did describe the country using the brand personality traits *sincerity* ( $n = 3$ , 0.03%), *sophistication* ( $n = 4$ , 0.04%), and *excitement* ( $n = 4$ , 0.04%); however, these traits were mentioned in only a few posts.

### 4.4. RQ4: are the brand personality traits from promotional messages transferred to the messages by "friends" posted on official Facebook page of Mexico and Brazil?

To explore this research question, a  $5 \times 4$  two-way contingency table of frequencies was constructed by aggregating the occurrences of words corresponding to each brand personality dimension observed on the sample data. Each cell in

**Table 3**  
Correspondence analysis results showing principle inertias (Eigen values).

Principal inertias (Eigen values)			
	1	2	3
Value	0.076731	0.005308	0.000511
Percentage	92.95	6.43	0.62

**Table 4**  
Correspondence analysis results showing row and columns Eigen values and chi-square distance.

Rows	Sincerity	Sophistication	Competence	Ruggedness	Excitement
Mass	0.287417	0.233113	0.092715	0.143046	0.243709
ChiDist	0.085340	0.419366	0.420108	0.186898	0.272521
Inertia	0.002093	0.040997	0.016363	0.004997	0.018100
Dim. 1	-0.286239	-1.511687	1.472324	0.532478	0.910872
Dim. 2	-0.026291	0.045813	-1.313405	-1.573964	1.410699

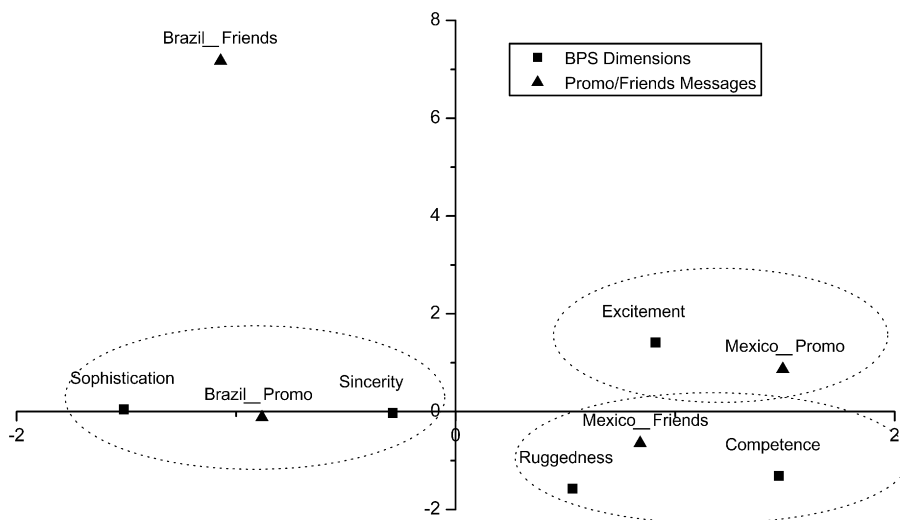
  

Columns	Mex-Friends	Mex-Promo	Brz-Friends	Brz-Promo
Mass	0.287417	0.164238	0.014570	0.533775
ChiDist	0.239023	0.418981	0.607133	0.244570
Inertia	0.016421	0.028831	0.005370	0.031928
Dim. 1	0.840720	1.490450	-1.070539	-0.882075
Dim. 2	-0.644390	0.869395	7.171407	-0.116272

Table 2 contains the frequency and percentage of occurrence of the synonyms of a particular brand personality dimension observed on each country's official Facebook page. Subsequently, a correspondence analysis was conducted on the two-way contingency table.

Tables 3 and 4 present results of correspondence analysis. A chi-square test on the sample data shows that there is enough variation in the data set ( $\chi^2 = 62.3252$ ,  $df = 12$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ) and that the row variables (i.e., country promotional messages) and the column variables (i.e., brand personality dimensions) are significantly related (Greenacre & Balsius, 1994). In addition, Table 3 shows that the principle inertia (Eigen values) across the three axes are 92.95%, 6.43%, and 0.62%; this implies that about 99.38% of inertia (variance) in data can be explained in the two dimensional space. The values in Table 4 are used to plot the data points in the two-dimensional space as represented in Fig. 1.

