DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Title of the dissertation

Understanding travel promotional narratives: The influence of narrative transportation and skepticism

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

An important challenge for destination management organizations is designing effective methods to create awareness among travelers by means of promoting their travel destination to potential and/or return visitors. In response to this challenge, a growing stream of literature exists which examines travelers' decision-making processes, use of tourism information sources, and general search behavior; the identification of this process illuminates the influential role and overall effectiveness of various travel-related promotional information sources or narratives on travelers' knowledge of and visitation to destinations.

However, an examination and understanding of *how* travelers process promotional travel-related narratives or information sources is lacking in current tourism literature. Moreover, when examined in the context of tourism, promotional narratives have been largely examined by literary and history scholars from a more critical standpoint where, in short, conclusions have often assumed that the narratives examined possess a certain level of persuasive power. Such research lacks a concrete examination and/or measurement of the actual persuasiveness held by the promotional travel narratives examined. In seeking to examine the oft-assumed persuasive power held by promotional travel narratives, this dissertation utilized an online survey format with an embedded experiment and included the adaptation of two established and validated scales: narrative transportation scale (Green and Brock, 2000) and skepticism toward advertising scale (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1988).

The utilization of these scales allowed for an examination of how message cue (travel article, travel brochure, no cue) influenced participants' processing of travel messages; how the format in which promotional travel messages was presented (story versus list) influenced the overall persuasiveness of the information received; how participants' skepticism of travel articles and travel brochures compared; how participants' skepticism toward travel articles and travel brochures influenced their processing of travel narratives; and, how participants' demographic characteristics influenced their narrative processing and their skepticism of travel articles and travel brochures.

Methodology

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the cells of the 3x2 (Message cue: travel article, advertisement, no cue x Presentation format: story or list) between-subjects factorial design. The dissertation incorporated six surveys; each identical except for message cue given (travel article, travel brochure, no cue) and presentation format (story versus list). The six versions were: 1) Travel article message cue (publicity) with story format; 2) Travel article message cue (advertising) with list format; 3) Travel brochure message cue (publicity) with story format; 4) Travel brochure message cue (advertising) with list format; 5) No message cue with story format; and 6) No message cue with list format. Depending upon the survey received, participants were instructed to read an excerpt taken from either a travel article, a travel brochure or to simply read the excerpt on the next page. Participants were then asked to read an excerpt presented in story format or an excerpt presented in a bulleted list format. The list format was created using the information presented in the narrative excerpt. All participants were asked to answer six questions relating to the Transportation scale, eight SKEP statements relating to travel articles, eight SKEP statements relating to travel brochures, and general demographic-related questions. The total usable data sample from the combined six survey groups consisted of 526 completed surveys.

Narrative Transportation Scale: Green and Brock's (2000) Transportation scale was incorporated in order to examine the assumed persuasive power of travel narratives by measuring a narrative's ability to transport readers using both a story format and a list format. Green and Brock's (2000) Transportation scale includes a total of 11 question-items measured on a 7-point scale anchored by *Not at all* to *Very much*; where higher scores represent greater transportation. For the purposes of this dissertation, the Transportation scale was adapted to include a total of six questions, each slightly reworded to include "travel narrative" as the focus (e.g., I could picture myself in the destination described in the travel narrative). Questions 2, 5 and 6, in the scale are reverse coded. In order to assess the ability of a travel narrative (story vs. list format) to transport readers, participants' answers to the six Transportation scale questions were summed, yielding scores ranging from 13-42; where higher scores indicate greater degrees of narrative transportation and thus, greater persuasiveness. When used in its entirety, the Transportation scale has been shown to yield a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.77 (Green, 2004) and 0.72 (Wang & Calder, 2006); in this study, alpha reliability tests yielded a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.812.

Skepticism Toward Advertising Scale: Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1988) SKEP scale was incorporated to measure participants' level of skepticism concerning travel articles and travel brochures as informational sources; providing an examination of the assumed persuasive power held by promotional travel narratives. SKEP consists of nine statements operationalized using a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*; where the higher the score, the higher the skepticism. We incorporated eight of the original SKEP questions and applied the scale twice, once to examine participants' skepticism towards travel brochures and once to examine participants' skepticism towards travel articles as information sources. Wording was manipulated to substitute "advertising" to include either "travel brochures" or "travel articles". This allowed the adapted SKEP scale to measure how participants' level of skepticism towards publicity based messages (e.g., travel articles) versus advertising based messages (e.g., travel brochures) differed. Before answering the two SKEP statement sets, participants were supplied with a definition of both a travel article and a travel brochure. Participants' overall score was computed by summing the eight statement items, yielding scores that ranged from 13-24 for skepticism toward travel articles and 8-40 toward brochures; where higher scores indicated lower degrees of skepticism. When used in its entirety, the scale has shown to yield a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.86 (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, 2000), and 0.825 (Obermiller, Spangenberg & MacLachlan, 2005); for this study, alpha reliability tests yielded a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.916 for SKEP towards travel articles and 0.932 for SKEP towards travel brochures.

