

Selling the Paradise

Content Analysis of Cruise Ads in Brazilian Newspapers

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Abstract

Tourism activities are hedonic and symbolic by nature. Among tourism activities, maritime cruises have long been one of the preferred means by which consumers express social differences, establish symbolic congruence and build their self-image. Only during the last two decades lower middle-class consumers have had access to the consumption of tourism products and services – such as maritime cruises – as a result of the increase on their income and the growing availability of credit in emerging markets. Tourism companies have sought to communicate with these "new" consumers, by several media, including print newspapers. This article presents a content analysis of the content of newspaper advertisements offering maritime cruises. Advertisers used different positioning by emphasizing different aspects of the experience. Symbolic appeals were classified in six categories: Experience, Integration, Classification, Play, Achievement, and Socialization. Utilitarian appeals were mainly price-related.

Introduction

Tourism activities are hedonic and symbolic by nature (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; McCracken, 1986). This is partly because the consumption of leisure products and services, especially tourism, has traditionally been used by the elite as an element of distinction (Bourdieu, 2011). Among tourism activities, the maritime cruises have long been one of the preferred means by which consumers express social differences, establish symbolic congruence, and build their self-image (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; Hogg, Banister & Stephenson, 2009). Cruises carry an aura of glamour built by the cultural industry, which is already part of our collective images of “the good life” (Belk & Pollay, 1985; Krippendorf, 2009).

During the past two decades more than 50 million Brazilians emerged from poverty to the middle-class. This group had, for the first time, access to the consumption of tourism products and services – such as maritime cruises – as a result of the increase on their income and the growing availability of credit in emerging markets (Neri, 2010).

Brazil ranks fifth as a market for maritime cruises. A study by the Brazilian Association of Maritime Cruises (ABREMAR) partly attributes the growing consumption of cruises in the country to the demand of lower middle-class consumers (ABREMAR & FGV, 2012). The study also indicates that these consumers, after having experienced cruises for the first time, planned to repeat the experience. In general, they preferred to travel in groups (couples, family, and friends). Credit is an important means to ensure affordability (Neri, 2010; ABREMAR & FGV, 2012).

Tourism companies have sought to communicate with this new consumer group using several types of media, including print newspapers (Krippendorf, 2009). In this process, advertising works as an enabler, using emotional appeals to bring consumers closer to their objects of desire (Hogg, Banister, & Stephenson, 2009). Krippendorf (2009, p.38) points out that the consumption of leisure is associated with "the promises [made by companies]; the sellers of paradise". He adds: "This is the fabric with which people build their dreams" (p.41).

This study presents a content analysis of newspaper advertisements of maritime cruises published in a Brazilian print newspaper. The purpose of the study was to identify symbolic and utilitarian elements in cruise ads. Content analysis is a data analysis technique that allows the interpretation of text and images, in order to make sense and extract the meanings embedded in ad messages. The technique has been extensively used to analyze the content of advertisements (e.g. Belch & Belch, 2013; Hong, Muderissoglu, & Zinkham, 1987), and is recommended by several authors (e.g. De Geer, Borglund & Frostenson, 2004; Strehlau & Huertas, 2006).

Literature Review

The main reason to examine meanings associated to products and services by advertising comes from the fact that these meanings change the nature of the offer to incorporate values that, to a large extent, surpass its pure utilitarian value (Barbosa & Campbell, 2006). Meanings associated to products and services include issues such as identity, identification, self-image, distinction, socialization, and belonging, among many others. Holt (1995) recognizes the use of three metaphors in the interpretive literature on consumer behavior – consumption as experience, consumption as integration, and consumption as classification – to which he adds a fourth, consumption as play. In this study, we started from these four categories to structure our analysis of meanings in the advertising of maritime cruises.

