Research Paper

Internal brand management of destination brands: Exploring the roles of destination management organisations and operators

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ABSTRACT

Achieving a consistent brand experience across a destination and all brand-touch points is a major challenge in destination branding efforts. Strategies to manage the complexity of coordination across multiple network stakeholders are therefore critical for destination management organisations. However, theories to inform these strategies are limited. This paper proposes that internal brand management theory provides a framework to explore strategies that may increase operator buy-in to the destination brand, thus creating a more consistent brand experience for visitors. Semi-structured interviews with members of a destination brand network indicate that highly centralised networks hinder operator buy-in to the destination brand. Informal communication via more personalised sub-networks rather than directive leadership appear to facilitate knowledge sharing and create support mechanisms that promote brand citizenship behaviours. This study advances destination brand management theory and provides practical insights into destination brand management practices.

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1. Introduction

Delivering a consistent brand experience for visitors across the multiple brand touch-points is a major challenge for tourist destination brand managers. Destination branding involves the coordination of multiple supply-side stakeholders in a network brand (Manente & Minghetti, 2006). Network brands can be defined as a network of independent organisations working through relational ties towards the delivery of consistent experiences within the structure of a brand (Rowley, 1997). Destination network branding is a major challenge due to a multitude of products and services that are on offer to consumers in a destination. These experiences are marketed together as one product, that is the destination, under the network brand name (Morgan, Hastings, & Pritchard, 2012). Given its complexity, the development of theories to understand destination network brands is a topic of increasing scholarly interest. For example, recent studies have explored power relationships within destination network brands and the internal brand management of the brand coordinator (Hankinson, 2007; Marzano & Scott, 2009). Internal brand management is important to consider in network brands, as a consistent brand experience is dependent on the alignment of multiple internal, but independent, stakeholders within the network brand. The consistency of network brand is dependent on member interactions and behaviours that are aligned with brand values. The multiple independent stakeholders involved in the delivery of destination network brands distinguish them from corporate brands. For corporate brands, internal, contractually and culturally bound stakeholders (employees) deliver the brand promise. In contrast, destination network brands are manifested through interactions of multiple independent internal stakeholders. These stakeholders may include destination marketing organisations (DMO) that operate at national, state, regional and local levels, as well as, local network members being tourism operators, hoteliers and restaurateurs. All of these stakeholders need to market under a common network brand for effective marketing. For that reason, a greater focus on increasing internal stakeholder buy-in to the brand by both the brand custodian (being DMO) and local network members is needed to align stakeholder behaviours with brand values. The term “stakeholder buy-in” is frequently used (see Phillips, Freeman, & Wicks, 2003; Virgo & de Chernatony, 2006) to refer to the stakeholders’ understanding and acceptance of the brand and their willingness to operate in a way that supports and delivers the brand vision and values. It is important that the stakeholders demonstrate understanding of the brand as it indicates purposeful buy-in rather than accidental adoption of brand vision and values. This paper aims to explore influences on network stakeholder buy-in to destination network brands.

DMOs are the guardian of the destination brand. They are responsible for the development, coordination and implementation of the destination network brand, working to induce images
in the minds of consumers of destination experience (Marzano & Scott, 2009). Nonetheless, it is the internal network stakeholders – the tourism and hospitality operators – that deliver the brand promise through the consumer experiences. Operators are often focused on their own business objectives rather than the destination branding goals thereby causing a contradiction in the network brand visions and values (Hanna & Rowley, 2011). Due to the independent focus of operators, DMOs often find it difficult to develop a brand that meets the values of all network stakeholders (Yilmaz & Gunel, 2009). Consequently, when DMOs and stakeholder values and expectations are not matching, it reduces stakeholder buy-in to the network brand vision and values (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011). Unlike corporate brands, DMOs have no formal control over the operations of the network stakeholders to ensure that their behaviours (e.g. operating systems) support the network brand. Despite this, DMOs need to deliver a consistently high quality experience that clearly represents the brand to the consumers (Byrd & Gustke, 2007).

This paper employs a social network and identity perspective to study network brand management. In doing so, challenges faced in achieving consistent tourist experiences that represent the destination network brand are identified. Internal brand management is applied to investigate how the DMO can overcome these challenges. Internal brand management has previously been used to understand destination marketing and understand the employees’ role in delivering the brand experience (Hankinson, 2007). The authors therefore argue that internal brand management principles provide a theoretical framework to understand how to promote multiple stakeholders’ commitment to a destination network brand. The study draws upon previous research (e.g., Hankinson, 2007; Naipaul, Wang, & Okumus, 2009) that highlights the importance of communication and leadership in effective internal brand management. In doing so, the paper advances network brand management theory and practice and, thus, has relevance to destination marketers as well as other network brand managers. This article begins with a review of relevant literature on stakeholder networks and internal brand management. Following this, study methods and results of a typical destination brand are presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings and implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Stakeholder networks in relation to network brands

