

WWW.Branding.States.US: An analysis of brand-building elements in the US state tourism websites[☆]

Gyehee Lee^{a,*}, Liping A. Cai^b, Joseph T. O'Leary^c

^aDepartment of Tourism Management, Keimyung University, 1000 Shindang-dong, Dalseo-gu, Daegu City 704-701, Republic of Korea

^bDepartment of Hospitality & Tourism Management, Purdue University, Room B1C, Stone Hall, 700 W. State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2059, USA

^cDepartment of Recreation, Park & Tourism Sciences, Texas A & M University, 2261 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-2261, USA

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Abstract

The Internet plays a significant role in attracting visitors and facilitating their trip planning and reservations. The website of a destination has become a crucial branding channel. However, electronic branding has yet to be adequately conceptualized, particularly in the context of destination marketing. The current study aims to fill this gap through the analysis of the 50 states' official tourism websites. Specifically, the researchers attempt to delineate the unique selling propositions (USPs) and positioning strategies of destination organizations at the state level through a content analysis of slogans, graphic projections, verbal expressions, and other explicit or implied messages. The state tourism slogans are categorized and analyzed in terms of USP building and market targeting. Among other findings, five types of slogans emerge: (1) buy us because we are good; (2) common attribute-based; (3) unique attribute-focused; (4) exclusive appeal; and (5) average Joe. Results also show that almost all the states emphasize nature and culture/heritage, and that many of the states' official websites do not maximize their utility as marketing tools due to lack of consistency among the website elements.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Internet branding, a hybrid mix of art and science

Electronic commerce has a far-reaching impact on the way travel is marketed, distributed, sold, and delivered (Williams & Palmer, 1999; Pollack, 1995). Because of its role in information provision, the Internet is becoming increasingly important as a destination-marketing tool for tourism organizations, including state tourism offices and national tourist organizations

(NTOs). If “information is the lifeblood of the tourism industry,” (Sheldon, 1993, p. 633), the Internet is the heart that circulates that lifeblood. The US State official travel website has been recognized not only as a key promotional vehicle but also as a major distribution channel for domestic and international tourism, potentially able to reach the 167 million Internet users in America (Nielsen/Netratings Hot off the Net, 2001), as well as the 400 million worldwide (Computer Industry Almanac, 2001). In 2000, Americans made purchases of travel and travel-related goods and services over the Internet worth more than \$13 billion (TIA, 2001).

The Travel Industry Association (TIA, 2003) estimates that 95.8 million Americans over the age of 18 with Internet access are part of the travel market (see Fig. 1). Of these, more than 64.1 million people have used the Internet to make plans for travel. According to

[☆]These fifty websites were visited during the month of November 2000 from the links of URL: <http://www.july15.com/julia/statetravel.htm>.

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +82 53 580 6401.
E-mail address: ghlee@kmu.ac.kr (G. Lee).

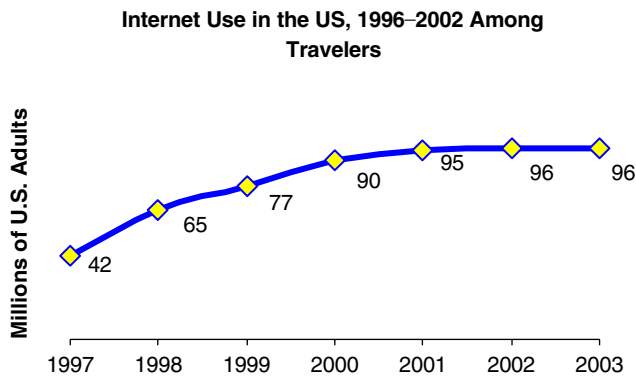


Fig. 1. Online travel market growth.

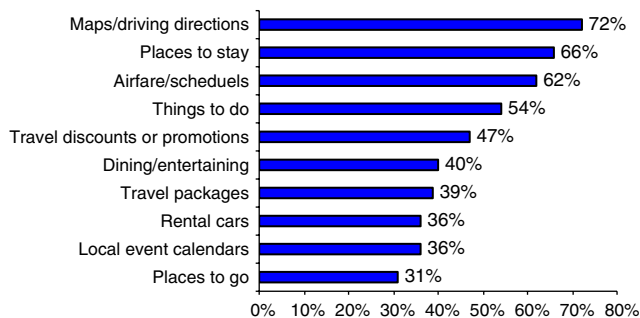


Fig. 2. On-line pleasure trip planning activities (Source: Travel Industry Association of America (TIA)).

the TIA's (2003) report on travelers' use of the Internet, destination-related searching, including searching for things to do, dining, entertainment, and local events, gained more popularity in 2003 than in previous years. Destination-related online planning is steadily becoming more popular each year (Fig. 2). The report also shows that destination websites are very popular with online travel planners, a vast 55% among 64.1 million online travelers who used the Internet to make travel plans, along with the most popular websites, such as online travel agencies (e.g., Microsoft Expedia, Travelocity, or Priceline), and search engine sites. In addition, 31% of those 64.1 million online travel planners reported that they use the Internet to search for ideas on what destinations to visit (TIA, 2003).