The first metaphor refers to “consumption as experience”. Holt (1995) indicated that consumption as experience has emerged in marketing studies in the 1980s, pioneered by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982). The key issues associated to hedonic consumption are that (i) consumption has meanings that transcend the merely utilitarian value of a product or service; (ii) consumers’ emotions prevail over rationality; and (iii) hedonic consumption is attached to a subjective construction of reality. The consumption experience was summarized by these authors as “fantasies, feelings and fun” (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

The second metaphor, “consumption as integration”, refers to how consumers actively engage in the process of creating and transferring social meanings. McCracken (1986) proposed an explanatory framework to describe the process, whereby meanings residing in the culturally constituted world are transferred to goods by means of advertising and the fashion system. Advertising as a cultural product is seen as providing consumers “with the opportunity to construct, maintain and communicate identity and social meanings” (Elliot, 1997, p.285).

The third metaphor, consumption as classification, looks at “consuming as a process in which objects – viewed as vessels of cultural and personal meanings – act to classify their consumers” (Holt, 1995, p.2). The classificatory nature of consumption, inspired by a long-standing tradition of economic and sociological studies, has also been named “positional consumption”.

The fourth metaphor, play, refers to the use of consumption to interact with other consumers, “interaction for interaction’s sake” (Holt, 1995, p.9). Play includes communing (sharing experiences with others) and socializing (a consumer assuming a more active role and

entertaining another consumer). Holt showed how “consuming as play” is also an important dimension, and can happen in private consumption (self-play) or in group consumption.

Method

The study uses content analysis to investigate meanings associated to cruises in Brazilian advertisements. The technique involves the use of systematic procedures that allow the coding of text and visual elements and their interpretation (Kohlbacher, 2006). Both manifest and latent content can be analyzed, challenging the researcher to find out what is behind the content, whether explicit or not (Mozzato, 2010). We used a quantitative and a qualitative approach to content analysis. Although often referred to as a quantitative method, content analysis can be used in both quantitative and qualitative studies. Quantitative studies use more often frequencies (Acevedo & Santos, 2012), while qualitative analyses generally stick to the existence or absence of a particular aspect, the context in which this aspect appears and the inferences that can be drawn from it (De Geer, Borglund & Frostenson, 2004).

In this study we performed the following steps. First, we selected a Brazilian newspaper with large paid circulation, *Folha de São Paulo*. A total of 119 (13.4%) ads of maritime cruises were selected from a total of 887 tourism ads that appeared in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* during the second semester of 2011. The ads aimed to offer cruises exclusively (94 ads) or not (25 ads composed by cruises and other offers, such as tour packages or airline tickets). After eliminating ads that were repeated, we ended up with 60 ads. All ads were placed by only seven companies; all of them had text and color images, and provided details on their offers. Each ad received an identification number. Second, the material was systematically encoded using pre-defined categories, as well as others that emerged from the study. The following visual elements were catalogued: the use of color (or not), types of images used (human or not), characters represented (man, woman, child, family, etc.), types of scenery (urban or natural landscape, ship facilities, among others), and ambience suggested by the situation (festive, relaxation, tropical paradise, among others). As to the copy, after selecting the terms to be used in the analysis, we proceeded to the coding of the material. The unit of analysis was the image for the visual elements and the term (word or group of words) for the copy. Third, we classified the terms into the categories and sub-categories drawn from the literature. The two authors acted as independent judges, examining the material separately; only in very few cases there was some doubt as to the classification and the two judges discussed the matter and resolved the issues. Next, frequencies were computed. The final stage of content analysis, as proposed by Bardin (2006), consisted of a reflexive and critical interpretation of the data in order to answer the study's research question.

Results

The analysis was conducted separately for the visual elements identified in the ads and the text. Because of space limitations, the tables with frequencies for the visual elements are not presented here.

