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Influence of Gender and Age on the Processing of Travel Narratives

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this study was to investigate processing as well as perceived skepticism towards tourism persuasive communications. The importance of understanding processing and perceived skepticism resides in the fact that both have been linked to overall message persuasiveness; and as such, both are essential to developing and implementing effective travel promotional communications. Moreover, extant research suggests that general persuasability may differ depending upon such demographic characteristics as gender and age. Therefore, this study sought to examine if participants differed based on their demographic characteristics—gender and age—in (1) the degree to which participants’ were able to be transported by a narrative (i.e. process), and (2) participants’ level of perceived skepticism concerning travel articles and travel brochures. Overall, data analysis revealed several significant findings, indicating that age had a significant influence on participants’ skepticism towards travel articles and participants’ skepticism towards travel brochures. Additionally, gender was shown to have a significant influence on participants’ degree of narrative transportation.

INTRODUCTION
Seeking to create awareness, improve image, and/or persuade individuals to visit their destination, DMO’s rely on the use of such persuasive communication as advertising and publicity. An example of the use of advertising would be travel brochures, while an example of publicity would be travel articles. While research exists which examines the use of tourism promotional communications (Andereck, 2005; Dann, 1999; Loda, Norman, & Backman, 2005), an investigation of how travelers process such promotional communications is lacking. In response, this study sought to investigate processing as well as perceived skepticism towards tourism persuasive communications. The importance of understanding processing and perceived skepticism resides in the fact that both have been linked to perceived message persuasiveness; and as such, both are essential to developing and implementing effective travel promotional communications. Moreover, extant research suggests that general persuasability may differ depending upon such demographic characteristics as gender and age. Specifically, the way in which males and females process narratives has been shown to differ (Meyers-Levy, 1989; Meyers-Levy and Maheeswaran, 1991). Therefore, considering that demographic characteristics may influence general persuasability and overall use of promotional communications, this study sought to examine if participants differed based on their demographic characteristics—gender and age—in (1) the degree to which participants’
were able to be transported by a narrative (i.e. process), and (2) participants’ level of perceived skepticism concerning travel articles and travel brochures. To do so, it incorporated Green and Brock’s (2000) Transportation scale and Obermiller and Spangenberg’s (1988) Skepticism Toward Advertising scale (SKEP). Overall, this study sought to not only address a gap in tourism literature, but also to apply theories related to marketing and consumer behavior to travel and tourism while providing information to practitioners regarding processing of and general persuasiveness of travel promotional communications.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

The study population included individuals who had contacted the Charleston (South Carolina) Area Convention and Visitors Bureau (CACVB) and had requested to receive at least one of six CACVB monthly e-newsletters. 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 study 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, and eight SKEP statements relating to travel brochures. 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. In this study, the Transportation scale was adapted to include a total of six questions, each slightly re-worded 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 .77 (Green, 2004) and .72 (Wang & Calder, 2006); in this study, alpha reliability tests yielded a Cronbach’s Alpha score of .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 to 24 for skepticism toward travel articles and 8 to 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 .86 (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998, 2000), and .825 (Obermiller, Spangenberg & MacLachlan, 2005); for this study, alpha reliability tests yielded a Cronbach’s Alpha score of .916 for SKEP towards travel articles and .932 for SKEP towards travel brochures.

FINDINGS

Participants ranged between the ages of 45-53 (27.9%) and 54-62 (28.9%). Almost three-quarters of the participants were female (73.2%).

How is participants’ degree of narrative transportation influenced by participants’ gender? T-test analysis illustrated that females (M=33.49, SD=5.94) and males [M=32.89, SD=5.15; t(524)=1.06, p=.29] did not differ significantly in their degree of narrative transportation.

How is participants’ degree of narrative transportation influenced by participants’ age? In examining the influence of age, participants were divided into seven groups according to age (Group 1: 18-26; Group 2: 27-35; Group 3: 36-44; Group 4: 45-54; Group 5: 54-62; Group 6: 63-71; Group 7: 72-80). ANOVA results indicated a statistically significant difference in narrative transportation scores for the seven age groups [F(6, 519)=4.2; p<.000]. Post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for participants age 27-35 (M=30.89; SD=6.41) were significantly different from participants age 45-53 (M=33.91; SD=5.73), age 54-62 (M=33.76; SD=5.30), and age 63-71 (M=34.81; SD=5.14). Participants age 18-26 (M=32.52; SD=4.49), age 36-44 (M=32.74; SD=6.06), and age 72-80 (M=36.86; SD=3.44) did not differ significantly from the other age groups. These results suggest that participants age 45-71 experienced significantly greater degree of narrative transportation than participants age 27-35; suggesting that for these age groups (45-71), their degree of narrative transportation significantly increases as their age increases.

How is participants’ skepticism towards travel articles influenced by participants’ gender? T-test analysis illustrated a statistically significant decrease in participants skepticism towards travel articles mean scores from females (M=30.14; SD=4.97; to males [M=28.75;
These results suggest that male participants were more skeptical of travel articles than female participants.

**How is participants’ skepticism towards travel articles influenced by participants’ age?** In examining the influence of age, participants were divided into seven groups according to age (Group 1: 18-26; Group 2: 27-35; Group 3: 36-44; Group 4: 45-54; Group 5: 54-62; Group 6: 63-71; Group 7: 72-80). ANOVA results indicated a statistically significant difference in skepticism towards travel articles mean scores for the seven age groups \[F(6, 519)=2.8; \ p=.011\]. Post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for participants age 27-35 (M=28.03; SD=5.27) were significantly different from participants age 45-53 (M=30.74; SD=4.81) and age 54-62 (M=30.20; SD=5.00). Participants age 18-26 (M=29.22; SD=4.09), age 36-44 (M=29.22; SD=4.94), 63-71 (M=29.44; SD=6.48), and age 72-80 (M=29.43; SD=6.32) did not differ significantly from the other age groups. These results suggest that participants age 45-62 were significantly less skeptical of travel articles than participants age 27-35, suggesting that for these age groups (45-62), skepticism towards travel articles significantly decreased as age increased.

**How is participants’ skepticism towards travel brochures influenced by participants’ gender?** T-test analysis illustrated a statistically significant difference in participants’ skepticism towards travel brochures mean scores from females (M=28.56; SD=5.72) compared to males (M=27.01; SD=5.61; \[t(524)=2.78; \ p=.006\]). These results suggest that male participants were significantly more skeptical of travel brochures than female participants.

**How is participants’ skepticism towards travel brochures influenced by participants’ age?** In examining the influence of age, participants were divided into seven groups according to age (Group 1: 18-26; Group 2: 27-35; Group 3: 36-44; Group 4: 45-54; Group 5: 54-62; Group 6: 63-71; Group 7: 72-80). ANOVA results indicated a statistically significant difference in skepticism towards travel brochures mean scores for the seven age groups \[F(6, 519)=2.18; \ p=.044\]. Post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for participants age 27-35 (M=26.81; SD=5.67) was significantly different from participants age 45-53 (M=29.24; SD=5.47). Participants age 18-26 (M=27.61; SD=5.36), age 36-44 (M=27.22; SD=5.30), age 54-62 (M=28.35; SD=5.73), 63-71 (M=27.65; SD=6.79), and age 72-80 (M=29.86; SD=4.78) did not differ significantly from the other age groups. These results suggest that participants age 45-53 were less skeptical of travel brochures than participants age 27-35.

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

This study revealed that in comparison to male participants and participants age 27-35, female participants and participants between the age 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 study’s 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.
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