Does the listener matter? How a listener affects the storyteller's memory of a tourism experience

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Introduction

Sharing travel memories is an important aspect in creating meaningful tourism experiences (Wang, Park, and Fesenmaier 2012). Tourists remember, (re)create memories of their experiences, and share these memories to others as stories (Tung and Ritchie 2011). Despite the breadth of literature on tourists' narratives, the influence of the *listener* during storytelling on individuals' travel memories has received little attention in tourism research. The role of the listener is a critical consideration during interpersonal sharing that could elicit a process called capitalization whereby an individual (re)constructs details of an experience to make it more memorable to the self meanwhile letting others know about them to maximize the significance of their memory (Hirst and Echterhoff 2012; Reis et al. 2010).

In light of this research gap, this study contributes to the tourism literature by investigating how a listener could affect a storyteller's memory of his/her travel experiences through two experiments. Experiment 1 investigates whether interpersonal sharing with a listener – rather than simply recollecting an experience in private – enhances tourists' post-trip evaluation of their experiences. Experiment 2 further examines how the nature of a listener's responsiveness (i.e., specific or general responsiveness) could affect the storyteller's travel memory and whether storytellers would also maximize the details of negative experiences. Finally, while Experiment 1 assesses broad-based evaluations of post-travel experiences (e.g., overall experience was entertaining and memorable), Experiment 2 examines whether capitalization could affect the storyteller's recollection of highly specific cognitive and affective destination image attributes (e.g., quality of infrastructure, beautiful scenery).

Overall, this research seeks to contribute to the field by demonstrating that interpersonal sharing is a dynamic process between the storyteller and the listener in which the recollection of the storyteller's travel memory could be affected by the listener.

Literature Review

Recollecting travel memories

The provision of memorable experiences is one of the most fundamental characteristics of the tourism phenomenon, and studies investigating tourists' memories oftentimes involves interpersonal sharing where participants shares stories of their travel memories to a listener or researcher (e.g., Cutler, Carmichael, and Doherty 2014; Tung and Ritchie 2011). Research in social psychology suggests that interpersonal sharing could elicit a process called capitalization whereby individuals mark and enhance their memories in some way when they retell their experiences to others (Hirst and Echterhoff 2012; Reis et al. 2010). Here, impression management and self-perception theory are relevant theoretical considerations during the process of capitalization.

Impression management refers to the tendency for individuals to try to establish and present themselves positively in front of others (Leary and Kowalski 1990). During the presence of others, individuals may maximize the significance of the experience to enhance self-evaluations and desired identities (Crocker and Park 2004). Impression management motives can also

prompt individuals to alter their behaviours to present themselves in a positive light (White and Dahl 2007). In addition to impression management, self-perceptions may influence the degree to which individuals maximize the significance of a memorable experience. Self-perception theory suggests that individuals may evaluate their attitudes towards an object by observing their own behaviours towards it (Bem 1972). For example, individuals could evaluate memories of their past tourism experiences more positively or negatively because they chose to share those memories with a listener (e.g., "I chose to describe this travel memory; therefore, this experience must be truly positive or negative").

The extent to which capitalization occurs from the above motives of impression management and self-perception could be affected by the listener's response during interpersonal sharing (Reis et al. 2006). During interpersonal sharing, a listener may respond unenthusiastically, showing benign disinterest in the story, or respond with interest, which could be perceived by the storyteller as recognizing and appreciating the story. In this case, an active and constructive response could reinforce the efforts taken by the storytellers as they try to establish and maintain a positive identity in the eyes of others (Murray, Holmes, and Collins 2006). Indeed, the identity of the listener in relation to the storyteller also matters during the interaction as this relationship could influence the tendency for storytellers to maximize an experience and present themselves in a positive light.

Methodology

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 examines the effects of capitalization on tourists' memories and posits that interpersonal sharing with a listener – rather than simply recollecting a memory in private – enhances tourists' post-trip experiences.

Participants and design

41 participants were recruited at a large university in Asia to participate in this experiment (20 females, 21 males; 58.5% of participants were between the age of 25-34).

