ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CONSUMER NARRATIVES FOR DESTINATION MARKETING

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Using tourists' stories to promote destinations is believed to be an innovative approach in destination marketing. This study conceptualizes and investigates the effectiveness of such an approach. This study supports the underlying premise of introducing narrative in marketing, that is, the narrative reasoning that human beings possess with which they can retrieve information better through a story. Furthermore, it is argued that the increased knowledge of a destination will have a stronger effect on the intention to visit a destination if the audiences can identify themselves with the story characters. Several managerial implications are also discussed.

KEYWORDS: destination marketing; online; tourism behavior

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of social media on the Internet, there has been a surge of interest in studying the use of consumer narratives (e.g., consumers' reviews and/ or stories) for marketing tourism and hospitality businesses (Godar, 2005; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2007; Wang, Tussyadiah, & Mattila, 2008). Narratives are widely believed to have a potential to be an effective way to market products/services. Indeed, Learned (2007) argued that storytelling in its many forms is one of the most powerful tools for presenting the truths of products, services, or brands, and that stories have the ability to convey the values of the products/services to the buying minds of the audiences. As a result, marketing through storytelling continues to gain popularity and is extensively adopted by companies in tourism and hospitality industry. Web 2.0–based local review sites and travel blogs (e.g., travelblogs.org, citysearch.com, yelp.com) are becoming increasingly popular forms of storytelling where destination marketing organizations (DMOs) have integrated blogs and other storylike features on their websites (e.g., Roadtrippers section on visitPA.com).

Previous work on the use of narratives in the field of advertising has focused on the influence of narrative structure to audiences' information processing (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Escalas, 2004a, 2004b). Indeed, this research suggests that narratives are extremely effective in conveying information and influencing evaluation about products/services because of their ability to help audiences simulate mental models of the product benefits. Adaval and Wyer (1998) found that consumers tend to favorably evaluate products about which the information is conveyed through narratives (i.e., in thematically and temporally related sequence) instead of merely a list of attributes; this claim is supported by the study of Mattila (2000, 2002). Escalas (20041, 2004b) introduced the term *mental simulation* in narrative processing, whereby it is argued that a consumer forms a cognitive construction of the hypothetical scenario based on the chronology (i.e., temporal dimension) and causality (i.e., relational organization) of the story. In a more recent study using a psycholinguistic paradigm, Luna (2005) argued that an accurate and integrated mental representation of ad contents is influential for ad comprehension and evaluation. He further claimed that to form the integrated mental representation, the text in an ad should be coherent and possess referential continuity.

In the field of tourism and hospitality, narrative marketing is particularly significant since tourism and hospitality products are characterized with their experiential values. Polkinghorne (1997), Gabriel (2000), and Mattila (2000, 2002) argue that stories are uniquely effective in representing and conveying lived experiences because they offer a logic for the narrators and audiences, and therefore, narrative appeals should be effective in communicating the value of tourism and hospitality as experiential products to audiences (Mattila, 2000, 2002; Padgett & Allen, 1997). Recent studies on consumer narratives in the context of tourism marketing have focused on analyzing the contents of travelers' stories for their implications to destination marketing (Pan et al., 2007; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008). Using narrative theory and following the narrative structure analysis proposed by Escalas (2004a, 2004b), and more recently, Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2008) proposed a methodology for assessing the effectiveness of narrative marketing by extracting the key marketing strategies from blog contents of a DMO website. Despite their contribution to the better understanding of the role of tourists' stories from the perspective of the organization, the study did not directly evaluate the marketing effectiveness of stories. To that end, this study assesses the effectiveness of using consumers' stories for marketing tourism and hospitality products by analyzing the relationship between story comprehension and product evaluation and, more important, the behavioral intention of audiences. Based on these results, this study also offers several managerial implications for DMOs and other tourism and hospitality businesses wishing to use narratives as part of their destination marketing strategy.

