



Dual-route communication of destination websites

Liang (Rebecca) Tang^{a,*}, Soocheong (Shawn) Jang^b, Alastair Morrison^b

^a Iowa State University, IA, USA

^b Purdue University, IN, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 April 2010

Accepted 25 January 2011

Keywords:

Elaboration likelihood model (ELM)

Destination website

Cognition

Attitude

Travel intention

ABSTRACT

To understand the communication route of destination websites, this study employed the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) which is a dual-route, multi-process model of persuasive message processing. That is, this study proposed a theoretical model for the dual-route persuasive process based on ELM, investigated its antecedents and consequences, and identified the moderating effect of involvement. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is used to test the validity of the conceptual model. The results indicate that highly involved people are inclined to elaborate on information (central route), while people with low involvement are likely to make judgments based on simple cues (peripheral route). Website design characteristics are an important antecedent of both central and peripheral-route persuasions. Attitudes resulting from careful consideration via the central route are more predictive of conation and behavior (further information searching and travel intentions) than those formed via the peripheral route. The study provides a foundation for further tourism research investigating the Internet as a persuasive tool, and suggests strategies for website designers.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

Since the launch of Internet applications in the late 1990s, tourism researchers have realized the potential of information technology and incorporated it into the tourism industry (Burger, 1997; Clyde & Landfried, 1995). It is widely accepted that websites provide a distinct advantage for tourism organizations and serve as an effective tool for marketing communications between suppliers and consumers (Buhalis, 2003; Zafiroopoulos & Vrana, 2006). However, simply being present on the Internet cannot guarantee success (Liang & Law, 2003). The large and dramatically growing number of tourism websites makes it more difficult for tourism organizations to attract visitors to their sites and to convert visitors into customers (Auger, 2005). Consequently, industry practitioners have realized the importance of persuasive strategies for Internet marketing. The key to designing successful persuasive strategies is to understand the communication process between suppliers and customers on these websites (Berthon, Lane, Pitt, & Watson, 1998).

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).

Communication and persuasion are complex processes that include three stages (Littlejohn, 2003). In the first stage, information is sent in some form from a sender to a receiver. The second stage signifies the receiver's cognitive efforts to process the message. The last stage presents the receiver's response. This process may take the form of an oral comment, a written message, or some other behavior. The evaluation of website characteristics in previous studies can be viewed as analyses of the message transmitted by the sender. Consumer belief and subsequent behavior are regarded as the receiver's response and feedback. However, few studies have been concerned with information processing in terms of these websites, which is a critical bridge between the first and third stages. Without an evaluation of the cognitive process, discussions of the relationship between website characteristics and customers' conation and behavior are biased.

Many critical questions in the communication process have not been answered: How do website characteristics influence the cognitive process? What are the routes of the cognitive process? How does the cognitive process affect attitude and, consequently, behavior? What are the situational factors in the communication process? This research was motivated by the need for a theoretical framework to address information processing on destination websites.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: rebeccat@iastate.edu (L. (Rebecca) Tang).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) has been utilized as a dual-route, multi-process model of persuasive processing. The ELM framework features two routes of persuasive processing: central and peripheral. The framework identifies the antecedents (message characteristics) and consequences (conation and behavior) of persuasive processing. It also identifies the key moderating variable in dual-route process-involvement. ELM is a comprehensive framework for describing the communicative process and has provided the theoretical foundation for numerous studies on marketing communication (Areni, 2003; Scholten, 1996; Yang, Hung, Sung, & Farn, 2006). However, this study is the first to apply ELM to comprehensively understand the communication process on destination websites.

This research established and tested a theoretical model that represents the correlations between website characteristics, cognition, attitude, and consequent behavior. This model also incorporates the moderator of involvement in the process. An understanding of the communication process can help Internet marketers better predict customers' behaviors. This study provides further guidance for website designers to improve communication effectiveness. The specific objectives of this research are to: 1) understand the two routes of communication on destination websites; 2) discuss the antecedents and consequences of the dual routes of persuasion on destination websites; and 3) assess the moderating role of involvement in the two-route process of persuasion on destination websites.

