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Modeling Austrian Consumer Responses to a Vignette Television Commercial Drama for a Vacation Resort Destination

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Abstract - This project involved the formulation and test of a model of Austrian consumers' cognitive and affective responses to a vignette television commercial drama for a vacation resort area, the Halkidiki region of Greece. Results indicate that response to the commercial was both cognitive and affective with sympathy and empathy, mediating the influence of verisimilitude on attitudes toward the ad and brand. These results were consistent with what was expected from a sample of consumers from a low power distance and moderate individualistic culture such as Austria. Results suggest that a vignette to promote tourism services effectively, a commercial's production value and realism must be high to produce verisimilitude and, in turn, sufficient sympathy and empathy to influence attitudes.

Keywords - T.V. Commercial Drama, Tourism Marketing, Austria, Cultural Values, Empathy

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners - Television commercial dramas are widely used in the tourism industry to influence tourists' attitudes toward a holiday destination. The effect of sympathy and empathy on the attitude toward the advertisement and brand are investigated—the results shed light on how to create and implement television commercial dramas effectively.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to extend the testing of a theoretical model of cognitive and affective responses to T.V. Commercial Dramas (TVCD) to an Austrian context. A methodology similar to that employed in previous studies conducted in the U.S. and China was used. An important focus is on the role of sympathy and empathy, which previous research indicates are the critical viewer responses that mediate the effect of a TVCD's executional elements on attitudes toward

commercials and brands. However, sympathetic and empathic tendencies are thought to vary cross-culturally. These variations might be linked to Hofstede's (1980) value dimensions. Sympathetic and empathic tendencies are thought to occur more readily within cultures characterized by more collectivist, feminine, and low power distance profiles (e.g., Chopik, O'Brien, and Konrath 2014; Prot et al., 2014; Sadri, Weber and Gentry, 2011). Even though Austrian culture features high masculinity and a moderate level of individualism, it also features very low power distance. Thus, a TVCD execution could work well with Austrian consumers.

The tourism industry is widely using TVCD in their advertisements (Miller, Stoica, & Kilic, 2017) because the dramatic approach of a TVCD is particularly suited to advertising tourism services. It is depicting tourists enjoying the amenities of cruises, resorts, etc. is akin to visualization, one of Berry and Clark's (1986) suggested strategies for overcoming the inherent intangibility of services (cf., Mittal 1999). Further, tourism is an important economic sector globally. The World Travel and Tourism Council (2018) estimated that in 2017 about 10.4% of worldwide G.D.P. was accounted for by tourism. Regions with above-average contributions to G.D.P. include the Caribbean (15.7%) and Oceania (12.3%). Estimates for some individual countries include: Bahamas (48.3%), Barbados (39.5%), Greece (19.7%), Austria (14.8%), Italy (13.2%), China (11.3%), France (8.9%), and U.S.A. (7.7%).

Tourism locations and services tend to be vigorously advertised and promoted because consumers have so many destination choices. However, tourism agencies have found that with the rise of social media (Yang and Wang, 2015) and its ability to spread word-of-mouth communications virally, the overall impact of marketer-controlled communications has diminished (Litvin & Hoffman, 2012). Even so, marketer-controlled communications such as websites and advertising in traditional media remain essential components of the communication mix of resorts, casinos, cruise lines, and destinations (Bhagwat and Debrune, 2008; Rasty, Chou, and Feiz, 2013). Nonetheless, total media advertising spending worldwide for 2015 was estimated at \$592.43b and \$170.50b for total digital media and \$64.25b for mobile internet (eMarketer, 2014). The majority of media spending on traditional media implies that tourism marketers believe that these channels still have an essential role in creating awareness and building and maintaining brand images (Pan, 2011), and attracting visitors (Meehan, 2008).

The marketing literature contains several studies that involve analysis of cognitive and affective consumer responses to two forms of TVCD, the classical and the vignette. A few of these studies have attempted to model the influence of TVCD characteristics and the relationships among responses such as ad-evoked feelings, attitudes toward the ad (A_{ad}), beliefs, and attitudes toward the advertised brand (A_b). As mentioned above, two psychological responses that are critical to TVCD effectiveness are sympathy and empathy. An essential variable antecedent to sympathy and empathy that is related to the executional elements of the TVCD is perceived verisimilitude (Boller and Olson, 1991; Deighton and Hoch, 1993; Deighton, Romer, and McQueen, 1989; Wells, 1989). This variable has been shown to influence sympathy, empathy, and consumer response variables such as A_{ad} and A_b (Miller, Stoica, and Kilic, 2017). In this study, we tested a pattern of these antecedents, mediating, and attitudinal response variables responses are tested in this study with a vignette TVCD for the major resort area of Halkidiki on the Northern Aegean Coast of Greece.

