Designing advertising campaigns for destinations with mixed images: Using visitor campaign goal messages to motivate visitors

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ABSTRACT

Promoting a destination challenges tourism managers when potential visitors have mixed images. Extending Koo and Fishbach's (2008) dynamic self-regulation research, this study uses diminishing sensitivity theory and proposes that a destination's goal progress information in advertising messages non-linearly influences tourists' motivation to visit the destination. A sample of 114 potential tourists was assigned randomly to scenarios employing a 2 (goal progress frame: to-date vs. to-go) × 2 (goal progress rate: high vs. low) between-subjects design. The finding supports the proposition that the destination city's campaign goal progress rates moderate goal progress framing's impact on travel attractiveness. Consistent with diminishing sensitivity theory, tourists' motivation to adhere to the campaign goals depends on the distance between the current goal progress and the reference point ("differential goal progress frame effects"). Both tourists' social and personal benefits also mediate the differential goal progress frame effects.

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1. Introduction

Leisure travel enriches and refreshes travelers' repetitive lives. Destination images often influence visitors' evoked set of choices. For example, Mexico's warm climate and lax alcohol consumption laws draw U.S. college students, Hawaii's romantic white sandy beaches and palm trees attract honeymoon couples, and Disney's family-friendly theme parks appeal to parents traveling with young children. People often choose a specific destination because they anticipate pleasant vacation experiences, often influenced by subconscious thinking (see Bargh, 2002).

What happens if visualizing a future experience is difficult due to mixed destination images? For example, New Orleans's unique cuisines, multicultural festivals, and music concerts create a positive destination image. Conversely, Hurricane Katrina news stories featuring destruction and civil unrest or news updates about BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico create negative images still fresh in peoples' minds. How can destination management organizations (DMOs) create effective messages to combat such images? This research shows

how to develop compelling tourism advertising messages using campaign goal progress frame and progress rate to motivate committed travelers.

Dynamic self-regulation theory posits that goal progress frames and commitment certainty influence an individual's motivation to attain a goal (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Koo & Fishbach, 2008). Goal progress refers to an individual's act of moving forward to reduce the gap between one's current and desired state (Carver & Scheier, 1998) and can be framed as achievement or lack of achievement. On the other hand, goal commitment refers to an individual's determination to accomplish a worthwhile goal. Low commitment certainty exists when an individual perceives the goal is not important and the corresponding commitment is ambiguous or low; high commitment certainty exists when the goal is important and commitment is high. Recent evidence suggests that a goal progress frame's influence on an individual's motivation is qualified by commitment certainty to the goal (Koo & Fishbach, 2008). When individuals are certain about their commitment toward the goal, their motivation to pursue the goal increases when the goal progress is framed as a lack of achievement (e.g., 52% to-go), rather than achievement (e.g., 48% to-date). When individuals are uncertain about their goal commitment, the goal progress frame's influence on motivation is reversed. Koo and Fishbach's (2008) findings are intriguing; however, little is known how these results directly apply to situations where the goal progress rate is either considerably high or low. Drawing on diminishing sensitivity theory (e.g., Thaler, 1985), this research proposes that such effects are susceptible to the goal's progress rate. Specifically, this research shows that

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committed tourists' motivation to adhere to the campaign goal is influenced differentially by the gap between the goal progress framed in the message and the reference point ("differential goal progress frame effects").

Further, given the scant attention paid to promotional messages in the tourism literature, this study contributes to the literature by comparing tourists' responses to tourism campaigns addressing goal progress. The current research extends and advances Koo and Fishbach's (2008) findings in three ways. First, this study examines both travelers' social and personal benefits as the underlying processes for which the differential goal progress frame effects operate. Second, the study tests the moderating role of the goal's progress rate for the differential goal progress frame effects. Third, this study looks beyond a one-sided message and examines a two-sided message that contains both positive and negative attributes of destination.

2. Tourism advertising

Measuring advertising effectiveness on visitor behavior challenges tourism managers because advertising messages affect each person differently and the target audience often gets tourism information from multiple sources. Despite difficulties measuring advertising effectiveness, some evidence suggests compelling messages consciously and unconsciously influence trip decisions (e.g., Martin, 2010; Martin & Woodside, 2008). Most tourism advertising studies examine promotional strategies that destination management organizations (DMOs) implement (e.g., Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica, & O'Leary, 2006; Loda, Coleman, & Backman, 2010). The major tourism advertising themes include advertising conversion, word and image effects, and web-based delivery. DMOs tend to rely on advertising conversion studies to estimate a promotion's effectiveness (Woodside & Dubelaar, 2003). Advertising conversion studies estimate the number of people requesting free information advertised (e.g., brochures) that become buyers or visitors. Kim, Hwang, and Fesenmaier (2005) conclude strong linkages between destination top-of-mind awareness, advertising awareness, requests for information, and the likelihood of visiting the destination. A second theme examines advertising's messages and their effect on target audiences. Travel decisions are emotional decisions based on needs fulfillment. Tourism marketing's effectiveness depends on understanding customers' motivations (Fodness, 1994). To appeal to travelers' needs, effective advertising must provide both imagery and information (Goossens, 2000).

