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Impact of personality traits and involvement on prior knowledge

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing data collected in a southern city of China, this study proposes and tests a model that examines two personality traits namely extraversion and neuroticism as antecedents of perceived risk, personal relevance (two dimensions of involvement) and familiarity, and the influence of familiarity on analysis and elaboration (two dimensions of expertise). Familiarity and expertise are utilized as two dimensions of prior knowledge. Findings reveal that extraversion's effects on personal relevance and familiarity are moderate. Familiarity has strong impact on analysis but moderate impact on elaboration. The impact of neuroticism on perceived risk and familiarity are found to be weak. While personal relevance has a moderate effect on familiarity, perceived risk's impact on familiarity is found to be weak.

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Introduction

Prior knowledge has long been recognized as an important factor in decision-making processes. A plethora of studies conclude that prior destination knowledge has significant impact on information search behavior (Bruce, 1985; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004), evaluation of

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alternatives (Sujan, 1985), purchase decisions (Lin & Chen, 2006) and post purchase evaluations. Even though the role of prior knowledge in decision making and destination selection process has been well established (Gursoy, 2003), factors that may influence the formation of prior knowledge have been somewhat overlooked in tourism studies.

Literature suggests that personality traits influence prior knowledge (Ackerman, 1996). Personality traits refer to cognitive, affective and behavioral patterns that show stability over time and across situations (e.g. Cattell, 1965). Personality traits are seen as important determinants of individuals' behavior because personality traits tend to determine personal values, attitudes and behaviors (Landers & Lounsbury, 2006). It is often argued that personality traits are enduring and can lead to stable and cross-situational individual differences. For example, a number of studies report that a tourist's personality traits play significant roles in destination selection and decision making process (Lepp & Gibson, 2008; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Since personality traits help determine an individual's unique responses to his/her environment, differences in personality traits should result in different interpretation of a product and variations in the extent of involvement with the product (Antil, 1984). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that personality traits are likely to influence tourists' prior knowledge formation.

Tourists' level of involvement is also argued to influence their level of prior knowledge (Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003). Since the involvement is viewed as "personal relevance" an individual attaches to a product (Zaichkowsky, 1985a), the level of involvement with an object, situation, or action is determined by the degree to which an individual perceives that concept to be personally relevant. To the extent that product characteristics are associated with personal goals and values, the consumer will experience strong feelings of personal relevance or involvement with the product (Celsi & Olson, 1988). Studies suggest that individuals pay more attention to incoming information about something that has personal relevance and high importance (Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003; Havitz & Dimanche, 1999). If an individual believes that a product category such as a vacation is highly relevant, the individual will be involved in an ongoing information search, which will result in higher prior knowledge with the product category (vacation).

In recent years, both domestic and international tourism in China has been growing rapidly. The World Tourism Organization forecasts that in 2020 China will become the number one tourist generating country in the world (WTO, 1999). Although China has become one of the world's largest tourist markets, a review of tourism literature has revealed a very small number of empirical studies that examine Chinese tourists' behaviors and attitudes. Studies that investigate Chinese tourists' prior knowledge and the antecedents of that knowledge are rare. Furthermore, the majority of studies that examine prior knowledge and the antecedents of prior knowledge are conducted in Western countries. Given the fact that research has identified Eastern and Western societies are ontologically different (Clark, 2009), examination of prior knowledge and the antecedents of prior knowledge in an Eastern society might generate critical findings and implications for operators and marketers that target tourists from Eastern countries. Therefore, this study aims to help enrich the tourism literature by examining the factors that will lead to Chinese tourists' destination knowledge formation, using data collected from Chinese tourists.

This study proposes a model that specifically demonstrates the effects of personality traits on Chinese tourists' involvement and their familiarity, as well as the effects of Chinese tourists' familiarity on their expertise. The proposed model is tested utilizing data collected from Chinese domestic tourists who are located in a southern city. This study specifically aims to address the following research objectives:

a. To develop a theoretical model to examine the effects of extraversion and neuroticism (two personality traits), and personal relevance and perceived risk (two dimensions of involvement) on tourists' familiarity, and the effect of familiarity on analysis and elaboration (two dimension of expertise).
b. To test and evaluate the strength and direction of relationships among these constructs.

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