Procedure

At the beginning of the study, all participants were provided with the following instructions to recollect a positive travel experience based on an autobiographical memory recall procedure. The procedure, as described below, was adopted from psychology research on interpersonal sharing (Reis et al. 2010) but modified to be suitable for the context of tourism research.

> "Please take a moment to think about three positive, memorable trips that you took within the last 2 years. These trips can include leisure or business trips, long haul or short haul, individual or group tours, and so on."

Participants were then asked to rank how well they remember each trip (i.e., rank 1 as the most memorable). To avoid ceiling effects from memory recall (Smith et al. 2010), only the second ranked experience was selected for this experiment and participants were asked to assess their post-trip evaluation of their memorable experience based on the scale from Kim and Fesenmaier (2015). This scale included eight items rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) (e.g., my experience was entertaining; my experience was memorable).

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants in the "sharing" condition were asked to discuss the focal event with a listener. The listener responded with active and enthusiastic feedback, including non-verbal cues such as nodding, acknowledging, and making eye contact with participants while keeping an open posture. Participants in the "private" condition were asked to write an essay diary about their focal trip that no one is expected to see.

After completing the activities, participants were asked to reassess their post-trip experience. Participants in the "sharing" condition were also asked to rate the listener with an adapted version of the 12-item Perceived Responses to Capitalization Attempts (PRCA) scale (Gable et al. 2004). This scale assesses four response types to capitalization attempts: the first and second types are constructive responses (i.e., active-constructive, expressing enthusiastic/positive support, and passive-constructive, showing benign disinterest) while the third and fourth types are destructive responses (i.e., active-destructive, expressing derogatory responses, and passive-destructive, distancing and otherwise failing to respond). Each item was rated from 1 (not at all true of our interaction) to 7 (very true of our interaction).

Results

The reliability scores for the eight-item measure of post-trip experience are .84 (pre-manipulation) and .82 (post-manipulation), which are greater than .70 (Nunnally 1978). This suggests that the scale is acceptable both before and after the manipulation in this experiment.

To compare the effects of the manipulations on post-trip evaluations of the focal experience, two change scores were computed by subtracting the pre-manipulation rating (Sharing condition $M = 5.32$; Private condition $M = 5.50$) from the post-manipulation rating (Sharing condition $M = 5.92$; Private condition $M = 5.72$). This difference served as the dependent variable, with positive values indicating greater increases in positivity from pre-manipulation to post-manipulation for the travel memory. An independent samples t-test comparing the change scores of the "sharing" condition ($M = .60$) with the "private" condition ($M = .22$) was significant, $t(39) = 2.695$, $p = .013$.

Participants in the "sharing" condition also rated the listener with the PRCA scale (Gable et al. 2004). They perceived the listener as responding significantly more constructively ($M = 5.78$) than destructively ($M = 3.30$), $t(23) = 14.490$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, participants' evaluation of the listener's active-constructive responses was compared with each of the three other feedback types. Participants evaluated the listener as responding with higher ratings on active-constructiveness (e.g., enthusiasm) ($M = 5.83$) and passive-constructiveness ($M = 5.72$) than active-destructiveness ($M = 4.92$) and passive-destructiveness ($M = 3.67$). This result suggests the presence of constructive capitalization attempts in the "sharing" condition.

Summary of Experiment 1

Experiment 1 demonstrated that interpersonal sharing with a listener, and not simply recollecting the experience in private, enhanced post-trip evaluations of the experience. The storyteller perceived the listener as responding constructively, and capitalization occurred as the storyteller retold a travel experience that influenced his/her later impressions of the memory.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 examines the effects of capitalization on destination image via a 2 (focal memory: positive versus negative) x 2 (listener responsiveness: general versus specific) between-subjects experimental design.

<u>Participants and design</u>

108 participants were recruited at a large university in Asia to participate in this experiment (52 females, 56 males; 66.7% of participants were between the age of 18-24).

