



## Processing promotional travel narratives

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### ABSTRACT

While research exists which examines the use of tourism promotional communications (Andereck, 2005; Loda, Norman, & Backman, 2005), an investigation of how travelers process such promotional communications is lacking. In response, this study sought to investigate processing as well as perceived skepticism towards tourism promotional communications. The importance of understanding processing and perceived skepticism resides in the fact that both have been linked to overall message persuasiveness; and as such, both are essential to developing and implementing effective travel promotional communications. Specifically, this study sought to examine if participants differed based on their demographic characteristics in (1) the degree to which participants' were able to be transported by a narrative (i.e. process), and (2) participants' level of perceived skepticism concerning travel articles and travel brochures. To do so, Green and Brock's (2000) Transportation scale and Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1998) Skepticism Towards Advertising scale (SKEP) were incorporated.

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### 1. Introduction

Seeking to create awareness among travelers, Destination Management Organization's (DMOs) utilize a variety of promotional techniques. The use of several techniques to promote a travel destination is often referred to as the promotional mix (Belch & Belch, 2004) and uses the following tools to accomplish an organization's communications objective: advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, publicity/public relations, and personal sales. As a means of attempting to create awareness, improve image, and/or persuade viewers to visit their destination, DMOs often rely on two differing forms of persuasive communication found within the promotional mix: advertising and publicity; specifically, travel brochures and travel articles. While substantial research exists which examines preference and use of promotional travel narratives, or more specifically travel brochures and travel articles (e.g. Andereck, 2005; Dann, 1999; Fodness & Murray, 1999; Loda, Norman, & Backman, 2005; Santos, 2004a, 2004b, 2006; Williams & Shaw, 1995), an examination of how travelers process these promotional narratives is lacking in current tourism literature. In response, the current study sought to explore how reader's demographic characteristics influence and/or help explain their processing of promotional travel narratives, as well as

their level of perceived skepticism towards promotional travel narratives. To do so, Green and Brock's (2000) Transportation scale and Obermiller and Spangenberg's (1998) Skepticism Towards Advertising scale (SKEP) were incorporated.

The importance of understanding travelers' processing and perceived skepticism of promotional travel narratives resides in the fact that both have been linked to overall message persuasiveness (e.g., Escalas, 2004a; Friestad & Wright, 1994, 1995; Green & Brock, 2000; Learned, 2007; Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998; Slater & Rouner, 2002); and as such, both are essential to developing and implementing effective travel promotional communications. Moreover, extant research suggests that general persuasability may differ depending upon demographic characteristics. Specifically, the way in which males and females process message claims has been shown to differ (Meyers-Levy, 1989). More recently, Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran (1991) examined gender differences in processing strategies, particularly that of availability and accessibility, and noted that while results from their study

...support previously established findings that females' processing often entails substantial, detailed elaboration of message content...[their findings also suggest that]...gender differences in processing strategies are more likely to have their locus in cue accessibility than in cue availability...as males' processing appears to be driven by overall message themes or schemas (p. 68–89).

Research has also shown that various traveler demographic characteristics are often linked to information search behavior (see

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Capella & Greco, 1987; Fodness & Murray, 1997; Gitelson & Crompton, 1983; Pearce & Schott, 2005; Snepenger, Meged, Snelling, & Worrall, 1990; Woodside & Ronkainen, 1980). With specific reference to brochures, findings by Andereck (2005) illustrated that brochures are evaluated differently depending upon gender, age and income; “women tend to be more heavily influenced by the brochure than men, as were people of middle age with lower incomes” (p. 11).

Additionally, both of the chosen scales in the current study have also been shown to be influenced by various demographic characteristics. For example, in developing and testing the Transportation scale, Green and Brock (2000) found mixed results concerning the influence of gender on one's ability to be transported by a narrative. Specifically, when gender differences did occur, women were more often reported to experience greater transportation than men. Moreover, in developing and testing SKEP, Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) provided evidence that personality traits, marketplace experience and education act as antecedents to advertising skepticism; and further, that the quality of combined consumer experiences was established as the primary source of influence on participants' skepticism towards advertising.

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. Advertising: travel brochures

Advertising, defined as “any paid form of nonpersonal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor” (Kotler, 1993 in Loda et al., 2005, p. 64) is one of the most widely used and often most expensive forms of promotion (Loda et al., 2005). One of the more popular forms of advertising used in travel and tourism includes the use of brochures. For the purposes of this research, brochures include pamphlets printed as a single sheet or as a booklet providing travel-related information to tourists. Information is most often displayed on brochures via various narrative formats including short paragraphs, sentences and/or lists of quick facts. In general, brochures are used to advertise topics and locations relating to a particular destination and/or attraction, and are often distributed via direct mail, hotels, visitor centers, informational kiosks, trade shows, and brochure racks/stands among others.

