When less is more: Sustainability messaging, destination image, and processing fluency

Lydia Hanks, Lu Zhang, Nathan Line, and Sean McGinley

Introduction

In an effort to communicate their commitment to the environment, many hotel companies provide guests with information about their efforts to promote sustainability and the positive impact of these efforts on the natural environment. However, relatively little is known about the communication of these messages and their effects on consumer perceptions of the message content. Marketing messages can vary along a number of important communication elements including the medium, the fluency of the message, and the cognitive schemas that the message evokes; and research has shown that reactions to marketing messages can be significantly affected by manipulating these elements (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009; Van Rompay et al., 2010; Zhang, 2014). Unfortunately, little research exists exploring the extent to which such variables affect perceptions of and reactions to sustainability messages.

To further complicate the issue of sustainability communication, recent research has shown that consumers do not react uniformly to corporate efforts to promote environmental sustainability. For example, Line and Hanks (in press) found that tourists’ attitudes toward environmental sustainability differ depending on the cognitive image of the destination. Extant literature suggests that while reactions to sustainability messages can vary based on both the form and context of the message, current theoretical perspectives cannot definitively account for the effects of such variance on consumer behavior. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to address this gap in the literature from the theoretical perspective of information processing.
theory (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which predicts reactions to messages based on the congruence of new information with existing cognitive schemas. We propose that the most effective sustainability communication strategy will depend both on the presentation of the message and the destination’s image. Specifically, we predict that consumers will respond more favorably to highly fluent sustainability messages when the natural attributes of a destination are less salient (i.e., an urban tourism destination).

Theory

Urban destinations “are often much better developed than other types of destinations” and “are easily accessible through airports and scheduled services” (Edwards et al., 2008, p. 1033), while nature-based tourism (NBT) destinations tend to be “relatively undeveloped or undisturbed natural areas” (Lee, 2009, p. 215). Relatively little research has examined the relationship between destination image and environmentally friendly product consumption. In this study, we are interested in the interplay between destination image and marketing messages about environmentally friendly hotel initiatives.

Information processing theory (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) posits that people engage in two types of information processing: systematic and heuristic. In “systematic processing” (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), the individual analyzes all available data and uses this information to arrive at a conclusion. Conversely, “heuristic processing” relies on stereotypes, clues, proxy characteristics, or cues to evaluate a situation (Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). When faced with new pieces of information during the decision-making process, a person’s motivation to process that information either systematically or heuristically often relies heavily the extent to which the new piece of information is congruent with an existing (Van Rompay, De Vries, & Van Venrooij,
If the information is congruent with the existing schema, the individual may engage in heuristic processing, as there is no need for further examination or information gathering. However, when the new information is incongruent with the existing situation, an individual may resolve the discrepancy by engaging in deeper, systematic processing.

A second element that impacts the way in which a consumer perceives and utilizes new information is processing fluency: “the subjective experience of ease with which people process information” (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009, p. 219). Prior research has demonstrated that a number of elements can impact the fluency of a message. For example, the physical characteristics of the medium impact message fluency (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009), as can the level of linguistic fluency. Linguistic fluency includes the following dimensions: phonological fluency, lexical fluency, syntactic fluency, and orthographic fluency.

Processing fluency has been previously demonstrated to have a significant impact on consumer skepticism, as prior research has shown that people tend to associate high levels of fluency with truth and lower levels of fluency with falsehoods (e.g., Schwarz, 2004). In this study, we investigate how the fluency of a marketing message detailing a hotel’s green initiatives impacts consumer skepticism about that message in the context of both NBT versus urban tourism destinations. Specifically, we predict that when customers are presented with a high fluency message regarding green initiatives at a destination, the high fluency will allow the individual to process the message heuristically, resulting in low levels of skepticism, regardless of destination. In the case of a low fluency message, however, the deeper systematic processing will kick in, motivating the individual to seek more information – in this case, information about the congruency of the sustainability message with the information that he or she already knows about the destination. Based on the tenets of information processing theory, we predict that when
the destination features natural attributes (i.e., an NBT destination), the congruency of the sustainability message and the destination image will result in low levels of skepticism and a more positive attitude toward the hotel. However, when the destination features a highly developed attribute structure (i.e., an urban destination) that is perceptually incongruent with the sustainability message, the customer will react with a higher level of skepticism and a less positive attitude.

Methods and Results

A 2 (Destination image: urban vs. NBT) x 2 (Processing fluency: high vs. low) experimental design was employed. A survey was created in which participants were asked to imagine taking a vacation to a destination depicted in a series of photos (see Appendix B). In one condition, a nature-based tourism destination was evoked, and in the second condition, respondents were presented with an urban tourism destination. In this condition, six color photos of a popular urban tourism destination were shown, followed by the questionnaire. Process fluency was manipulated by varying the presentation of the sustainability message along a number of elements. A 2x2 MANCOVA was conducted with destination image and processing fluency as independent variables, skepticism and attitude as dependent variables, and education, PEB, and GAI as covariates. The results show that there is a significant main effect of destination type on attitude, qualified by a significant interaction effect of destination type and fluency on skepticism and attitude. For low fluency conditions, participants exhibited higher level of skepticism for urban destinations than NBT destinations. For high fluency conditions, the difference between urban destinations and NBT destinations was not significant. Similarly, participants who read a low fluency CSR message showed more positive attitudes in the NBT condition as compared to the ones in the urban condition. Such a difference disappeared in the
condition of high processing fluency. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were both supported.

**Discussion and Theoretical Implications**

These results extend our understanding of current theoretical perspectives regarding the interplay between information processing, message fluency, and consumer reactions to sustainability messages. First, we found that the established relationships between process fluency and consumer skepticism is moderated by the consumer’s perceptions of the destination image. These findings extend our understanding of information processing by demonstrating the presence of a boundary condition for the impact of fluency on customer evaluations. Second, our results add to our understanding of information processing theory by demonstrating that it is not only the content, but also the congruency of the message with previously held perceptions, that influences the way in which an individual processes a sustainability marketing message. In our case, it was not the content of the low fluency message, but rather the congruency of this message with previously held perceptions about destination image, that determined whether the consumer processed the message systematically or heuristically.

Finally, the results of this study suggest conditions under which people may process information in a way that is not consistent with their previously established mental schemas. It is interesting to note that while urban destinations are not typically associated with sustainability in the minds of consumers, this fact was rendered irrelevant when they were presented with a message that was sufficiently highly fluent.