As Fig. 1 shows, Brazil's "friends" do not use any of the five brand personality traits in their messages, even when Brazil's promotional messages highlight *sophistication* and *sincerity* traits (depicted by relatively distantly placed points, Brazil-promo and Brazil-Friends, in Fig. 1). On the other hand, Mexico's promotional messages as well as messages posted by "friends" frequently use same traits (depicted by relatively proximately located points, Mexico-Promo and Mexico-Friends, in Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** Correspondence analysis map. Graphical representation of the brand personality traits observed in the promotional messages of Mexico and Brazil and messages of their Facebook friends.

## 5. Discussion

The findings indicated that Mexico and Brazil do indeed communicate distinctive brand personalities on each country's official Facebook page. As in previous research, findings showed that the most frequently observed brand personality trait was *sincerity*, followed by *excitement* (Ekinici & Hosany, 2006; Jain & Chan-Olmsted, 2009). By highlighting these traits on their Facebook messages, Mexico and Brazil aspire to enhance their attractiveness to prospective and returning tourists, communicating that they are cheerful, down-to-earth, imaginative and daring destinations (Aaker, 1997).

However, findings showed that while “friends” of Mexico associated it with distinct brand personality traits, such mentions were absent in the messages posted by Brazil's “friends.” The brand personality trait, *excitement*, followed by *sincerity*, were the two most frequently associated traits with Mexico in both the promotional messages as well as the messages posted by its “friends.” However, even though *sophistication*, *sincerity*, and *excitement* were the most often used brand personality traits in Brazil's promotional messages, its “friends” did not communicate these traits in their messages. These findings were substantiated through the correspondence analysis, which also showed significant distance in the personality traits communicated between Brazil's promotional messages and the messages of its “friends.”

An important finding of this study is that Facebook “friends” showed an interest in engaging the destination promoters in dialog about the destination; supporting existing research regarding the importance of social media in obtaining information about tourism destinations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In fact, for both countries, “friends” posted responses to messages and started conversations. However, these findings also suggested that the number of interactions between destination promoters and members of its public via Facebook do not necessarily lead to agreement in the messages. This is evidenced in the lack of correspondence in Brazil's promotional and “friends” messages, while for Mexico, even though friend messages outnumbered the postings from tourism promoters a greater agreement in the personality traits was observed. This finding suggested that Mexico was more successful in communicating brand personality traits and leading the conversation.

This study has several theoretical and practical implications for public relations in tourism branding and promotion. First, it demonstrated the use of Aaker's (1997) brand personality traits as a theoretical framework for studying public relations tourism promotion efforts. Additionally, from a country reputation perspective, this study highlighted the value that Facebook “friends” gave to the country's emotional appeal, i.e. how much people like, admire, and respect the country (Passow et al., 2005), as evidenced in the salience of the *sincerity* and *excitement* traits in their Facebook postings.

This study not only contributed to the scholarly efforts in examining destination branding and public relations tourism promotion via social media sites, but also suggested new avenues of research in related areas of destination promotion and country reputation. For instance, future studies could analyze the bases for the personality traits being discussed through social media and other channels. Because country reputations are based at least in part on word of mouth and the information that the members of the audience get from other audience members (Yang et al., 2008), future research could identify how pre-existing reputation influences conversations of social media users about a country, and the personality traits that they assign to that country.

Similarly, this type of analysis could also inform practice of public relations in the tourism industry, as it highlighted the use of correspondence analysis as an evaluation tool for messages from organizational senders and its recipients. In addition, this paper builds on the emerging interest in and importance of using social networking websites in public relations tourism branding and promotion efforts. Applying this analysis to “friends” messages for any given destination and/or competitors can provide key insights into how these publics view the nation's brand personalities, and how they may differentiate themselves from competing tourism destinations, which is a major concern in branding efforts (Aaker, 1997; Anholt, 1998, 2006; Freling & Forbes, 2005; Ramaseshan & Tsao, 2007).

### 5.1. Limitations and implications for future research

This study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged, but which also provide insights into future research avenues. One limitation is that it analyzed only the textual information available on the official Facebook pages of Mexico and Brazil. Both pages also contained visual communication tools, which were not evaluated in this study due to the limitation of the software employed, which only analyzes textual data. Also, this study used only two nations in its analysis. Research in future could expand the study to more countries as well as other web-based mediums of communicating with publics.

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