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Research on the Influence of Emoji Communication on the Perception of Destination Image: The Case of Finland

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Introduction

Emojis were first created by Shigetaka Kurita in 1999 and were then popularized among social networks (Kryptoners, 2014). This has caught the attention of marketers, and its use by industries is expanding dramatically. Their application in retail and commerce saw the biggest increase after 2011, peaking during the holiday season. However, the practice of emojis by destination marketers is as yet relatively limited, except for pioneers such as the Finland Tourism Bureau (FTB). In 2016, FTB successively launched multiple emojis related to its destination image.

The increasingly large variety of social communication channels and the rise of the emoji culture have made online marketing even more complicated. Therefore, the marketing industry and scholars urgently need to understand the changes brought about by the popularity of emojis and to be aware that the changes are intensifying. This research conducted an experiment in China in the context of emoji promotion about Finland to explore the impact of emoji design quality, the communication channel, and the familiarity with destinations on tourist perceptions of destination images. The findings contribute to the literature on digital marketing and have practical implications for building positive destination image via emojis.

Literature Review

In the era of social media, as consumers are no longer used to watching long advertising messages, emoji marketing is a better approach to digital marketing. The brand advertising information containing emojis can show its emotions and connections to customers, and enhance customers' awareness of the brand (Emoji Research Team, 2016). The popularity of emojis indicates that there has been a significant increase in public acceptance of emojis, and there are more campaigns creating and using emojis for brand promotion. Customers like emojis very much, and most of them think it is very interesting to use emojis in brand promotions (Grennae, 2016). They like to see new emojis and spread them spontaneously (Emoji Research Team, 2016). Although some emojis are ambiguous and may be misunderstood due to cultural differences (Wang, 2015), high-quality design, which can make an emoji clearly convey information, accurately express emotions in humorous and interesting ways, and with a simple and powerful meaning (Wang, 2015), can arouse the emotional resonance of consumers, thus shortening the distance with consumers.

In the context of destination marketing, a destination image is attached to the visual image of the destination rather than its real characteristics (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Therefore, visual perception, which includes comprehensiveness, uniqueness and attractiveness, is crucial for the image of a destination to attract potential tourists (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). Therefore, this study investigates the image of destinations from the perspective of the quality of emojis as a visual image, and the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1. The quality of emoji design is positively related to the audience's perception of the destination image.

The information source created by the marketers plays an important role in the image construction of the destination. Different information sources have different effects on destination image propagation (Mack, Bloise, & Pan, 2008). Previous studies (e.g., Lim, Chung, & Weaver, 2012; Llodrà-Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco, & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015) have demonstrated that user generated content (UGC) on social media influences the images of a place significantly as UGC can quickly and strongly shape the perceived cognitive and affective images of a destination for tourists. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis.

H2. The official channel and the UGC channel of emoji communication have different effects on the audiences' perception of the destination image.

There is a relationship between destination familiarity and destination image recognition. Some previous scholars defined familiarity as having visited the destination, but later found that many tourists' familiarity with the destination was based on information acquisition before the trip (Baloglu, 2001). Through tourism information, potential tourists become familiar with and interested in destinations, which affects their choice of destinations and stimulates their travel motivation and results (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Tan & Wu (2016) conducted a confirmatory study on the relationship between familiarity, destination image and future visit intention, and found that the three promote each other. Milman & Pizam (1995) conducted a survey on familiarity and travel intention in central Florida, and found that the familiarity of destination has a significant impact on future travel intention, pushing consumers to the stage of purchase decision. Artigas, Vilches-montero and Yrigoyen (2015) proposed that familiarity can be divided into three stages of knowing, understanding and knowing well, and proved that familiarity can enhance tourists' cognitive image perception and emotional image perception of destinations. This investigation follows the same line of thinking.

