The Amazing Race to India: Prominence in reality television affects destination image and travel intentions

Tina Tessitore*, Mario Pandelaere, Anneleen Van Kerckhove

Department of Marketing, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

HIGHLIGHTS

- Two experiments show the impact of destination placement in reality TV.
- Reality TV has the advantage of conveying an authentic image of the destination.
- Destination placement changes perceptions and increases destination knowledge.
- Destination placement improves destination attitudes and travel intentions.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Considering the increasing popularity of reality television shows, this research investigated the impact of a destination placement in reality television on tourism. Two experiments reveal that a reality show can change the image of the destination in which the show is set. This positively affects cognitive, affective and behavioral outcomes. Specifically, it changes perceptions in accordance with the depiction of the destination in the reality show, increases knowledge about the destination, favorably affects viewers' attitude toward the destination, and even more importantly, increases the intention to travel to the destination. Our findings are of interest to destination marketing organizations; they inform them on how to promote touristic destinations.

1. Introduction

People have become less inclined to extensively read about touristic destinations, but increasingly prefer audiovisual information sources (Butler, 1990). Destination marketing organizations should thus shift to audiovisual media to promote their destinations, especially because traditional travel advertisements' effectiveness diminishes (Riley & Van Doren, 1992; Vagionis & Loumioti, 2011). The current paper focuses on the viability of increasing interest in a touristic destination through reality TV. Reality television is one of the most frequently watched television programming and its popularity is still growing (e.g., Patino, Kaltcheva, & Smith, 2011, 2012; Rose & Wood, 2005). In the top 10 of most watched Prime-time TV Programs of 2012 in the United States, five programs are reality programs (Nielsen Media Research, 2012). We show that when a destination is prominent in a reality TV show, this could benefit the perception of, knowledge about, attitudes toward and intentions to travel to that destination.

The current paper contributes to an emerging literature on the appearance of a destination in audiovisual media as a strategy to promote a touristic destination. In particular, the current paper extends prior research in two ways. First, in contrast to prior research that investigated *movie*-induced tourism, the current paper investigates the potential of *reality television*-induced tourism. As reality TV is likely to project a more authentic, but potentially coarser image of a destination, it is unclear whether similar effects are obtained for appearances in reality TV as for appearances in movies. Second, almost all studies on the impact of destination appearance in movies have relied on case studies. To better examine the causal effect of appearance on television, the current paper uses an experimental design. Finally, by viewing destination appearance in reality TV as a form of product placement, we also contribute to the literature on the latter.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Destination placement in movies

The inclusion of a destination in movies and television films can induce tourism, and is mentioned in tourism literature as one of the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33 (0)320 545 892.
E-mail address: t.tessitore@ieseg.fr (T. Tessitore).

new marketing methods that could compensate for disadvantages of traditional advertising. According to Morgan and Pritchard (1998), destination placement in a film can be considered as the ultimate tourism product placement. Also other researchers suggested that including a destination in audiovisual media can be considered as product placement, which may benefit tourism (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Hudson, Wang, & Gil, 2011; Su, Huang, Brodowsky, & Kim, 2011; Tooke & Baker, 1996). Product placement is the paid visual and/or verbal inclusion of brands in mass-media programming, mostly without consumers' awareness of its commercial intent (Balasubramanian, 1994; Karrh, 1998). Different types of product placements exist. Russell (1998) presents three dimensions along which product placements may vary in intensity: (1) visual appearance, (2) auditory appearance, and (3) connection to the plot or story. Product placements, scoring differently on these three dimensions, have been shown to be very effective at increasing consumers' brand awareness, affecting their brand evaluations, and/or changing their buying behavior (Bhatnagar & Aksoy, 2004; Cowley & Barron, 2008; Gupta & Lord, 1998; Law & Braun, 2000; Matthes, Schemer, & Wirth, 2007; Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1998; Roehm, Roehm, & Boone, 2004; Russell, 2002; Wei, Fischer, & Main, 2008).

Destination placements similarly could benefit the goals of tourism organizations and serve as an alternative to traditional advertising techniques that are becoming less effective. In fact, many studies on film- or movie-induced tourism have examined how the appearance of a destination in a motion picture in cinemas, on television, on video, … increases a destination's visitor numbers (Beeton, 2001a, 2001b; Connell, 2005; Riley, Baker, & Van Doren, 1998; Riley & Van Doren, 1992; Schofield, 1996; Tooke & Baker, 1996), desire to visit (Beeton, 2004; Hudson et al., 2011), and renders the destination's image more positive (Beeton, 2004; Hudson et al., 2011; Kim & Richardson, 2003). Riley et al. (1998) found that certain box office successes can increase tourism for 40%–50%. For the 12 movies they considered, such increase lasted for at least four years. In general, it appears that movies act as 'pull' factors to generate interest and to stimulate viewers to visit places depicted in the movie (Riley & Van Doren, 1992).

