

# Virtual experience vs. brochures in the advertisement of scenic spots: How cognitive preferences and order effects influence advertising effects on consumers

Wen-Bin Chiou<sup>a,\*</sup>, Chin-Sheng Wan<sup>b</sup>, Hsin-Yi Lee<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Center for Teacher Education Program, National Sun Yat-Sen University, 70, Lien-Hai Road, Kaohsiung 804, Taiwan, ROC

<sup>b</sup>General Education Center, National Kaohsiung Hospitality College, 1, Sung-Ho Rd., Kaohsiung 812, Taiwan, ROC

<sup>c</sup>Graduate School of Business Administration, National Chiayi University, Chiayi 580, Taiwan, ROC

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## Abstract

Virtual experience has begun to play a significant role in the marketing and promotion for the tourism industry. This article demonstrates that the advertising effects of traditional brochures vs. virtual experience would be contingent on consumers' cognitive preferences. The traditional use of brochures in advertising would be more effective for verbalizers, whereas the virtual experience mode would be more effective for visualizers. Under a hybrid of the two advertising modes, a recency effect was found indicating that the subsequent or more recently experienced advertising mode would generate a greater impact. Moreover, the recency effect of traditional brochures was more apparent for verbalizers, whereas the recency effect of virtual experience was more pronounced for visualizers. The findings provide insights into the contingent use of traditional brochures, the use of virtual experience, and the use of hybrid advertising. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, advertising has been defined as a form of controlled communication that attempts to persuade consumers, using strategies and appeals, to buy or use a particular product or service (Defleur & Dennis, 1996). It is becoming abundantly clear that the media environment into which advertising is placed is changing, and because of this trend, the nature of advertising is changing as well. Many new channels of mass communication were developed during the latter part of the 20th century that exposed the public to an ever-increasing number of mediated messages (Fitzgerald, 1999; Lombard et al., 1997).

Tourism and leisure have become prevalent activities in modern life. With the rapid expansion of the tourism

market, people have used multiple channels to gain travel information. People may have received tour information from relatives, friends, brochures, or travel agents in the past. However, through the progress of media technology in recent years, most consumers can now view the photos and read information about scenic spots through the Internet in order to experience the sights in advance (Klein, 1998). Traditionally, most tourism-oriented industries used brochures to promote travel-related products (Holloway & Plant, 1992; Yamamoto & Gill, 1999), but brochures can only supply short and limited introductions. Direct product experiences have consistently been shown to lead to stronger beliefs and attitudes than advertising (Marks & Kamins, 1988; Smith & Swinyard, 1988). More and more industries (e.g., hotels, exhibitions and travel destinations) now provide virtual experience, such as panoramic views, animation, and interactive photos, so that consumers can get a direct experience without actually being there. Clearly, virtual experience does more for the tourism industry than does just print information; virtual

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\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +886 7 5252000 5884;  
fax: +886 7 5255892.

E-mail addresses: [wbchiou@mail.nsysu.edu.tw](mailto:wbchiou@mail.nsysu.edu.tw) (W.-B. Chiou),  
[won@mail.nkhc.edu.tw](mailto:won@mail.nkhc.edu.tw) (C.-S. Wan), [jennyhylee@gmail.com](mailto:jennyhylee@gmail.com) (H.-Y. Lee).

experience actually gives consumers the chance to get a feel of their travel destinations on the Internet. Therefore, the preferred medium for advertising scenic spots has gradually turned from the traditional brochure to virtual experience (Fang & Lie, 2006).

## 2. Review of literature and hypotheses

### 2.1. Cognitive preference as a moderator

Previous studies on virtual experience have focused mostly on how virtual experience affects consumers (Li, Daugherty, & Biocca, 2001). However, consumer researchers have been increasingly interested in how cognitive personality factors influence various aspects of consumer behavior. One cognitive personality factor in particular, cognitive preference (visualizers vs. verbalizers), has been useful in understanding selected aspects of consumer behavior (Paivio, 1991). Cognitive preference refers to an individual's style of or inclination in information processing, which is closely related to personal preference but not to intellectuality (Riding & Douglas, 1993). In principle, cognitive personality research classifies consumers into two groups: visualizers (consumers who prefer visual information and products that stress the visual, such as membership in a videotape club) or verbalizers (consumers who prefer written or verbal information and products, such as membership in book clubs or audiotape clubs).

To compare the effects of visualizing and verbalizing styles on memory, previous studies have supported the idea that people differ in their predisposition to remember details from verbal or visual information (Riding & Ashmore, 1980; Riding, Burton, Rees, & Sharratt, 1995). Some people use fewer images and rely mostly on verbal material, whereas others remember better from visual material (Riding & Douglas, 1993). Because of the differences in the consumers' cognitive preferences, marketers should consider how cognitive preference moderates the effects of verbal and visual materials, so that they may know what mode of advertising to choose in order to achieve better advertising results. The findings about the moderating effect of consumers' cognitive preferences on advertising effects may provide further insights into the interplay of cognitive preference and advertising mode (virtual experience vs. traditional brochure). More specifically, it was predicted that visualizers, when compared with verbalizers, would be more influenced by virtual experience than by traditional brochures. On the other hand, verbalizers, when compared with visualizers, would be more affected by traditional brochures than by virtual experience.

### 2.2. The order effect and hybrid advertising using both brochures and virtual experience

Researchers in marketing, psychology, and many other disciplines have identified two types of order effects in

belief updating: primacy and recency (Haugtvedt & Wegener, 1994; Hogarth & Einhorn, 1992). Generally, an order effect exists when an outcome, based on a fixed set of phenomena, varies with the order in which the phenomena occur. Primacy is obtained when the relative weight accorded to the first piece of the evidences is the greatest. Recency is obtained when the relative weight accorded to the last piece of the evidences is the greatest.

Previous researchers (Haugtvedt & Wegener, 1994; Hogarth & Einhorn, 1992) have stated that the presentation order of advertising information would affect consumers' information processing. The primacy effect refers to previous information exhibiting greater effect than subsequent information, whereas the recency effect refers to subsequent information generating greater effect than earlier information (Curtis & Duane, 1994). Therefore, when marketers in the tourism industry advertise products by adopting both virtual experience and brochures, they should consider message order effects. Moreover, the order effect would be contingent on consumers' cognitive preferences, under the hypothesis that depicts the interplay of advertising mode and cognitive preference.

The first study generally examined whether the differential advertising effects between virtual experience and traditional brochures would be contingent on consumers' cognitive preferences. The second study, aimed to determine whether the cognitive preferences of consumers would influence the order effects when virtual experience and traditional brochures were used consecutively in advertising scenic spots.

## 3. Experiment 1

### 3.1. Participants and design

In the recruitment of participants, Singh, Lessig, Kim, Gupta, and Hocutt (2000) suggested that the effects of advertising on students and the common masses are similar. Hence, it was appropriate to use college students as participants in this research. In Study 1, the Ping-Tung Indigenous People Cultural Park in Taiwan was used as the advertising target. Respondents were 104 college students who participated in a 2 (cognitive preference: verbalizers vs. visualizers)  $\times$  2 (advertising mode: traditional brochure vs. virtual experience) between-subjects design.

### 3.2. Independent variables

Cognitive preference was treated as a subject variable in this experimental study. The verbal and visual cognitive styles scales (CSS) developed by Kirby, Moore, and Schofield (1988) were not employed in the present research, because this self-report measure is relatively subjective. Participants' cognitive preference was determined by a free recall task that was designed to differentiate their relative advantage in information processing between visual items and verbal items. Participants' recall rate

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