



Message framing and regulatory focus effects on destination image formation



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of message framing and how a match or mismatch between message framing and individuals' regulatory focus can influence their destination image perceptions and visit intentions utilizing attribute framing and regulatory focus fit theories. This study also examines the mediating role of cognitive fluency and emotional state on attribute framing effects on destination image formation and visit intentions. Findings indicate that framing of marketing messages exerts significant influences on consumers' decision making and destination selection process. Consumers under gain-framed message condition tend to have higher destination image perceptions compared to those under loss-framed message conditions. A match between attribute framing and regulatory focus results in formation of better destination image perceptions compared to mismatch. Furthermore, cognitive fluency and emotional state mediate attribute framing effects on destination image formation.

1. Introduction

Destinations offers experiential products that require significant time and effort commitment and can easily cost a lot more than most other everyday purchases (Lu & Gursoy, 2015). Furthermore, since travelers cannot evaluate the quality of experiential offerings before experiencing them, destination selection poses significant consumption risks (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Matloka & Buhalis, 2010; Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015). Thus, information plays an especially critical role in travelers' decision making and destination selection process. Furthermore, information acquisition and processing are two of the most crucial stages in decision making process that can have significant impacts on destination image formation; and thus, on destination selection and making on-site decisions such as selecting accommodations, transportation, activities and tours (Coenders, Ferrer-Rosell, & Martínez-García, 2016; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). Therefore, information acquisition and processing stages provide some of the best opportunities for marketing managers to influence travelers' destination image perceptions and their decision making process (Ali, Amin, & Cobanoglu, 2016; Lu & Chen, 2015).

While studies argue that a number of factors can influence information search and processing behaviors (Kim, 2014; Kim, Lehto, &

Morrison, 2007; Zhang, Gursoy, & Xu, 2017), the way information is presented (framed) can influence how that information is processed and used in decision making (Kapuściński & Richards, 2016). The “framing effects” theory suggest that individuals react to identical problems in different ways depending on how the problems is framed (Liu & Mattila, 2016). Since the introduction of “framing effects” by Nobel laureate in economics Kahneman in 1981, “framing effects” has been studied extensively in the fields of psychology and sociology, but such studies are mainly focused on risky choice framing (Larrick & Soll, 2008; Putrevu, 2010). In the field of tourism, Kapuściński and Richards (2016) have examined media effect on travelers' perceptions of risk resulting from terrorism and political instability. Their findings suggest that the use of risk-amplifying frame and risk-attenuating frame result in higher and lower ratings of risk respectively. Their findings also indicate that psychographic characteristics are likely to moderate influences of news frames on perceived risk. In recent years, scholars have started applying the principles of “framing effects” on framing other choices beyond the risky choice framing. For example, Lee and Aaker (2004) have utilized the framing effect concept in advertising studies and reported that the way an advertising message is framed, either as positively or negatively (e.g. enjoy the peace or escape the noise), is likely to result in significantly different reactions from consumers.

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Several studies have examined the influence of advertising messages on travelers' attitudes, destination image formation and visit intentions (Amar, Droulers, & Legohérel, 2017; Zhang, Cai, & Lu, 2014). Those studies have concluded that advertising messages can significantly influence travelers' attitudes, destination image formation and visit intentions. Studies have further reported that positive messages are likely to work better in the context of experiential products because a positively framed option generates positive associations and thus seems more attractive than a negatively framed option (Seta, McCormick, Gallagher, McElroy, & Seta, 2010) as in the case of the destination slogan "Up above, there is paradise; down below, there are Suzhou and Hangzhou" used by Suzhou and Hangzhou in China. This positively framed slogan has been so successful that many people have indicated that they visit Suzhou and Hangzhou just because of this slogan (Ma, 2006).

Even though the way a message is framed can play critical roles in travelers' attitudes and destination image formation and their visit intentions, message framing has not received much attention from tourism scholars. This study aims to fill this void in the literature by examining the impacts of attribute framing effects of destination advertising messages on travelers destination image perceptions and visit intentions. The attribute framing, as the name suggest, refers to framing of an attribute of a product or an object as positively or negatively. For example, if we say that "97 percent of visitors to a specific destination are satisfied," we implicitly emphasize "satisfaction" as an outcome of visiting the destination. On the other hand, if we say that "only 3 percent of visitors to a specific destination are dissatisfied," we implicitly emphasize "dissatisfaction" as an outcome of visiting that destination.

