

Studying the Impacts of Tourism Destination Advertising Using Text, Pictures, and Virtual Worlds

Stacey Szumiak, B.S. Student, and Neha Singh, Ph.D

ABSTRACT:

This senior research study explores the effects of various forms of tourism destination advertising on consumers' travel motivations and purchasing decisions. The study focuses on three forms of media that were used to advertise a particular tourism destination: a written description, a series of pictures, and a virtual experience demonstration conducted through Second Life. Three groups of California Polytechnic University Pomona hospitality management students were each shown a different form of media, and were surveyed about their reactions to the advertisement and also about their prospective travel purchasing decisions. This paper highlights the results of this survey and discusses which form of advertising media is most effective in motivating consumers, in particular hospitality management college students, to make travel purchasing decisions.

KEYWORDS: Tourism destination advertising, virtual worlds

INTRODUCTION:

Many people view travel and tourism as luxurious, relaxing, and as exciting opportunities to experience new cultures, to see new sights, and find adventure. Although traveling can be all of those things for the consumer (traveler), tourism is more than just taking a vacation to an exotic destination-it is also a living and breathing industry that is complex and diverse. In order for the tourism industry to flourish and thrive, it needs professionals who make intelligent business and marketing decisions (Gartrell, 1994). Behind all the travel pamphlets, Internet tourism advertisements, and travel package television commercials are individuals who make strategic decisions of how to market tourism destinations in ways that will convince consumers to travel. It is challenging and interesting to seek creative ways to market tourism destinations with appealing advertisements that help persuade consumers to actually travel. For tourism destination marketers, it is imperative to know what forms of advertising should be used to attract and convince consumers to make travel-purchasing decisions.

This study compares three types of tourism advertising media: text, pictures, and virtual tour experience. The purpose is to explore which form is most effective in getting consumers to make tourism-purchasing decisions, based on their involvement with the advertisement (ad), their attitudes toward the ad, and the intention to travel to the destination the ads are marketing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism Destination Marketing

In the case of tourism destination marketing, the destination is the product that is being advertised to prospective travelers. In the eyes of the traveler, tourism destinations are

geographic areas that each have certain attributes and activities. Although travelers may consider activities, lodging, dining, and other elements while planning a vacation, the prospective vacation destination is the focal point of consumer decision-making (Gartrell, 1994). Because choosing the prospective travel destination is such a crucial decision for consumers, tourism marketers must implement advertising strategies that portray destinations in the most attractive and appealing ways.

Tourism destination marketers depend on consumer behavior when creating destination advertisements, as it forms the foundation for strategic decision-making (Ritchie & Goeldner, 1987). Because consumer behavior is complex, tourism destination marketers must use unique and creative tactics to advertise tourism destination products. Van Raai and Francken (1984) created a framework that separates the traveler's experience into what they call a "vacation sequence" of five phases, which include the following:

1. The prospective traveler's decision of whether they wish to or are able to take a vacation;
2. Their search for information about prospective vacation destinations;
3. Making the vacation decision;
4. Planning the vacation and the related activities;
5. The level of consumer satisfaction ultimately received during the vacation experience.

The focus of this study is the second phase of the vacation sequence, during which the prospective tourism consumer acquires information about their vacation destination. How to communicate the right information about a tourism destination through the right form of media are pertinent advertising decisions, as the information that consumers acquire about possible tourism destinations may help sensitize the consumer favorably toward a vacation location, and therefore assist them in choosing a vacation destination (Gartrell, 1994).

Visual Communication

Tourism destinations are frequently marketed as print and text advertising, using media such as magazines, newspapers, and travel brochures. Travel organizations constitute a small, but significant, portion of the total market for magazine advertising (Burke & Resnick, 2000). However, reading a purely text advertisement for a travel destination takes more effort for the consumer to read and process and may not be as effective as using pictures to advertise a tourism destination.