On the other hand, destination placement in films or movies could also lead to visitor dissatisfaction (Beeton, 2001b; Connell, 2005; Connell & Meyer, 2009). As destinations are placed in a movie, film or drama series, they run the risk of passing on an unauthentic destination image to viewers as a result of cinematographic editing and visual effects. This may lower visitor satisfaction. For example, the Isle of Mull in Scotland knew a significant increase in visitors after the children's television program *Balamory* was broadcasted on television (Connell, 2005). However, *Balamory* was artificially created and contained attributes which did not match reality; the only resemblance with its depiction in the program are the colored houses on the island. Such misfits between perception and reality could lead to disappointment with the real location or country (Connell & Meyer, 2009), and maybe even with the television program. Also, for some destinations that undeservedly lack a positive touristic image, either due to their past (e.g., conflicts between Serbia and Croatia) or due to recent unfavorable news reports (e.g., financial crisis in Greece), it might especially be interesting to illustrate themselves as authentically as possible, in order to encourage tourism. To deal with this issue, one may consider promoting touristic destinations through reality TV.

2.2. Destination placement in reality TV

Reality shows are "programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur" (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003, p. 304). Reality shows are a perfect environment for product placements for several reasons. First, reality shows share the advantages of movies and films over traditional travel advertisements. While a traditional advertising spot simply passes a message without tapping into sentiments of viewers and character development (Vagionis & Loumioti, 2011), viewers vicariously consume the movie or television program (Riley & Van Doren, 1992). As such, viewers participate in the place-related experiences and the sentiments of the characters (Kim & Richardson, 2003), which leads to more focused attention and long-term memory effects (Riley & Van Doren, 1992).

Further, viewers are longer exposed to a destination placement in a movie than to a 30-s spot or print ad (Riley & Van Doren, 1992). The same advantage holds for reality television. Moreover, possible re-watching of movies or television programs on DVD, digital television,… may produce even longer-lasting effects; visitors may be attracted years after the release of the movie (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Riley et al., 1998; Vagionis & Loumioti, 2011). Although re-watching may be less likely for reality shows, long-lasting effects may also result if the same destination is placed in different episodes and seasons. Further, in contrast to traditional advertising, most viewers are not aware that they are being persuaded by a product placement in a movie, drama or reality show (Balasubramanian, 1994; Bhatnagar, Aksoy, & Malkoc, 2004; Wei et al., 2008).

Finally, the target audience of the promotion of touristic destinations in movies is much wider than of traditional tourism advertisements and promotions (Riley & Van Doren, 1992), even though destination placements are generally less expensive than tourism advertisements. While a wider audience is not an aim in itself of a marketing campaign, because of it, destination placements have the potential to raise interest in a destination among people who are not necessarily the target audience of traditional tourism advertisements. At the same time, however, it is important that the destination placement continues to reach the target audience of traditional tourism advertisements, or on the balance fewer people may be persuaded to visit a given destination. In this respect, the fit between the content of a television program and the destination may be crucial. Indeed, the content of a show may attract a specific audience. For instance, people with a sentimental nature are more likely to watch romantic television programs (e.g., The Bachelor), whereas people who like backpacking and traveling may rather watch adventurous travel programs (e.g., The Amazing Race). So, one way to ensure one does not lose the traditional ad's target audience is by selecting a program of which the content (and the corresponding audience interests) matches the destination. For instance, the Seychelles Islands, which are a romantic location, are preferably inserted in a romantic program like *The Bachelor*. By contrast, India, which is a more adventurous location, is preferably placed as a challenging environment in an adventurous travel program like *The Amazing Race*. As such, an adventurous traveler is likely to watch *The Amazing Race* and is then likely to consider India as a potential, adventurous travel destination. Finally, another way to continue reaching the traditional advertising audience is by prominently inserting the destination in the program, or even in the title of the program. For instance, if a program is titled *The Amazing Race To India*, people who are interested in traveling to India may be likely to watch the program, even if the program content does not appeal to them 100%.

In addition to these advantages over traditional advertising, reality shows also have some advantages over movies and soap operas to promote products and touristic destinations. First, reality shows are less expensive than movies and films since these shows need no actors or writers, have smaller crews, and visual editing is less elaborate. Hence, reality-induced tourism can be especially helpful for economically lagging destinations that are not capable