MARKETING THROUGH NARRATIVES

Narrative, and the act of narrating, has been a subject of research across different disciplines. Most of this research came to a common belief that narrative

is the most effective device to understand human experience. In other words, it is argued that we can understand the ways people (and we) experience the world through understanding stories. Based on his comprehensive literature review in the field of anthropology, literary theory, philosophy, psychology, geography, organizational theory, and many other disciplines, Craig (2007) suggests that narrative is the most likely medium to capture human experience as lived in context and over time. One of the fundamental assumptions that support such research is the idea that human beings and stories are intertwined and that narrative is the closest attempt to understand experience (Andrews, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Eakin, 1999; Varaki, 2007). Furthermore, Mattila (2000) argues that the facts of an experience are constituted by its sequence of events; the act of narrating involves interconnecting these facts into a pattern or structure representing the experience. Thus, as experience is a narrative phenomenon, stories and the process of storytelling act as a device for interpreting experience.

Additionally, research indicated that narratives can be viewed as a means to make sense of decision and action. Sarbin (1986) proposed the term *narratory principle* whereby people think, feel, act, and make moral choices according to narrative structures. More recently, Gabriel (2000) argued that the process of storytelling can be considered as the process of meaning making, that is, people create stories to make sense of their lives. He argued that there are mechanisms through which meaning is generated in narratives and that represent either a way of making sense of specific parts of the narratives or a way of making connections between different parts. That is, a story can act as a contributing value justification for human action (Cragan & Shields, 1998). Following from this research, it is argued that narratives offer the potential to persuade by encouraging people to make desired (from the sellers' perspective) choices. The following sections describe the results of research related to narrative processing, narrative structure, and narrative transportation that provide a theoretical framework guiding this study (see Figure 1).

Narrative Reasoning and Narrative Processing

The underlying premise of narrative in information processing is that people possess (use and can develop) a skill called narrative reasoning. Worth (2005) argues that people have the capacity to reason narratively in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience and that narrative knowledge (i.e., knowing what it is like) is beyond the traditional form of knowledge (i.e., knowing how and knowing what; Worth, 2005). Polkinghorne (1988) indicates that narrative reasoning is different from discursive reasoning: Whereas discursive reasoning captures the logic; narrative reasoning is related with imagination. Narrative processing is the process of retrieving the readily available information in a story. As imagination has the potential to help facilitate causal judgments of likely future events, the capacity to imagine and narrative meaning construction are intertwined (Worth, 2005). Formulating narrative processing in the context of advertising, Escalas (2004a, 2004b) defines the concept of mental simulation in which audiences form an imitative mental representation of events (i.e., in the form of a story) and the process of narrative transportation, which is defined as the immersion into the

Figure 1
Proposed Framework of Narrative Persuasion
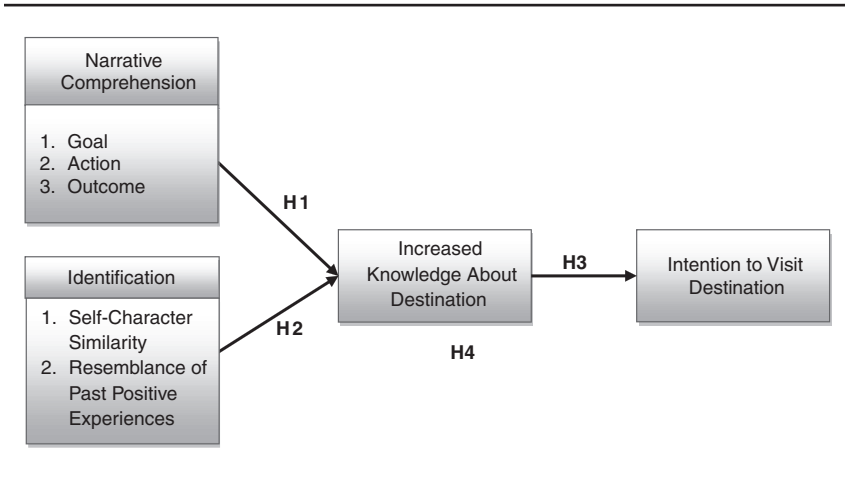
text (i.e., a situation where a person becomes lost in a story). Furthermore, researchers in psychology define mental simulation as the "instruction to imagine," meaning that narrative has the potential to be persuasive. Extensive research indicates that the narrative power of a story has the ability to "manipulate" mass audiences (Boje, 1999). Thus, it is proposed that stories have the ability to encourage audiences to "imagine" (i.e., to form a mental representation of) the consumption of a product/service. That is, within the context of destination marketing, tourist stories help audiences gain information about a place by recognizing coherence in the story, which, in turn, generates the motivation to visit the destination.