Petty and Cacioppo (1986) proposed the Elaborated Likelihood Model (ELM), believing that there are two paths to persuade people: a central path and a peripheral path, which have different effects on the propagation results. The central path is usually explained as one that can change the audience's attitude for a long time (Ajzen, 1987), such as product quality, film quality and so on. The peripheral path is usually interpreted as the communication channel, changing the attitude of the receptor for a short time, and the receivers do not need to think too much during the communication process. Therefore, in this study, the design quality of emoji is regarded as the

central path, and the communication channel of emoji is regarded as the peripheral path, which has a concentrated impact on the image communication of the destination, resulting in different image perception. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses.

H3. The emoji design quality has a greater impact on destination image perception in the condition of high familiarity than in the condition of low familiarity.

H4. The official communication channel of emoji under high familiarity has less impact on destination image perception than the UGC channel under low familiarity.

Methodology

Experimental scenario design

The participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: 2 (emoji design quality: high, low) × 2 (communication channels: UGC channel, official channel). Each condition contained 60 to 65 samples for a total of 241 samples. The emojis released by Finland's national tourism administration were used as the research case, mainly because Finland is the first country to launch emojis with its own national image (Finland Promotion Board, 2016). Additionally, its communication range is small in China, and it is a relatively new destination for most Chinese. Since emoji users are mostly young people and college students can better understand and use emojis, undergraduate students in a university were recruited as participants.

First, participants were asked to view the emojis in the condition to which they were assigned. They were then asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements on a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The statements were about emoji design quality, destination familiarity, cognitive image perception, and affective image perception (Table 1).

Table 1. Variable measurement items

| Variable | Items | Literature |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Emoji Design Quality | Communicate information clearly Emotion is expressed accurately Humorous / Interesting Simplified literal expression | Wang (2015) |
| Familiarity | I know Finland as a tourist destination I hear a lot about Finland I'm familiar with the whole situation in Finland My family and friends think I know Finland well | Tan & Wu (2016) Artigas et al. (2015) |
| Cognitive image perception | Beautiful natural landscape Profound cultural deposits Distinctive winter features Various folk festivals Pure Christmas style Friendly local people Social harmony Minority cultures are diverse A country of peace and security Clean and comfortable environment | Chi & Qu (2008) |

| | | |
|----------------------------|--|-----------------|
| Affective image perception | Interesting Vivifying Exciting Pleasing Relaxing Cheerful | Chi & Qu (2008) |
|----------------------------|--|-----------------|

Variable control and preliminary investigation

Before the start of the formal experiment, a preliminary survey was designed to determine the control scheme of emoji design quality. To prevent the subjective judgment of the investigators on the quality of emoji design, 56 emojis on Finland's website were initially screened, and the emojis with unclear meaning, deep local characteristics and insufficient meaning were removed. Next, 30 college students were recruited to score (on a scale of 1-10) the actual quality of the remaining 21 emojis during the preliminary survey. Six emojis with the highest scores of design quality had an average above 6.50: $M_1 = 8.43$, $SD_1 = 1.48$; $M_2 = 7.70$, $SD_2 = 1.66$; $M_3 = 7.11$, $SD_3 = 1.96$; $M_4 = 7.08$, $SD_4 = 2.33$; $M_5 = 6.97$, $SD_5 = 2.01$; $M_6 = 6.89$, $SD_6 = 2.47$. Six with the lowest scores had an average lower than 5.60: $M_7 = 5.53$, $SD_7 = 2.14$; $M_8 = 5.53$, $SD_8 = 2.74$; $M_9 = 5.52$, $SD_9 = 1.95$; $M_{10} = 5.47$, $SD_{10} = 2.18$; $M_{11} = 5.31$, $SD_{11} = 2.24$; $M_{12} = 5.08$, $SD_{12} = 2.13$. The six high-scoring emojis were grouped to represent the high-quality condition, and the six low-scoring emojis were clustered to represent the low-quality condition. A paired-samples T test was conducted to compare the differences in these two conditions. The lowest mean score in the high-quality condition was significantly higher than the highest mean score in the low-quality condition, $t(29) = 4.31$, $p < 0.001$. It indicated that the two groups were significantly different and could be used as two conditions.