Stakeholder network theories are extensively discussed in the literature (Arya & Lin, 2007; Merrilees, Getz, & O’Brien, 2005; Roloff, 2008; Rowley, 1997). Stakeholder network theory identifies the role of multiple stakeholders in the delivery of mutual outcomes. Yet these theories have not previously been applied to network brands through a relational – exploring the relationships between the DMO and network stakeholders – and identity – examining how to facilitate brand buy-in through shared values in the network – lens (Heding, Knudtzen, & Bjerre, 2009). The importance of stakeholders delivering on the brand experience and, therefore, the positive impact on consumers is evident within both relational and identity brand literature (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). It is important that stakeholders buy-in to the vision and values of the network brand in order to deliver a consistent brand experience (Cox & Wray, 2011). Yet, stakeholders within destination network brands can work independently and interdependently of the brand network. They have their own business marketing strategy and activities that they undertake independently of other businesses and network members. However, they are also interdependent on other businesses, such as other suppliers, and network marketing entities, such as DMOs, to market and deliver their product. Despite the complexity, network brand success is reliant on the coordination of all stakeholders (Keast, Mandell, Brown, & Woolcock, 2004). There are varying levels of dependency within the network brand (Rowley, 1997). Some stakeholders are highly embedded in the network and share multiple links within the network, actively leveraging these relationships. Others act almost autonomously with limited linkages to other stakeholders (Rowley, 1997). Diversity of stakeholder attachment to the network can cause relationship management problems that need to be nurtured over time; consequently, understanding the relationships within a network brand is a key part of internal brand management. An additional complication within destination network brands is stakeholders are not always motivated to cooperate (Cook, 1977; Hanna & Rowley, 2011). Stakeholders may have values that do not support the vision and values of the network brand, and are often motivated by self-interest rather than in the interests of the destination network brand (Roloff, 2008). Consequently, stakeholders may harm the reputation of the destination network brand by offering an experience that supports their own values rather than those of the network brand. As such, there are varying levels of experience quality within the network brand and, thus, the overall brand experience may not deliver the brand promise to consumers. Understanding the network structure may therefore provide guidance on how to address this issue.

2.2. Network structure

Understanding power and communication among stakeholders in the network structure is important to identify opportunities for knowledge and resource sharing and encourage engagement in the network brand (Dredge, 2006). Stakeholder networks with high levels of interconnectivity are considered “dense” (Rowley, 1997). Dense relational networks can develop strong institutional links over time. Dense networks (Fig. 1) allow for high levels of knowledge and resource sharing and strong levels of consistency across the network (Timur & Getz, 2008). However, dense networks may also create inertia and reduce innovation due to greater levels of cohesion among members (Dredge, 2006). Less dense or “sparse” networks find it more difficult to communicate effectively and share knowledge due to an inability to directly communicate with others, using a “central organisation” to gain information (Rowley, 1997). The central organisation also has control over resources in a sparse network and, therefore, can constrain development (Pavlovich, 2003). Knowledge and resource sharing is considered vital for network consistency and success (Roloff, 2008). For instance, by communicating brand values to stakeholders and sharing resources facilitates a more integrated marketing approach through the development of common values and behaviours (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

In addition to density, centrality of the stakeholder network is an important consideration for network success (Scott, Cooper, & Baggio, 2008). The assumption of a “central” position implies that one stakeholder assumes they have a greater level of power than others within the network (Rowley, 1997). Central organisations are defined by the number of links they have within the network, the level of dependency that others within the network have toward the central organisation and the power that dependent stakeholders have within the network (Timur & Getz, 2008).

In centralised networks the central organisation may act as a commander, dictating the norms of the network and the distributing knowledge and resources (Rowley, 1997). Organisations that assume the central role and organisations that are close to the central role benefit from greater access to knowledge and
resources and greater support from other members of the network based on perceived power than those organisations on the periphery (Dredge, 2006). As such, central organisations may assert power over other members of the network, through control of resources and information distribution (Rowley, 1997). Due to the dynamic nature of networks, the central position may change, with stakeholders evolving and seeking centrality based on their power and legitimacy (Scott et al., 2008). In addition, at times, there may be a notable difference between where one stakeholder perceives themselves and how they are perceived by others in the network (Baggio, Scott, & Cooper, 2010). Thus, there may be a difference in the formal and informal power of the network and legitimacy claims form stakeholders. The ties between stakeholders in a centralised network indicate that there will be quicker distribution of knowledge and resources (Pavlovich, 2003).

Within tourism, centralised networks are typical. These networks are often well developed, with links that have strengthened overtime and evolved through mutual goals. Tourism networks are predominantly managed by regional DMOs whose role is to promote coordination among network members (Scott et al., 2008). This developed regional structure is due to greater levels of coordination, knowledge sharing and consistency among operators. Furthermore, greater coordination can also lead to more resource sharing among network members. Critically, the DMOs often assume centrality of the destination network brand. This centrality is derived from the DMO controlling and disseminating the brand vision, values and resources and is involved in the provision of knowledge to network stakeholders. Furthermore, the DMO is responsible for ensuring the brand is used effectively across promotion material (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2009). Stakeholders are invited to become members of the DMO, contributing to the funding available for the promotion of the region (Hsu, Killion, Brown, Gross, & Huang, 2008); this process is controlled by the DMO, further reinforcing their perception of formal power and centrality to the network brand. The organisations that contribute the most to the DMO are often also considered “powerful” organisations and therefore have greater decision-making powers within the network brand (Timur & Getz, 2008).

A less central and a denser network can promote freedom of knowledge and resource sharing across the network (Rowley, 1997). This is often identified in destinations that host predominantly small independent operators and are considered as fragmented (Dredge, 2006). Despite this, the less centralised network can foster greater socialisation in the network, which promotes a sense of identification and belonging (Keast et al., 2004). Furthermore, Naipaul et al. (2009) posit that a more informal ad-hoc approach to a network can help to encourage friendships and strengthen working relationships thus creating network strength through the alignment of values and commitment. Thus, whilst dense networks will be expected to promote higher levels of inter-stakeholder identification due to the processes of organisational socialisation, centralised networks tend create a sense of institutionalism harbouring innovation and controlling access to resources (Timur & Getz, 2008). Whilst Hankinson (2004) identifies that a resilient brand needs strong network relationships with a common vision of the core brand. It is therefore proposed:

**Proposition 1.** A centralised stakeholder network, with the DMO as the focal organisation, controls information dissemination and leads to greater cohesion among “powerful” stakeholders whilst marginalising smaller independent operators.

