



The effect of searching and surfing on recognition of destination images on Facebook pages



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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNSs) are playing an increasingly important role as information sources for tourists. Among the various types of SNSs, Facebook has become the leading site in terms of number of users and volume of content. Despite the proliferation of Facebook, however, there has been little research on its users' cognitive processes as they acquire visual images from photos. Particularly in the context of tourism and hospitality, one largely ignored area that warrants examination is individuals' recognition accuracy when acquiring visual information via Facebook. Based on LC4MP, this study examines users' ability to encode tourism information acquired from Facebook by differentiating the two types of information-search processing conditions, surfing and searching. After employing a visual-recognition test, the findings of this study indicated that participants recognized the photos they acquired from searching more accurately than the photos they acquired from surfing on destination Facebook pages. Further discussion and implications are provided in the text.

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1. Introduction

It has been noted that destination images influence tourists' attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, studies have shown that a destination image affects several consumer-behavior variables, such as destination choice (Kim & Perdue, 2011), decision-making (Wang & Hsu, 2010), and satisfaction (Chi & Qu, 2008). Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and industry practitioners, therefore, largely focus on how to enhance the favorable or memorable image of a destination in their promotional activities. Accordingly, DMOs have embraced new online technologies for their marketing and advertising activities (Banyai & Glover, 2012; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2006). More recently, social networking sites (SNSs) have become pivotal marketing channels for many DMOs because of advantages such as their ability to analyze network members' relationships and harness word-of-mouth (Katona, Zubcsek, & Sarvary, 2011; Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012).

SNSs, as a means of online marketing, allow companies to follow consumer trends and communicate more directly with target segments to gain market share and revenue (Holzner, 2009). In the context of hospitality and tourism, SNSs provide a platform for tourists to share their experiences, opinions, and information

online in the form of text, photos and videos (Sigala, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The tourism and hospitality industries have started leveraging the functions of SNSs for their promotions. For example, destination marketers analyze online target markets and integrate targeted channels to build a more vibrant destination image. Sigala (2012) has also pointed out that because of the imperatives of competition and survival, the tourism industry is developing Web 2.0, which includes SNSs for transforming the behavior of potential tourists, developing new business models and improving tourism services.

Due to its unrivaled contribution to the growth of users and online traffic on SNSs, Facebook has become a realm of interest for scholars exploring the psychological processes and effects of social networking (Wise, Alhabash, & Park, 2010). Scholars have stated that Facebook is a mine of consumer information and a revolutionary means of spreading information (Hsu, 2012). Even if a simple web search or browsing does not provide sufficient information, SNSs' contents can be useful for potential consumers when identifying and making decisions (Becker, Naaman, & Gravano, 2009). Xiang and Gretzel (2010) argued that tourists use social media as an information source for travel planning.

In this study, the researchers draw on the literature and experimentation to investigate whether there are differences between the most important two types of information processing (i.e., surfing and searching) on travel-related Facebook pages in terms of cognitive response. While perhaps similar at first blush, the two types are unique in that the surfing condition does not imply a

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mental target while the searching condition does have a mental target. To date, many studies have examined how photos in online media influence users' cognitive responses with the assumption that visual information allows individuals to pay thorough attention to behavior cues and to communicate accurately (e.g., Dehkordi, Zarei, & Dehkordi, 2008; Kim & Lee, 2011; Wise & Kim, 2008). In a related vein, it was reported that photos depicting destinations, one aspect of marketing activities, lead to a personal impression about the destination (Martínez & Alvarez, 2010).

Another line of research on SNSs has examined how cognitive responses vary depending on individual characteristics and experiences. Gender has frequently been identified as an influential factor in online travel-information searches (Kim, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007). Hum et al. (2011) have examined gender roles in Facebook photos by comparing the content and volume of profile photographs. Another important variable, technology experience has been investigated better to understand individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behavior in online environments (Chang & Chen, 2008).