Accordingly, destination-marketing organizations (DMOs) are increasingly interested in exploiting the Internet's unique features, such as graphical interactivity with the audience, low-cost accessibility world-wide, hyperlinks with other travel suppliers and design flexibility, to attract more tourists and better position their state in the intense competition for visitors. An important way in which the DMOs can use the Internet to serve their branding needs is by selecting a consistent brand element mix to identify and distinguish a destination through positive image building (Cai,

2002). Branding has arguably become one of the most important marketing strategies, functioning as "the glue that holds the broad range of marketing factions together" (Ries & Ries, 1998, p. 2). Compared with more traditional information sources such as pamphlets, print, and media, the Internet can be an extremely effective tool for destination branding in terms of both cost effectiveness and market penetration. Via its unique merits of flexibility, interactivity, and cross-selling among complementary products within a destination, the Internet can facilitate and strengthen the process of destination brand building (Williams & Palmer, 1999).

However, branding as a concept is still in its infancy in the hospitality and tourism industry (Morrison, 2002). While brands are found in many categories of tourism products and services and permeate almost all facets of tourist activities, branding is practiced less vigorously in destination marketing than in general marketing fields (Cai, 2002). It is therefore not surprising that most of the branding literature focuses on packaged goods (Morgan & Pritchard, 1999, p. 213) and research on destination branding is a relatively recent endeavor (Gnoth, 1998).

Some evidence supports the theoretical argument for the Internet's great potential in this area. For example, Williams and Palmer (1999) note that the Brand West Australia (Brand WA) marketing campaign has created a strong destination brand, which is being reinforced through an electronic distribution strategy, mainly by way of the Internet. They further conclude that in making Brand WA even stronger, the Western Australia Tourism Commission (WATC) needs to realize the synergistic potential of electronic commerce in brand building.

The need for more research is critical in light of the observed difficulties in implementing destination branding. Williams and Palmer (1999) find that the diversity and complexity of tourism products makes information provision difficult for both national and regional tourism organizations. Consequently, branding a region, a country, or a state can be very difficult and often cumbersome. Research needed to address this problem is hampered by the lack of a conceptual framework. As Morgan and Pritchard (1999) pointed out, there is a research gap in destination branding in terms of how its principles are translated into practical marketing activity and, further, in how to conceptualize the empirical analysis of the application of branding to tourism products. A well-recognized conceptual framework that facilitates empirical research is still hard to identify.

1.2. Objectives

This study expands an existing framework by Richardson and Cohen (1993) and applies it in the context of Internet destination branding by analyzing

the 50 US state tourism organizations' official websites with respect to their image building and branding. Particular attention is paid to the state tourism slogan, a focal point of state tourism brand building due to its significant contribution creating awareness and image building in destination branding. The analysis is carried out with these steps:

1. Categorize each state's destination slogan as presented on its official website;
2. Evaluate the slogans in light of establishing the state's unique selling propositions (USPs) and market targeting; and
3. Analyze the graphic images and verbal expressions on each state's website, incorporated with the slogan into the state's image building and destination branding.

2. Related literature

2.1. Branding tourism destinations

According to the American Marketing Association (AMA), a brand is "a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or combination of these elements that is intended to identify the goods or services of a seller and differentiate them from competitors to influence the behavior of the consumer." Keller (2003, p. 175) defines brand elements as "those trademarkable devices that service to identify and differentiate the brand, of which the main elements are brand names, URLs, logos, symbols, characters, spokespeople, slogans, jingles, packages, and signage." These elements independently and/or collectively function as brand equity creators (referred to in the current study as "brand builders"). While "branding" is often used interchangeably with "positioning", Plog (2004, p. 130) distinguishes between the two: "Branding applies a label or sort phrase to the positioning concept that conveys the essence of the positioning platform, quickly and easily, making the benefits easy to understand and memorable." In this study, Plog's distinction between branding and positioning is adopted so that branding is viewed as a strategic goal of destination marketing and positioning as a precedent step toward the completion of destination branding.

A branding strategy is developed for "encouraging awareness and establishing perceptions of quality and favorable associations" (Henderson, 2000, p. 37). In fact, branding is considered by many marketing researchers to be one of the most powerful strategies for market positioning, making the product stand out from its competition in the minds of existing and prospective customers in terms of benefits and promises (Crawford-Welch, 1998). One way in which it accomplishes this is

by its uniting role in building image towards a consistent and strong destination identity (Cai, 2002).

For these reasons, a strong brand is essential, as emphasized by Plog (2004):

A good branding statement helps establish an identity for a product or service to help consumers call to mind its essential qualities and its position in the marketplace. Repetition of the phrase in each ad and collateral materials reinforces the brand image and builds strong brand equity. Without good branding, even the best positioning strategies can fail (p. 130).

What gives a brand strength is cohesiveness among the brand elements; i.e. they must consistently support a clear and distinctive theme (Keller, 2003). Keller (2003) concludes that a successful branding strategy blends all the branding elements in a unique way to give the customer a strong and positive perception (*image*) of the product/service.

These arguments apply equally to destination marketing. The image of a destination is created through pictorial components of promotional material (e.g., brochures, websites, and pamphlets) and verbal expressions such as slogans and messages. The image plays a vital role in branding the destination. Destinations with a positive and clear image enjoy stronger market positioning than those without (Cai, 2002).

2.2. Image as a pivot in destination branding

The study of image began in the early 1960s in the field of retailing, based on theory derived from the Wharton Studies (Fisk, 1961). Fisk (1961) outlined a conceptual model to measure the influence of image based on its six dimensions relevant to consumer patronage. In tourism studies, empirical research investigating destination image began in the 1970s with Levens' (1972) study of visitors' images of eight Mediterranean countries. Soon afterward Hunt (1975) analyzed the images of four states in the US, and Riley and Palmer (1975) compared the images of British and European resorts.