The tourism industry is uniquely visual (MacKay, 1997), and marketing in the tourism industry depends mostly on advertising through visual forms of communication; therefore, tourism destination marketers most commonly use pictures to convey important attributes and features of tourism destinations (Dann, 1996). Picture forms of advertisements not only feature the tourism destination, but also communicate characteristics, concepts, values, and ideas about the destination to the prospective traveler (MacKay, 1997). Presenting pictures of tourism destinations can be a highly effective method of tourism destination advertisement, as pictures are more easily recalled or recognized by consumers than are words (Mac Innis & Price, 1987). Studies also show that out of the five human senses, 60% of human understanding is influenced by sight (Hathaway-Bates, 1993). MacKay (1997) discusses the 'picture superiority effect', which describes that concepts conveyed through pictures are more easily remembered than those presented through words, therefore making picture advertisements 'superior' to other forms of media.

Not only do consumers more easily remember and understand pictures, but their use as advertisements also helps viewers create an emotional disposition towards the

product in the advertisement. The effect of using of pictures in advertisements can be powerful, as consumers tend to assume that there is a direct connection between photography and reality (Messaris, 1997). This consumer assumption that photographs accurately portray reality is particularly important in the realm of tourism; if a prospective traveler perceives a photograph of a tourism destination as beautiful and captivating as the real version, it may pull the consumer to travel to the destination.

Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds are computer-generated environments that allow users to create an avatar (a computer generated version of themselves), and to participate in an alternative reality. The presence of virtual worlds is not a new phenomenon, as countless virtual worlds already exist, and over 10 million virtual world participants use avatars to log on and play virtually simulated role-playing games (Hubbell, 2009). The use of virtual worlds is becoming more complex and multi-faceted, and now is developing a significant presence in the realm of tourism and travel. Virtual environment programs now allow subscribers to log on and travel to computer-generated foreign tourism destinations. With the click of a button, people can use their virtual avatars to experience a simulation of the world's great wonders, like the Niagara Falls, the Sistine Chapel, and Spanish Plaza Mayor.

Second Life is one of these virtual worlds that provide users with the exciting ability to travel and view real-life places all over the globe. Launched and released in 2003, Second Life has encouraged previously unimaginable synergies between real and virtual entities (Hubbell, 2009). Second Life is the largest existing virtual environment. Millions of users, in over 150 countries internationally use Second Life, more than any other virtual world, to travel,

explore countless tourism destinations, and interface with people from all over the globe (Linden Lab, 2009). Traveling in virtual platforms like Second Life is an interesting experience, as “avatars within virtual worlds have the possibility of exploring their virtual environment in three dimensions. In many virtual worlds, the basic rules of physics continue to hold, which makes navigation within them very similar to what one is used to in the real world” (Kaplan, 2009).

Visiting tourism destinations in virtual environments can easily become a metaphor for tourism and traveling, because similar to real travel experiences, they can provide relaxation and an escape from reality (Book, 2003). Virtual worlds, such as Second Life, provide users with the ability to take a virtual vacation, without spending a penny or leaving their living rooms (Gross, 2007).

For many people, virtual travel is a substitute for real-life traveling, as millions of Second Life users are taking advantage of the opportunity to become virtual tourists. Second Life is a virtual simulation of reality, and this study explores whether it can be used as an effective means of advertisement to persuade people to travel to their prospective destinations.

Involvement With The Ad

To successfully and effectively convince consumers to make travel-purchasing decisions, it first must be understood how advertisement viewers connect with the advertisement. In the realm of tourism and travel, there is a significant relationship between involvement and tourism destination selection (Josiam, 1999). Involvement with an advertisement is a consumer’s perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values, and interests (Josiam, Smeaton, Clements, 1995). Therefore, marketers must create an advertisement that convinces viewers of their need and interest to visit and travel to a particular destination.

Involvement with the advertisement affects consumers' attitude toward the ad. The more engaged and involved a consumer is with an advertisement, the greater affect it has on consumer attitude (Singh, 2007)

Attitude Towards the Ad

The tourism destination's image in the advertisement has an impact on the attitude of the travel consumer. The more positive feelings the consumer has for a destination, the more likely that destination will be chosen for the vacation destination. Similarly, the more constraints, limitations, or negative perceptions held by a traveler about a destination, the less likely will that travel destination be the final choice for a vacation (Gartrell, 1994). There are two types of consumer attitude towards the advertisement: emotional, and cognitive. The cognitive dimension of Aad consists of the consumer's decided reactions, such as knowledge and personal assessments of the ad. The affective side of Aad includes consumers' emotional reactions and feelings towards the advertisement. (Singh, 2007). Both dimensions of consumer attitude were explored in this study.

