Evaluations of Iconic Versus Genuine Experiences Depend on Attitude Functions

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In this research, we first define fake experiences as the replica of the original experience and provide a brief conceptually discussion. Then, through a series of three studies, using attitude functions theory, we provide insight into attitude functions and advertising appeals for this kind of experiences.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The controversial topics of the appreciation for the non-genuine experiences (Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995; Hall 2007; Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink 2008; Munoz, Wood, and Solomon 2006) and more specifically, replica experiences imitating the original experiences like visiting a re-made Egyptian tomb are being more widespread worldwide but relatively little research have been performed on the side of consumer behaviorists. Defined in line with Grayson and Martinec (2004), we conceptualize non-genuine replica experiences as iconic experiences rather than counterfeit, fake, or inauthentic experiences; meaning that the replicas physically resemble the original or the genuine but lack indexical authenticity features.

Even fewer studies have investigated why consumers engage in the iconic experiences, even when the original option is available for them to experience. In this research, we employ an attitude functions perspective (Katz 1960) and through three experiments, we argue that individuals’ attitude toward engaging in iconic experiences is more favorable than their attitude toward engaging in genuine experiences when the utilitarian functions of attitudes are salient. While consumption decisions stemming from value-expressive function attitudes are based on central values, beliefs and self-identity, the iconic experiences might be designed in order to serve a degree of expected utility while minimizing the costs or punishments. The utilitarian objectives of experiences vary from adrenaline rush to relaxation (Clarke 2006). Cannon and Yaprack (2001) mentioned that for a certain type of cosmopolitan tourists or consumers, it is possible to move from the search for authenticity to the search for comfort, compromising their central values. In addition, the suppliers of iconic experiences such as re-made historical caves, emphasize the multiple rewards of their experiences such as projections, information stands and enhanced lighting as well as decreased punishments such as shorter waiting times and more availability to visit as opposed to genuine caves or tombs that need to limit number of visitors and lighting arrangements (The Houston Museum of Natural Science official website- www.hmns.org).

Study 1 had a 2x2 between-subjects experimental design with the type of experience (genuine vs. iconic) and the manipulated attitude function towards sightseeing (utilitarian vs. value-expressive), holding attitude favorability towards the experience as the dependent variable. We used the real-life example of the Tutankhamun tomb and its replica and showed that individuals’ attitudes toward engaging in iconic experiences would be more favorable than their attitudes toward engaging in genuine experiences when the utilitarian functions of these experiences are salient ($M_{.utilitarian} = 6.60$, $SD = .47$ vs. $M_{value-expressive} = 5.26$, $SD = 1.40$; $F(1, 77) = 17.60, p < .001$) while there was no significant difference when the value-expressive functions were salient. Study 2 replicated the finding in a different iconic context (Lausac caves in France and its replica in the similar location) and we also confirmed that the self-authenticity of the person as a trait is not a significant factor in explaining our findings.

We designed study 3 in order to capitalize upon our main finding and to test appropriate method of persuasion in the context of advertising or communicating the iconic experience. Even though “the matching hypothesis” (Petty and Wegener 1998) predicts increased persuasion and message scrutiny when the functional appeal of the advertising message (image versus quality) matches the attitudinal function of the recipient (social-adjective versus value-expressive); recently, LaBoeuf and Simmons (2010) have shown that products that give rise to utilitarian attitudes at the category level may give rise to brand attitudes that are less utilitarian and more symbolic and found support for the hypothesis that brands have to differentiate themselves from the category as much as possible in order to be favorably evaluated through an advertisement. Therefore, attitude functions associated with brands significantly differ from attitude functions associated with the product category. In real life, iconic experience brands (e.g., Thames Town tours, Emoya Shanty Village) need to distinguish themselves from the category-level attitudes (i.e., general attitudes toward tour agencies). Study 3 showed that when an advertisement emphasizes the value-expressive functions of iconic experiences, individuals’ evaluations of the advertisement will be more favorable than when an advertisement emphasizes the utilitarian functions of the iconic experiences. ($M_{value-expressive} = 4.56$, $SD = 1.80$ versus $M_{utilitarian} = 3.56$, $SD = 1.37$; $F(1, 100) = 4.98, p < .04$) while there was no significant difference for genuine experience advertisements.

Hence, by demonstrating that individuals would have more favorable evaluations of iconic versus genuine experiences when utilitarian attitude functions are salient, this research opens a new gate to the study of iconic experiences.

REFERENCES


