



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Destination Marketing & Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jdmm

Impact of destination familiarity on external information source selection process

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

External information sources
Importance level
Conjoint analysis
Destination familiarity
Type of travel
Information search

ABSTRACT

Utilizing a conjoint analysis approach, this study aims to examine the impact of destination familiarity on the relative importance of external information sources for domestic and international travelers during the pre-purchase information search process. Data for this study were collected from 719 tourists traveling to Sardinia (Italy). Findings reveal that the level of destination familiarity is a critical determinant of the importance domestic and international travelers attach to different external information source categories and related sub-categories. For example, the online personal information sources category is found to be the most important for domestic travelers with low destination familiarity while the personal information sources category is the most important information source category for international travelers with low destination familiarity. Contradicting the general belief that the social networking sites such as Facebook plays a critical role in individuals' consumption behavior, findings suggest that the social networking sites are not that influential when it comes to travel and destination selection decisions. Both theoretical and practical contributions of this study to the literature and managerial implications are discussed, and suggestions for further research are provided.

1. Introduction

Information search process is considered to be one of the most complex and important steps in decision making process; especially for travel products because of the risks associated with them (Gursoy, 2011; Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015). Many studies have examined the information search behavior of travelers and concluded that travelers tend to spend a significant amount of time and effort on information search during the pre-purchase stage (Hyde, 2006; Jun, Vogt, & MacKay, 2007; Luo, Feng, & Cai, 2004). Studies have also identified a number of antecedents that can impact search behavior and the type of external information sources utilized during the process (Kim, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Rodgers & Harris, 2003). However, with the rapid advancements of the Internet, information distribution and the availability of information has tremendously increased within the last decade, which have further complicated the dynamics of travelers' information search behavior (Qi, Law, Cheung, & Buhalis, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Xiang, Gretzel, & Fesenmaier, 2009). Studies argue that while the number of available external information sources available is extremely large, travelers are not likely to utilize all those available sources (Lu & Gursoy, 2015). Instead, they pick a small

number of external sources to utilize in their pre-purchase information search process.

As suggested by the cost-benefit framework and the economics of information theory, travelers are selective in determining the type of external sources to use in their information search process in order to balance the perceived costs and expected benefits (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a). The extent to which travelers assess the importance of different external sources depends on a number of factors including, but not limited to situational factors (e.g. satisfaction with previous experiences, risk perceptions, traveling party composition, time limitations, etc), product characteristics (e.g. destination type, travel occasion and purpose, type of trip, mode of travel, frequency of visiting the destination, etc), environmental factors (e.g. availability and accessibility of alternatives, perceived cultural and spatial distance, ease of choice task, etc) and consumer characteristics (e.g. knowledge level, education level, socio-economic status, travelers' involvement with the product, culture, etc) (Coenders, Ferrer-Rosell, & Martínez-García, 2016; Ferns & Walls, 2012; Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2002; Osti, Turner, & King, 2009).

One of the critical factors associated with travelers' decision making and destination choice behavior is the frequency of visits to a destina-

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2017.02.004>

Received 13 September 2016; Received in revised form 6 February 2017; Accepted 17 February 2017
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tion and the amount of previous experiences a traveler has with that destination and with the activities offered (Jiang, Ramkissoon, & Mavondo, 2016). Travel frequency to a destination and previous experiences with that destination are also considered among the most critical determinants of travelers' familiarity with that destination (Gursoy & Chi, 2008). Furthermore, travelers' familiarity with a destination is one of the most frequently investigated antecedents of information search behavior and decision-making process (Huang, Gursoy, & Xu, 2014). Studies suggest that the level of familiarity can have significant direct impact on information search behavior and it can be significant determinant of which external information source is likely to be utilized (Gursoy, 2003; Gursoy, Chen, & Chi, 2014). For example, previous research shows that differences in levels of familiarity can result in significant differences in individuals' utilization of functional and nonfunctional dimensions of information search and in their ability to use acquired information in their destination selection process (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

Identification of the most critical external information sources used by the current and prospective market segments during the pre-purchase information search can provide significant insights in the development of effective communication strategies that includes a mix of most frequently utilized external sources by their target consumers. Since destination familiarity and type of travel can influence external information source utilization patterns of travelers in their decision making, it is also important to consider the type of travel when examining the level of importance travelers attach to various external information sources. As suggested by previous studies, information search behaviors of domestic and international travelers are likely to be different (Gursoy & Umbreit, 2004). Furthermore, level of destination familiarity can also influence travelers' utilization of various external information sources (Yoon & Kim, 2016).