Despite the emergence of the Internet as well as other newer sources of information dissemination (e.g., podcasts), brochures remain an ever-popular and influential source of travel information for tourists (Andereck, 2005; Andereck & Caldwell, 1993; Andereck, Vogt, & LeClerc, 2003; Getz & Sailor, 1993; Wicks & Schuett, 1991). While travelers are often shown to be critical of brochures (McCullough, 1977), a variety of studies exist which show brochures to be consistently ranked among the top five used sources of travel information (Andereck & Caldwell, 1993; Andereck, Vogt, & LeClerc, 2003; Gitelson & Crompton, 1983; Hsieh & O'Leary, 1993; Fodness & Murray, 1999). Moreover, similar to research put forth by Wicks and Schuett (1991) and Zhou (1997), Andereck (2005) suggested that “a brochure can increase prospective visitors' interest in visiting a destination, can influence people to actually visit a destination or keep it in their decision set, and is used for trip planning” (p. 9). From an examination of visitors to the Arizona Welcome Center, Andereck, Vogt and LeClerc (2003) found that 98% of visitors expected brochures and pamphlets to be available for their use. Additionally, while recent research concerning the usefulness of brochures exists, Molina and Esteban (2006) were unable to support the notion that brochures “have a decisive impact upon an individual's decision to travel or formation of a destination image” (p. 1049). They were, however, able to create a usefulness model from which they concluded that brochures should be designed to

present viewers with practical, decision-making information concerning the planning of a current trip and/or create an image of the destination as an alternative option for future travel (Molina & Esteban, 2006).

Overall, research supports the notion that brochures are an important and well-utilized information source for travelers. Such findings illustrate why Convention/Center Visitor Bureaus (CVB's) across the nation invest considerable amounts of money and time designing and disseminating brochures.

### 2.2. Publicity: travel articles

In comparison to advertising techniques such as travel brochures, publicity is often less expensive and generally indicates coverage via news media. Specifically, publicity has been defined as “editorial space, rather than paid space, in print and broadcast media, to promote a product, place or person” (Loda et al., 2005, 64). A popular form of publicity used in travel and tourism includes travel articles. For the purposes of this research, travel articles are defined as narratives primarily concerned with providing instruction and interpretation of recent travel experiences written in a non-fictional narrative story format, from a first-person account, and published in regional and national newspapers and magazines.

As noted by Williams and Shaw (1995), travelers' decisions “are increasingly dependent on the opinions of travel writers” (p. 18). According to Gartner (1993), by utilizing travel articles as a means of what he termed “covert publicity,” “credibility is increased as the image is now presented by a person who does not appear to have any connection with the destination except through prior visitation” (p. 201). Dann (1999) offers several reasons for the genre's continued popularity and societal centrality: “travel narratives offer alluring descriptions of faraway locales; space and time are frequent categories which are generalizable across cultures and eras; narratives focus on the journey; and lastly, from ‘writing out’ the tourist experience, travel writers connect with the anti-tourist within the reader” (p. 182–183).

Travel narratives are increasingly found throughout various media outlets. For example, to date, a variety of media exist for the purpose of promoting and advertising travel opportunities via the use of travel narratives: print media (*National Geographic*, *Fodor's Travel Guides*, *Lonely Planet Travel Guide*, *Rick Steve's Travel Guidebooks*, travel sections in most major newspapers); television (*The Travel Channel*, *The Discovery Channel*, *The Food Network*, *Globe Trekker*); radio (*Travel with Rick Steves*, *Talkin' Travel*, *Peter Greenberg's Travel Show*); podcasts (*Amateur Traveler*, *Fodor's*, *National Geographic*); in-flight magazines (*Sky Magazine*, *Attaché*, *Hemispheres*, *en Route*, *American Way Magazine*, *Go Magazine*); and countless websites on the Internet (*Expedia.com*, *IgoUgo.com*, *Orbitz.com*, *Traelocity.com*, *Concierge.com*). Despite the increase in popularity of travel coupled with the increase in media coverage, a gap remains in the travel and tourism literature concerning the examination of travel articles; specifically, the processing of, use of, and perception of travel articles as both persuasive and informational tools.

### 2.3. Advertising versus publicity

As discussed above, extant research supports the use of travel brochures and travel articles as persuasive promotional tools used by both tourism practitioners and travelers. And while several studies have compared the persuasive effects of advertising and publicity (e.g., Anderson & Abbott, 1985; Cameron, 1994; Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Chew, Slater, & Kelly, 1995; D'Astous & Hébert, 1991; Gartner, 1993; Hallahan, 1995, 1999; Hausknecht, Wilkinson, & Prough, 1989; Hennessey & Anderson, 1990; Michaelson & Stacks, 2007; Salmon, Reid, Pokrwczyński, & Willett, 1985; Schwarz,

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