More recently, the relationship between destination image and behaviors has become an area of greater emphasis. A number of empirical studies demonstrate a clear relationship between positive perception of destinations and travelers' destination choices (Lee, O'Leary, & Hong, 2002; Lee, 2001; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Martin & Baloglu, 1993; Bojanic, 1991; Gartner, 1989; Tourism Canada, 1989; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Pearce, 1982; Goodrich, 1978; Crompton, 1977; Hunt, 1974, 1975; Mayo 1973). For example, introducing the Fishbein-type choice-attribute model to tourism research, Goodrich (1978, p. 6) finds a strong and direct association between respondents' preference for a vacation destination and the perception of the destination.

He concludes, “The more favorable the perception of a given destination, the more preferred that destination tends to be.” Similarly, Lee et al. (2002) find overall destination image to exert a stronger influence on destination choice than other behavioral and socio-demographic factors. In another study, Lee (2001) found that the destination image is a significant precedent to destination loyalty. As Bojanic (1991) posits, tourist preferences for destinations largely depend on the positive perceptions future visitors possess of the destination.

Brand image is a key component in the formation of a clear and recognizable brand identity in the market (Williams & Palmer, 1999). However, the concept of image has thus far not been comprehensively examined in relation to destination branding. While certain brand elements such as logos and slogans have been discussed in tourism research, none has been examined in light of its unifying role in the construction of an image that contributes to a consistent and strong destination identity. The present study aims to close this gap.

2.3. State tourism slogans

Destination products’ personalities and characters can be summarized in the destination image, which plays a pivotal role in destination branding. Projecting the image of the destination brand by careful selection and tactical utilization of an effective slogan is essential for a destination marketer. According to Keller (2003, p. 204), slogans are short phrases that communicate descriptive or persuasive information about the brand. They are believed to play a crucial role in advertising (Richardson & Cohen, 1993) and have been widely used as part of advertising campaigns for various products. Slogans interplay effectively with other brand builders, such as names, logos, packaging, and designs. Because they provide an easy “hook” or “handle” to help consumers grasp the essence of the campaign, Keller (2003) finds them to be an indispensable means of summarizing and translating the claim of a marketing program.

Marketing researchers (Plog, 2004; Keller, 2003; Morrison, Taylor, & Douglas, in press) repeatedly emphasize the need for constant use of a theme (branding) once unique and thematically coherent benefits to sell are identified (positioning) for successful destination marketing. Moriarity (1991) attributes slogans with the ability to deliver a constant theme about touristic destinations, as “battle cries” of advertising campaigns. She further emphasizes that in order to play this role successfully slogans must reflect the character or personality of the product. Accordingly, the researchers of this paper identify tourism slogans as one of the best ways to communicate and deliver the theme and the state tourism image to the traveling public.

Among the easiest brand elements to manage with a high level of flexibility at relatively low cost (Plog, 2004), tourism slogans are important brand builders, especially in raising brand awareness and building the image of a tourism destination. As a useful *hook*, a powerful slogan contributes to brand equity in multiple ways: after achieving a high level of penetration, an effective slogan may serve as a reminder of the brand for which it has created awareness and recognition. In this way the slogan provides frequent calls for customers’ attention and repetition, which reinforces the *brand image* and thus builds strong brand equity (Plog, 2004).

A state’s promotional campaign for tourism is typically organized around a central advertising theme or slogan (Hawes, Taylor, & Hampe, 1991; Richardson & Cohen, 1993). Serving as a central advertising theme, an effective slogan should deliver a message about the USP of a product to the market, as originally suggested by Reeves (1961). Ultimately, a good state tourism slogan should express the USP of the destination brand pleasantly and effectively to the audience.

Despite the importance of tourism slogans, relatively little research has been devoted to them. Important exceptions are the ground-breaking empirical studies by Richardson and Cohen (1993) and Klenosky and Gitelson (1997). Richardson and Cohen conducted a content analysis of the tourism slogans of 46 US states with regard to four USP criteria and categorized each as being at one of seven levels. Level 0 indicated that the slogan delivered no proposition, level 1 a proposition equivalent to the ‘buy our product category’ used in this study, level 2 a proposition equivalent to ‘our product is good’, level 3 (3a and b subcategories) a proposition giving a product attribute but not unique, and level 4 (4a and b subcategories) a USP (Richardson and Cohen, 1993). They concluded that the slogans of only five states reached level 4 and thus met the USP criteria. The vast majority of the slogans in their study failed to make a meaningful claim or made a claim that was not unique.

Another analysis of state tourism slogans is by Klenosky and Gitelson (1997). By means of telephone interviews with a national sample of 260 US travel agency managers, they examined those managers’ perception about state tourism slogans. Results indicated that New York’s “I ♥ NY” and Florida’s “When You Need it Bad, We Got It Good” were the favorites of the highest number of interviewees, at 26% and 7% of all the respondents, respectively. The researchers then followed up with a content analysis of the characteristics of the slogans as reported by the same travel agency managers. The characteristics of effective slogans cited by the respondents referred to the slogan itself; 17% mentioned “easy to remember”, 6.8% “accurately conveying/describing the state”, 5.4% “appealing to the right market” 4.9% “clever/amusing”, and 3.9% “simple”. The researchers concluded that the success of

a tourism slogan as a key component of marketing campaign hinges upon its ability to create awareness, interest, and liking and to secure a desired image and its memorability.