Visual Elements

The images portrayed in the ads examined were in general quite similar, with a dominance of blue and green colors. The image of large ships sailing in the sea appeared

recurrently, evoking the idea of luxury and smooth travel. Ship facilities were presented in a smaller number of ads, usually serving as a scenario for fun activities. Human characters in the ads were dominantly Caucasian, typically presented as a nuclear family (parents and children) or as a couple. When only one woman was portrayed in the ad, she was typically young and Caucasian. Natural landscapes shown were mostly associated with the image of a “tropical paradise” (sunset, beach, coconut trees etc.).

A qualitative analysis of visual elements in the ads led to the observation that different advertisers used visual elements in their ads in often distinctive ways:

Advertiser 1 – This company emphasizes visual elements in its newspaper advertising. The ads always portray human characters, combined or not with a background scenery. They depict typically young people or couples as central characters and, to a lesser extent, couples close to 40 years-old and others at a more advanced age. Natural landscapes predominate among the scenarios used by this advertiser. Some ads, however, present no specific scenario. The presence of human characters is therefore the critical visual element in this advertiser’s communication.

Advertiser 2 – This company’s ads highlight natural landscapes, complemented by human characters or large ships. The human characters suggest a family gathering. Natural landscapes (sea, beach, coconut tree, and sunset) compose the scene of the ads. The ambience combines the concept of a harmonious and restful environment and the idea of a "tropical paradise". The emphasis is on the destination, rather than on the protagonists, or on the ship itself.

Advertiser 3 – This advertiser’s ads typically present human characters as part of landscapes and give prominence to the image of large ships. A vessel navigating in the ocean appears in each ad. In addition, some ads present ship facilities, portraying an environment of fun and pleasure. The use of characters suggests they belong to families or are part of groups. Therefore, it seems that Advertiser 3 positions itself in terms of the entertainment in the ship, rather than destinations.

Advertiser 4 – Although Advertiser 4 uses human characters and scenarios, including the ship itself, in the ads, these elements do not have any prominence, and are mixed with other information. In general, one is not sure of what exactly the ad is trying to portray in terms of ambience. The most easily seen aspects in the ads are prices and conditions, suggesting that Advertiser 4 positions itself mainly in terms of price.

Advertiser 5 – This company’s ads depict ships navigating in the ocean, highlighting ship facilities and cruise activities. Within the ship, the ads show several activities offered on the cruise suggesting that these activities take place permanently. The characters, which are given only secondary emphasis, include crew members, men, women and children, the latter usually depicted as families or couples. The ads pass an idea that “you will not be bored” in the cruise.

Advertiser 6 – The ship navigating is the image that stands out in this company’s advertisements. Sometimes the ads use human characters. Although aesthetically similar, the difference between the ads is the type of characters presented: family, children and men, women and children, young couple and woman alone. The scenario is marked by the sea and the stage refers to the journey itself. The ads suggest harmony and peacefulness. Therefore, it seems that the intention was to present the cruise as moments of leisure and rest, away from the hurdles of everyday life.

Advertiser 7 – Like in the case of Advertiser 6, the ship is always present in the ads of this advertiser. When human characters appear, prominence is given to them. Families are

portrayed enjoying the facilities (open areas) or specific scenario (beaches or swimming, for example). Feelings of happiness and harmony seem to be shared by the characters.

Copy

The analysis of the copy examined symbolic and utilitarian elements conveyed in the ads. We used Holt’s (1995) categorization of the meanings of consumption for a first classification of symbolic elements. Although the initial intention was not to go beyond this first step, the large amount of terms falling into the “Consumption as Experience” category suggested a need for further classification.

Therefore, a set of subcategories was generated using the literature review for two of the categories that were more frequently used in the ads (“Consumption as Experience” and “Consumption as Classification”). In spite of departing from the literature, some categories and sub-categories also emerged from the analysis. Table 1 presents the symbolic meanings extracted from cruise ads, the terms identified, organized by categories and sub-categories, and frequencies.