Narrative Structure

In the attempt to conceptualize the definition of narrative, most scholars focus on its structure and features (i.e., what constitutes a narrative). One of the widely appraised descriptions of narrative structure is the concept of "narrative connection" introduced by philosopher Noël Carroll (2001). In outlining the theory of narrative, Carroll provides a networked notion that emerged from a number of important features within narrative that are connected together to make the narrative understandable. He argues that the narrative connection can be obtained when

(1) the discourse represents at least two events and/or states of affairs (2) in a globally forward-looking manner (3) concerning the career of at least one unified subject (4) where the temporal relations between the events and/or states of affairs are perspicuously ordered, and (5) where the earlier events in the sequence are at least causally necessary conditions for the causation of later events and/or states of affairs (or are contributions thereto). (Carroll, 2001, p. 126)

Based on Carroll's (2001) argument, narrative discourse is not merely a list of several events or state of affairs but must include a sequence of events, which implies a temporal ordering. However, a mere temporally ordered list of events cannot be considered narrative because it has no unified subject. Another condition often suggested that links the multiple states together in a way that would make a sequence identifiable as a narrative is causation (Carroll, 2001; Worth, 2005). Furthermore, the description of narratives must also focus on the transition from one event to another, which defines a narrative with its beginning and end. This refers to the construction of a plot. The plot crafts the multiple events into a story (Carroll, 2001; Worth, 2005). Indeed, Jameson (2001) argues that plot holds a story together as an abstract concept that explains the nature of a narrative. Furthermore, Ricoeur (1984) claims that a story must be an organization of events into an intelligible whole such that audience can always capture the "thought" of the story. Akin to the aforementioned concepts, Escalas (2004a, 2004b) suggests two elements that characterize a narrative: temporal dimension and relational organization. Temporal dimension refers to a plot, which is translated by Escalas as the chronological nature of a narrative. Thus, a narrative is composed of episodes within a time line that characterize a narrative into its beginning, middle, and end. Relational organization refers to the causality within a narrative; that is, a narrative consists of an episode schema that explains the characters' goal–action–outcome. These conditions (of the narrative structure) are believed to influence the narrative processing that affects audiences' information processing and, in the end, behavior toward advertisements. Based on these notions of narrative and narrative structure, it is hypothesized that

Hypothesis 1a: The ability to comprehend the plot and schema of tourists' stories as indicated by understanding the reasons for actions will increase the overall knowledge about the destination.

Hypothesis 1b: The ability to comprehend the plot and schema of tourists' stories as indicated by understanding action will increase the overall knowledge about the destination.

Hypothesis 1c: The ability to comprehend the plot and schema of tourists' stories as indicated by understanding the outcomes of action will increase the overall knowledge about the destination.

The Role of Self in Mental Simulation

Escalas (2004a) also states that "while one can mentally simulate an episode involving other people, mental simulation typically involve the self" (p. 38). Furthermore, Phillips, Olson, and Baumgartner (1995) suggest the term *consumption visions*, whereby consumers form self-constructed mental simulations of future consumption situations. They assert that the consumption visions can motivate consumption behavior because these visions involve self-enacting, detailed, product-related behavior. The self–brand connection may be formed based on the perceived psychological benefits from the product (Escalas, 2004b). People are motivated to act positively toward a product if they could see themselves in the

self-constructed mental stories (within the settings described in the narratives) as deriving values from consuming the product. In other words, people will have positive attitudes toward products in self-relevant stories (Feagin, 2007).

When relating to a story, a consumer might link the products in a narrative to the achievement of self-related goals. The connection is a result of a process of mapping the goal–action–outcome structure within the narrative with self-related stories in the memory. This mapping process can be achieved through the association of self with the narratives. Therefore, it is argued that audiences will be able to imagine the benefits of consuming the same products with the characters in the stories if: (a) they see themselves as similar to the characters (i.e., the audiences think that the characters resemble themselves) and/or (2) they can relate the story to stories stored in their memories (i.e., the audiences recognize similar occurrences in the past). Hence, it can be suggested that the overall knowledge about the destination will increase when audiences can relate to the character(s) within the story and can identify with the story character(s). This, in turn, provides the foundation for the following hypotheses:

> *Hypothesis 2a:* The ability to identify with character(s) in the narratives will increase the overall knowledge about the destination.
> *Hypothesis 2b:* The ability to identify resemblance to own past positive experience in the narratives will increase the overall knowledge about the destination.