These two studies, especially the first, have laid an analytical foundation for the current study. Compared to branding packaged goods and other more tangible types of services, destination branding is more difficult because tourism consumption as a holistic experience is derived from a bundle of intangible benefits. Furthermore, destinations can generally be promoted based on more than a single benefit or attribute. To cope with the difficulty inherent in tourism destination branding, several researchers (e.g., Richardson & Cohen, 1993; Plog, 2004) have recommended the USP approach, as suggested by Reeves (1961), which is discussed in Section 3.

3. The framework

Destination slogans are centerpieces of marketing campaign and advertising. Slogans are truly a shorthand means to build brand equity (Keller, 2003). To exploit this potential, a state's tourism slogan should successfully deliver its USP. The USP approach to advertising originated from Reeves' (1961) work on advertising. According to Reeves, advertising success has two components: "penetration," measured by consumer recall, and "pull," the advertising effect that induces consumer usage of an advertised product. Furthering Reeve's conceptual frame, Richardson and Cohen (1993) identify four criteria that distinguish a USP from other propositions: (1) it makes statements about products that are substantial enough to be true or false; (2) it makes only one such statement or a few thematically coherent ones; (3) it informs consumers of genuine product benefits; and (4) its claims for benefits are unique (Richardson and Cohen, 1993). This USP approach has been recognized as an "ancient though time-honored axiom" (Kagan, 1989, p. 32) by other researchers (Churchill, 1989; Hemmings, 1990). In fact, Kagan (1989, p. 32) finds the concept of positioning to be little more than a "gussied-up creative repackaging" of the USP approach to advertising.

The USP approach is clearly applicable to tourism branding theory, and may be especially helpful given the difficulty in branding highly symbolic attributes. In his destination brand model, Gnoth (1998) argues that a destination brand contains three levels of attributes: functional, experimental, and symbolic. The more symbolic the brand attributes are, the less tangible they are, and thus the more difficult to portray as unique. To help address this difficulty, the USP approach may not only provide clear criteria for assessing the effectiveness of tourism slogans in terms of brand building but also

suggest a useful guideline for developing and maintaining a destination website for DMOs. To achieve the goal in delivering the USP, the *raison d'être*, tourism slogans must create a coherent theme uniting the bundle of benefits that each state tries to sell to the traveling public, and they communicate effectively with potential visitors of the state. In the present study, the taxonomy for state tourism slogans is a modification of that found in Richardson and Cohen (1993), who classify 46 US state tourism slogans into five levels and seven categories based on the four criteria listed above. The study categorizes the states tourism slogans based on the four USP criteria.

In addition to tourism slogans, the present study also considers other image-building elements, including pictorial and verbal messages and the design of the websites. These elements and the state tourism slogans are analyzed in terms of their coherence and consistency in creating positive brand images and targeting market. Morrison (2003) argues that when building a tourism website, be it commercial or public, incorporating branding throughout the website is critical so that the consumers never forget what site they are visiting. The image conveying what a brand represents on the website preconditions the consumers' expectation for the quality they desire. This study adopts Morrison's website evaluation guideline (2003) as follows.

- The graphic/verbal images are consistent with the slogan.
- The image elements do not contradict each other.
- The text messages reflect the USP delivered by the slogan.
- The target markets are clearly stated.
- The text is clear and readable and the pages are clean and uncluttered.
- The graphics and pictures are effective and aesthetically appealing.
- Pictures are available to reinforce the text content.
- Rich images are used to improve the aesthetics of the site.
- Color is used to enhance the site's visual appeal.
- The site is appealing overall.

4. Methodology

The official website of each state was located through <http://www.july15.com/julia/statetravel.htm>. Because the websites vary in terms of content and format, the analysis focuses on the common directories, such as "trip planner," "destinations/regions," "things to do," "attractions," "festivals," and "governor's message," as applicable. The front page of each website is the most important element in terms of evaluation of overall

impression of the site. The overall approach for the analysis is content analysis, an “observational research method that is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all forms of recorded communications” (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991, p. 243). This approach offers several benefits in consumer research, including unobtrusiveness, a means of assessing environmental variables, and an empirical starting point (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). It also has potential as a companion research method in multi-method studies (Brewer & Hunter, 1989).

In analyzing branding elements and evaluating each site in terms of efficiency in establishing the state’s USPs and market targeting, the thematic points of the content analysis are the slogans and the visual, verbal, and graphic images projected on the states’ websites.

5. Results

Five groups of states emerged as a result of the content analysis. Three states did not have specific slogans at the time of this analysis: Oregon, Alaska, and Louisiana. The other 47 states fell into one of the following categories.

1. Buy us because we are good.
2. Common attribute-based.
3. Unique attribute-focused.
4. Exclusive appeal.
5. Average Joe.

5.1. Buy us because we are good

Sixteen states (about 32%) take a “buy us because we are good” approach. Examples of such broad and vague slogans of this category include “Come be our guest” (IO), “Simply Wonderful” (KA), and “Genuine Nebraska” (NE). These slogans do not identify the brand image or USPs they try to project to the travel public. More examples in this category are: “Sounds good to me” (TE), “Unforgettable” (AL), “Come find Idaho” (ID), “Find yourself here” (CA), “Take a real vacation” (MA), and “A better place to be” (NC).