Table 1 – Symbolic Meanings Attached To Cruises

Category	Sub-category	Terms	No. of terms in the sub-category	No. of terms in the category	No. of times all terms appeared
Experience	hedonic (trip-related)	vacations, sea, maritime, trip, travel, crossing, navigate, embark, ship facilities*	15	40	86
	hedonic (fantasies)	discover, unveil, explore, romantic, exuberant	5		15
	hedonic (feelings)	unforgettable, remarkable, joy, emotions, sensations, pleasure	6		12
	hedonic (fun)	entertainment, enjoy, leisure, celebrate, commemorate, musical, shopping	7		63
	atemporal	day and night, never ends, all the time, 24 hours, worth a life	5		22
	relaxation	comfort, peace	2		11
Integration		the world is mine, the world under a new perspective	2	2	4
Classification	distinction	unique, exclusive, special, elegance, taste, style, service, casino, gastronomy, charm	10	14	37
	abundance	everything, all you wish, food, drinks	4		17
Play		spectacle	1	1	8
Achievement		deserve, conquest, novel trip, new life	4	4	5
Socialization		family, couple, friends, loved ones	4	4	12

Note: * refers to several facilities such as discotheque, bar, restaurant, jacuzzi, pool, theater.

Cruise ads mostly emphasize the consumption experience and not much attention is devoted to other meanings associated to consumption. The concepts of “integration” and “play” are almost inexistent in the ads.

Within the category of experiential consumption, we were able to identify four aspects of hedonism in the ads: *trip-related aspects* and the three elements of hedonic consumption – *fantasy, feelings and fun* – suggested by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982). Trip-related aspects, in fact, could also be classified as fun, because of the connotations given to these terms in everyday

life, but we chose to keep them separately from those terms that are in fact more obviously associated to fun. Fun appears, therefore, as the dominant symbolic element in the text content of cruise ads. In fact, terms related to the other two subcategories – fantasy and feelings – are scarcely used in the ads.

Interestingly, we found a large number of mentions (22 mentions) to a situation of “suspended temporality”, or “atemporality”. These terms – day and night, never ends, all the time, 24 hours, worth a life – have been used to indicate that, for a period of time, one can immerse in the cruise and have a “total” experience. These copy elements used to describe the cruise experience is similar to the Brazilian Carnival (as analyzed by Brazilian anthropologist DaMatta, 1983), in which there is also a suspension of time.

Two other categories, achievement and socialization, were also identified, although they are not part of Holt’s conceptual framework of metaphors of consumption. Achievement appeals are very few (deserve, conquest, novel trip, new life), suggesting they have not been seen yet by advertisers as a powerful appeal to motivate lower middle-class consumers to participate in cruises. Socialization appeals are those that refer to the cruise as a place for interaction with family, friends and beloved ones.

As to utilitarian aspects identified in the text, they were classified in two categories: (i) presentation of the company or of the ship as the best or the largest in some regard (40 mentions); and (ii) price-related issues (80 mentions). Table 2 details price-related issues.

Table 2 – Price-Related Categories

Category	Terms	No. of terms in the category	No. of terms in the category	No. of times all terms appeared
Price	unbeatable prices, incredible prices, unbelievable prices, super low prices, low prices	5	7	10
	cheap	1		1
	fits your budget	1		5
Promotions	offer, promotion	2	7	12
	discount	1		7
	in x installments, in x times	2		15
	no interest	1		9
	get a... free	1		15
Value	cost-benefit	1	1	6

The price, presented as a total or "ranging from...", was generally highlighted, calling the attention to the possibility to pay in installments, the value of the installment or special conditions (such as discount, gratuity for the second passenger, number of installments, among others). Interestingly, the term “cheap” appears only once, suggesting it is avoided by advertisers. Instead the concept of “great prices” appears more often and in a few cases the term “fits your budget” is used. Discounts and special offers are highlighted. Only one company used the concept of cost-benefit.