### 2.3. Internal brand management

As brand management literature has moved from product brand focus to corporate brand focus (Hatch & Schultz, 2010), greater attention has been given to aligning internal stakeholders to the brand (de Chernatony, 1999). Burmann and Zeplin (2005, p. 279) state: ‘If the promise made in the brand’s advertising is not consistently kept in the customer brand experience along all customer–brand touch points, the credibility and the overall strength of the brand will suffer’. Thus, it is important that internal stakeholders buy-in to the brand in order to deliver the brand promise and values (Henkel, Tomczak, Heitmann, & Herrman, 2007; King & Grace, 2009; King, Grace, & Funk, 2011; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). For service organisations, internal brand management is advocated as the means to orientate the employees’ attitudes, values and behaviours towards delivering a consistent brand experience (King et al., 2011).

From a destination branding perspective, internal brand management helps identify the role network stakeholders play in the provision of a destination brand experiences in alignment with the destination brand values (Hankinson, 2004). Positive stakeholder cognitive and behavioural attitudes towards the brand values can create a willingness to contribute to brand success, thus resulting

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**Fig. 1.** Dense and central network structures. Dense network with multiple links. Sparse central network.
in a consistent brand experience (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; King et al., 2011). Burmann and Zeplin (2005) argue that two factors are critical to branding success. First, stakeholders must show brand commitment, that is, a psychological commitment to the brand. Commitment is demonstrated by understanding and buy-in to brand values (Burmann, Zeplin, & Riley, 2009). For example, integrating brand values in policies and systems. Second, stakeholders must show brand citizenship behaviour, that is, they must be willing to behave in a way that enhances brand identity (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). For example, using the brand in marketing efforts and delivering the brand experience through consumer interactions (Hasnizam, Salniza, & Zolkafi, 2012). Trust and dignity are pre-requisites to achieve brand commitment and respect (Xiaong & King, 2013). However, the negative use of power within destination branding can create a sense of elitism among operators and therefore has a detrimental impact on stakeholders by hindering development of trust and respect (Marzano & Scott, 2009). Brand compliance is increased when the employee identifies with the organisation’s values and vision (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Socialisation is required for network brand compliance that can be achieved through communication, knowledge and resource sharing between brand leaders and tourism operators (network stakeholders) (Burmann, Zeplin, & Riley, 2009). This positive engagement can create processes that enhance commitment to the brand and brand values by enabling network stakeholders to identify with the network brand, increasing their enthusiasm and willingness to act in a way that supports the brand, thereby, achieving brand citizenship behaviour through compliance, internalisation and identification of the brand (Burmann, Zeplin, & Riley, 2009). It is therefore proposed:

**Proposition 2. Positive engagement from the DMO with network stakeholders can enhance stakeholder buy-in and willingness to contribute to brand success.**

### 2.4. Communication

Internal brand management literature suggests that communication is an integral tool for achieving brand buy-in (Bergstorm, Blumenthal, & Crothers, 2002). However, Vallaster and de Chernatony (2006) note that internal brand building is often not successful due to a lack of convincing communication. Effectively communicating the brand identity – that is, how the company wants the brand to be perceived – to all stakeholders is a precursor for the achievement of brand consistency (Lynch & de Chernatony, 2004). It is understood that the quality and style of communication is more imperative than the level and volume (i.e. frequency and length) (Kraatz, 1998). Constant mass communication may be ignored because stakeholders are often time poor, focusing on their own brand efforts rather than the network brand. Dunn and Davis (2003) posit that the brand should be transparent and easy for the employees to understand so that integration into operations is effortless. Integration can be achieved through formal communication, such as rules and policies, as well as, informal communication, through personal interactions (Thomson, de Chernatony, Arganbright, & Khan, 1999). Communication across multiple channels (memos, policies, emails) is considered to minimise miscommunications about the brand and encourages brand commitment and brand citizenship (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005).

Internal brand communication stimulates trust in the brand and brand execution consistency across all employees (Goodman, 2006). Brand communication should help to develop the employee’s awareness and understanding of the brand identity, values, promise and on-going brand developments (Baxter, Kerr, & Clarke, 2013). Through the consistent delivery of brand values across employees at all levels, external communications are more consistent and accurate in the portraying the brand (Hankinson, 2012). For a tourist destination, effective communication and engagement with brand values needs to be delivered across all stakeholders within the destination (Bregoli, 2013). Brand tool kits and training manuals are recommended tools for the DMO to communicate the brand values to all stakeholders involved in the delivery of the brand experience (Hankinson, 2012). If employees do not understand the brand identity, values and promise then adaptation of brand citizenship behaviours is likely to be diminutive (Xiong & King, 2013). Therefore, it is proposed:

**Proposition 3. Meaningful and timely brand centred communication between the DMO and network stakeholders can enhance brand commitment and citizenship behaviour.**