METHODOLOGY:

Data was gathered in the form of written and voluntary surveys that were distributed to one hundred and ninety students, all of whom were enrolled in various Hotel and Restaurant Management courses at the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. The sample set of surveyed students was divided into three sections of approximately sixty-five students. Each section viewed a different form of media, which advertised a tourism destination. For this research study, the country of Morocco was the advertised tourism destination, but the

country's name was unmentioned to avoid all connotations and biases. Morocco was selected as the tourism destination because it existed in all three forms of advertisement media.

The three methods of media used as the tourism advertisements were a text description of the destination, a PowerPoint presentation with a compilation of eight photographs of the destination, and a brief tour of the virtually simulated destination, which was conducted in Second Life. Each of the three sections of students viewed one form of media, and thereafter answered survey questions, seeking their perceptions of the tourism destination. Each section viewed the media for one minute, and the respondents were asked to not refer back to the media while answering the survey questions.

The text advertisement described the beautiful natural sights and landscape that Morocco has to offer its visitors. It also highlighted historical landmarks and travel activities that tourists can experience while visiting Morocco.

Figure 1.1 Text advertisement

This country all in all is a fascinating place to visit. It has a medieval spirit and extreme outdoor adventure, coupled with some excellent culinary delights! It is a land rich in natural beauty and unforgettable places that are both fascinating to visit and intriguing to explore. For those who want to immerse themselves in culture and history there are hundreds of mosques, palaces, and historical sites to visit.

The culture is rich in history and the arts and sciences. Throughout the country there is a wide choice of museums which house on display unique collections of glass objects, manuscripts, exquisite carpets, jewelry, pottery and ancient manuscripts. For those whom enjoy live performances, the country has many wonderful theatres that present classic, translated and reworked productions of western classics such as Shakespeare to modern productions of plays that are filled with the country's tradition and folklore.

Equally memorable is the landscape, which is framed by several impressive destinations, which offer outdoor activities such as snow skiing, hiking, climbing, and adventure travel. For travelers wanting the relaxation of seaside towns and beaches, the coast is home to spectacular fishing

villages swimming beaches, and the atmosphere carries a whiff of magic.

If it's mountains you love, the country has them in abundance; the land is custom-built for trekking as you follow quiet mountain trails amid fascinating villages and fields of flowers. Then, suddenly, everything changes. The mountains fissure into precipitous gorges the color of the earth; mud-brick desert turns blood red with the setting sun and the sense that one has stumbled into a fairytale takes hold.

This country is sensory overload at its most intoxicating, from the scents and sounds that permeate air to the astonishing sights of the landscape.

The answer is simple: there is no place on earth quite like it.

The above description of Morocco was passed out in hard copy to each individual student.

The photograph presentation included a compilation of eight photographs taken of the destination, which featured various tourism sights, such as luxurious hotels and great nightlife scenes, as well as the beautiful landscape of beaches and deserts. Each photograph was viewed for approximately 8 seconds.

The Second Life tour took students through a demonstrative experience in the virtually simulated Casablanca, Morocco. Students watched as an avatar walked through the cobblestone streets of Morocco, past a historical building, and to a beautiful waterfall scene. The avatar then led the students into a lounge area, which had a hookah smoking area, where avatars can actually virtually smoke hookah. The one-minute Second Life tour concluded with a view of the virtually simulated Moroccan ocean view.

After viewing each form of media, a survey was then passed to all students, who took the survey based on their perceptions of the advertisement.

The survey tested students' involvement with the advertisement, their cognitive, emotional and overall attitudes toward the ad, as well as their prospective travel purchasing decisions. The students' involvement with the advertisement was measured by a ten item, five-point semantic

differential scale. The items ‘unimportant/important’, ‘boring/interesting’, ‘unexciting/exciting’, ‘means nothing/means a lot’, ‘unappealing/appealing’, ‘ordinary/fascinating’, ‘worthless/valuable’, ‘uninvolving/involving’, ‘useless/useful’, and ‘undesirable/desirable’, were used to test the students’ involvement with the advertisement.

