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### **PolyU Study Finds Right Audience Critical for Destination Marketing Mini-movies**

Destination marketers interested in how to produce effective mini-movies to market travel destinations need to ensure that they target the right audience, according to BSc graduate Tianyi Gong and Dr Vincent Tung of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. In a recently published research paper, the researchers observe that mini-movies are an increasingly popular and effective form of advertising, but many current efforts are missing the mark. In some circumstances mini-movies may actually have the opposite of the intended effect on the destination's image.

Mini-movies have recently become a popular way for marketers to promote destination brands. The researchers explain that a mini-movie is a trailer-length video that “blurs the line between advertising and entertainment” by integrating the product message into the plot to better engage the audience. They differ from promotional videos in that they generally emphasise “cinematic esthetics and film attributes” and present storylines focusing on the “place, protagonist, and plot” rather than on the landscape and scenery of a destination.

The idea is that as viewers become absorbed in the story, they are “transported into a fantasy world” that enhances their emotional response but reduces their critical thought. Similar to film tourism, moviegoers are motivated to travel to a destination by viewing the characters, actors, plot and setting portrayed in the movie. Unlike a full-length movie, however, mini-movies are usually only around 3-10 minutes long and have much lower production costs. This, the researchers note, make them very appealing to “emerging and growing destinations” that do not have the resources to produce big-budget films.

The researchers also speculated that the influence of mini-movies on evaluations of destinations might depend on viewers' travel motivation, or the extent to which they are aware of, and act on, their needs. In addition, the effectiveness of any form of advertising can be reduced by “reactance” – that is, individuals may resist persuasion if they feel that advertising is attempting to control their behaviour or eliminate their freedom of choice.

However, the researchers also hypothesised that mini-movies could “reduce consumers' resistance to embedded brand promotions” because they tend to be viewed voluntarily, usually through online advertising channels or video-sharing websites such as YouTube. Moreover, the “narrative storytelling” format means mini-movies are less likely to be regarded as attempts to persuade.

To determine whether motivation on the one hand and recognition of persuasion on the other have considerable influences on the impact of destination marketing mini-movies, the researchers asked a group of 156 students to watch a mini-movie entitled “Whatever you need is now in Peru”. Created by the Peru Tourism Board, the mini-movie features a hard-working businessman

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watching a video he made 20 years ago when he was a young adult travelling through Peru. This seemed a particularly apt movie because it features landscapes, historical and archaeological sites, activities and facilities that are useful for tourists' evaluation of destination images. Furthermore, the destination and marketing nature of the movie are not revealed until the end.

Of the 156 viewers, most were aged between 21 and 25, as young people of this age group were considered an appropriate target audience. They were randomly assigned to one of four groups. The researchers asked half of them to write about their "most enjoyable and memorable tourism experience" to prime their motivation to travel, while the other half were asked to write about their morning routine. After being assigned to a group, half of each group received information about the advertising nature of the video, describing it as "a perfect platform to . . . convince the audience to come and visit Peru". The other half did not receive this disclosure, and were merely asked to watch the video.

After the movie, the viewers answered questions designed to evaluate what Peru has to offer as a tourism destination in terms of safety and comfort, interest and adventure, nature and culture, climate, cost and language barrier. As none had travelled to Peru previously, their judgements were not affected by their personal experience of the country.

The results confirmed the researchers' expectation that motivation influences how people are persuaded. When the viewers were primed to think about travel by writing about a travel experience of their own, they evaluated the destination image of Peru more positively than those who had not been primed. However, this positive effect only applied to those who were unaware that the mini-movie was an advertisement before watching it. Priming participants to think about travel and then telling them that they were going to watch an advertisement made them evaluate the destination negatively.

In contrast, the disclosure of the advertising content made little difference to the evaluations of those who were not primed to think about travel, and if anything it seemed to result in slightly more positive views. Therefore, the most positive evaluations were made by those who had been primed to think about travel but were unaware that they were watching an advertisement. The researchers suggest that a possible explanation for this is that when viewers were not primed to think about travel, they perceived "less loss of freedom" from the advertisement's attempt to persuade.

From a practical viewpoint, the study should provide food for thought to destination marketers. For instance, rather than sharing the advertising nature of a mini-movie at the outset, leaving the disclosure until the end may be a more effective when targeting viewers who are already motivated to travel. The researchers explain that motivation "may drive individuals to search for signs" in communication materials that "contain the promise of fulfilling their needs". However, advertising is generally perceived as less credible than "real" movies, so disclosing the nature of a mini-movie at the outset reduces its credibility and could cause reactance, ensuring that the movie has the opposite of the intended effect.

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The researchers also suggest that marketers should consider using social media platforms to attract potential tourists based on their “recent browsing history”. Someone who has spent a lot of time searching for travel-related information is likely to be a “motivated potential traveller” who will react positively to a travel-related mini-movie if they do not realise it is an advertisement.

Alternatively, marketers hoping to “capture the attention of non-motivated viewers” may be better off disclosing the advertising nature of the mini-movie at the outset to generate awareness of the destination.

Mini-movies are a novel and interesting form of marketing ideally suited to today’s social-media-led world. Yet their relative novelty means that marketers may not have all of the information they need to use them in developing positive destination images. Still, the results of this study will go a long way towards rectifying that situation, paving the way for a better understanding of how mini-movies can influence potential travellers.

**Gong, Tianyi and Tung, Wing Sun Vincent. (2017).** The Impact of Tourism Mini-Movies on Destination Image: The Influence of Travel Motivation and Advertising Disclosure. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 34(3), 4160-428.

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