<u>Procedure</u>

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Participants in the "focal memory: positive" condition were asked to recollect a positive travel experience based on the autobiographical memory recall procedure as per Experiment 1. Participants in the "focal memory: negative" condition followed similar instructions albeit the recollection of a negative memorable experience. All participants were then asked to assess their cognitive and affect images of the destination (i.e., pre-interaction evaluation). Affective image included four items: unpleasant to pleasant, gloomy to exciting, distressing to relaxing, and sleepy to arousing, each anchored from 1 to 7, respectively (Stylos et al. 2016). Cognitive image covered a total of 13 items, such as culture, infrastructure, climate, and nature on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) (Baloglu and Mangaloglu 2001).

Next, participants were asked to share their experience with a listener. They were randomly assigned to receive general or specific responsive feedback from the listener throughout the interaction. For participants in the "Listener responsiveness: general" condition, the listener responded with verbal feedback that contained largely generic responses such as "this sounds fun" (i.e., in response to a positive experience) and "I am sorry for you" (i.e., in response to a negative experience). Nonverbal feedback in this condition also included nodding and an open posture.

For participants in the condition, "Listener responsiveness: specific", the listener showed deeper interest in the story and tracked the participant's narrative more closely by commenting on the details of the narrative (Bavelas, Coates and Johnson 2000). For example, the listener reflected on the storyteller's experience by paraphrasing (e.g., "so you took this trip to escape from routine life") and/or by asking follow-up questions (e.g., "what made you choose this destination?")

After sharing their narratives, all participants re-assessed the cognitive and affective destination images (i.e., post-interaction evaluation) and rated the listener with the PRCA scale as per Experiment 1 (Gable et al. 2004).

<u>Results</u>

Manipulation check

To examine the effectiveness of the responsive feedback conditions, participants' post-interaction ratings of the constructiveness (e.g., enthusiastic responses) (α = .79) versus destructiveness (e.g., derogatory and distancing responses) (α = .78) of the listener's feedback were compared. Participants perceived the listener as responding significantly more constructively (*M* = 5.28) than destructively (*M* = 3.25), *t* (107) = 19.345, *p* < .001.

Furthermore, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) indicated no significant differences

in evaluations of these response types between focal memory conditions (i.e., positive or negative memories), but significantly higher ratings of active-constructiveness for participants in the "Listener responsiveness: specific" condition (M = 5.90) than participants in the "Listener responsiveness: general" condition (M = 5.29), t (106), $p < .001$.

Taken together, the results provide support to the effectiveness of the responsive feedback manipulation as participants perceived the listener as responsive in both focal memory conditions (i.e., positive and negative experiences), but more active and constructive in the "listener responsiveness: specific" condition than in the "general" condition.

Assessment of measurement structure for destination image

Participants were asked to evaluate the cognitive and affective components of destination image of their focal memory before and after sharing their narratives with the researcher. The three factors of cognitive destination image are comfort/security, cultural attractions, and natural state (Baloglu and Mangaloglu 2001). The composite reliability for cognitive image is .89 (pre-interaction) and .93 (post-interaction) (e.g. the reliability scores for each factor of cognitive image, pre-interaction are: comfort/security α = .85, cultural appeal α = .82, natural state α = .82; post-interaction: comfort/security α = .89, cultural appeal α = .89, natural state α = .85). The composite reliability scores for the affective component are .91 (pre-interaction) and .94 (post-interaction). These reliability scores are greater than .80, suggesting acceptable reliability for composite measures of both cognitive and affective images, before and after the manipulation.

Changes in pre- and post-evaluations of destination image

To compare the effect of the listener responsiveness manipulation on pre- and post-evaluations of destination image, change scores were computed by subtracting the pre-manipulation rating from the post-manipulation rating separately for both cognitive and affective components of image. The differences served as the dependent variables, with positive values indicating greater increases in positivity from pre-interaction to post-interaction in cognitive and affective image for the focal memory.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to assess focal memory and listener responsiveness on the change scores (post minus pre) of cognitive and affective image. The results indicate a significant effect of the focal memory condition (i.e., positive or negative) on cognitive and affective image (Wilks' λ = .838), F (2, 103) = 9.978, $p < .001$. Participants who shared a positive memory conveyed increases in change scores for both cognitive (M = .151) and affective images (M = .245); in contrast, participants who shared a negative travel experience reported decreases from pre- to post-interaction for both cognitive (M = -.071) and affective components (M = -.027). However, there is an insignificant effect from the listener responsiveness condition (i.e., general or specific) on cognitive and affect image (Wilks' λ = .955), F (2, 103) = 2.286, $p = .107$.