The students’ emotional attitude toward the advertisement was measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The emotions tested were ‘pleased’, ‘stimulated’, ‘angry’, ‘irritated’, ‘good’, ‘depressed’, and ‘calm’. The students’ cognitive attitude towards the advertisement was measured by a four item, five-point semantic differential scale. The items ‘useful/useless’, ‘wise/foolish’, ‘beneficial/unbeneficial’, and ‘effective/ineffective’, were used to test the students’ cognitive attitude toward the advertisement. The students’ overall attitude towards the advertisement was measured through a three item, five-point differential scale. The items ‘like/dislike’, ‘favorable/unfavorable’ and ‘good/bad’ tested students’ overall evaluation of the advertisement.

The students were asked two questions about their prospective travel purchasing decisions. Firstly, “Does the advertisement make you want to travel to the tourism destination?” and secondly, “If money were not an issue, would you actually travel to the tourism destination?”

The final section of the survey asked for general information about the respondent, such as age, gender, class standing, and degree major. It also asked about the respondent’s prior travel behavior, such as previous travel experiences nationally, internationally, and if the student desired to travel internationally. Finally, the survey asked about student’s travel planning behavior, and how often they seek information about travel destinations online or in travel magazines.

FINDINGS

The average scores for the text advertisement were as following; involvement with the ad: 3.80, emotional attitude towards the ad: 3.02, cognitive attitude toward the ad: 2.44, and overall attitude toward the ad: 2.82. 51% of students responded that the text description made them want to travel to the tourism destination. 59% of students reported that if money weren't an issue, they would travel to the tourism destination.

The average scores for the picture advertisement were as following; involvement with the ad: 3.57, emotional attitude towards the ad: 2.85, cognitive attitude toward the ad: 2.39, and overall attitude toward the ad: 2.53. 62% of students responded that the pictures made them want to travel to the tourism destination. 59% of students reported that if money weren't an issue, they would travel to the tourism destination.

The average scores for the Second Life demonstration were as following; involvement with the ad: 3.24, emotional attitude towards the ad: 2.76, cognitive attitude toward the ad: 2.23, and overall attitude toward the ad: 2.22. 18% of students responded that the Second Life demonstration made them want to travel to the tourism destination. 29% of students reported that if money weren't an issue, they would travel to the tourism destination.

Figure 1.2 Average Scores of All 3 Media

Average Scores	Text	Pictures	Second Life
Involvement	3.80	3.57	3.24
Emotional Attitude	3.02	2.85	2.76
Cognitive Attitude	2.44	2.39	2.23

Overall Attitude	2.82	2.53	2.22
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The average score results were unanimous for all four surveyed constructs; the text received the highest average scores in all categories, followed by the pictures, and then Second Life. The student responses illuminated that the text advertisement of the tourism destination was the most effective in helping students comprehend the information presented in the tourism destination advertisement. However, students responded that the pictures were most appealing and convincing when it came to actual purchasing decision-making. The majority of the students said that the pictures made them want to travel to the tourism destination, followed by the text, and then Second Life.

Many students commented that the travel advertisements they find to be most appealing are communicated through several forms of media, such as pictures with descriptions of the photograph. Students also indicated that some of the most interesting advertisements tell a personal story about the tourism destination, either through local inhabitants or previous tourists.

When asked, many students had no reference or prior knowledge of the existence of Second Life. Students commented that the graphics on Second Life were outdated and unrealistic, and that the virtual demonstration reminded them of a computer game, not a tourism destination.

CONCLUSION:

The purpose of tourism destination advertising is to convince consumers to actually travel to particular tourism locations. It is crucial to use the most effective forms of media to advertise tourism destinations in ways that are appealing and attractive to consumers. This study explored

the effects of three types of tourism advertising media: text, pictures, and virtual tour experience, and compared the consumer reactions to the advertisements.

The research gathered from the one hundred and ninety hospitality management college students showed that using purely text advertisements most successfully draw consumer involvement.

The research illuminated that text advertisements of tourism destinations also positively affect consumer attitudes about the destination and sensitize them favorably towards it. When it comes to purchasing decisions, the use of pictures to advertise is the most coercive method of media, and causes consumers to actually desire to visit the destination.

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