The graphic and verbal images projected on the websites in this category are diverse in terms of both types and intensity. They tend to use more graphic imagery effects than verbal expressions. For example, the Kansas website shows sunflowers, evoking the state’s nickname, the “Sunflower State.” However, its website does not efficiently reflect the unique appeal of its touristic products, such as the Great Plains, wildlife (birds and tall prairie grass), and rural areas. Another example, Tennessee, uses a moving image of a river with sound effects and a voice-over saying, “Listen, it’s Tennessee.” However, though the audio-visual image

seems appealing, the USP is not delivered clearly from the projected image, nor is the target market specified. On the other hand, even though its slogan has not been efficiently selected (“Genuine Nebraska”), the state website of Nebraska orchestrates the visual components of the brand image with graphics of native culture and wilderness in delivering a USP. These elements make a clear point targeting crowd avoiders and urban escapers. California’s website is an exception in that it has very few graphic/verbal images; it consists mainly of descriptive text. The relative lack of graphic elements is rather surprising because California is a top international and domestic tourism destination (Table 1).

Common to the aforementioned state slogans, is a lack of information on what their states tourism could offer to potential travelers or why they should visit these state. Thus they fail to provide a platform on which to develop a broad array of advertising messages to different audiences, a necessary condition for any good positioning strategy, as Plog points out (2003).

Other states in the first group, including Iowa, Georgia, Indiana, and Illinois, also use relatively few graphic/verbal images in their websites. In most cases, touristic products such as cultural events, historical sites, and natural recreational opportunities are depicted, but these are similar and common to almost every state. The states in this first category focus primarily on cultural-historical attractions and natural attractiveness. Thus, they do not deliver a USP.

5.2. Common attributes based

The second group of states communicates to the travel public through a slogan based on product attributes that are not unique. For example, Missouri, “Where the river runs,” tries to emphasize its beautiful rivers; however, many other states have beautiful rivers as well. Some other examples in this category include Arkansas, “The natural state,” Texas, “It’s like a whole other country,” New Hampshire, “The road less traveled,” and South Carolina, “Smiling faces, beautiful places.” These slogans try to get at the selling points but fail to differentiate their products from others. This category covers another group of 16 states (32%).

As with the first group, the brand-building components of some of the states’ websites in this category do not effectively orchestrate clear targeting. For instance, although the Missouri slogan is “Missouri, Where the river runs,” its website projects prominent city images with verbal descriptions of diversity, proud heritage, music and musicians, and interesting cities. These components failed to project a specific and harmonized brand image, because the website tries to convey too many messages. About one-third of the websites in the second category do rather poorly in orchestrating brand-building components and delivering messages to

Table 1
Analysis of official tourism websites of 50 states in the US: Group 1

Name of states	Slogan	Graphic/verbal image	Targeting market	Selling points -> branding
<i>Group 1: Buy us because we are good</i>				
Iowa	“Come be our guest”	Limited graphics	Midwest vacationers	Culturally rich cities/ authentic American farms/many things to do and see
Kansas	“Simply Wonderful” theme—“Heart of American West”	Sunflowers	Vacation destination— traveling alone/family/ group tours/special interest traveling	Friendly Midwest hospitality/sunflower state/special interest travel opportunity/wild beauty/sports
Nebraska	“Genuine Nebraska”	Peaceful graphic image/ native American dancer	Crowd avoiders/ birdwatcher/urban escapers	Wildlife/birds’ native *Separate wildlife site
Tennessee	“Sounds good to me”	Riverboat passing through river/aquarium with children around “Listen, it’s Tennessee”	Not specified	Authentic mountain music/sunrise above the mountain/individualized itinerary/tailored trip schedule
Georgia	“Georgia on my mind”	Limited graphics	Not specified	Not specified *International assistance-exchange rate
Alabama	“Unforgettable”	Black jazz musician playing music	Not clear	Provided in separated links
California	“Find yourself here”	Limited graphics	*Regional focus	Very descriptive website-decentralized by region or cities
Massachusetts	“Massachusetts, take a real vacation”	Affective wordings such as “feel”, under the star/ swing music, candle light, swan	Not specified (the web was very sophisticated urban image with elaborated wordings	To see and do/travel experience such as local cuisine
Connecticut	“We are full of surprises”	Rowing boat picture	NA	Limited information
North Carolina	“A better place to be”	Wallpaper type of beach image	Weekend market	Heritage/natural beauty
Minnesota	“Explore Minnesota- Take home a story”	Lakes and mountain	Family tourists/fun and education seekers/Fall- breakers	Giant ridge golf/long trails/outdoor activities/ scenic bypass
Indiana	“Enjoy Indiana”	Limited graphics	Getaway weekenders	History/Hoosier people
Illinois	“Right Here Right Now”	Limited graphics	Getaway trip	State of Lincoln/African American heritage/ Hispanic culture/diverse theme trips
Ohio	“A Perfect Getaway”	Fall colors	Family getaways	Wide spectrum of activities; Buckeye state
Idaho	“Come find Idaho”— Come find Idaho and come back to life	Waterfalls/resort	Not specified	Waterfalls/resorts/ski/ ranch/scenic byways
Wyoming	“Like no place on earth”	Natural scenes	Urban dwellers	Natural scenery/friendly people/heritage and value/great nature

Note: Source of information for 50 US states’ Official Tourism Websites: <http://www.july15.com/julia/statetravel.htm>. The analysis was based on the information available as of November, 2000.

*Indicates particularly good or unique features.

a target market. Examples include the sites of Washington, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Arkansas, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania (Table 2).