### 2.5. Leadership

In addition to communication, another important tool of internal brand management is leadership style (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Henkel et al. (2007) suggest that an informal leadership style allows employees to feel empowered and increases brand engagement and consistency. Furthermore, empowerment of stakeholders allows common goals and joint outcomes to be established (Beritelli & Bieger, 2014; Zehrer, Raich, Siller, & Tschiderer, 2014). Rigid, hierarchical leadership however, may hinder internal brand building as it disempowers employees by not allowing them to ascribe their own meaning to the brand, thus, employees feel compelled to follow the brand rather than feeling committed to the brand for personal reasons (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). In a tourism context, Marzano & Scott (2009) suggest that DMOs using power and hierarchy in leadership creates distrust toward the DMO and ultimately the region. The alternative is strong destination leadership that is built on empowering stakeholders through mutual trust and strong communication (Beritelli & Bieger, 2014; Zehrer, Raich, Siller, & Tschiderer, 2014). It is considered important that one or more members of the DMO take responsibility for the marketing direction of the destination, ensuring that a clear vision of the desired brand identity is established (Cox & Wray, 2011). This rationale is due to the importance of the human touch of leadership as stakeholders have been found to want to feel support from leaders (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006). Successful leaders should build an internal brand culture that helps create employee behaviour - or in the case of network branding, stakeholder behaviour - that is consistent with the desired brand identity and brand values (de Chernatony, Cottam & Segal-Horn, 2006). It is often more difficult to achieve this outcome within a destination network brand as the stakeholders are not direct employees of the DMO and are often spread over a wide geographical region (Bregoli, 2013). As such, a more flexible leadership approach is needed in destination network brands where the leader is able to shift relationships and approaches over time based on stakeholder capabilities and needs (Beritelli & Bieger, 2014). Therefore:

**Proposition 4. Destination brand buy-in among network stakeholders is promoted by leaders of the DMO that are flexible and empower network brand members to deliver the brand promise.**

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research position

In-depth semi-structured interviews with network stakeholders across the destination brand were utilised to investigate the four propositions. This qualitative approach is appropriate when seeking to understand actions and problems from the
participant’s perspective (Philimore & Goodson, 2004) and provides researchers with a flexible approach to unpack themes and probe into insightful comments (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Furthermore, it allows participants to elaborate on core themes and concepts, which is not possible in quantitative research due to its descriptive nature (Neuman, 2011). Given the propositions explored in this study, it was important to engage with participants and develop an understanding of the complex interactions that exist between stakeholders of a destination network brand (Daymon & Holloway, 2011).

3.2. Study context

This study explores a destination network brand of a single region that is referred to henceforth as “Destination A” due to ethical considerations. Destination A is a coastal destination that attracts almost one third of international visitors to the state. Visitor numbers to Destination A have been in decline over the past three years with a 2% fall in visitor numbers between 2012 and 2013. Destination A was selected as it is a typical tourism destination in the mature stage of its destination life cycle. The destination comprises of both coastal and hinterland landscapes. Tourism is the main economic driver for the region and makes a substantial contribution to the region’s Gross Domestic Product. Destination A operates within a hierarchical DMO structure of national, state, regional and local DMOs. Therefore, the state-level DMO devises an umbrella brand for the state, which is then broken down into regional destination brands (including Destination A). There is also several sub-regional or local brands within Destination A. Membership of the Destination A DMO ranges from the lowest level of Supporter (with minimal entitlements) to Bronze, Silver, Gold and Platinum membership. The membership fee and entitlements depend on membership level, so Platinum level members pay a larger fee and are offered more opportunities than Gold level members and so forth. Destination A’s brand has changed numerous times over the past 10 years with the current brand implemented in 2009.

3.3. Participants and procedure

Interviews were conducted with 23 members of Destination A’s network brand. Interviews concluded when a point of theoretical saturation was established, that is, participant’s answers were overlapping and no new information was identified (Bazeley, 2013). Participants included senior executives from state tourism organisation (STO), regional tourism organisation (RTO) and local tourism organisations (LTO) (n=5) as well as with tourism operators (n=11), a senior executive from the airport (n=1), marketing consultants to the region (n=2) and hoteliers (n=4). Interviewees were selected through purposeful sampling to ensure participants varied in their level of membership, operations, business size and industry experience (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). It was also essential that participants were willing to share their experiences in the region and discuss the differing relationships that exist within the destination network brand (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Initial emails were sent out to 100 tourism and hospitality focussed businesses. In the email operators were invited to participate in the study and given a brief overview of the study. Fifteen businesses responded (n=15), indicating they were willing to be interviewed. Snowball sampling from initial interviews resulted in more participants within the region across varying membership levels. This approach is consistent with Neuman’s (2011) recommendations. Interviews were conducted in person and the duration ranged from 30 to 1 h 45 min, depending on the depth of answers that participants were willing to offer. Consistent with Daymon and Holloway’s (2011) recommendations, face-to-face interviews were conducted to allow respondents to more accurately understand the researcher’s intent, build rapport with the participants, and encourage participants to share their thoughts and views more openly with the interviewer than other data collection approaches. Semi-structured interviews discussed the structure of the region, the role the DMO plays in the destination network brand and the level of communication and leadership identified across the network brand. Furthermore, it allowed the interviewees to discuss additional themes based on their perceptions of the region and their relational experiences within the region.

3.4. Interpretation

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were thematically analysed using NVivo10 software. Accordingly, central themes from the literature review and the propositions were explored in a deductive manner, consistent with the approach proposed by Creswell (2013). Close attention was paid to additional themes that emerged and the relationship between themes identified in the literature, similar to the approach adopted by Miles and Huberman (1994). As a result of this process, key themes emerged including: network structure, the role of the DMO, communication, leadership and brand architecture.