2. Literature review

2.1. Destination websites

Since the emergence of the Internet in the late 1990s, many researchers have realized its potential value to business and have advocated the incorporation of the Internet into the travel industry. The increasing importance of the Internet can be explained by the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) in the contemporary travel business world. TAM is an information systems theory that models how users accept and adopt a technology (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989). TAM was developed based on Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reasoned action (TRA) which indicates that belief influences attitudes, which lead to intentions, and finally to behaviors. TAM further suggests that perceived usefulness and ease of use in the technology system are the determinants of attitude toward using, behavioral intention to use, and actual system use.

Based on TAM, the majority of the research on tourism websites has discussed the effectiveness of destination websites as destination marketing tools. Li and Petrick's (2007) analysis of these studies delineated two broad categories. The first category is concerned with website design, information content, and other issues regarding quality that can attract the attention of potential tourists and facilitate comprehension and retention (e.g., Cai, Card, & Cole, 2004; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008; O'Connor, 2005). Many of these studies developed evaluation models/instruments to evaluate travel-related websites. For instance, Morrison, Taylor, Morrison, and Morrison (1999) developed a modified Balanced Score Card (BSC) to assess the design and maintenance of hotel websites. They show that website performance is assessed with a balance of different dimensions, including technical, marketing, internal, and customer perspectives. Their modified BSC has been used widely in other studies as well. For example, Feng, Morrison, and Ismail (2004) applied a modified BSC to evaluate and compare destination marketing organization (DMO) websites in the U.S. and China. Ismail, Labropoulos, Mills, and Morrison (2001) used the BSC to examine the marketing of culture on European Union NTO websites. Other website evaluation approaches also have been used in

many tourism studies. Li and Petrick (2007) utilized the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) to develop a procedure for benchmarking Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) websites. Lu, Deng, and Wang (2007) developed an index system for the evaluation of Chinese tourism websites, incorporating factors relating to website design, content, and effectiveness. The second type of study looks at tourists' interactions with websites and the websites' influence on consumer beliefs and subsequent behavior, such as travel decisions (e.g., Mills & Law, 2005), website revisiting (e.g., Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2006), and e-reservations (e.g., Nysveen & Leshagen, 2001).

As discussed in the Introduction, communication consists of three stages: information receiving, cognitive processing, and formation of attitude and conation (Littlejohn, 2003). Prior studies have investigated the first stage (website characteristics), the third stage (attitude and travel intention), and the linkage between the two stages (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2006; Mills & Law, 2005). Yet the cognitive process in the second stage is still the "black box" of studies regarding destination websites. Many details in the cognitive process have never been explored (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008). However, without understanding the cognitive process, the discussion of website characteristics and their influence on potential tourists' attitudes and behavior is impartial and unreliable at best. Moreover, a big picture that depicts all three stages of information processing on destination websites can also assist scholars to understand more fully the findings of prior studies. For example, what makes highly involved people more likely to become actual tourists after checking destination websites than people showing low involvement (Bai, Law, & Wen, 2008).

2.2. Elaboration likelihood model (ELM)

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1981, 1986) is an important theory in social psychology. It provides a fairly comprehensive framework for organizing, categorizing, and understanding the basic cognitive processes underlying effective persuasive communication. The model features two routes of persuasive influence. The first route of persuasion occurs as a result of a person's careful and thoughtful consideration of object-relevant arguments (central route). The other type of persuasion, however, occurs as a result of peripheral cues in the persuasion environment that determine attitudes by simple linkage (peripheral route). The process of scrutinizing object-relevant arguments in the central route is usually more deliberate than the processes involved with affective links in the peripheral route (Cialdini, 1984). Therefore, the perception gained in the central route brings about a more confident attitude, and confidence is more likely to last over time, more likely to lead to action, and more unlikely to be given up in the face of counterargument.

Although the changes in attitude associated with the central route are the most desirable, it is a difficult persuasion strategy because people must have both the motivation and ability to elaborate the arguments (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, 1986). Given the difficulties of changing attitudes via the central route, researchers might also consider the peripheral route as a potential persuasion strategy for weak arguments and/or low elaboration likelihood. Nevertheless, persuasion through the peripheral route is short-lived. It is necessary to incessantly remind the targeted audience of the cues their favorable attitudes are based on. Continual reminders (such as advertising repetition, political posters, etc.) may be enough to get people to take action. Interestingly, once the tourist has made a decision, both motivation and ability to process any subsequent arguments about the object may be improved. This could ultimately result in an attitude that predicts, persists, and resists behavior in the future (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1012578>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1012578>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)