The issue of affordability appears, with more or less emphasis, in all ads. Affordability is the strongest appeal made by advertisers. Although they draw attention to communicate the price in installments and the amount of the installments, proportionally to the size of the ad, the information seems to be small to call consumers attention. Only in Advertiser 3 ads the value of the installment is easy to see. Advertiser 4 emphasizes the number of installments that the

customer can pay for the cruise. However, the promise of affordability of the cruise seems to be timidly explored by some advertisers.

In general, advertisers seem to make limited use of certain aspects in the visual communication. For example, Advertiser 4 uses affordability of the cruise as its main appeal in detriment of others that, properly exploited, could better communicate the company's offer to target consumers.

Discussion and Managerial Recommendations

The analysis of visual elements in the advertisements of maritime cruises examined suggest that advertisers may not have adapted their ads to the new middle class consumers, exactly those that started to have access to cruises in recent years and are partly responsible for the increase in cruise consumption in Brazil. Firstly, human characters used in the materials are dominantly Caucasian. Therefore, these ads do not adequately portray the biotype of Brazilian consumers, which is quite diverse. If advertisers depicted a larger variety of biotypes in their ads, they might achieve greater identification with this consumer segment, as well as call their attention to the possibility of consuming something that may still seem to some a remote possibility.

Secondly, some advertisers do not portray people in groups in their ads, which is not the typical way by which consumers go to cruises. According to ABREMAR/FGV (2012), cruises are a type of tourism adopted by people who prefer to travel together. It is suggested that this is an attribute that should be better explored by advertisers.

Thirdly, the various activities that make up the cruise experience were little explored visually in the ads of several advertisers. The promise of fun is portrayed in family moments and in a paradisiacal setting. Thematic cruises, for example, might vary in the activities they offer depending on the theme itself.

A fourth consideration regards consumers' background. The ads do not suggest clearly the type of audience the communication is meant to be addressed to. Individuals from different background, even different social classes, must also present distinct behavior, expectations, life style and so on. Communicating clearly the target group to specific consumers can avoid problems in consumers experience, arising from differences in background, for example, as pointed out by authors like Grove and Fisk (1997) and Wu (2007).

The analysis of the copy also shows a limited use of possibilities. In terms of the use of symbolic elements in the ads, advertisers, despite more variety in terms of images portrayed in their advertising, tend to overwhelmingly concentrate in symbolic aspects associated to fun. Other aspects that could be also emphasized and are part of the cruise experience do not appear in the text. The text of the ads is therefore not well used by advertisers. Advertisers and creatives should be aware of the evidence from academic studies that visual elements in service ads are not enough to assure advertising effectiveness (e.g. Clow, Berry, Kranenburg, & James, 2005; Lutz & Lutz, 1977; Stafford, 1996).

Another consideration refers to affordability, which is of critical importance for lower middle-class consumers, who take into consideration the possibility of paying in installments in their purchase decision (Neri, 2010). Since some advertisers do not emphasize affordability, they should consider the possibility of using this appeal in a more obvious way. In the same token, images of meals and drinks also received little attention in the ads. The modality of the cruise can influence the consumer purchase decision. For example, in an "all inclusive" cruises, food,

drink and entertainment are included in the price paid for the cruise, without additional payments to the consumer at the time of the trip. The communication of these attributes in the ad may have a strong appeal to some consumers, especially emerging consumers.

Conclusion

It seems that the advertising of maritime cruises in Brazil is not taking into consideration several different possibilities both in terms of copy and visual elements. The results of the study point out to some aspects that demand advertisers' and creatives' attention in order to accurately communicate with ascending consumers. This study unveils several issues that are relevant to approach this new group of consumers.

This research aimed to respond to the quest for more studies on ascending consumers (Rocha & Silva, 2009), and, specifically, on consumer behavior on cruises (Weeden, Lester & Thyne, 2011). We also hope to have contributed to help companies to approach their "new" customers in terms of communication.

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