4. Interpretation

4.1. Network structures

The various DMO levels, and the wider networks in which they operate, appears to be a central issue identified by interviewees. The hierarchy of the STO, RTO and LTO structure that influences the regional destination brand was particularly noted, although issues with this structure were more prevalent among the lower level network members. The RTO perceive that they are at the centre of this structure with the LTO and other members beneath them. The various levels of membership, based on their financial contribution to the RTO, influences access to destination marketing opportunities, knowledge and resources. The central position of the RTO, in controlling the network, means they exert power over brand decisions. The brand was developed by the STO and RTO with limited consultations to those in top level membership positions. This power differential then benefited larger, more affluent companies who often were perceived as having “preferential” treatment over those members that contribute less financially to destination marketing activities via their membership fee. Furthermore, higher-level members were able to input to the development of the region. Access to opportunities was therefore not determined by the best fit to the opportunity, but rather by level of membership. For instance, the RTO stated ‘the higher your membership the more opportunity you get’ (RTO 8). Members also noted this power differential with one Gold member stating: ‘hopefully we get a few extra perks, you know some preferential, not treatment, but I guess motivators like access to the familiarity programme’ (G13).

The perception that the RTO is the focal organisation caused many members to feel a sense of distain toward the RTO sensing that the RTO was using their power to benefit certain members of the destination whilst ignoring others. Ultimately, this hindered brand buy-in, alienating other network stakeholders. However, higher-level members or those members with strong relationships with the RTO tended to support the RTO and their approach to branding and managing the network: ‘I think we get an amazingly
informal in nature, some had a...

sub-networks are places that stakeholders could go to in order to share knowledge or stakeholders with similar values and experiences. They were a necessary evil and I do think that you need to be part of the wider group (B10). Whilst another said: ‘The only reasons I am a member is 1. political and the other is the wider destination promotion but other than that they do not do anything for us and most operators will tell you the same thing’ (B20). Members across all levels were able to identify the value in the RTO which is important to note suggesting that members identify solely a functional benefit to the relationship. Although not all participants were happy with the operating systems that were in place, the overall acknowledgement for the need and the value of the RTO suggests that the region is driven by similar underlying functional goals of getting people to the region however they lack the buy-in to the current approach. This is important for brand consistency, there is a clear need to stimulate additional cohesive values among network stakeholders, they imply that they are willing to operate under shared values and the existing sub-networks seem to support this however, there a leadership drive is needed to empower members to achieve a common goal.

4.1.1. Value of sub-networks

One of the most important support mechanisms for members was the sub-networks. These sub-networks developed based on stakeholders with similar values and experiences. They were a place that stakeholders could go to in order to share knowledge or get help in situations that they faced. The sub-networks are informal in nature, some had a “president” and formal routine whilst others were more ad-hoc, all operate under mutual understanding and collaboration.

For a number of stakeholders, these sub-networks represent an opportunity to share ideas with like-minded people and operate with a sense of unity. In doing so, they felt supported by other members which they felt was lacking form the DMO. The sub-network stimulates co-operation between businesses and instils a common sense of purpose to work towards creating shared values across the sub-network businesses. These shared values create brand consistency across the network, ensuring that the value and belief systems are similar among sub-network members. These values may vary between different sub-networks, with accommodation and experience sub-networks operating automatonaly however, help them to deliver a more consistent brand to visitors by creating groups of network stakeholders operating under mutual values.

Proposition one is supported by these findings that show that a centralised structure and top down approach to brand development does not facilitate member engagement in the network brand. By utilising a hierarchical central structure, the RTO creates a culture of entitlement for the more financially viable members and discord in the lower level members. This sense of hierarchy limits innovation among members. Resource dissemination is based on the strength of relational ties with the DMO, in support of Timur and Getz (2008) findings that indicate that the DMO find power and legitimacy through resource dissemination in tourism destinations. In contrast, freedom and empowerment provided by the sub-networks enhances collaboration within the destination. These informal sub-networks create a sense of companionship and support among network members that are working together toward a common purpose. The sub-networks, in turn, facilitate greater levels of communication and resource sharing as members that is otherwise present. In particular, these networks allow smaller independent organisations to work together and feel support that is lacking from the RTO.

4.2. Internal brand management

4.2.1. Attitude toward DMO

Another discussion point across participants was the RTOs role in the “bigger picture” development and marketing of the destination. Several participants noted that the only reason that they were members of the RTO was for their contribution to the wider marketing efforts of the destination. As such, they had a non-chaclant attitude toward the RTO but could understand their role. One such member stated: ‘I do believe that they [memberships] are a necessary evil and I do think that you need to be part of the wider group’ (B10). Whilst another said: ‘The only reasons I am a member is 1. political and the other is the wider destination promotion but other than that they do not do anything for us and most operators will tell you the same thing’ (B20). Members across all levels were able to identify the value in the RTO which is important to note suggesting that members identify solely a functional benefit to the relationship. Although not all participants were happy with the operating systems that were in place, the overall acknowledgement for the need and the value of the RTO suggests that the region is driven by similar underlying functional goals of getting people to the region however they lack the buy-in to the current approach. This is important for brand consistency, there is a clear need to stimulate additional cohesive values among network stakeholders, they imply that they are willing to operate under shared values and the existing sub-networks seem to support this however, there a leadership drive is needed to empower members to achieve a common goal.