Results

Participants ranged between the ages of 45-53 (27.9%) and 54-62 (28.9%), with almost three-quarters of the participants being female (73.2%). Over half of the participants were from the South (58.6%); with the largest majority from South Carolina (18.8%). When asked if they had ever visited Charleston, South Carolina, almost three-quarters answered “yes” (72.8%).

RQ1: How is participants’ degree of narrative transportation influenced by presentation format; message cue; participants’ skepticism towards travel message cue experienced a significantly greater degree of narrative transportation than participants who received the travel brochure cue. Additionally, as participants’ skepticism towards travel articles and travel brochures decreased, participants’ degree of narrative transportation increased.

RQ2: How is participants’ skepticism towards travel articles influenced by presentation format; message cue; and by participants’ demographic characteristics, particularly their travel experience to Charleston, SC, their gender, their age, and their geographic location? Results from multiple t-tests and ANOVAs illustrated that females (versus males) were less skeptical of travel articles. Additionally, participants age 45-62 were shown to be significantly less skeptical of travel articles than participants age 27-35.

RQ3: How is participants’ skepticism towards travel brochures influenced by presentation format; message cue; and by participants’ demographic characteristics, particularly their travel experience to Charleston, SC, their gender, and their age? Results from multiple t-tests and ANOVAs illustrated that an excerpt cued as being from a travel brochure (versus a travel article and control group), obtained significantly higher levels of skepticism towards travel brochure. Additionally, females (versus males) were shown to be less skeptical of travel brochures. And, results suggested that participants age 45-53 were less skeptical of travel articles than participants age 27-35.

RQ4: What is the relationship between participants’ skepticism towards travel brochures compare to participants’ skepticism towards travel articles? A Pearson’s articles; participants’ skepticism towards travel brochures; and by participants’ demographic characteristics, particularly their travel experience to Charleston, SC, their gender, their age, and their geographic location? Results from multiple t-tests and ANOVAs illustrated that participants who received the travel article cue and participants who did not receive a bivariate correlation revealed a significant relationship; suggesting that as participants’ skepticism towards travel brochures increased, participants’ skepticism towards travel articles also increased.

Theoretical conclusions and practical application of the dissertation

This dissertation examined promotional travel narratives and in doing so, provided evidence of the implementation and promise of two consumer behavior scales to the study of travel and tourism. Findings suggested that skepticism plays an important role in determining the persuasive power of travel narrative promotional materials. Specifically, skepticism towards either travel articles or travel brochures was shown to have the ability to negatively influence degree of narrative transportation; perhaps, due to the notion that skepticism towards the promotional sources leads individuals to read the excerpt in a more critical, analytical fashion rather than allowing them to become lost or transported by the excerpt.

Moreover, the dissertation revealed that in comparison to male participants and participants age 27-35, female participants and participants between the ages of 45-62 were shown to be less skeptical towards travel articles and travel brochures, and/or experienced greater degrees of narrative transportation. Overall, findings suggested that age and one's skepticism towards travel articles and travel brochures may negatively effects one's degree of narrative transportation; in turn, having the potential to negatively influence the overall persuasiveness of travel promotional communications. As noted by Bettman and Park (1980) noted, "One must have the ability to process the information, and one must possess the motivation to perform processing" (p. 244). As indicated by the current findings, age and skepticism towards travel articles and/or travel brochures may negatively affect travelers' ability to process information and/or their motivation to process the information. A better understanding of what factors affect travelers' processing of travel promotional communications is of importance to both researchers and practitioners as advancements in the literature are imperative to extend current knowledge surrounding decision-making behavior, information search behavior, and effectiveness of promotional techniques. Moreover, from their critique of gender relations and tourism, Pritchard and Morgan (2000) concluded "That the language and imagery of promotion privileges the male, heterosexual gaze" (p. 884). Taking into account the current dissertation findings and past research supporting the notion that females are often given the task of planning a vacation and collecting travel-related information sources (Fodness, 1992; Mottiar & Quinn, 2004), practitioners designing tourism promotional materials should re-examine their target audience to better meet the needs and interests of female trip planners.

With both processing and perceived skepticism being linked to overall message persuasiveness, an understanding of both is essential in developing effective tourism promotional communications. While much of past research relating to information search and information use examined *what* sources travelers are collecting and using, it

is central that we examine *how* travelers are using these sources and *what* affects travelers' processing of these information sources. Research related to these issues can identify *what* affects the overall persuasiveness of travel-related promotional messages, providing practitioners with the ability to create more effective promotional travel campaigns. Indeed, as the use of social media tools (e.g., YouTube, flickr, Myspace, Facebook, blogs, LinkedIn, etc.), social media optimization methods (SMO), and consumer-generated media (CGM) increase in their use to market and promote destinations, research is required to examine the persuasiveness held by such promotional techniques and the overall effectiveness of such tools at reaching potential and/or return visitors. Furthermore, with the foundation of social media tools, SMO, and CGM built around the use of personal narratives as a means of sharing and promoting information, researchers and practitioners need to better understand the effectiveness of using such narratives as marketing and behavioral tools.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of chapter one

