



## When less is more: Sustainability messaging, destination type, and processing fluency



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 4 December 2015

Received in revised form 19 May 2016

Accepted 13 July 2016

Available online 1 August 2016

#### Keywords:

Sustainability

Process fluency

Destination image

Skepticism

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore consumer responses to hotel sustainability messages based on the congruence of preexisting cognitive schemas with newly presented information. Based on information processing theory, this research proposes that variations in the processing fluency of a sustainability message will interact with the cognitive perception of the hotel's destination (NBT versus urban) to affect the perception of the message and the attitude toward the hotel. Results suggest that under conditions of low fluency, consumers are less skeptical of messages presented by hotels in NBT destinations than of similar messages presented by hotels in urban tourism destinations. Low fluency messages also generate more positive attitudes toward NBT destinations than toward urban destinations. These results suggest that the most effective sustainability messages depend not only on the presentation of the message, but also on the type of the destination.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, a growing number of hotels have joined the green movement both to reduce harmful impacts on the environment and to increase their profitability through cost savings and increased customer attraction/retention (Pizam, 2009; Wolfe and Shanklin, 2001). For such hotels, communication of their efforts to promote environmental sustainability has become an increasingly important part of the marketing message. In an effort to communicate their commitment to the natural environment, many properties provide guests with information about their efforts to promote sustainability and the positive impact of these efforts on the natural environment.

However, while many in the industry have acknowledged the marketing power of the sustainability message, relatively little is known about the communication of these messages and their effects on consumer perceptions of the message content. Marketing messages can vary along a number of important communication elements including the medium, the fluency of the message, and the cognitive schemas that the message evokes; and research has

shown that reactions to marketing messages can be significantly affected by manipulating these elements (Alter and Oppenheimer, 2009; Van Rompay et al., 2010). Unfortunately, little research exists exploring the extent to which such variables affect perceptions of and reactions to sustainability messages.

To further complicate the issue of sustainability communication, recent research has shown that consumers do not react uniformly to corporate efforts to promote environmental sustainability. For example, Line and Hanks (in press) found that tourists' attitudes toward environmental sustainability differ depending on the cognitive image of the destination. Specifically, their research indicates that tourists are more willing to accept decreased levels of comfort to promote environmental sustainability in nature-based tourism destinations than in urban tourism destinations. Likewise, Miao and Wei (2013) have shown that consumers are less willing to act in an environmentally responsible manner when staying in a hotel than in their everyday home life. Although such research demonstrates that sustainable hospitality behavior may be context dependent, it remains unclear the extent to which the presentation of the message may affect consumer reactions to sustainability messages.

A review of the extant literature suggests that while reactions to sustainability messages can vary based on both the form and context of the message, current theoretical perspectives cannot definitively account for the effects of such variance on consumer

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behavior. As such, hotel marketers have been left with a relative scarcity of theory driven guidance on how and when to implement their sustainability messages. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to address this gap in the literature from the theoretical perspective of information processing theory (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken, 1987; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), which predicts reactions to messages based on the congruence of new information with existing cognitive schemas.

Based on the tenets of information processing theory, we propose that the most effective sustainability communication strategy will depend both on the presentation of the message and the attributes of the destination. Of particular concern is the fluency of the message, or the relative ease with which consumers are able to process the message content via the selected medium. Specifically, we predict that consumers will respond more favorably to highly fluent sustainability messages when the natural attributes of a destination are less salient (i.e., an urban tourism destination). As follows, the hypotheses inherent to this proposition are tested on a sample of U.S consumers via a manipulation of both destination type and processing fluency. The results confirm the overall hypothesis that these two variables interact to significantly affect consumer perceptions of the message. Upon the empirical demonstration of these relationships, the principal implications for theory and practice are discussed.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Destination type

Various types of destinations possess different sets of attributes. For example, urban destinations “are often much better developed than other types of destinations” and “are easily accessible through airports and scheduled services” (Edwards et al., 2008, p. 1033), while nature-based tourism (NBT) destinations tend to be “relatively undeveloped or undisturbed natural areas” (Lee, 2009, p. 215). The features of each type of destination tend to vary widely as well, with urban destinations featuring a large number of choices with regards to lodging, dining, and entertainment (Ashworth and Page, 2011; Edwards et al., 2008), while NBT destinations generally feature a more natural set of attributes (Ardoin et al., 2015), such as access to wildlife and natural landscape features. Together, these attributes create an image of the destination in the mind of the consumer. A destination’s image can be defined as the “set of qualities, attributes and benefits that visitors hold about the destination; it represents the sum of beliefs and impressions that a person has of a destination” (Chiu et al., 2014, p. 877) and is primarily influenced by the evident physical characteristics of the destination (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Obenour et al., 2006; Turner and Reisinger, 1999).