Furthermore, following Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) and others (Fodness & Murray, 1999; Hwang, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2006; Vogt, Fesenmaier, & McKay, 1993), it is argued that when audiences are able to develop better knowledge about a destination, they will be able to assess and evaluate the value of the destination. This, in turn, will influence the intention to visit the destination. Hence, visit intention is hypothesized to increase significantly, led by the increased knowledge resulting from the narrative reasoning and processing. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

> *Hypothesis 3:* The increased knowledge of a destination will influence the intention to visit the destination.

Finally, following the concept of consumption visions proposed by Phillips et al. (1995), it is argued that one's attitude toward ads is influenced by the ability to form a mental construct of the consumption. That is, since the process of forming the mental construct of consumption involves self-enactment, the intention to visit the destination depends on one's ability to relate to the consumption settings *and* the consumption outcome. The ability to identify similarities of self with the story character(s) will generate the consumption vision, that is, the audience will have a better picture of himself or herself consuming the product. Hence, identification of self in the stories will lead to intention to consume the product. The process of relating self with the stories to form the consumption visions can also be influenced by the past experiences—the audience will develop the purchase

intention if they perceive that the process and outcome of consumption is similar to their past positive consumption experiences stored in their memories. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

> *Hypothesis 4a:* Identification of similarity between the self and the character(s) in the story will influence the intention to visit the destination.
> *Hypothesis 4b:* Identification of resemblances to past positive experience will influence the intention to visit the destination.

RESEARCH METHOD

The goal of this study is to assess the effectiveness of destination marketing using tourists' stories. Several conditions were considered to select the stories for this study: (a) the stories must be written by actual tourists, (b) the stories must portray tourism experiences at the destination, and (c) the stories must be made available to audiences by a DMO for marketing purposes. The blog section of Pennsylvania Tourist Office website (visitPA.com) was selected for the study as it invites travelers to Pennsylvania to share their experiences within the state and thus appears to meet the conditions. Interested public can submit their stories to the Pennsylvania Tourist Office. Stories are then selected and edited before publishing. The website features six different story genres; a story genre contains three to four trips to different parts of Pennsylvania and each trip contains several stories about daily tourism experience (see Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2008). The stories posted on four blog themes were used as stimuli for data collection.

A survey based on narrative structure items of Escalas's (2004a, 2004b) was designed. In particular, the first part of questionnaire consists of questions about "Identification," which are self-character identification/similarity (i.e., "I think the travelers in the stories could have been me") and resemblance to past experiences (i.e., "The plots of the stories remind me of my own past trip experiences"). The second section, on the other hand, consists of three questions related to audiences' understanding of the stories and focus on obtaining a general understanding of the plot and identification of the episode schema, which are related to the character(s)' goals, actions, and outcomes (i.e., "I know exactly the reasons why they took the trips," "I can fully understand the storytellers' feelings and emotions while they were traveling," and "I think they have achieved their goals by doing the trip activities described in the stories"). Furthermore, there is a question measuring increased knowledge about the destination (i.e., "I know the tourist spots in Pennsylvania better through the stories") and the intention to visit the destination (i.e., "I would like to visit the same places described in the stories to have similar experiences with the storytellers"). All questions were assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale (i.e., 1 for *strongly disagree* and 5 for *strongly agree*). The last part of the questionnaire was designed to collect information regarding the demographic characteristics of the participants.

