



The contribution of website design to the generation of tourist destination image: The moderating effect of involvement



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The effect of tourist destination website design on destination image is analyzed.
- The destination image is more positive when emotional messages are employed.
- The destination image is more positive when the individual does not feel overloaded.
- The moderating effect of consumer involvement on message type is demonstrated.
- The moderating effect of consumer involvement on overload is demonstrated.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 December 2012

Accepted 3 October 2014

Available online 30 October 2014

Keywords:

Tourist destination image

Website

Information-overload

Involvement

ABSTRACT

The question of how tourist destination image is generated is an issue of significant interest in the tourism management field. The present work analyzes the effect of the design of a tourist destination website, and the effect of the tourist's processing of information, on the destination image that the tourist creates. In order to achieve this objective, an experimental design was carried out, in which a destination website was specially created in order to manipulate message type and information-overload. The results demonstrate that destination image is more positive when emotional messages are employed on the website and when the individual does not experience overload. The work also demonstrates the moderating role of involvement, in the effect of the factors manipulated in the study (message type and information-overload) on tourist destination image. The conclusions reached in this study hold some interesting implications for practitioners working in tourist destination management.

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1. Introduction

International tourism is responsible for a flow of people around the world that, in fewer than 50 years, has grown from 25 million, to 983 million in 2011 (WTO, 2012). Alongside this growth, the Internet has become one of the most important sources of tourism information (Buhalis & Law, 2008). The Internet has become the primary means by which destination marketing organizations communicate with prospective tourists (Hwang, Gretzel, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2006; Morrison, Taylor, & Douglas, 2004) and the most persuasive medium for destination marketing to influence tourists' travel planning (Anderson, 2006; Hwang et al. 2006; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008).

Research in the hospitality and tourism field has demonstrated that website design and Internet marketing features contribute to effective delivery of messages, quality of products and services, and brand image (Bai, Law, & Wen, 2008; Liu, Arnett, & Litecky, 2000; Perdue, 2001).

Persuasive websites are those that can influence the attitudes of website users (Morosan & Fesenmaier, 2007). Websites' influence on product attitudes has been confirmed by empirical research (Lee, Gretzel, & Law, 2010; Macias, 2003). In this regard, creating strong attitudes that are resistant to change is especially important in the context of tourism destinations, about which online information is abundant (Lee & Gretzel, 2012; Xiang, Wöber, & Fesenmaier, 2008).

A website's capacity to persuade can be affected by the characteristics that the firm creates when building the site, such as information quality (Rosen & Purington, 2004), credibility of the source (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008), the brand (Cai, 2002) or the site's capacity to handle transactions (Morosan & Fesenmaier, 2007).

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Furthermore, it should be noted that the image of a tourist destination website that is formed by the consumer may be affected by information-processing, particularly in terms of the possible effect of information-overload. The Internet is known to provoke information-overload and disorientation amongst some users, especially amongst those with little experience of the medium (Ahuja & Webster, 2001). The principal cause of these phenomena is related to the sheer quantity of information available on the Internet (Chen & Wells, 1999). One also has to factor-in the low cost of information-search on the Internet, which stimulates the search for information to a greater degree than do traditional media (Biswas, 2004). In consequence, considering that the amount of information on a given topic may be very high while, at the same time, the user's ability to process that information is limited (Malhotra, 1982; Owen, 1992) the likelihood of the occurrence of information-overload is very high.

The bulk of prior research on tourism websites has discussed communicative processing on destination websites. Two major trends can be observed in previous website studies. One type emphasizes website characteristics (e.g., Cano & Prentice, 1998; Efferson, 2000; Tang & Jang, 2008), and the other investigates how tourists use the websites, and more importantly, how the websites influence their attitudes and travel intentions (e.g., Bonn, Furr, & Susskind, 1999; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2006).

However, there are few works examining tourism in the context of online information-processing that center on integrating the persuasive characteristics of the website that are capable of generating lasting attitudes to the site (Lee & Gretzel, 2012). There are even fewer works that capture the effects of message type and information-overload on the image of destination websites. There is therefore a great practical need from the destination marketing point of view to identify those features of destination websites that can effectively persuade and encourage users to elaborate on the portrayed advertising messages, so as to form a more positive image of a tourist destination.