One of the primary objectives of this study is to explore interplay between destination type and marketing messages about environmentally friendly hotel initiatives. We propose that destination type (i.e., urban versus NBT) can influence attitudes toward the environmentally friendly behavior of a hotel located in these destinations. That is, we suggest that when a destination features natural attributes (such as wildlife, greenery, and natural elements), consumers are more likely to exhibit positive attitudes toward the cognitively congruent idea of environmental sustainability than when the destination features urban elements such as nightlife, restaurants, and hotels. Using the framework of information processing theory, this study investigates how the fluency of a marketing message about a hotel’s green initiatives influences consumer perceptions of both NBT and urban tourism destinations.

### 2.2. Information processing theory

Information processing theory (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken, 1987; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) posits that people engage in two types of information processing: systematic and heuristic. In “systematic processing” (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken, 1987; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), the individual analyzes all available data and uses this information to arrive at a conclusion. This exhaustive analysis of all available information is likely to result in an accurate evaluation of the situation, but can be disadvantageous in that it necessitates a high usage of cognitive resources (Chaiken, 1980). Conversely, “heuristic processing” relies on stereotypes, clues, proxy characteristics, or cues to evaluate a situation (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken, 1987; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). One disadvantage of heuristic processing is that it can result in less accurate and less complete information than systematic processing. However, heuristic processing can be advantageous in that it takes less time, energy, and cognitive effort.

When faced with new pieces of information during the decision-making process, a person’s motivation to process that information either systematically or heuristically often relies heavily the extent to which the new piece of information is congruent with an existing schema (i.e., whether this new piece of information matches what is already known about the situation; Van Rompay et al., 2010). If the information is congruent with the existing schema, the individual may engage in heuristic processing, as there is no need for further examination or information gathering. However, when the new information is incongruent with the existing situation, an individual may resolve the discrepancy by engaging in deeper, systematic processing, necessitating a further examination of details, context, and peripheral information. In addition to cues, heuristics, and cognitive elaboration, there are other factors that can influence the way a customer processes new information during the decision-making process. One such factor is processing fluency.

### 2.3. Processing fluency

A second element that impacts the way in which a consumer perceives and utilizes new information is processing fluency. Processing fluency refers to the “subjective experience of ease with which people process information” (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009, p. 219). As a cognitive cue, processing fluency plays an important role in influencing human judgment and decision-making (Alter and Oppenheimer, 2009). Prior research has shown that people tend to associate fluency with truth (e.g., Schwarz, 2004), largely because high fluency implies frequency, which in turn implies social consensus (Schwarz et al., 2007). Thus, people assume that messages that are easier to process are more likely to be true or credible. Accordingly, this is often named “the truth effect” (e.g., Begg et al., 1992).

Interestingly, repetition is not the only way to induce fluency. Processing fluency can be manipulated with various techniques such as semantic priming, visual clarity, and phonological priming (Alter and Oppenheimer, 2009). However, all types of fluency experiences exhibit similar effects on judgment of truth. Basically, when a stimulus is easy to perceive visually (Reber and Schwarz, 1999), easy to process linguistically (McGlone and Tofghbakhsh, 2000), easy to retrieve from memory (Begg et al., 1992), or semantically activated (Kelley and Lindsay, 1993), people tend to believe that it is truer than its less fluent counterparts.

Prior research has demonstrated that a number of elements can impact the fluency of a message. For example, message fluency is often impacted by the physical characteristics of the medium (Alter and Oppenheimer, 2009). A common technique used to study the effects of physical fluency is font manipulation, in which the size, type, and color of font, or contrast of the font against the

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