Literature Review

Television Commercial Dramas

The TVCD is an advertising format that is like a short movie or play where the product message is delivered through the interaction of characters. When TVCDs are adequately designed, and executed viewers are psychologically drawn into the depicted scenario becoming either close observers or even vicarious participants (Wells, 1989).

Stern (1994) explains that there are two types of TVCD—the classical and the vignette with early research focusing exclusively on the former. A classical drama contains a single unified plot with a beginning, turning point, and resolution. As applied to a TVCD, the beginning typically involves a consumer recognizing a problem, experiencing a turning point in which they are introduced to the advertised product, and the resolution when they adopt or decide to adopt the product. Alternatively, the vignette drama features a repetition of unconnected or loosely connected episodes depicting a diverse set of characters interacting with one another and the advertised product. The episodes feature various locations and temporal contexts. There is no plot and no linear problem, solution, and resolution causal structure. She says that vignette drama ads are intended to display evidence of the richness and diversity of life, unified by the common denominator of the advertised product or service. However, a TVCD vignette is not chaotic. Structural order is typically provided via narrative devices such as music, voice-overs, superimposed graphics, and titles.

The persuasive effects of TVCDs involve both cognitive and affective responses. Cognitively, consumers may draw inferences or conclusions about how an advertised product may help solve problems (Wells, 1989). In doing so, consumers might generate self-reflective thoughts that connect their experiences with the depicted scenarios (Boller, 1990; Deighton and Hoch, 1993). Also, consumers can become vicarious participants in the dramatized scenario, experiencing some of the feelings associated with purchasing, consuming, or using the advertised brand Wells (1989). This affective response may, in turn, positively influence A_{ad} and A_b (Wells, 1994). The influence of TVCD on feelings and A_b has been empirically demonstrated by Deighton et al. (1989) and on A_{ad} by Escalas and Stern (2003). It is important to note that for these effects to occur, there must be sufficient levels of involvement with the commercial (MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989; Wells, 1989).

Mediators to Persuasion: Sympathy and Empathy

Several researchers have suggested that the key and necessary consumer response for a TVCD to influence attitudes and beliefs is empathy (Boller, 1990; Boller and Olson, 1991; Escalas and Stern, 2003; Stern, 1994; Wells, 1989). However, there has been a lack of consensus among social psychologists about whether empathy is more a cognitive or affective process (cf., Davis, 1983; Goldstein and Michaels, 1985; Strayer, 1987). Marketing researchers similarly lack consensus. Wells (1989) mentions migrating into a drama and experiencing the feelings associated with buying or using the advertised brand. Similarly, MacInnis and Jaworski (1989) describe the process in terms of role-taking, whereas Boller (1990) discusses vicarious participation described as the projection of one's self into the perceptual and emotional perspectives of characters. Boller

and Olson (1991) combine the processes of identification and vicarious participation under the umbrella of empathy.

Stern (1994) convincingly argues that empathy, as described by the early research in TVCD, is not a single process. Instead, the descriptions involve two related processes--sympathy and empathy, with the former influencing the latter. In her view, empathy is primarily an affective response and involves becoming immersed or "lost" in the drama. Sympathy, often described as an affective response, is more cognitive. The viewer understands the situation from a character's perspective but remains detached and aware of him/herself. Sympathy and empathy scale development efforts by Escalas and Stern (2003) confirm the discriminant validity between the constructs.

Empathy, being an affective response, should influence A_{ad} . Indeed, connections between ad-evoked feelings and the affective dimension of A_{ad} have long been established in the advertising and literature (e.g., Batra and Ray, 1986; Edell and Burke, 1987). Sympathy may also directly influence A_{ad} as consumers generate thoughts related to the perspectives of characters in the commercial. Finally, the influence of A_{ad} on A_b has also been long established. The influence of the affective dimension of A_{ad} can influence A_b by either a classical conditioning or direct affect transfer process (Mitchell and Olson, 1981).

Escalas and Stern (2003) demonstrated the influence of both sympathy and empathy on A_{ad} . They had expected that the effect of sympathy on A_{ad} would be entirely mediated by empathy since the latter process is more robust in its affective character. However, they found that empathy only partially mediated the influence of sympathy. The explanation being that sympathy may have a cognitive impact on A_{ad} , and some subjects had limited empathy responses to some of the commercials that comprised their stimuli.