For decades, DMOs have competed using a wide range of photos to provide information and to influence tourists' decision-making behavior (Akehurst, 2009; Hsu, Kang, & Lam, 2006). Yet despite the importance of tourist responses on SNSs, there has been little research on users' cognitive responses to photos linked to travel information via destinations' dedicated Facebook pages. The present study, therefore, extends the line of cognitive research on SNSs by examining individuals' visual recognition test results. Thus, the main purposes of this study are to: (1) examine the differences between searching and surfing for travel destinations in terms of recognition accuracy, (2) investigate the differences between searching and surfing based on gender differences, and (3) identify differences based on respondents' technology experiences.

To achieve these ends, the study investigated, in an experimental design setting, how accurately individuals recognize travel-related visual content when they surf or search on Facebook pages. More specifically, based on the Limited Capacity Model of Motivated Mediated Message Processing (LC4MP) (Lang, 2006, 2009), this study examines users' ability to encode visual tourism information acquired from Facebook pages by differentiating the two types of online information-search strategy conditions in participant's short-term memory. The current study will help researchers and industrial practitioners develop better strategies for utilizing effective SNS destination pages and offer, with greater efficacy, the visual information desired by potential tourists.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social networking sites

In the past few years, SNSs have become extremely popular on the Internet. By building upon Anderson's (2006) model of the long tail, Enders, Hungenberg, Denker, and Mauch (2008) have highlighted the potential that SNSs offer in terms of reaching a greater number of consumers. These sites are no longer mere conduits for friends to stay connected; they also now play a pivotal role in

explaining behavior in travel-information searches. Many SNSs allow individuals to post and share travel-related comments, opinions, and personal experiences, which then provide information to others who are seeking ideas. Weber (2009) noted that SNSs provide an online outlet for users with common interests or connections to gather and share thoughts, comments, and opinions. Prior studies have pointed out the significance of adapting to SNSs like Facebook because they increase the number of potential tourists as users search for online travel information (Australian Government, 2011; Leung & Law, 2013). To promote and advertise to prospective tourists' interests, most tourism and hospitality organizations have started to use SNSs. However, their adoption of social media is not a strictly linear progression: the use of SNSs requires marketers to step back from traditional thinking about marketing campaigns and focus more on building relationships (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011).

In terms of business-to-consumer, Sigala (2011) has stated that social media enables industry and Web 2.0 users to generate consumer value and build consumer relationships. Thus, businesses can create personalized value and individualized communication for specific consumers through SNSs. According to Sigala (2012), Web 2.0 not only engages consumers but also increases the opportunities for businesses to interact with consumers. This suggests that DMO marketers need to put more effort into understanding and developing consumers' information processing on SNSs.

2.2. The role of photos in destination-image formation

No one doubts that travel photos play a significant role in tourism (Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011). Photos and travel are linked intrinsically because photos shape the travel experience (Larsen, 2008; Lo et al., 2011) and provide an opportunity for tourists to share experiences with others (Groves & Timothy, 2001). They have also stated that sharing photos with those outside the travel party can also enhance the bond between the tourist and the audience. Photos play a very deep symbolic role in helping to construct travel memories (Bærenholdt, Framke, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2004).

The effects of photos on SNSs are explained by previous findings in cognitive psychology. Human beings learn and get information more efficiently from visual images than from other sources (Höfner & Schwartz, 2011; Imhof, Scheiter, & Gerjets, 2011). Visual images have the power to create a simplification of a large number of associations and pieces of information connected with places (Day, Skidmore, & Koller, 2002). Considering the role of photos in tourism and their effectiveness in altering the cognitive process, it is logical to presume that visual images are a very efficient communication method on SNSs – and particularly on tourism-related sites.

2.3. The limited capacity model of motivated mediated message processing

As Fig. 1 depicts, the LC4MP is a model of mediated message processing. It describes all communication as a continuous interac-

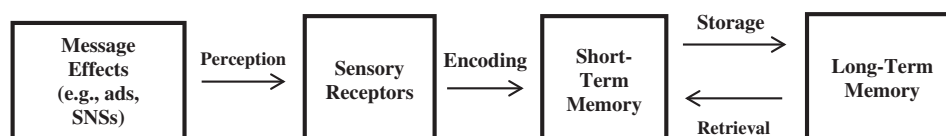


Fig. 1. The limited capacity model of motivated, mediated, message processing. Note: This diagram depicts the cognitive processes involved in media exposure.

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