4.2.2. Member’s attitude toward brand development

The brand development process was not transparent in the eyes of the network stakeholders within the region. Several participants were unsure of the role that the RTO played within brand development; others also noted that they were unsure of the level of communication to all network stakeholders within the region. These comments were prevalent across all levels of membership from Bronze to Platinum membership levels, one member stated: ‘no I do not believe there was any industry consultation unless I missed it but I do not think I did” (G13). Furthermore, many members suggested that the brand was “dumped” on them and was an inappropriate fit for the regions that they operate within. In particular Bronze operators noted the lack of consultation and that they were just told what the brand was: ‘Nope they told us they were doing it and that was pretty much it. You have to use specific colours, use this, use that’ (B10).
Whilst Gold members identified that there had been consultation, however, those that ran the consultation process had put their own spin and own preconceived outcome from the process:

‘Well they were consulted with but it was a case of having the meetings then you have the people running the meetings then putting their own spin on things, now I’m not being negative in what I am saying, I am saying that the brand of [DMO] was influenced upon how the [STO] saw the branding fitting together across the different regions of the state’. (G6)

This initial lack of support from the members has caused ongoing issues with their attitude both toward the RTO and the brand. Network stakeholders have low levels of brand commitment as they are unable to identify or internalise the brand. As such, this confirms proposition two. A lack of positive engagement with stakeholders has created a lack of network stakeholder commitment and brand buy-in. Despite this, the overall role of the RTO was recognised by all members interviewed as being integral to the success of the region, a necessary evil for instrumental value and promotion for the region. This demonstrates willingness for members to engage with the region and the overarching goals of the network brand. Imposing a weak level of brand engagement, that has not yet manifested as brand citizenship behaviour. The lack of brand citizenship behaviours can be identified through the members’ lack of willingness to advocate the brand.

4.2.3. Communication

Communication was one of the core subjects of discussion identified through the interviews with members and the DMO. Communication appears integral to the success of the brand at all stages, through the development, implementation, and delivery.

4.2.4. Communication from the DMO’s perspective

From the RTO’s perspective the communication process is clear and structured. On a monthly basis the RTO sends out a newsletter to all members detailing regional activities. These activities include sales missions and marketing opportunities as well as participation in upcoming regional promotional and social events. Furthermore, on an annual basis Platinum members receive a briefing with the RTO’s CEO where strategic and marketing plans for the year are discussed. There is additional information available to members on the RTO website, including visitor statistics, brand toolkits and instructions of brand usage. Members are encouraged to keep the RTO up-to-date with information about their businesses and any noteworthy news that has happened. A RTO representative said: ‘I ask them frequently to give me an update or not to forget to update their member profile’ (RTO8). The RTO identify their role as providing constant and relevant dialogue with network stakeholders, although they identified that this was a challenge. Furthermore, the participant identified the reciprocity of the relationship between the RTO and its members. It is not just about the RTO talking at members but requires their interaction. However, it was suggested that feedback only occurs when members are dissatisfied and they will often respond by enlisting other operators with ‘shared’ dissatisfaction, despite this the RTO understands the value in the process and is willing to try and sooth members. One RTO interviewee states:

‘So that pretty much is consistently my challenge to say to those that are having a whinge or an uproar and leading them to water saying this is what we have been doing, this is how you were effected, this is what you gained from it and the information is all there, if you want to learn about it pick up the phone and talk to us, it can be a constant battle but is also very rewarding when things pay off’ (RTO8).

Despite the RTO and LTO’s attempts to communicate with network members both the LTO, the RTO acknowledges that no one is listening. Yet, no changes have been made to the approach to communication despite acknowledgement that the current approach is not effective. The RTO noted: ‘well you can lead them to water but you cannot make them drink’ (RTO8) whilst the LTO just made light of the issue: ‘someone get them with a big stick? Am electric shock… I think it is just a time issue’ (LTO9). Both the LTO and RTO believe they are transparent in their management of the brand and encourage open communication across all levels of membership, however members do not feel the same way. Therefore, next the network stakeholders’ perspective is explored to better understand the shortfalls of this strategy.

4.2.5. Communication from the members’ perspective

Another core discussion that arose was that some members perceived that the RTO and LTO are not listening to members, be it through discussions of improvements or requests to the RTO. One member said ‘they do not listen because we are just petty little members’ (B10) and then went on later to state:

‘They won’t listen to anyone, they won’t do anything differently, they won’t umm there is a lot of “this is how it has always been done” kind of thing or “ohh they always complain”, well have you listened to what they say? Do you know why they are complaining?’ (B10).

A lack of effective communication from the onset of the branding process within this case appears to be hindering stakeholder buy-in the destination thereby supporting proposition three. Members do not feel compelled to act in a way that supports the destination network-brand as they are detached from the brand due to a lack of meaningful communication from the onset of the branding process. Network stakeholders feel that they are not being listened to and the communication process is not effective in its current formation. This supports proposition three in that the lack of meaningful communication is reducing the levels of brand commitment and citizenship behaviour.

4.2.6. Leadership

Leadership was not only introduced in discussions about the RTO’s and the LTO’s roles within the region but members also noted that they were seeking more from these key organisations. Leadership is notoriously difficult to achieve within tourism destinations due to the unique structure that they hold, despite this it is still integral to the success of a region.

4.2.7. Leadership from the DMO’s perspective

There is a clear hierarchical approach to leadership with the way that the RTO and LTO interact with network stakeholders. Those that pay the most money to the region receive the most benefits; this is not identified by the RTO as preferential treatment though. One participant stated: ‘I do not think that happens within our company because we do not have preferential treatment as such, we give Platinum and Gold members more opportunities but we treat members the same’ (RTO8). At the time of data collection (mid-2012), no individual acted as a clear brand leader as the RTO staffer responsible for the development of the brand and dissemination of branding information left the RTO and was not replaced. This lack of brand ownership within the DMO means that network stakeholders have no one to turn to with brand questions. This lack of a figurehead caused a lack of brand buy-in, network stakeholders are unsure of their role and lack of representation within the DMO cements poor understanding and thus leads to lack of acceptance and compliance to brand values among network stakeholders.
The RTO perceive their role as an educator, through dissemination of knowledge, helping network stakeholders to understand the benefits that they are bringing to the region. The RTO identify this as an on-going process involving frequent communication with stakeholders.