Antecedent Variable: Perceived Verisimilitude

For the sympathy and empathy sequence to occur, there is an antecedent variable related to the execution of the TVCD that is of concern. Viewers must perceive the commercial as having verisimilitude (Boller and Olson, 1991; Deighton et al., 1989; Deighton and Hoch, 1993; Wells, 1989). Verisimilitude means that the commercial must have the appearance of being real or genuine.

Perceived verisimilitude is less likely to occur when the commercial has production flaws such as poor casting, acting, direction, editing (Boller and Olson, 1991), and a lack of coordination of verbal and visual cues (MacInnis and Jaworski, 1989). Further, Boller and Olson (1991) argue that the commercial must contain sufficient and realistic affect-laden cues conveyed by its actors relevant to the advertised product for empathic responses to occur. If the commercial lacks verisimilitude, consumers tend not to engage empathically. Instead, they tend to remain mentally apart and engage in critical thoughts about the commercial itself or the advertised brand. Using a modeling approach, Deighton, Romer, and McQueen (1989) demonstrated the influence of verisimilitude on ad-evoked feelings, which is related to empathy. With a sample of American consumers and using a tourism commercial for a Bahamian resort, Miller, Stoica, and Kilic (2017) demonstrated the antecedents' effects on the complex of sympathy, empathy, and A_{ad} along with a link from A_{ad} to A_b .

Cultural Differences in Sympathy and Empathy

Although sympathy and empathy are universal human psychological processes, researchers have proposed that there may be cultural differences in empathic tendencies. Several have tied explanations for these differences to variations in cultural values. Some researchers have proposed that empathy is associated with Hofstede's masculine/feminine dimension (e.g., Timofejeva, 2014) or his power distance dimension (e.g., Sadri, Weber, and Gentry, 2011). Higher empathic capacity is posited to be associated with more feminine values and lower power distance. Most (Chopik, O'Brien, and Konrath 2014; Prot et al. 2014) have suggested that empathic capacity should covary with Hofstede's individualist/collectivist dimension, with more collectivist tendencies being associated with greater empathy.

However, empirical evidence supporting these propositions is mixed. One reason for the lack of consistent empirical support stems from variations in how individuals studies have defined and measured sympathy and empathy. Some employed youthful subjects via convenience samples and research suggests that age correlates directly with empathic tendencies (Lennon & Eisenberg, 1990). Further, these studies have involved comparing empathy for a mere two, three, or four countries at a time (Chopik et al., 2017). For these reasons and the lack of consistency in the operationalization of the constructs, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions based upon the limited scope of most of these studies.

Fortunately, a study has recently been published that employed a more age-diverse sample of adults across 63 countries (Chopik et al., 2017), expecting to find that empathy would be positively associated with a country's degree of collectivism. Using Davis' (1980) E.C. (i.e., empathy) and P.T. (i.e., sympathy) subscales, their expectation was confirmed for E.C., which directly and significantly correlated with Hofstede's individualism/collectivism scores. However, P.T. did not. Noteworthy also is that neither E.C. nor P.T. was not significantly correlated with the remaining Hofstede dimensions.

The above mentioned Miller, Stoica, and Kilic (2017) study was conducted with a commercial for a Bahamian resort and a sample of American consumers. The sympathy/empathy complex played its expected mediating role between verisimilitude and attitudes. Despite the high individualist (Hofstede Score = 91) and moderately high masculine (62) values in American culture. However, Americans have moderately low power distance values (40), which is consistent with empathic tendencies.

Miller, Stoica, Kilic, and Xu, L. (2017) ran a follow-up study in a Chinese context (i.e., Chinese resort TVCD and Chinese sample of the consumer). They expected the approach to work well because of Chinese culture's powerful collectivist nature (Hofstede Individualism Score = 20). They found that sympathy served as the central mediating effect between verisimilitude and attitudes and that, unexpectedly, empathy did not play a mediating role. This could perhaps relate to China's high power distance (80) and moderately high masculinity (66). They concluded that it probably related more to the nature of the stimulus commercial. Even though it could be categorized as a vignette TVCD, it perhaps lacks sufficient focus on the characters' human interactions and more on background features.

Summary of Proposed Effects and Research Question

To summarize, the discussion above implies a pattern of effects among theoretical variables related to TVCD execution elements and their effect on attitudes and beliefs mediated by sympathy and empathy. In the form of a theoretical model, Figure), the pattern of hypothesized effects includes paths from 1) verisimilitude to sympathy, empathy, and A_{ad} ; 2) sympathy to empathy and A_{ad} ; 3) empathy to A_{ad} ; and finally 4) A_{ad} .