Exposure to externally generated product frames is one of the factors that can influence consumer information processing. Another critical factor that influence consumer information processing is the fit between the message framing and the consumer focus. Regulatory fit theory suggests that if an anticipated future outcome (not) fits individuals' current regulatory state, the motivation (not) to move forward with a decision will increase (decrease) in intensity (Higgins, 1997). Therefore, a fit between the way a message is framed and an individual's regulatory focus can have significant impact on that individual's decision making process (Higgins, 2000). While an anticipated positive outcome can sustain or fit a promotion state (i.e., by maintaining promotion focus eagerness), an anticipated negative outcome can sustain or fit a prevention state (i.e., by maintaining prevention focus vigilance).

Studies also suggest that consumers' cognitive fluency can have significant effect on their image formation and decision making process (Lu, Gursoy, & Lu, 2016; Tang & Jang, 2014; Thai & Yuksel, 2017). Cognitive fluency, also known as the ease of information processing, can enable consumers to develop associations with minimal effort. Consumers utilize these associations during their image formation and decision making process. Studies also suggest that the emotions generated by a message can also influence individuals image formation and decision making process. If a message generates a positive emotional state, individuals are likely to develop positive associations while the opposite is true for messages that may generate negative emotions (Zhang et al., 2017). Therefore, both cognitive fluency and emotional state of individuals can mediate the influence of message framing and regulatory focus on image formation and purchase intentions.

This study aims to examine the impact of message framing and how a match or mismatch between message framing and individuals' regulatory focus can influence their destination image perceptions and visit intentions utilizing attribute framing and regulatory focus fit theories. Furthermore, this study also examines the mediating role of cognitive fluency and emotional state on the aforementioned relationship.

Drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of the attribute framing and regulatory focus fit theories, this study aims to make several

theoretical contributions to the existing literature. First, findings of this study will contribute to the literature by identifying the impact of message framing on individuals' destination image perceptions and their visit intentions utilizing the attribute framing theory. Second, findings will help us understand the impacts of a match or mismatch between message framing approach and individuals regulatory focus on their destination image perceptions and visit intentions utilizing both attribute framing and regulatory focus fit theories. Third, findings of this study will help us understand the mediating effects of cognitive fluency and emotional state on the relationships between attribute framing and destination image formation. This study seeks to advance the existing knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the impacts of message framing and individuals' regulatory focus on their destination image formation and visit intentions. This study will also provide practical strategies to help destination marketers and managers develop and communicate marketing messages that can enable tourists to form positive destination image and purchase intentions.

2. Literature review

The framing theory was first proposed by Goffman (1974). In his work titled "frame analysis," he argued that individuals interpret what is going on around themselves utilizing either their primary natural or social frameworks. While natural frameworks are used to interpret purely physical occurrences such as the state of the weather, social frameworks provide background understanding for interpreting individuals' behaviors, attitudes and actions. Framing theory is later adopted by cognitive psychologists (Kahneman & Tversky, 1981) to study the effects of information framing on individuals interpretations, behaviors, attitudes and actions. In cognitive psychology, framing effect is considered as a form of a cognitive bias, in which people react to a particular choice in different ways depending on how it is presented, e.g., as a loss or a gain (Plous, 1993).

The framing theory suggests that the way a piece of information is presented (called "the frame") influences how individuals process that information. Frames are abstractions that work to organize or structure message meaning (Kapuściński & Richards, 2016). The most common use of frames is the frame marketers place on messages they attempt to deliver to their target customers in order to influence their perceptions of products/services. Through utilizing the principles of framing theory, marketers do not only tell the target audience what to think about (image formation), but also how to think about that product/service (Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998; Liu & Mattila, 2016; Pechmann & Catlin, 2016). As suggested by previous studies, these perceptions are later used by target audiences as critical determinants in their image formation and decision making process.

While the initial research on framing effects is focused on risky choice framing effects, several scholars have also examined the attribute framing effects on customer information processing and decision making (Liu & Mattila, 2016; Pechmann & Catlin, 2016). Most studies that examined attribute framing affects in consumer behavior field have focused on two areas: advertising communications and sales promotions. Studies on framing effects of advertisements suggest that the framing mode of information presented in an advertising message can have a significant impact on the persuasion effect of an advertisement, and the framing mode can also have an interaction effect with the information source of the advertisement and the individual's cognitive demand (Pechmann & Catlin, 2016; Zhang & Buda, 1999). Therefore, framing mode is considered to be a significant determinant of advertising effect because the information framing mode used in an advertising message can serve as a critical determinant of how target audiences process the information presented (Kim, 2006).

Destination organizations and marketers continuously use advertising to promote their destination offerings and how those offerings can satisfy travelers needs and wants in order to influence their perceptions of destination image and destination brand (Amar et al., 2017;

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