On the other hand, some websites in this category have effectively developed consistency among brand-

building components. Vermont provides a good example; its slogan and image projection are consistent and harmonious, even though its slogan fails, more or less, to deliver a clear USP. In keeping with its slogan, “Vermont is plain beautiful,” visual and verbal images

Table 2
Analysis of official tourism websites of 50 states in the US: Group 2

Name of states	Slogan	Graphic/verbal image	Targeting market	Selling points -> branding
<i>Group 2: Common attribute-based</i>				
Missouri	Missouri, "Where the river runs"	City image	Family holiday/fun and adventure seekers	State of diversity/proud heritage/music and musicians/cities
Arkansas	"The natural state"	Limited graphics	Family/outdoor escape *Seniors' site	Feel free to do everything/catch your breath/family fun/outdoor activities/natural beauty/star gazing
Vermont	"Vermont is plain beautiful"	Green mountain/farm files/villages/lakes, ponds	Family travelers/package tourists, searching for diverse themes	Small scales/intimacy/peaceful scenery
Oklahoma	"Parks, resorts & golf"	A young camping couple/natural parks	Outdoor recreationists/state park visitors/golfers	Strong outdoor recreation focus/state parks/golf/world class equestrian trail/state park package special (*CEO Membership program)
Mississippi	"The south's warmest welcome"	Sunset in a mountain/nature	Domestic group tourists, International tourists	Golf/casino/Highway 61 tour/Delta blues/beaches/heritage/African American heritage *International site and domestic group tour sites provided
Texas	"It's like a whole other country"	Rodeo/cowboys/wild west graphic image	Tourists seeking 3–5 day vacations and getaway/package tourists	"Wild west Texas adventure"/cultural diversity—"Texas melting pot"/sea, sands, and sights
New Mexico	"Put yourself in a state of enchantment"	A train passing cross mountain	Not clear	Beauty of ancient cultures/rich landscape/nature with deep contrast i.e., mountain and dessert, lake, forest
Washington	"A little trip to the extraordinary"	Limited graphic image	No distinctive message	Not specifically presented
*Nevada	"Home of adventure and entertainment"	Night life-bright lights/natural scenes	Korean and Japanese tourists—try to attract these markets also to nature and outdoor, sports event in conjunction with casino and city tour/domestic city tourists for entertainment (casino) and nature-based tour	Entertainment/night life/casino/hotels/nature/outdoor recreation-ski, fishing/silver state/sports events/bypass/wedding-official tourism offices provide marriage information for the visitors and tourists *Korean/Japanese websites—detailed information in Korean and Japanese languages, also very detailed guidelines against crime and theft

North Dakota	“Discover the spirit” “Begin the adventure”	American Indians and frontiers faces	History/culture oriented tourists	Salient message: visit a land where history never gets old/“Place of American democracy”/“The Faces” festival
Maine	“The Maine attraction”	A light house	Clear target on summer vacationers/youth campers	Marine resources/seafood/natural treasure/summer youth camp/outdoor recreation/culture
Maryland	“So many things to do, so close together”	Limited graphic image	NA	Art/culture/history/sea
Pennsylvania	“Pocket edition of world”	17C Sail boat/verbal image projection — “relaxed,” “unique” and “authentic”	Nature lovers and culture oriented travelers	Hunting/fishing/wildlife observing/unspoiled natural beauty/beer festival/100% pure Pennsylvania
West Virginia	“Wild and wonderful”	Limited graphic image	NA	Web is being improved
New Hampshire	“The road less traveled”	Picture of children	Kids and families/people traveling with children	Tax free shopping/theme parks
*South Carolina	“Smiling faces, beautiful places”	A couple on the beach	Domestic market *Strong international focus: German and Japanese sites	Adventure/climate/theme parks/golf/beach/nature based activities/value and variety

Note: Source of information for 50 US states' Official Tourism Websites: <http://www.july15.com/julia/statetravel.htm>. The analysis was based on the information available as of November, 2000.

*Indicates particularly good or unique features.

of green mountain, farms, small villages, and lakes are presented along with verbal expressions supporting the imagery, including such words as ‘small scale,’ ‘intimacy,’ and ‘peaceful scenery.’ These components, however, do not come together to clearly define target markets. Another good example of integration of brand-building elements is found on North Dakota’s website which, although the slogan does not clearly deliver a USP, exhibits a high level of consistency among the slogan, “Discover the spirit”/“Begin the adventure,” and the other brand-building components. In accordance with the slogan that emphasizes adventure as its tourism product, the site depicts Native American and frontier faces and includes salient verbal messages such as, “Visit a land where history never gets old, and a place of American democracy festival.” These components lead to a clearly defined target market, tourists interested in American history and culture.

5.3. Unique attribute-focused

Slogans in the third group focus on unique product attributes, as in “Great Faces, Great Places” (South Dakota), “Grand Canyon State” (Arizona), “Great Lakes Great Times” (Michigan), “Totally Winteractive” (Colorado), and “Big Sky Country” (Montana). Other states in this category are Kentucky, and Utah, for a

total of seven. Overall, these states’ slogans effectively deliver a USP for their touristic products. Furthermore, their websites define their target markets well and the other components harmonize with the slogans to develop a unique brand for their state’s tourism. For example, Arizona’s “Grand Canyon State” was matched well by the graphic images—a highway crossing the desert and a canyon; the site thus focuses on desert adventure seekers and outdoor recreationists. Websites following a similar strategy are South Dakota, Montana, Kentucky (“Heart of America”), and Michigan (“Great Lakes Great times”). While employing an effective slogan that reflect their USP, these websites fail to maximize the cohesiveness of branding elements, and thus do not successfully create a brand identity in order to zero in on a well-defined market (Table 3).