Along with this hypothesized pattern of effects, we pose the following research question: Given the possibility of cross-cultural differences in empathic capacity and the tendency, will empathy serve as the key mediator in the Austrian case as it was in the American case? It is difficult to make a firm prediction given that, compared with the U.S.A., Austria is characterized by lesser individualist values (55 vs. 91) and lower power distance (11 vs. 40). However, it is also characterized by higher masculinity (79 vs. 62). Also, Chopik et al. (2017) found that Americans score higher than Austrians on both Perspective Taking (3.67 vs. 3.59) and Empathic Concern (3.78 vs. 3.58).

Methodology

Sample

A convenience sample of 216 business majors (59% male and 41% female, 10% of graduate students) at a large university in Austria was employed. Some have criticized the use of students as subjects as a compromise of external validity. It is a concern only when the background demographic factor would interact with the theoretical variables in a confounding way (Calder, Phillips, and Tybout, 1982). However, in this case, no confound seems likely to have occurred. Within the stimulus commercial, several of the actors were young adults similar in age to our subjects, indicating that undergraduates would fit within the target market segment.

Stimulus

We chose a tourism commercial for the Halkidiki (or Chalkidiki) region posted by the Greek Halkidiki Tourism Organization (2012) on Youtube. This commercial is appropriate because it is virtually a pure vignette drama like that used by Miller, Stoica, and Kilic (2017). It consists of three and a half minutes of scenes showing vacationers interacting with one another and tourism personnel. There is no voice-over. The audio track consists of gentle instrumental background music throughout. The commercial includes more than 100 camera shots lasting approximately two seconds, with several approximately four seconds. The sequence of scenes ranges from sunrise to late evening. Tourists are shown singly, as couples, family groups, and large groups. They appear to range in age from young children to middle-aged. Activities depicted include beach activities, visits to archeological and cultural sites such as a vineyard and a monastery, sporting activities such as golf, scuba, horseback riding, and cycling. Also depicted are scenes of dining, strolling through villages, gambling in a casino, enjoying a concert, and dancing in a disco. The commercial ends with a Halkidiki tourism logo, a slogan "inside your dreams," and a URL www.visit-halkidiki.gr.

Measures

Variables were measured with multiple item summated indexes using 7-point semantic-differential scales. Each item was independently translated and back-translated by two scholars fluent in both German and English. Scales used for measuring perceived verisimilitude were developed and validated by Miller, Stoica, and Kilic (2017). Respondents were asked to indicate whether the depicted situations: natural/unnatural, realistic/unrealistic, to have the appearance of truth/not to have the appearance of truth, contrived/authentic, and implausible/plausible.

The scales used for measuring sympathy and empathy were developed and validated by Escalas and Stern (2003). For sympathy, respondents were asked to indicate their reactions to the commercial. A three-item scale was used to measure sympathy. The scale was composed of the following items: 1. I understood what the characters were feeling; 2. While watching the ad, I tried to understand the events as they occurred, and 3. While watching the ad, I tried to understand the characters' motivation.

Four items were used for measuring empathy. These included: 1. While watching the ad, I felt as though I was one of the characters; 2. I felt as though the events in the ad were really happening to me; 3. I experienced many of the same feelings that the characters portrayed, and 4. I felt as if the characters' feelings were my own.

Finally, three widely used items (Bruner and Hensel, 1994): positive/negative, bad/good, and favorable/unfavorable was used to measure A_{ad} . Attitude toward the brand (A_b) was measured with four items chosen from (Bruner and Hensel, 1994) that exhibited face validity for vacation resorts. These included: boring/exciting, appealing/unappealing, enjoyable/unenjoyable, undesirable/desirable.

Findings

Data Checks

As shown in Table 1, internal consistency reliability coefficients for all measures were above the minimum .70 necessary for adequate reliability established by Nunnally (1978). Descriptive statistics for all summated variables can also be seen in Table 1.

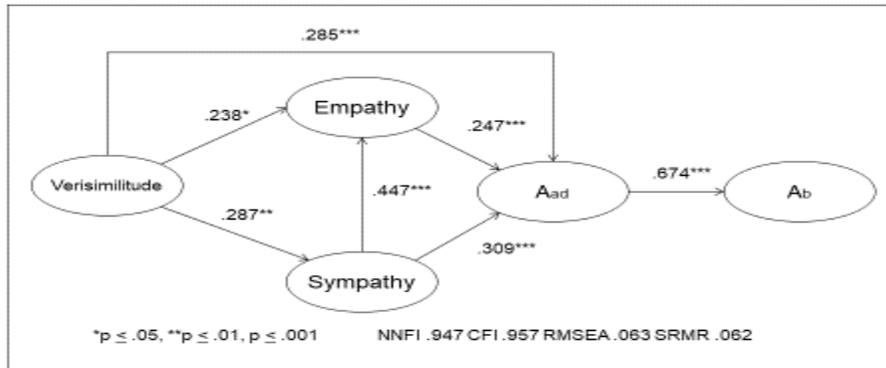
Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients for all Variables