"It is about educating them that it is still about the big picture that we are striving for and without that bigger picture there would be no product to sell and there will be no boat that goes out to the reef or no gallery cafe because no one will be coming here" (RTO8).

Yet despite this the RTO is unable to instil a sense of ownership and empowerment across network stakeholders. The following section explores leadership from the network members' perspective.

4.2.8. Leadership from the members' perspective

Network stakeholders felt that they had no one to turn to if they had branding questions. Furthermore, according to members the RTO did not follow the branding strategy, resulting in reduced buy-in from members. One respondent states:

"If I am being really picky if you go over to the [DMO] boardroom and look in the photos, the big photos are still [the old brand identity]. Now they are lovely pictures but they are not on the current brand" (S13).

Some network stakeholders identified that there is a power-oriented approach to leadership with those that are “leaders” manipulating decisions. A number of network stakeholders spoke of the “boys club” where “leaders” of the region would come together and make decisions based on history and personal perceptions of the region rather than based on facts and research. For example one member stated: ‘They are run like a boys club, there are a group of guys in [destination] who basically controls the whole thing and it really is a boys club’ (B20). Other members noted that there was a flaw in the DMO structure:

‘I see a problem in the way in which the regional arms are structured. They are structured to please everyone and to me that is not the way to structure stuff because the classic is there are 12 directors at [DMO] 8 of them represent what totals about 3% of tourism in the region, so you’ve got a fundamental flaw and trying to keep everyone happy’ (B18).

Whilst the considerable experience that resides in this “boys club” can be regarded as a strength, it is perceived by many network stakeholders to create inertia for change. Rather than fighting for the network stakeholders and issues that are arising, some suggest that “leaders” no longer battle as they once would for the issues that matter to stakeholders. It was also identified by some participants that those that are considered members of the “boys club” are unwilling to accept change within the region. They are set in tradition and do not see any problems with the way the region is operating, as noted by the following interviewee:

‘The town doesn’t really have any leadership and the two people that are meant to be its leaders are totally not here. They are stuck in the past, they don’t want to look into the future because they are nearly done and so they have had their time’ (B10).

This RTO is not demonstrating leadership through the ability to change; consequently there is stagnation and discontent within the region. Not all members were frustrated with the RTOs leadership approach. One Gold member noted the RTO brings the region together, supporting local businesses. Instead they suggest that those that are discontented with the RTO are “lazy” and unwilling to be involved in the region. Furthermore, the RTO helps to create cohesion in the marketing efforts of the region, that they create direction and common goals for the region.

There was also a sense of anonymity identified at the top of the hierarchy. An organisation is the figurehead rather than an actual leader, someone that members are able to turn to in the case that they need advice or support in branding matters. As one participant noted support from the RTO is hard to get: ‘What support? Like I said someone from [DMO] was supposed to get in contact and they didn’t, they did not follow through so there is no support’ (B19). This anonymity is impacting the brand buy-in and commitment across network stakeholders. Leadership requires a person, accountability and direction, the lack of a figure head is therefore impacting brand buy-in. With the diversity that exists within the region it is important that the leaders of the brand develop a clear understanding of the destination in order to successfully market the region. Another stakeholder commented that representatives of the RTO were showing visitors through the region when they themselves had not visited the region previously and therefore, demonstrated a lack of knowledge about the region they were responsible for ‘selling’.

It is not just the regions that were noted as not being known or understood by the RTO but network stakeholders noticed that RTO representatives were unaware of what they did. This has two consequences; firstly it hinders stakeholder buy-in to the region by building a perception that the RTO is not interested in its members. Furthermore, it may mean the RTO are unable to fulfil their roles when promoting or selecting familiarity experiences the RTO are unable to select the best fit for the opportunity due to a lack of understanding. This may again encumber the buy-in of members who do not feel there is reciprocal respect between them and the RTO. With over five hundred members it is difficult for the RTO and LTO to develop a complete and full understand of all members, however, by attempting to familiarise themselves with the region and establish an understanding of categories of members they may be able to enhance stakeholder satisfaction and brand citizenship behaviours.

It is interesting to note that within the informal networks there is more self-organisations and power roles switch dependent on the situation. Despite this, the participants felt empowered and inspired by similar values and morals. This cohesive approach lends to greater levels of consistency within the brand and participants are operating under similar values. A Gold operator noted that ‘we are very supportive of other operators, we don’t compete, we work with them and support them, it makes sense to us’ (G6).

A lack of empowerment from a distant anonymous figurehead and no clear leadership within the region supports proposition four. The destination is not harnessing the power of its stakeholders to create a cohesive brand due to a lack of clear understanding of members in the region. This perception of a distant “boys-club” that is creating stagnation in the region is hindering members’ buy-in to the region. There needs to be more consideration into the leadership of the destination network brand to empower stakeholders toward stronger buy-in and brand citizenship behaviour. This would involve a clear figure head and RTO employees that are willing to spend the time to get to know members, acting in a way that promotes the strongest region rather than the most convenient.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Destination network brands are identified as being complicated to manage. These complexities arise from the multitude of stakeholders that are involved in the delivery of the network brand experience. The results identified within Destination A, in
particular the DMOs inability to harness network stakeholder support and buy-in to the brand network, are typical of problems facing network brands (Cox & Wray, 2011; Naipaul et al., 2009; Pike, 2013). Issues were identified across all three levels of analysis: structure, leadership and communication. Each hindered the buy-in and brand citizenship behaviour and therefore, the delivery of a consistent brand experience. There was a connotation identified between the network structure and the communication and leadership style, which in turn impacted on the level of buy-in from members as seen in Fig. 3. It is evident from this research that a clear focus needs to be given to the internal management and network structure of network brands in order to stimulate brand buy-in.