5.4. Exclusive appeal

Slogans in the fourth category differ from those in the first three in that they make an exclusive appeal. Four states’ slogans fall into this category: “I ♥ NY” (New York), which has successfully evoked emotional attachment to the state since 1977; “The Island of Aloha,” with which Hawaii creates a unique foreign, tropical atmosphere; Wisconsin’s “Just Stay a Little Longer,” which appeals to the audience to increase their

Table 3
Analysis of official tourism websites of 50 states in the US: Group 3

Name of states	Slogan	Graphic/verbal image	Targeting market	Selling points -> branding
<i>Group 3: Unique attribute-focused</i>				
Arizona	“Grand canyon state”	Highway crossing dessert/canyon	Hikers/desert adventure seekers travelers/outdoor recreationists	Outdoor recreation/nature wonders/ old west attractions/dessert adventures-attractions/cacti gardens
Kentucky	“Heart of America”	NA	Not clear	Getaway— mini vacation, long weekend
Michigan	“Great lakes great times”	Lighthouse	Personalized vacation with variety experience	Summer golf capital: Snowmobiling; skiing; culture
Colorado	“Totally winteractive”	Mountains/skiers	Not clear	Snow Ski/Ecotourism sites
Montana	“Big sky country”	Natural scenes	Outdoor recreationist/wildlife watchers/sight-seeing tourists	Ski (rocky ski area)/wildlife watch/ cousin: Big sky-way cooking recipes/ ghost town tour/crystal lake/ canoeing/mountain bicycling
South Dakota	“Great faces, great places”	Great faces and mountains	Family vacationers/fun seekers/ getaway/active outdoor vacationers: “Vacation, it is not virtual, it is reality”	History/Great faces/American Indian culture—history/adventure history
Utah	No official state slogan, a catchphrase instead: “The greatest snow on earth”	Limited graphic imagery except Olympic promotions	Winter Olympic attendees	Ski/rafting/winter Olympic 2002: Salt lake 2002— Emblem “Contrast-Culture-Courage”

Note: Source of information for 50 US states’ Official Tourism Websites: <http://www.july15.com/julia/statetravel.htm>. The analysis was based on the information available as of November, 2000.

* Indicates particularly good or unique features.

stay; and “Virginia is For Lovers,” both persuasive and evoking a special feeling with the romantic phrase, “for lovers.”

New York’s “I ♥ NY” has long been a successful state tourism slogan, and has inspired many souvenirs. The state tourism office maintains a high level of consistency in the use of the slogan. For example, the state’s official website address is www.iloveny.state.ny.us. This provides a good example of how to harmonize the brand-building components with the slogan. The consistency across elements contributes to effective brand building for the state of New York (Table 4).

5.5. Average Joe

Finally, some slogans are characterized by an ambiguity of meaning or an image mismatch. For example, Delaware’s “The First State” is likely to leave the reader wondering what it is first in. Similarly, Rhode Island’s “Ocean Current” is not clearly a slogan, and communicates no clear proposition. The three other slogans in this category are “FLA USA,” and “New Jersey and You, Perfect Together.” Slogans in this category do not refer to a USP. However, this is not to imply that they are necessarily poor slogans; “FLA USA” tries to create a unique message. By matching the sounds of “FLA” and “USA,” it attempts to create a rhyming catchphrase that is easily remembered (Table 5).

6. Conclusions and implications

The current study has made a contribution to web-based destination marketing in conjunction with destination branding strategy in two ways. It has analyzed the 50 US states’ official tourism websites in terms of slogan, visuals, graphics, and verbal expressions, and also the sites’ web-based brand-building systems. Results show that the more clearly the tourism slogan of each state reflects the USP of a brand, the more efficient a message it tends to deliver. Furthermore, the slogans that create a concrete image rather than an abstract or general statement about products and are supported by matching graphical/verbal imagery are highly likely to project a relatively clearer brand image.

There seems to be ample opportunity for improving states’ websites with respect to creating destination brand images. However, many of the websites do not currently maximize their utility as marketing tools due to lack of consistency among their elements. Visual/verbal images to support the slogan are sometimes used too sparingly, or the graphic/verbal images are not consistent with the slogan. Often the target market is ambiguous because a shotgun type of approach (“We offer you all you want”) is frequently taken. Many slogans fail to clearly deliver a USP. A more specific observation is that most of the sites emphasize nature and culture/heritage as their USPs, which causes

Table 4
Analysis of official tourism websites of 50 states in the US: Group 4

Name of States	Slogan	Graphic/verbal image	Targeting market	Selling points -> branding
<i>Group 4: Exclusive appeal</i>				
Hawaii	“Visit the Aloha state”, “The island of Aloha”	Tropical colors/pictures of Hawaiian women	Family vacationers/ honeymooners	Adventure in paradise/ action/adventure opportunities/world-class event/shopping *Decentralized webs
New York	“I ♥ NY”	“Nobody beats New York state!”/ski, family, youth, horseback riding pictures	Domestic tourists from all around the US/ international travelers	Hudson River—America’s identity/rich heritage and diversity/history/romance/ outdoor activities/road trip/family gathering/NYC weekends/waterways
*Wisconsin	“Stay just a little bit longer”	Pictures of little children/ mountains/lots of beautiful nature pictures	Family for nature-based vacations/families with young children/nature- based tourism	Memory/beauty of nature/ wonderful people and wonderful nature/scenic beauty
Virginia	“Virginia is for lovers”	History/beaches/mountain graphic image	Outdoor recreationists/ vacationers/*International tourists-very detailed, well organized international sites in several languages	Beaches/mountains/ mountain trails/history— first English settler

Note: Source of information for 50 US states’ Official Tourism Websites: <http://www.july15.com/julia/statetravel.htm>. The analysis was based on the information available as of November, 2000.

