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Examining the impact of mental imagery visualization on place attachment: Destination marketing perspective

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Purpose of Study

This survey study examines the influence of pre-trip behaviors of first-time visitors on place attachment formation prior to the destination being experienced in person. Specifically, mental imagery processing and involvement will be examined as antecedents of attachment in order to determine if, how and why levels of attachment could be affected before the visit occurs. Additionally, the influence of social media use on mental imagery, involvement and attachment will be observed. It is proposed that understanding what might influence pre-trip attachments will aid destination markets in attracting visitors to their destination by appealing to the pre-trip emotional meanings visitors likely associate with that destination.

Review of Literature

Imagery

Lutz and Lutz (1978) define imagery as “a mental event involving visualization of a concept or relationship” (p. 611). Mental imagery can be seen as a way to process information. According to previous research, generally elicitation of mental imagery can emerge through one of three types of strategies, or external treatment variables: pictorial stimuli (picture or illustration), concrete verbal stimuli, and imagery instructions (providing instructions to form mental pictures) (Miller and Stoica, 2004; Paivio, 1971; Burns, Biswas and Babin, 1993). Lutz and Lutz (1978) further elaborated that the brain may be engaged more fully in the response to an ad when imagery is used in advertising, with a combination of verbal and pictorial information more likely to activate both the left and right hemispheres. According to Lee and Gretzel (In press), the significance of mental imagery is supported by two theories, dual coding theory (Paivio, 1971) and multimedia learning theory (Mayer, 1997). From a dual coding theory perspective, information is best represented and processed when presented using a combination of verbal and nonverbal stimuli. Furthermore, multimedia learning theory posits that content presented in both verbal and pictorial form can result in immersion into that content, in turn making it more meaningful. Mental imagery is an important subject in the realm of consumer research, with multiple studies having looked at imagery in relation to product placement or advertisement since it helps customers’ persuasion process (Lee & Gretzel, in press). It has been

found to positively influence attitudes and increase satisfaction (MacInnis & Price, 1990) and product attitudes (Lee, Gretzel, & Law, 2010; Miller & Stoica, 2003, Rossiter & Percy, 1980). More interestingly, there was research evidence in support of the influence of mental imagery processing on tourists' selection of the destination (MacInnis & Price, 1990; Miller & Stoica, 2003; Oh, Fiore, & Jeung, 2007; Lee et al, 2010; Lee & Gretzel, in press).

Narrative Transportation

Verbal stimuli and instructions to imagine take a narrative form. Recent studies have looked at narratives and how they have the means to evoke mental imagery (Escalas, 2004; Green & Brock, 2000). Narrative is an important means by which individuals can make sense of their experiences. According to Padgett and Allen (1997), narrative is “the primary form through which people communicate and comprehend experience” (p. 56), and as Wiles, Rosenberg, and Kearns (2005) state, “narratives reflect, communicate and shape the world and our understanding of it” (p. 90). Narratives, through the form of consumer stories, can result in potential visitors imagining themselves experiencing a destination, and hence can be used to effectively promote a destination and influence decision-making (Tussyadiah, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2011).

Involvement

The concept of involvement has been extensively used in consumer behavior research and more recently applied to tourist consumers' choice behavior (Cai, Feng, & Breiter, 2004; Huang, Chou, & Lin, 2010). Involvement can be defined as a state of motivation, arousal or interest (Havitz & Dimanche, 1997), and has been empirically measured under the terms low, high, enduring, situation, and emotional among others (Havitz & Dimanche, 1990; Havitz & Howard, 1995; Laurent & Kapferer, 1985). Muehling, Laczniak, and Stotlman (1991) highlighted research which suggested ad perceptions, brand perceptions and brand attitudes can vary depending on level of involvement. They found involvement to have a moderating effect on brand attitude formation processes, suggesting that ad message involvement could be entrenched in a person's motivations and abilities to process information from an ad. Celsi and Olson's (1988) study looked to explain the role of involvement in attention and comprehension processes. They did so through a model which identified individual differences and situational factors that together determined the level of involvement experienced by consumers. They viewed perceived personal relevance as the indispensable characteristic of involvement and suggested that consumers will experience greater feelings of involvement when product characteristics are associated with personal goals and values. McIntyre (1989) was one of the first to examine involvement in a recreation context. McIntyre discussed personal meaning of participation (commitment and involvement) as being represented by the concept of enduring involvement. Cai et al. found level of involvement to have a positive impact on ad message processing in travel blogs.

Place Attachment

Meanings of a place can be captured by how attached an individual is to that place (Williams, Patterson & Roggenbuck, 1992). Place attachment is a multi-dimensional concept that can be understood as a bond or link that exists between people and places and are generally understood to be formed after an individual has experienced a place (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). While several studies have explored place attachment in a recreation context (Bricker &

Kerstetter, 2000; Moore & Graefe, 1994; Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989), this concept has only recently been applied to a tourism context. Lee and Allen (1999) discuss the importance of this research in capturing the emotional meaning that tourists associate with the places they visit and experience, and observed tourists may attach symbolic meanings to the destinations they visit. Several studies have suggested a connection between involvement and attachment in a recreation (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000; Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2003; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2003; Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, & Watson, 1992) and tourism context (Hwang, Lee, & Chen, 2005). Overall, these studies suggest that involvement positively influences place attachment.

Social Media

The growth in types, uses, and popularity of social media has been tremendous in recent years, and has become extensively incorporated into tourism. According to Guarente (2010), social media needs to be an integral part of a destinations marketing strategy. While evidence exists showing the importance of social media in tourism, Xiang and Gretzel (2010) identified a lack of existing literature addressing the role of social media in online travel information search. Social media provides a variety of websites that allow consumers to share their experiences in different ways. Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño, and Díaz-Armas (2011) examined how intentions to use social media technologies could impact tourist's trip organization. Gretzel and Yoo's (2008) study found travel reviews are used to inform accommodation decisions, narrow down choices, get inspired at the beginning of a trip and confirm decisions, but not so much to inform decisions during a trip. Reviews helped participants increase their confidence and help reduce risk through allowing them to image what the destination will be like. The current study aims to further explore the influence of social media by examining how uses of various forms of social media affect mental imagery processing, involvement and attachment.

Proposed Research Methods

A survey approach is the preferred type of data collection procedure as it is cost and time effective, and can be administered to a large number of individuals in a short time. Data will be collected during the 2012 summer. For the purpose of this study, the population is first time visitors who have not yet had a chance to form an attachment through experiencing the destination firsthand. Participants for this study will be selected online via multiple communication channels including TripAdvisor, Facebook, and other travel blogs. The data will be gathered via an online self-administered questionnaire

A web-based experiment will be designed to explore the influence of mental imagery on place attachment. This web-based experiment will involve a 2 (narrative story vs. descriptive text) X 2 (video vs. no video) full factorial between-subjects design. There will be a total of four experimental conditions, including a narrative condition consisting of a story about the destination featuring a character and plot, descriptive condition including factual details about the destination, video featuring a short clip of sites and attractions throughout the destination, or no video. The questionnaire employed will include Likert-scales to measure mental imagery, involvement and place attachment modified from previous research.

Expected Outcome

Based on a review of literature, participants presented with a narrative story and video are expected to experience greater mental imagery. Participants who experience greater mental imagery are expected to be more involved, with higher involvement leading to higher levels of attachment. In addition, participants with higher use levels of social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook and Flickr prior to their visit are expected to experience higher levels of mental imagery, involvement and place attachment.

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