Variable	Scale range	Mean	SD	Sk	Chronbach's α
Verisimilitude	3 – 21	14.90	3.97	-0.45	0.78
Sympathy	3 – 21	12.69	4.29	-0.08	0.72
Empathy	4 – 28	12.40	6.80	-0.37	0.92
Aad	3 – 21	14.74	3.36	-0.37	0.85
Ab	3 – 21	15.58	3.78	-0.72	0.80

Model

Using AMOS 21, we tested the pattern of effects (Figure 1) suggested in the literature review. Goodness-of-fit indexes recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (2012) show that the data fit this model quite well (CFI = .957, NNFI = .947, RMSEA = .063, SRMR = .062). All of the hypothesized paths had statistically significant coefficients. Modification indices indicated that no new paths needed to be added.

Figure 1: Austria TVCD Model



Discussion

This study investigated the theoretical pattern of cognitive and affective responses to a commonly employed advertising approach used within the tourism industry – the vignette TVCD. A model was built on the existing theoretical and empirical literature and considered the relationships among the antecedent variable perceived verisimilitude, the key mediating processes of sympathy and empathy, and the consumer response variables of A_{ad} and A_b. The test was conducted with a sample of Austrian consumers and a commercial for a Greek resort destination.

The pattern of effects was as hypothesized. The effects of perceived verisimilitude on sympathy, empathy, and A_{ad} were all significant. This is consistent with Escalas and Stern's (2003) findings and those of Miller, Stoica, and Kilic (2017). Sympathy was shown to influence both empathy and A_{ad}, which is also consistent with Escalas and Stern's (2003) findings and those of Miller Stoica and Kilic (2017). Finally, A_{ad} influenced A_b, effects that are consistent with findings in many previous advertising studies.

The direct influence of verisimilitude on A_{ad} is likely related to a favorable reaction to the depiction of Halkidiki resort features not directly relevant to the sympathy/empathy complex. These could include scenes of the seaside, resort amenities, background music style, or the overall pace and tone of the commercial. The latter three elements are examples of what is defined as peripheral elements from the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann, 1983). The two "paths to persuasion" are apparent from the overall pattern—one affective and the other mostly cognitive; the affective path runs from perceived verisimilitude through empathy and A_{ad} to A_b. The cognitive path runs from perceived verisimilitude through sympathy to A_{ad} to A_b.

From the cultural perspective, we find virtually no differences in the pattern of effects between the Austrian and American results. Compared with the U.S.A. Austria is characterized by lesser individualist values and lower power distance but higher masculinity. Based upon the similarity of results, we tentatively conclude that verisimilitude is a more important factor in response to a TVCD than the national market's cultural values profile. This conclusion is necessarily tentative because although the samples of consumers between this and the American study were demographically similar, the stimulus TVCDs, although similar, were different.

Managerial Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

These results show that a vignette drama for advertising tourism services in Austria can favorably influence attitudes partially mediated by sympathy and empathy. Taken along with the results of Miller, Stoica, and Kilic (2017), one might conclude that a somewhat standardized approach to designing vignette TVCDs across markets characterized by varying degrees of individualism/collectivism, masculine/feminine, and high/low power distance values systems. However, more research should be conducted beyond these two countries, including those with very different cultural values profiles.

In any cultural context, it seems critical that a TVCD must produce a perception of verisimilitude. A commercial's production value should be of high quality and include realistic depictions of settings and human interactions. A commercial cannot have flaws that will disrupt the process of sympathy and favorable A_{ad} and A_b from occurring. Finally, as is the case with all advertising, a vignette drama commercial for a tourism product must get attention and generate sufficient involvement for sympathy and empathy to occur and, in turn, favorably influence attitudes.

These results must be evaluated with the limited experimental context within which they occurred, i.e., a single ad test, with a student sample, and a laboratory-like environment. Future research could test the model for other tourist destinations and services popular in Austria, such as those related to cultural tourism. The model could be tested with non-student samples. Indeed, one of the primary target market segments for tourism venues is the elderly/retired segment. One wonders whether they would respond similarly or differently. Finally, the laboratory-like setting of the exposure may have created high task involvement in subjects. Future research could test the effects in a more natural setting.

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