*Indicates particularly good or unique features.

Table 5
Analysis of official tourism websites of 50 states in the US: Group 5

Name of states	Slogan	Graphic/verbal image	Targeting market	Selling points -> branding
<i>Group 5: Average Joe</i>				
Florida	“FLA USA, Visit Florida”	Palm trees on the beaches	For all or not clear	Hospitality/kids fun (Disney)/sophisticated big city tour/nature/cultural attractions/beaches/sugar white sands
New Jersey	“New Jersey and you, perfect together”	Limited graphic image	Getaway weekenders/ family vacationers	Family vacation/getaway/ something for everyone
Rhode Island	“Ocean Current”	Traditional English mansion/English men in costum	Cultural interested	Tradition/English culture/ culture rather than nature
Delaware	“The first state”	Limited graphic image	Geographic target—NY, Washington D.C. Family pleasure vacationers/ overnight stoppers/ getaway weekenders/short stay	Easy access to the one third of the nation’s population/ culture/history/tax free shopping (top 10 shopping place in the U.S.)— value for money
<i>Currently No slogan</i>				
Oregon	NA	Mt. Hood	Japanese travelers*	Japanese website
Alaska	NA	Limited graphic image	NA	Decentralized and descriptive
Louisiana	NA	Limited graphic image	NA	Decentralized and descriptive

Note: Source of information for 50 US states’ Official Tourism Websites: <http://www.july15.com/julia/statetravel.htm>. The analysis was based on the information available as of November, 2000.

*Indicates particularly good or unique features.

these features to no longer be unique. Finally, the majority of state slogans seem to fall into the first three categories.

Based on this analysis, several strategic approaches to destination branding are suggested. First, to maximize the brand-building effect through the Internet, a regional tourism website could be developed based on strategic alliances among states within the same geographic regions. This strategy, known as co-branding, may be most effective for smaller states such as Rhode Island and Delaware, and also for typical by-pass (en-route) states, since these intra-regional sites frequently share similar tourism products. The success of a co-branding strategy hinges largely on a strong regional-scope umbrella brand and sub-brands, simultaneously promoted at an individual state level.

Second, maintaining consistency among the branding elements is critical. The slogan needs to reflect the brand image, a summary of the brand personality of a destination. When the slogan is integrated with the other components, the “battle cry” effect can be maximized. Considering that a core objective of destination branding is “producing a consistent, focused communication strategy” (Hall, 1999, p. 230), a focused communication channel is the *raison d’être* of a state tourism website.

Third, despite the increasing competition among the states for domestic and international travelers alike, the websites show surprisingly limited effort to provide information for internationals. This is especially true for states such as New York, California, Hawaii, and Florida, which are the most popular destinations among international pleasure travelers. It is a central concern for international travelers that they have accurate and sufficient information when they plan their overseas trip, and the Internet is especially effective for distributing this information because it can be accessed anywhere in the world at zero or limited cost. Furthermore, as emphasized in previous research (Um & Crompton, 1990; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Lee et al., 2002), destination image is critical in influencing the destination choice for an overseas trip. However, most sites do not provide enough information to facilitate overseas trip planning or create an image effectively and positively perceived by potential overseas travelers. Exceptions in this regard are the websites of Oregon, Nevada, Virginia, and South Carolina, which provide potential international visitors with considerable information.

In conclusion, there is evidence that the Internet has substantial potential to allow state tourism organizations to build both long- and short-term branding strategies. In addition to the merits of the Internet

described earlier, it has a high level of flexibility. However, most US state tourism websites do not currently maximize the capability of the Internet in brand building. Thus, the issue of branding through the Internet warrants a more aggressive approach. One challenge that the state marketing managers may confront seems to be the heterogeneity of their tourism products in terms of geographical, cultural, and natural diversity within a state. Another dilemma that the state tourism offices typically face is how to maintain political neutrality among diverse municipalities: the regions within a state compete with each other to get a fair amount of exposure, if not a spotlight, in their state tourism promotional materials and websites. This is well evidenced in large tourism host states such as Hawaii, Florida, New York, California, and Illinois (the national top spenders of tourism budgets for websites). Their state tourism organizations seem to decentralize their organizations at a regional level within a state. The decentralization tendency is well reflected in their official websites, which hardly project a uniquely concentrated brand personality.

The main limitations of the current study relate to the method of analysis. Even though content analysis is the most widely adopted method in the majority of the website analyses as reviewed by Morrison et al. (in press), the content analysis conducted in the current study primarily serves as a starting point for more comprehensive empirical research. It should be considered an initial attempt for more comprehensive multi-method studies, which may include focus groups, consumer surveys, Delphi methodology, and interviews with potential travelers who visit the tourism websites. In this way, the important findings of this study can be confirmed and extended.

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