The sub-networks that exist within the destination network brand suggest how the destination is remaining competitive despite a lack of congruency between the DMO and stakeholders. These sub-networks facilitate knowledge and support and have helped to ensure that the network brand has consistent values. This supports the work by Naipaul et al. (2009) and Rowley (1997) who identify that the structure of a network can facilitate knowledge and the value of informal sub-networks may outweigh formal hierarchical structures. Within sub-networks there is empowerment among group members and pride in what they are able to achieve. Trust is achieved in sub-networks through empowerment among group members and pride in what they form. Within sub-networks there is edge and the value of informal sub-networks may outweigh the buy-in and brand citizenship behaviour and therefore, the delivery of a consistent brand experience. There was a connotation identified between the network structure and the communication and leadership style, which in turn impacted on the level of buy-in from members as seen in Fig. 3. It is evident from this research that a clear focus needs to be given to the internal management and network structure of network brands in order to stimulate brand buy-in.

From the results it is possible to see that the current leadership structure of the network brand is hindering network stakeholder buy-in. There is no clear policy or procedure in place to support the delivery of the brand culture as Vallaster and de Chernatony (2006) note as being integral to brand success. Furthermore, the hierarchical approach rather than a flexible network appears to be reducing the network stakeholders’ desire to adopt brand citizen behaviour. This destination network brand indicates the complexities and a paradox that exists in the management of network brands. Although operators are seeking a leader they also want decentralisation, a feeling of empowerment and autonomy. Leadership in this case requires the ability to simultaneously bring network stakeholders together around the network brand whilst allowing for the development and growth of the sub-networks. A significant challenge given the lack of formal control a DMO has over its operators (Beritelli & Bieger, 2014; Pike, 2013). As such, it is suggested that further research is conducted into the governance of destination brand networks (Helm & Jones, 2010) and how they can effectively manage their brand architecture. These results suggest that the DMO need to restructure their approach to the way they stimulate buy-in and brand citizen behaviour and how they balance their relationships with stakeholders.

Furthermore, in order to create network stakeholder buy-in to the network brand the focal organisation needs to ensure a positive attitude is maintained between all key stakeholders. The value of communication needs to be taken into consideration, network stakeholders will perceive communication differently, and the disseminator of these communications needs to take this into consideration to ensure that the communication is achieving the goal of building trust and enhancing stakeholder buy-in. This problem becomes a major barrier for the development of brand centred behaviour and network brand buy-in, the DMO need to be more proactive as posited by Cox & Wray (2011), stimulating buy-in by empowering members.

This case confirms the paradox that Gyrd-Jones, Merrilees, and Miller (2013) propose, that top-down brand developments create major tensions between stakeholders, in this case between the DMO and members. When creating a top-down brand, the brand should be broad enough to enable the majority of stakeholders to tolerate it. This is not the case within Destination A. Furthermore, a bottom-up approach would allow stakeholders to join to create a collective brand personality (Gyrd-Jones et al., 2013); the lack of support from stakeholders indicates that this is not the case in Destination A. This lack of support by network stakeholders stimulated by a lack of communication in the development process has hindered the ability of the DMO to stimulate buy-in to the network brand. As such, the attitude toward the DMO has become a major barrier for the development of brand centred behaviour and network brand buy-in, the DMO need to be more proactive as posited by Cox & Wray (2011), stimulating buy-in by empowering members.

This paper identifies a number of challenges that are prevalent within the management of destination network brands. Further consideration needs to be given to a flexible governance and management approach to network brands to overcome these challenges. This

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Fig. 3. Relationship between core findings.
issue is important as destination brand sustainability lies in the ability to deliver the brand promise to consumers; that is, that there is shared meaning among operators that is reflected in their actions and experience delivery (Foley & Fahy, 2004).

This study highlights the complexities of managing destination network brands due to the multitude of stakeholders involved in the provision of the brand experience. Stakeholders within a network brand are championing their own brand as well as combining to create the network brand. As such, difficulties arise in creating stakeholder buy-in, brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviour. This study explored the role of the network structure, communication and leadership as management tools for destination brand networks. This study identifies that sub-networks within network brands are integral to their success. Communication is a means to build relationships and of creating brand knowledge yet communication styles need to be flexible to reach the diverse range of network stakeholders. A positive perception of the network brand leaders may stimulate brand buy-in of stakeholders. It is therefore important that the network brand leaders demonstrate brand commitment themselves. This study has advanced the literature on destination management through the application internal brand management across multiple stakeholders in destination network brands. The use of internal brand management has helped to explore core concepts in an attempt to stimulate consistently across the network brand experience through network stakeholder buy-in, brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviours.

6. Limitations & further research

This paper has focused on exploring destination network brands from an internal brand management perspective in one destination. Although this research focused on one-destination elements of similar management styles are evident across other destinations, Marzano & Scott (2009) identify similar elite or hierarchical management approaches. Furthermore, they discuss the role of the “boys club” within the destination, this suggests that other destinations are currently employing similar practices and this study could be applied to other destinations.

Furthermore, there needs to be additional research exploring other concepts that arose in relation to the creation of more cohesive network brand. As mentioned one key area of focus should be destination brand architecture, this emerged as a core concept within the data collected and as a tool to manage the sub-network brands.

Further research also needs to be conducted into the relationship between the DMO and other stakeholders, stakeholder-agency theory may an interesting lens to explore through where the focal organisation (DMO) is acting as the principle where the stakeholders (tourism businesses) are acting as the agents in the delivery of the brand experience.

References