Finding the right balance is difficult because trip decisions require both high involvement and emotionally charged decisions. Several researchers examine the balance between utilitarian information and hedonistic imagery (MacKay & Smith, 2006; Wang, Chou, Su, & Tsai, 2007). This balance varies depending on target audiences. Comparing text versus picture formats, MacKay and Smith (2006) conclude that age affects how the former is processed. Each destination also offers different perceived benefits to tourists. Success depends on correctly identifying and promoting the destination's key iconic images (see Litvin & Mouri, 2009).

Online trip planning represents a paradigm shift for the travel industry (see Gretzel, Yuan, & Fesenmaier, 2000). DMOs' websites provide opportunities for inexpensive global reach. Well-designed websites delivering compelling content provide another tool to inform customers about a destination's benefits. Compelling content helps, but other variables such as previous visits also impact trip decisions (Loda, Norman, & Backman, 2007). Consumer preference likely affects acceptance of online promotional materials versus traditional methods (see Chiou, Wan, & Lee, 2007).

The Internet allows customers to interact with each other directly and share their experiences (Hoffman & Novak, 1996) as well as to compare destinations based on price, activities, and even other visitors' experiences (see Hsu, Dehuang, & Woodside, 2008). DMOs' online content is compelling because both businesses and customers provide accessible information. Due to online content's organic form, some evidence suggests that this content is more persuasive than other advertising forms, particularly to younger customers (Loda et al., 2010). In addition, Internet blogs provide an underutilized promotion opportunity. Traditional travel blogs report visitors' self-reported experiences. Blog authors sometimes include visuals to accompany the text. One travel blog evolved into a viral campaign for visiting Greece and 45% of the web site's visitors found the posting compelling enough to generate a desire to visit (Lin & Huang, 2006). The hotel industry recognizes the influence of customer blog messages. Some hotel chains employ a full-time e-communications specialist to gather customer comments posted on travel blogs (Pehl, 2010). Although anecdotal, the evidence suggests that travel blogs affect tourism behavior. Additional study of how DMOs can use travel blogs to promote destinations advances tourism behavioral research. This study helps fill the void in tourism advertising research. Results reported in this paper provide DMOs with a theoretical framework for effective online advertising strategies in an increasingly global market.

3. Hypothesis development

3.1. Goal progress frame and motivation

Dynamic self-regulation research documents that an individual's motivation to adhere to a goal can be influenced by her goal progress (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Fishbach, Zhang, & Koo, 2009; Koo & Fishbach, 2008). According to Koo and Fishbach (2008), motivation increases if goal progress is framed as achievement (e.g., 48% to-date), rather than a lack of achievement (e.g., 52% to-go) when individuals are uncertain about their level of prior goal commitment. People uncertain about their commitment level first assess whether or not the goal is important to pursue further. In this case, to-date information focusing on an individual's achieved progress seems to signal the person's high commitment level toward the goal and encourages goal adherence. Additionally, Koo and Fishbach show that motivation increases when goal progress is framed as a lack of achievement (e.g., 52% to-go), rather than achievement (e.g., 48% to-date) when people are certain about their goal commitment level. People committed to an important goal seem to first consider what remains to be done in the future. In this case, to-go information that highlights the discrepancy between an individual's current and ideal states signals slow progress toward the goal and encourages the person to reach the goal.

Even though dynamic self-regulation theory mainly predicts the influence of goal progress frame on motivation when an individual pursues a personal goal, Koo and Fishbach (2008) also document goal progress framing effects can be extended to the situation where an individual is presented with a social goal (e.g., a fundraising goal set by a member's organization). In this case, uncommitted individuals' willingness to donate seems to increase when they learn that other people already contributed to the common social goal. In contrast, committed members' motivation to donate seems to be promoted when they find that other people have not contributed much to the social goal. The social identity literature (e.g., Brewer, 2003) argues that people generally pursue personal and social goals in the same way. Accordingly, an individual's motivation to adhere to a goal appears to be similarly influenced by a goal progress frame, regardless of whether the goal is personal or social.

Despite their thought-provoking findings, Koo and Fishbach (2008) are silent about the role and impact of different goal progress rates on an individual's motivation. Koo and Fishbach set goal progress rate to be close to the midpoint, but different from 50%. They argue that the goal progress rate would not influence their key findings; however, this argument's validity requires additional empirical support. Would the same effect occur if the goal progress rates were either substantially higher or lower?