Nowadays there is a general consensus about the significance of the role played by image in the process of decision-making and choice (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004). The results indicate that destinations with stronger positive images will have a higher probability of being included and chosen in the process of decision-making (Alhemoud & Armstrong, 1996; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993).

The objective of the present work is to understand the effect of the design of a tourist destination website, and the effect of the tourist's processing of information, on the destination image that the tourist creates. More specifically, the work seeks to understand which characteristics of a website (message type, number of attributes and number of alternatives) and of a tourist (greater or lesser involvement) succeed in creating a more positive image of a tourist destination. In order to achieve this objective, an experimental design was carried out, in which a destination website was specially created in order to manipulate message type and information-overload. For the type of message, two treatments were used – one conveying emotion and another conveying no emotion. Information-overload comprised both the number of alternatives from which the tourist could choose, and also the number of attributes of each alternative. Thanks to the experimental design it was possible to test: 1) the effect of message type on the formation of destination image; 2) the effect of information-overload on the formation of destination image; 3) and the moderating effect of the consumer's involvement with the information contained within the website on these relationships.

Although the literature analyzes the effect of information-overload in a general context, analysis of its effect in the online context is less frequently found (e.g. Lee & Lee, 2004). No works have

been identified that focus on tourism, a sector in which the Internet is becoming the primary channel, in which the tourist is faced with a complex product (having to travel, staying in a hotel, probably in a foreign country) and where the emotions that are conveyed via the message have a tremendous influence on tourists' purchasing decisions. What is more, personal characteristics such as the extent of involvement with the information on the website may influence this purchase decision-making process. In short, the present work makes an original contribution in helping to explain how factors relating to the website design (message type and quantity of information), together with characteristics of the tourist (involvement) influence the formation of a tourist destination image.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourist destination image-formation

Tourism has become increasingly dependent on image (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Holidays are intangible products, which are concurrently produced and consumed and therefore cannot be evaluated beforehand (Lewis & Chambers, 2000; Mundt, 2000). Thus, image plays a major role in travel decisions and choice of destinations (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly, & Luk, 2008; Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

Accordingly, the study of destination image has been a focus of tourism research for nearly four decades. While there is a relative abundance of research analyzing the image induced by the tourism industry's promotional materials (e.g., Gartner, 1989; Sönmez & Sirakaya, 2002) only a few of these studies have focused on the Internet (Lepp, Gibson, & Lane, 2011). For example, Choi, Lehto, and Morrison (2007) analyzed tourism websites promoting Macau; Frías, Rodríguez, and Castañeda (2008) found that the internet can have a negative effect on destination image; and Perdue (2001) focused on the effect particular website characteristics may have on destination image.

Thus, there is a need for additional research, especially considering the rate at which the internet is being embraced by destinations around the world. In a study of small developing countries, Mohammed (2004) found that 84% had official government websites. In addition, 35% of the official government websites analyzed were tourism promotion vehicles with a strong emphasis on self-presentation. In other words, their purpose was to induce an image favorable to tourism.

Tourist destinations' aim of creating a favorable image requires analysis of how the tourist processes the information contained within the destination's website. Researchers of consumer behavior have long been trying to identify how consumers process information. Therefore, an understanding of how information-processing works and what variables it is subject to becomes crucial when it comes to determining which formats, means, and arguments are the most persuasive. Hence the need in the present study to consider more general models offered by social psychology literature which precisely describe how information-processing takes place and what variables it is governed by. Among these models, the most noteworthy are the so-called dual models, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) (Chaiken, 1980), or the Motivation and Opportunity as Determinants Model (MODE) (Fazio, 1990), to name but a few. Although all of these have gained wide acceptance, the ELM is perhaps the one that enjoys the greatest popularity.

The ELM enables the researcher to justify the formation of a tourist destination image. Drawing on the model, information-processing is influenced by factors such as motivation and skill, albeit it should be borne in mind that skill is a concept that includes opportunity (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

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