



Reconciling unsatisfying tourism experiences: Message type effectiveness and the role of counterfactual thinking



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HIGHLIGHTS

- In case of unsatisfying tourism experiences, a marketing message can improve attitudes towards a destination and recommendation intention.
- User-generated messages are more effective than destination-generated messages in improving tourists' attitude towards a destination and recommendation intention.
- Emotionally appealing messages are more effective than rationally appealing message in improving tourists' attitude towards a destination and recommendation intention.
- Unsatisfied individuals engaged in downward counterfactual thinking respond more positively to the marketing message than individuals engaged in upward counterfactual thinking or no counterfactual thinking.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 August 2016

Received in revised form

9 December 2016

Accepted 9 December 2016

Keywords:

Destination marketing
Post-trip experience
Post-purchase evaluation
Message effectiveness
Counterfactual thinking
Message appeal
Message authorship

ABSTRACT

While attracting new tourists is an important issue in destination marketing, it is also imperative to manage tourists' experience post-trip, particularly in cases of unsatisfying experiences. Yet, the questions of how to rectify unsatisfying tourism experiences received little attention in tourism scholarship. In the present research, we investigated the effectiveness of different forms of marketing messages and the role of counterfactual thinking in the ability of a marketing message to improve tourists' attitudes towards the destination and intentions to recommend, when a tourism experience was not up to tourists' satisfaction. A scenario-based experiment was conducted with 480 respondents. The results showed that user-generated messages and the messages employing emotional appeal were more impactful than destination-generated or rational messages. Respondents who engaged in downward counterfactual thinking, that is imagining the situation in which their experience could have been worse, was shown to have a greater positive effect on unsatisfied tourists.

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1. Introduction

"Coming to Vegas Soon? We know waiting is the worst part. Tell us how you countdown the days". Just as this Facebook post from the official Las Vegas tourism page, destinations commonly target potential tourists in their advertising. In fact, destination advertising plays an important role in attracting tourists to a destination (Stienmetz & Fesenmaier, 2013), and naturally much of tourism marketing research has been dedicated to identifying the ways to draw potential tourists to a destination (Byun & Jang, 2015; Min,

Martin, & Jung, 2013; Quintal, Lee, & Soutar, 2010). Messages oriented toward tourists' post-travel experience, however, are rarely seen. Tourism experience is not limited to the experience *in situ* and involves making sense of and evaluating tourism experiences upon tourists' return home (Aho, 2001). It must be also recognized that, despite the best efforts, destinations may not always have provided satisfying experiences for tourists for various reasons (Alegre & Garau, 2010). In line with the expectancy-disconfirmation model proposed by Oliver (1980), when the actual performance is worse than tourists' expectations, tourists are eventually dissatisfied with their trip. Additionally, according to Oliver and Swan (1989)'s equity theory, if tourists perceive that they incurred more costs than benefits, they are unsatisfied. Various other factors, such as unforeseen events or circumstances, could prevent tourists from

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having a satisfying trip (de Sausmarez, 2007). These aspects point to the need to understand how individuals evaluate their tourism experiences post-trip and what can be done to lessen the effect of one unsatisfying experience on subsequent tourist decisions regarding the destination.

Previous studies have concluded that post purchase communication can reduce consumer regret and alleviate negative affect associated with unsatisfying product experiences (Chang & Tseng, 2014; Mao & Oppewal, 2010; Milliman & Decker, 1990). For example, it has been argued that consumers whose expectations were not met by a product/service are likely to look for information post-purchase to justify that they have made the right choice (Anderson, 1973). Such findings suggest that post-purchase communication that supports a consumer's decision can be effective in reconciling consumers' unsatisfying experiences. However, to be successful, these messages need to be carefully designed and communicated. For example, rational and emotional appeal types have been embraced in design of such messages (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Page & Brewster, 2007; Zhang, Sun, Liu, & Knight, 2014). Rational messages are oriented towards providing objective and practical information, whereas emotional messages are crafted to appeal to affective and psychological aspects associated with a product experience (Pallak, Murrioni, & Koch, 1983). The effect of the communication could also depend on message authorship: User Generated Content (UGC) or Destination Generated Content (DGC) (Lim, Chung, & Weaver, 2012). Generally, UGC is seen as more effective in enhancing customers' attitude as it is perceived as more reliable and trustworthy (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011).