A preliminary study was conducted to provide initial feedback on the conceptual framework and the wording of the questionnaire. Based on these responses, a final

questionnaire was developed and used as the basis of this study. A total of 250 students enrolled in four introductory classes in tourism from Spring 2007 to Fall 2008 of a large university located in Northeastern United States were asked to fill out the questionnaire as an additional task to the required class assignment on blog marketing; additionally, members of independent student clubs within the same university were invited to participate. This effort resulted in a total of 302 (242 students enrolled in introductory tourism courses and 60 student club members) usable responses. Students were chosen for this particular study based on the fact that most bloggers (i.e., both writers and readers) are younger. Furthermore, according to the MacKay and Smith (2005), younger respondents recall the written description about tourism destinations better than older respondents. The task was a take-home assignment; each student was given a specific URL of a series of stories on the RoadTrippers Blog. Stories assigned to a particular student were written by the same storyteller(s) in a chronological order. All students were required to read the stories thoroughly by navigating through all the provided links on the specified URL address (http://www.experiencepa.com/visitpa/roadTrippers.pa).

This study employs path analysis to examine the hypothesized relationships between constructs developed in the model outlined in Figure 1 (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998) and was estimated using AMOS 16 (Arbuckle, 2007). Path analysis was deemed appropriate for this study as it can be used to assess the strength of direct and indirect relationships among a set of variables in which only one single indicator is taken into account per each variable (Yavas, Karatepe, Avci, & Tekinkus, 2003).

FINDINGS

The participants in this study were dominantly female (60%) and in the age-group of 18 to 24 years (65.1%), followed by 25 to 34 years (29.8%), 35 to 44 years (2.5%), and 45 to 54 years (2.5%). Before examining the hypothetical model, several statistical tests were conducted to assess the extent of differences between respondents from two different data collection procedures. Specifically, the results of a series of t tests indicate that the respondents are statistically similar in terms of intention to visit the destination (i.e., initial group mean = 3.33, additional group mean = 3.28, $t = .35$, $p = .73$) and degree of knowledge about the destination (i.e., initial group mean = 3.43, additional group mean = 3.61, $t = -1.28$, $p = .20$). Thus, it was concluded that there is no unwanted differences based on sample collection procedures.

Following this preliminary analysis, correlation analysis was employed to examine the pairwise relationships among all variables considered in the model. As presented in Table 1, the signs of the correlations between the variables appear to be reasonably consistent with the proposed conceptual model. Variables representing "Narrative Comprehension" (i.e., "Action" and "Outcome") correlate positively with "Increased Knowledge" ($r = .14$ and .13, $p < .05$); however, "Goal" does not correlate with the "Increased Knowledge." In addition, all "Narrative Comprehension" variables significantly correlate with "Intention to Visit

Table 1
Correlation Matrix Among Measured Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Comprehension of Goal							
2. Comprehension of Action	.29**						
3. Comprehension of Outcome	.27**	.29**					
4. Self–Character Similarity	.13*	.22**	.14*				
5. Resemblance to Past Experiences	.02	.17**	.02	.39**			
6. Increased Knowledge	.071	.14*	.13*	.22**	.22**		
7. Intention to Visit Destination	.16**	.23**	.15*	.46**	.40**	.30**	
Mean (SD)	3.84 (.78)	3.87 (.78)	3.90 (.84)	3.18 (1.16)	3.11 (1.13)	3.45 (1.05)	3.32 (1.05)

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Destination" ($r = .16$, .23 and .15, $p < .05$). Within the "Identification" variables, "Self-Character Similarity" has positive significant correlations with all variables in the model. "Resemblance to Past Experience" does not correlate with two of the "Narrative Comprehension" variables. On the other hand, "Resemblance to Past Experience" correlates significantly with "Increased knowledge" ($r = .22$, $p < .01$) and "Intention to Visit Destination" ($r = .40$, $p < .01$), which are dependent variables in the model; also, it correlates with "Action" and "Resemblance to Past Experience" ($r = .17$, $p < .01$). Thus, it appears that each of the variables play different roles within the overall model of narrative persuasion.

Path analysis was then used to assess the direct and indirect relationships between the respective variables. Specifically, eight relationships were identified and tested based on the literature, (i.e., each of the individual variables in Hypotheses 1a, 1b, 1c, 2a, 2b, 3, 4a, and 4b were analyzed simultaneously). As can be seen in Table 2, the various goodness-of-fit statistics indicate that the model fits reasonably well; the model χ^2 value was 7.244 (degrees of freedom [df] = 3, $p = .065$) indicating that the hypothesized covariance structure is not significantly different from the observed covariance matrix. Also, the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), normed fit index (NFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and comparative fit index (CFI) indicate that the model fits well (i.e., GFI = .993, AGFI = .937, NFI = .97, TLI = .88, and CFI = .983). Finally, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was calculated to evaluate the model fit (RMSEA = .069) as it adjusts for parsimony by assessing the discrepancy per degree of freedom in the model (Chi & Qu, 2008). As a result, all indexes measuring goodness of fit indicate an acceptable model.