Even though several studies have examined the impact of familiarity on travelers' external information search behavior, findings have been contradictory (Lu & Chen, 2014). For example some studies have reported a negative relationship between familiarity and external information search behavior; the higher the familiarity with a destination, the lower the need for travelers to rely on external information sources, others have reported a positive relationships (Baloglu, 2001; Lu & Chen, 2014). Furthermore, despite the fact that travelers are likely to determine which external information sources to use based on the level of importance they attach to each of available external information sources, the level of importance travelers' attach to each of those external information sources has not received much attention from tourism scholars. Even the studies that examine travelers' external information source selection process have not paid much attention to the factors that may influence the level of importance attached to each external information source. Finally, very few studies have utilized a conjoint analysis approach to determine the level of importance attached to each external information source by travelers.

This study aims fill this gap by addressing an intriguing question facing researchers; whether the level of importance travelers attach to various external information sources differs based on travelers level of familiarity with a destination and the type of travel (domestic or international). Therefore, utilizing a conjoint analysis approach, this study examines examine the impact of destination familiarity on the relative importance attached to offline and online external information sources by domestic and international travelers. More specifically, this study examines:

1. The relative importance of external information sources for domestic and international travelers who are not very familiar with a destination.
2. The relative importance of external information sources for domestic and international travelers who are moderately familiar with a destination.
3. The relative importance of external information sources for domes-

tic and international travelers who are very familiar with a destination.

2. Literature review

Understanding the information search process of travelers is critical for destination managers and marketers because information search represents the primary stage in which marketers can provide information and influence travelers' decisions. Furthermore, information search is one of the most critical steps in travelers' decision making and destination selection process due to the nature of travel products (Matloka & Buhalis, 2010). Most travel offerings are bought, used and evaluated in the form of experiences. Since the production, delivery, consumption and evaluation of experiences differ from those of other products (Devesa, Laguna, & Palacios, 2010), strategies utilized in the information search process and the level importance attached to a number of sources tend to be different from the information search strategies utilized to purchase other products and the importance they place on information sources. First, travel products are mostly intangible (Lewis & Chambers, 2000; Swarbrooke & Horner, 2007). That is, they are mainly composed of experiences and performances. Consumers cannot try them before purchasing. In addition, in most cases, there is no tangible product to take home except for memories, souvenirs, pictures and receipts. Second, they are heterogeneous. There can be substantial differences between producers in production and delivery of a tourism product, which can significantly increase the possibility of receiving an experience that does not meet the expectations. Third, travelers consume most travel products at different locations than where they live. Forth, most travel products tend to be expensive. Fifth, decision making process for tourism products can take much longer than for many other tangible products because of high-perceived risk associated with tourism purchases mainly due to the amount of time, effort and money required to purchase those products (Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008); Lu and Chen (2014). Since individuals acquire information as a risk reduction strategy in the event of identified uncertainty regarding the outcome of an action to protect themselves and to maximize their satisfaction, travelers tend to acquire relatively more information from a variety of external information sources for tourism product purchase decisions than many other product purchase decisions in order to minimize the risk associated with travel purchases.

Even though travelers acquire relatively more information from a variety of external information sources during the information search process, they will not utilize all available information sources because of the sheer number of information sources available and the time, effort and processing capacity required to utilize all of them. Instead, as suggested by the cost-benefit framework and the economics of information theory (Avery, 1996; Stigler, 1961), travelers will determine the relative importance of each external source and utilize the ones that will provide the most beneficial information while minimizing the cost. However, as suggested by the contingency model, travelers' selection of the external information sources can be influenced by several factors such as type of a travel (international versus domestic travel), travelers previous experiences with a destination (first-time versus repeat visit), travelers socio-demographics characteristic (age and gender), etc (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a). This study specifically focuses on the differences between international and domestic travelers who are highly familiar, moderately familiar and not familiar at all with the destination examined in this study.

2.1. Impact of destination familiarity on information search behavior

Adopting the cognitive development theory, information processing approach examines tourists' information search behavior with an emphasis on the interactions between prior knowledge and information search behavior (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a). Tourists' prior knowledge

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