On the consumer side, counterfactual thinking, or the act of imagining alternative realities in which the factual past outcome is modified (Roese, 1997), could influence how information is processed and perceived (Krishnamurthy & Sivaraman, 2002; Nan, 2008). Since unsatisfying product experiences can trigger negative emotions (Roese, 1997), unsatisfied tourists are likely to engage in counterfactual thinking. The phenomenon of counterfactual thinking has been well acknowledged in the advertising literature due to its close relationship with how individuals perceive advertising messages (Baek, Shen, & Reid, 2013). Krishnamurthy and Sivaraman (2002) see counterfactual thinking as a problem solving process where people arrive at judgments of how outcomes could have been different by comparing good and bad solutions to the problem. They argue that engaging in counterfactual thinking results in more careful scrutiny of the advertising argument on the part of the consumers than when not engaged in counterfactual thinking.

To our knowledge, no studies have integrated message authorship, message appeal, and the human tendency to think counterfactually nor explored their role in destination marketing. This is particularly the case in literature related to post-trip communication intended to help tourists to reconcile unsatisfying experiences. Given this background, this research had two research objectives: 1) to uncover whether, after an unsatisfying destination experience, a tourist's attitude towards the destination can be enhanced by post-trip marketing message exposure and 2) to explore whether a tourist's attitude towards a message, his/her attitude towards a destination and his/her recommendation intention can vary as a function of message authorship, message appeal, and counterfactual thinking, all in the case of an unsatisfying tourism experience.

2. Literature review

2.1. Message appeal types

Message appeal types tend to influence message effectiveness and customer response (Liu, Wen, Wei, & Zhao, 2013). This is

reflected in the idea that consumers' decision making is mainly either thought-based (rational) or feeling-based (emotional) (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2004). Specifically, rational message appeal is intended towards objective, practical information whereas emotional message appeal is oriented towards psychological aspects induced from the product, service, or brand. Previous studies reported mixed findings in terms of which advertisement appeal is more effective in inducing a desirable consumer response (Albers-Miller & Royne Stafford, 1999; Lwin, Phau, Huang, & Lim, 2014). While some studies demonstrate that a rational message is a good predictor of message likeability and attitude towards a brand (Aaker & Stayman, 1992; Cornelis, Adams, & Cauberghe, 2012), others show that emotional message is more effective as it draws attention to and facilitates emotional connection with a product or a brand (Panda, Panda, & Mishra, 2013). Such a discrepancy can be attributed to differences in factors that influence message effectiveness, such as characteristics of audiences, product type and product involvement level (i.e. an individual's interest in purchasing a product) (Lwin et al., 2014; Yoo & Kim, 2005).

Product type is one factor that influences effectiveness of message appeal types. The general consensus is that a rational message works best for tangible and utilitarian products while an emotional message is most effective for intangible and hedonic products (Albers-Miller & Stafford, 1999; Drolet, Williams, & Lau-Gesk, 2007). That is, a rational message is more suitable when choice of the product is based on logical thinking, such as medical services (Huertas & Campomar, 2009), while emotional messages work better when a product is in nature highly experiential and hedonic, such as restaurant meals, hotel stays, and vacations (Lwin & Phau, 2013). In the non-hedonic service context such as a hospital, a rational appeal tends to play an important role since consumers require substantial information in order to make a decision (Berry, Conant & Parasuraman., 1991). In this vein, studies such as Laskey, Seaton, and Nicholls (1994) have suggested that messages for non-hedonic service products apply rational appeal more often. However, experiential consumption of services and tourism products, which are essentially more hedonic, are rather in line with emotional appeal; therefore, an emotive message could be more effective in increasing attitude, future behavioral intention as well as in gaining and retaining attention and interest about a service product (Lwin et al., 2014). Additionally, the emotional message helps tangibilize a tourism product (Mattila, 2001) as it allows tourists to develop affective and subjective impressions of the imperceptible (Aaker & Stayman, 1992; Douglas, Mills, & Kavanaugh, 2007, pp. 3–31). Overall, the literature suggests that an emotional message is more effective in evoking positive attitudes and behaviors (Jin & Sook, 2003; Mortimer, 2008; Rodríguez-Molina, Frías-Jamilena, & Castañeda-García, 2015), and thus emotional appeal-type message are more commonly used in hospitality and tourism contexts (Yüksel, Kayacan, & Yılmaz, 2014). Effectiveness of message appeal also depends on the dominant concern of the message receiver. For instance, consumers who expect a sense of loss after a product purchase tend to pay closer attention to loss-framed messages (Monga & Zhu, 2005). In this vein, since unsatisfied consumers are emotionally-oriented and tend to experience regret and/or anger (Bonifield & Cole, 2007), it is likely that they may better respond to a message congruent with their mood rather than reasoning. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a-b. In the case of messages oriented towards addressing unsatisfying experiences at a destination, emotional rather than rational message exposure will work better in improving tourists' attitudes toward the destination (H1a) and recommendation intentions (H1b).

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