Table 2
**Results of Path Analysis and Hypotheses Testing**

Paths	Hypotheses Testing	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects Intention to Visit Destination
Hypothesis 1a: Goal → Knowledge	Not supported	.01 (.14)	.01
Hypothesis 1b: Action → Knowledge	Not supported	.06 (1.00)	.01
Hypothesis 1c: Outcome → Knowledge	Not supported	.09 (1.57)	.02
Hypothesis 2a: Similarity → Knowledge	Supported	.13 (2.15)*	
Hypothesis 2b: Past → Knowledge	Supported	.15 (2.47)*	
Hypothesis 3: Knowledge → Intention to Visit	Supported	.18 (3.67)***	
Hypothesis 4a: Similarity → Intention to Visit	Supported	.32 (6.02) ***	.02
Hypothesis 4b: Past → Intention to Visit	Supported	.24 (4.51) ***	.03
Model fit statistics			
χ^2		7.24	
df		3	
GFI		.99	
RMSEA		.06	
AGFI		.94	
NFI		.97	
TLI		.88	
CFI		.98	
Explanatory power (R^2)			
SMC Knowledge		.08	
SMC Intention to Visit		.30	

Note: GFI = goodness-of-fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; AGFI = adjusted goodness-of fit-index; NFI = normed fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; CFI = comparative fit index; SMC = squared multiple correlation (R^2).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

The hypothesized direct and indirect relationships in the proposed research model were simultaneously tested and the results are presented in Table 2 and Figure 2. As can be seen, the paths linking "Identification" variables with "Increased Knowledge" and "Intention to Visit Destination" are statistically significant, whereas all paths (see Hypothesis 1) linking "Narrative Comprehension" and "Increased Knowledge" are not statistically significant. Specifically, "Self–Character Similarity" is positively correlated with "Increased Knowledge" (Hypothesis 2a: $\beta = .13, p < .05$), "Resemblance to Past Positive Experience" is positively correlated with "Increased Knowledge" (Hypothesis 2b: $\beta = .15, p < .05$), "Self-Character Similarity" is positively correlated "Intention to Visit Destination" (Hypothesis 4a: $\beta = .32, p < .001$), "Resemblance to Past Positive Experience" is positively correlated with "Intention to Visit Destination" (Hypothesis 4b: $\beta = .24, p < .001$), and finally,

Figure 2
Path Model of Narrative Persuasion
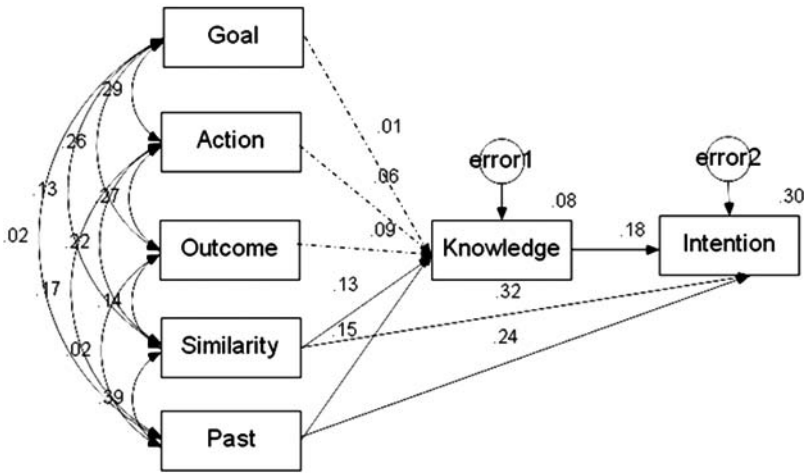
Note: Model fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 7.24$, $df = 3$, GFI = .99, RMSEA = .06, AGFI = .94, NFI = .97, TLI = .88, CFI = .98. GFI = goodness-of-fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; AGFI = adjusted goodness-of-fit index; NFI = normed fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; CFI = comparative fit index.