Another variable to be controlled in the experiment was the emoji communication channels. This experiment prepared two different communication channels. One is the real official channel of Finland, which was published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Communication and designed by the destination marketing organization. The other was the manipulated UGC channel, launched on a social platform in Finland and designed by local Internet users.

Results

This research tested the reliability of each construct using SPSS 20.0. The results showed that all the Cronbach α were between 0.74 and 0.95, indicating good reliability as the lowest one was greater than the threshold of 0.7. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the differences in people's evaluation of emoji design quality. There was a significant difference in the scores for the high quality condition ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.89$) and low quality condition ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.83$); $t(239) = -3.29$, $p < 0.01$. No significant difference was found in people's evaluation of the emojis quality on the official channel ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.80$) and the UGC channel ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.96$), $t(239) = -0.32$, $p = 0.75$, suggesting that the communication channel was not a

significant influential factor. Additionally, age and gender did not significantly impact people's evaluation of emojis.

ANOVA analysis was used to examine the effect of emoji design quality and emoji communication channels on people's perception of the destination. People who viewed the emojis with high design quality had a more positive cognitive destination image of Finland ($M = 3.84, SD = 0.72$) compared to those who viewed the emojis with low design quality ($M = 3.47, SD = 0.80$), $F(1, 239) = 14.22, p < 0.001$. Significant differences were also found in affective image perception ($M_{high\ quality} = 3.76, SD_{high\ quality} = 0.79; M_{low\ quality} = 3.50, SD_{low\ quality} = 0.86$), $F(1, 239) = 6.22, p < 0.05$. This finding supported the first hypothesis.

People who viewed the emojis through the official communication channel rated their perceived cognitive destination image of Finland with an average of 3.63 ($SD = 0.85$), while those who viewed the emojis through the UGC channel rated it with 3.69 ($SD = 0.70$). There was no significant difference between the two conditions, $F(1, 239) = 0.39, p = 0.53$. Additionally, no significant differences were found in affective image perception, ($M_{official\ channel} = 3.64, SD_{official\ channel} = 0.74; M_{UGC\ channel} = 3.62, SD_{UGC\ channel} = 0.92$), $F(1, 239) = 0.04, p = 0.85$. Therefore, the second hypothesis was rejected. Additionally, the interaction effect of emoji design quality and communication channels was tested, and it was not significant for either cognitive, $F(1, 237) = 0.27, p = 0.60$, or affective destination image, $F(1, 237) = 0.12, p = 0.73$.

Regarding destination familiarity, the questionnaire was used to measure the extent to which participants were familiar with Finland. A two-way ANOVA was used to examine the interaction effect of destination familiarity and emoji design quality. The results showed that familiarity significantly influenced cognitive ($F[1, 237] = 15.83, p < 0.001$) and affective destination image perception ($F[1, 237] = 8.22, p < 0.01$). Participants who were familiar with Finland had a more positive cognitive ($M = 3.81, SE = 0.06$) and affective destination image ($M = 3.75, SE = 0.07$) compared to the participants who had less familiarity. Emoji design quality was also a factor that significantly impacted cognitive ($F[1, 237] = 12.88, p < 0.001$) and affective destination image perception ($F[1, 237] = 5.12, p < 0.05$). However, interaction effect was not a significant factor influencing either cognitive ($F[1, 237] = 0.24, p = 0.62$) or affective ($F[1, 237] = 0.47, p = 0.50$) destination image. Thus the third hypothesis was rejected as there is no interaction effect of emoji design quality and destination familiarity on destination image perception.

The interaction effect of destination familiarity and communication channels was examined using two-way ANOVA. Familiarity significantly influenced cognitive ($F[1, 237] = 16.48, p < 0.001$) and affective destination image perception ($F[1, 237] = 9.18, p < 0.01$). However, the communication channels were not a significant influential factor for either cognitive $F(1, 237) = 0.03, p = 0.86$ or affective destination image $F(1, 237) = 0.60, p = 0.44$. The interaction effect significantly impacted cognitive destination image perception $F(1, 237) = 3.25, p < 0.1$, but it was not a significant factor influencing affective destination image perception, $F(1, 237) = 1.43, p =$

0.23. For participants who were not familiar with Finland, their perceived cognitive destination image was more positive when they were presented with emojis from the official communication channel (Figure 1).