The introduction included a description of the popularity of the tourism industry in the United States and of the continued challenge and need for destination management organizations (DMOs) to design effective communication methods to successfully promote their destination to travelers. The section continued by highlighting the role and overall effectiveness of various travel-related promotional information sources (narratives) on travelers' knowledge of and visitation to destinations by identifying and discussing a sampling of research that has examined travelers' decision-making processes, use of tourism information sources, and general search behaviors. It is noted that while this growing body of research exists, an examination and understanding of how travelers process promotional travel-related narratives or information sources is lacking in current tourism literature. In response, the overall purpose of the dissertation research is shared: to offer a better understanding of not only how travelers process travel-related promotional narratives, but also their perceived level of skepticism towards two popular promotional travel-related information mediums: travel articles and travel brochures. Moreover, it is suggested that the importance of understanding travelers' processing and perceived skepticism of promotional sources resides in the fact that both processing and perceived skepticism have been linked to overall message persuasiveness; and as such, both are essential to developing effective promotional communications. The chapter concluded with a summary of the remaining dissertation chapters.

Abstract of chapter two

This chapter provided a review of literature pertaining to the travel narrative, including the historical use of and importance of the travel narrative; the narrative format and the

persuasiveness of narrative transportation; and skepticism towards advertising and its link to persuasion. Additionally, the chapter included a review of techniques employed to promote the act of travel, including an examination of two popular promotional mediums: travel articles and travel brochures. The chapter concluded noting that while several studies have compared the persuasive effects of advertising and publicity, due to mixed and/or inconclusive findings, the debate continues as to which method of persuasive communication, advertising or publicity, is more effective and thus more persuasive. Moreover, it is highlighted that research is also lacking that examines how travelers process and perceive different types of promotional travel narratives.

Abstract of chapter three

Chapter three provided an overview of the dissertations five goals:

1. To assess the influence of message cue (travel article, travel brochure, no cue) on participants processing of travel messages.
2. To examine *how* the format in which promotional travel messages are presented (story versus list) may influence the overall persuasiveness of the information received.
3. To identify which promotional medium, travel article or travel brochure, participants are less skeptical of, and thus more likely to trust and be persuaded by.
4. To examine the influence of participants' skepticism toward travel articles and travel brochures on their processing of travel narratives.
5. To determine the influence of participants' demographic characteristics on their narrative processing and on their skepticism towards travel articles and travel brochures.

The chapter then continued with a detailed description of the research design, research questions, and hypotheses. A non-technical overview of how the study was conducted, including a description of the study's design, subjects, and variables were presented throughout the chapter.

Abstract of chapter four

This chapter highlighted the findings of the statistical analyses used to address the four research questions. The findings were presented in four sections: general descriptive analyses relating to the overall study and to the sample population based on sociodemographic variables and travel characteristics; a description of the validity and reliability tests that examined each of the scales utilized; a description of how the variables used in data analysis were created; and lastly, the results of the hypothesis testing. Overall, message cue, skepticism towards travel articles, skepticism towards travel brochures, travel experience to Charleston, gender, and age had a significant

influence on participants' skepticism towards travel articles, participants' skepticism towards travel brochures, and/or participants' degree of narrative transportation.

Abstract of chapter five

Chapter five included a discussion of the findings. Overall, the data analysis was shown to reveal several significant findings; each of which highlighted the influential role of experience surrounding the use of promotional travel-related information sources. More specifically, in comparison to male participants and participants age 27-35, female participants and participants between the age of 45-62 were shown to use various travel-related information sources more often for trip planning purposes, possess less skepticism towards travel articles and travel brochures, and/or experience greater degrees of narrative transportation. Overall, it was found that certain demographic characteristics and one's skepticism towards travel articles and travel brochures effects one's degree of narrative transportation; in turn, having the potential to influence the overall persuasiveness of the promotional message.

Abstract of chapter six

The dissertation concluded with a discussion of the implications of the research findings, the limitations associated with the research, suggestions for future research, and concluding remarks regarding the dissertation and its importance to both tourism scholars and practitioners. In short, it is noted that the role and influence of experience in relation to skepticism, narrative transportation, and persuasiveness is not only of importance to the study of tourism and consumer behavior but is also paramount to practitioners. Practitioners should be concerned with seeking to better understand how travelers process and perceive their promotional messages because both processing and perceived skepticism have been linked to overall message persuasiveness; and as such, an understanding of both is essential to developing effective promotional communications. Among the suggestions for future research, the need to examine overall persuasiveness of various types of travel-related narratives, including both traditional (brochures, visitor guides, travel articles) and non-traditional (blogs, podcasts, videos) formats was discussed. Moreover, it was suggested that future studies should seek to compare and contrast the persuasive abilities of travel-related narratives printed and read on paper versus narratives presented and read by way of a computer screen.

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