"Increased Knowledge" is positively correlated with "Intention to Visit Destination" (Hypothesis 3: $\beta = .18$, $p < .001$). The ability of the hypothesized path model to explain "Increased Knowledge" and "Intention to Visit the Destination" was assessed by squared multiple correlations; the results indicate that the three "Narrative Comprehension" variables and the two "Identification" variables account for 8.2% of the variance in "Increased Knowledge." This analysis also shows that "Self–Character Similarity" and "Resemblance to Past Positive Experience" account for about 30% of the variation in "Intention to Visit Destination." Finally, the indirect effects of the "Identification" variables were examined to assess their total influence on one's intention to visit the destination. As can be seen, "Self–Character Similarity" and "Resemblance to Past Positive Experience" explain approximately 4% of the variation in "Intention to Visit Destination" ($\beta = .02$ and .03, respectively).

CONCLUSION

Stories are now being used extensively to promote tourism destinations. The literature suggests that designing stories for marketing purposes should start with choosing the right character(s) that match the target market. That is, since audiences tend to relate to the lived picture of a character in the story, introducing characters with different tastes, preferences, and backgrounds can be effective in stimulating empathy among different audiences. Thus, for example, destinations

targeting younger, more adventurous tourists will not benefit from family-oriented stories. On the other hand, destinations can introduce different genres of stories to diversify or expand the current market. Portraying different stories will be effective in providing diverse hypothetical scenarios of travel. Introducing different travel genres and different story characters can be regarded as customization in advertising; the message about the product (bundles of products) is delivered differently to different market segments.

The results of this study indicate that simply understanding the story (i.e., narrative comprehension) has little effect on the increased knowledge about a destination. Although chronology and causality within a story particularly add to the detailed information about particular tourism activities within a period of time in narrative, identification of resemblance to past experience and identification of story character(s) as themselves are more significant to increase audiences' knowledge and can lead to intention to visit destination. Consistent with the concept of mental simulation and narrative transportation (Escalas, 2004a, 2004b) and consumption visions (Phillips et al., 1995), the results of this study indicate that it vital the potential traveler identify with characters of the story. That is, mental simulation and consumption visions can be formed only when audiences experience the present nonself-referencing narrative processing (i.e., reading stories about others) that leads to future self-referencing imagery (i.e., imagining the self experiencing the same things). This process is enabled when audiences find the stories to resemble the stories stored in their memories (i.e., the stories remind them of past experiences) and more strongly when audiences can identify the characters as having similarities with them (i.e., audiences fully understand why the characters choose some actions to fulfill certain recognizable goals).

Several implications can be drawn for from this research. First, it clearly supports the findings of previous research indicating that consumers' stories can be used very effectively to promote a destination, for example, by introducing blogging facilities on the official tourist websites. Furthermore, since many previous researchers have emphasized the importance of word of mouth, it is argued that blogs where visitors write down their experiences in their own words provide information as well as advertising to persuade people to visit the destination. Finally, this research opens a pathway to similar research investigating the use of digital media for marketing purposes in tourism and hospitality.

Although the results support the conceptual framework and instruments developed for this research, it has several limitations. First, this study was conducted mainly with student samples. Although this can be rationalized with the fact that most active blog writers and readers are young (Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, & Wright, 2006; RarePlay, 2006), a further study with more respondents of different age-groups would strengthen the argument to generalize the results. Second, respondents were asked to read the entire blog entry before responding to the questionnaires. This task was given based on the assumption that to comprehend the story, audience needs to follow the narrative from beginning to end. However, a further study capturing variations in audience story-reading behavior and their narrative comprehension will also increase generalization. Third, this study suggests a direct

causal relationship from increased knowledge about destination to intention to visit destination. Several researches in advertising and tourism, specifically those using the hierarchical model of stimulus–response effects (see Chiou, Wan, & Lee, 2008; Gresham & Shimp, 1985), suggest brand attitude as another construct to measure advertising effectiveness. Extending the theoretical framework to include audiences' attitude to the destination will improve the theory development.

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