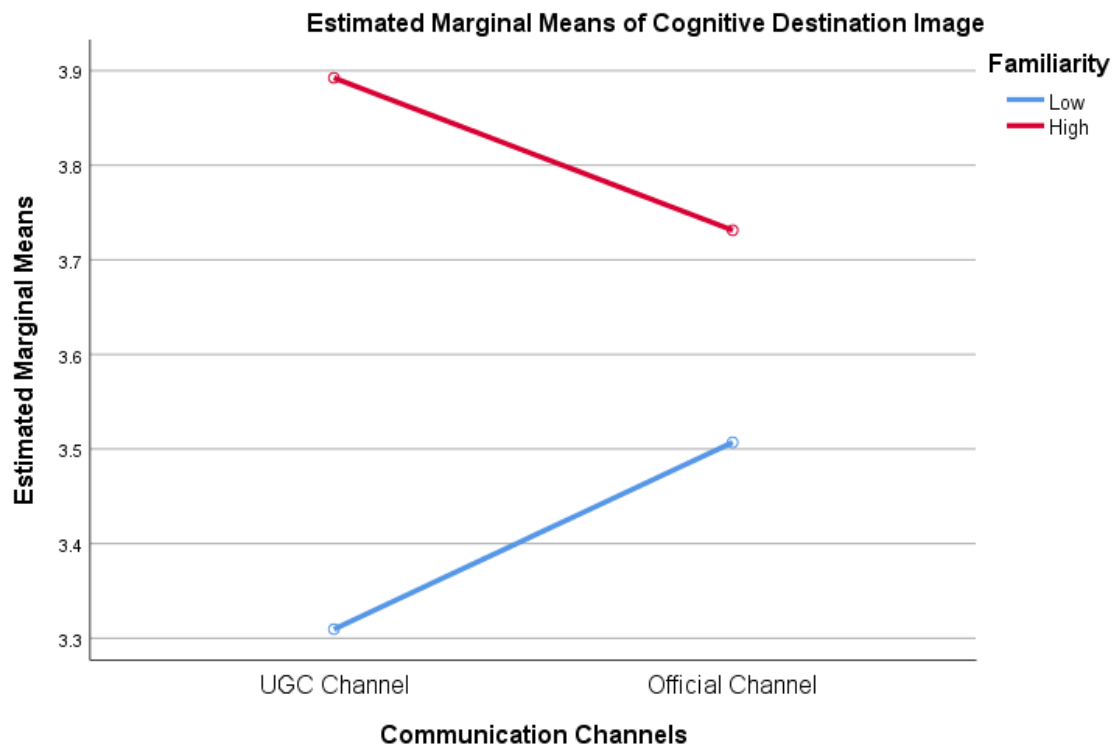


Figure 1. The interaction effect of destination familiarity and communication channels on cognitive destination image

Discussion and Conclusion

This research examined the impact of emoji design quality and communication channels on people's destination image perception using experimental design. It has both theoretical contributions and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, it extends the understanding of the effect of emojis on destination image perception. The design quality of emojis is a significant and positive influential factor for both cognitive and affective destination image. For people who are familiar with a destination, emojis from a user generated channel (e.g., social media) significantly increase their perceived cognitive destination image, whereas emojis from an official channel are more influential for people who are not familiar with the destination. From a practical perspective, DMOs could use emojis as an effective way to promote destinations. This could be accomplished by using emojis for local features of a destination to trigger people's visit interest; for dissemination through different channels so that people have more opportunities to download and share them with their peers; and through the launch of marketing campaigns by DMOs to promote their use to maximize the positive effect of emojis on destination image formation.

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