Summary of Experiment 2

Experiment 2 demonstrated that the effects of capitalization on post-travel memories of destination image could depend on whether the storyteller shared a positive or negative travel experience. Interestingly, the findings showed that storytellers would not only enhance their evaluations of a positive memory, but would also maximize the details of a negative experience, worsening their cognitive and affective images of the destination after interpersonal sharing. The

nature of the listener's responsiveness (i.e., specific or general), however, did not significantly improve or worsen the storyteller's travel memories after sharing.

Conclusion and Discussion

Theoretical implications

This research shows that the act of sharing a memory with another individual could elicit a process called capitalization, and the two experiments provide causal evidence of the effects on storytellers' post-travel memories when they sought to maximize the significance of their memory to a listener. The findings of this study are theoretically important because observing increases in post-travel experiences after interpersonal sharing, as well as declines in the case of sharing negative experiences in cognitive and affective images, shows that the sincere and simple act of listening to tourists' stories can help them savor their travel memories. The findings reinforce the idea that the act of remembering is difficult to be separated from the act of sharing (Hirst and Echterhoff 2012). Through storytelling, tourists are remembering and sharing memories of their experiences, while simultaneously (re)creating and re-evaluating their post-travel experiences.

A second contribution of this study lies in the statistically insignificant, yet important, results of Experiment 2, which concerns the role of the listener's feedback in shaping the storyteller's memory. While Experiment 1 provided experimental evidence to suggest that the presence of a listener can positively benefit post-trip recollections, the findings in Experiment 2 suggest that the difference between providing specific or generally responsive feedback during the interaction may not be sufficient to cause the storyteller to re-interpret destination attributes that are highly detailed in nature. In other words, although the findings in Experiment 2 provided general evidence on the malleability of destination image, varying the listeners' enthusiastic responses during the short conversations used in this research were not enough to truly reshape the storyteller's cognitive or affective images of the destination. This result is logical, as storytellers who were approached by the listener to ask them to share their memorable experiences for this research would have no reason to expect that their stories would be unfavorably or unenthusiastically received.

Managerial implications

The findings from this study have important managerial implications in service experiences and customer-relationship building in tourism and hospitality settings. From a service perspective, service staff, such as tour guides and hotel employees, are oftentimes trained to ask tourists and guests about their past and current experiences. This reflects the growing importance towards a high degree of customer orientation in which well-traveled tourists have an expectation that employees are responsive to their stories, feedback, and comments during interpersonal interactions (Susskind, Kacmar, and Borchgrevink 2003). Here, the results of this research provide empirical support on the potential benefits of employees' (i.e., listeners') constructive responses for enhancing tourists' post-travel experiences and destination image. Indeed, service staff also need to mindful and respond sincerely as research has shown that customers can detect

employees who have little genuine interest in creating a positive service interaction (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, and Gremler 2006).

Tourists oftentimes share their experiences online and a growing number of studies are exploring tourist reviews on social media (Xiang and Gretzel 2010). From a tourist-relationship building perspective, marketers are encouraging tourists to share their stories on social networks and then evaluating their posts to gauge their past experiences as well as level of satisfaction and electronic word-of-mouth (Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan 2008). Despite current research trend towards 'high-tech' or 'digital' sharing, it is nevertheless critical that industry practitioners do not forget that interpersonal sharing or 'high-touch' experiences, between an individual to another, in real-life and in-person, still matters and remains one of the important and intimidate forms of relationship building that enriches tourist experiences in the industry.

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