

The impact of using non-media information sources on the future use of mass media information sources: The mediating role of expectations fulfillment

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Abstract

An empirical study of 350 tourists reveals that using non-media information sources for planning tourist trips influences expectations fulfillment. The use of non-media information sources also has a direct impact on the future use of mass media information sources for future tourist trip planning, as well as an indirect impact through expectations fulfillment. More specifically, the main determinants of expectations fulfillment of local infrastructure are commercial brochures, travel agents and internet; expectations fulfillment of entertainment structures is affected by institutional brochures, travel agents and the internet; future use of mass media sources is influenced by expectations fulfillment of local infrastructure and entertainment structures; this factor is also influenced by past use of institutional brochures and the internet. Discussion centers on the implications of this model to theory and managerial development of tourism and services strategies. Directions for future research are also presented.

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1. Introduction

From a theoretical perspective, understanding consumer behavior is essential in decoding all the activities used to develop, communicate and sell services. Similarly, from a practitioner's perspective, it is necessary to understand the motives regarding why some services are preferred or rejected by consumers. With this understanding, it will be possible to influence consumers' decisions by developing appropriate strategies.

Consumer behavior study is much more complex for services than for goods, due to their intrinsic character-

istics: intangibility, inseparability of production and consumption, heterogeneity, and perishability (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985). Tourist consumer behavior is particularly complex because the final decision of buying tourist services presents distinctive aspects. First, the acquisition process has a strong emotional component for consumers. Second, purchasing is often the culmination of a long process of planning, choice, evaluation and assessment of alternatives by a large number of people. More importantly, this intangibility of tourist services creates uncertainty and perceived risk in the consumer's mind (Hugstad, Taylor, & Bruce, 1987; Zeithaml, 1981). So, before buying a tourist service, consumers acquire a large quantity of information and anticipate the consumption, creating images and expectations.

Information search is a dynamic area of services research, with a relatively large conceptual and empirical basis. However, selection of information sources mostly explains "who, when, where, how and why" consumers search for information in the pre-purchase phase. Rare

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research (see Fodness & Murray (1999) as an exception) indicates that the use of information sources influences future search behaviors.

To our knowledge, no research exists regarding the impact of information search patterns on future information search behaviors. Moreover, although a wide range of empirical studies have been developed concerning the impact of information sources on expectations, no empirical study has analyzed the impact of expectations fulfillment on the future use of information sources. Previous research indicates that expectations fulfillment is shaped through information sources that consumers obtain in the pre-purchase stage (Spreng & Page, 2001; Webster, 1991). Since future consumer choices are based on expectations, a better understanding of this relationship is vital to marketing managers (Anderson & Salisbury, 2003). By understanding how consumers will search for information, we have a basis to influence consumers' expectations (McColl-Kennedy & Fetter Jr., 1999). Information search in the pre-purchase stage strongly influences overall consumer decision, mainly because it influences consumers' images and expectations (Murray, 1991).

Similarly, the process of expectations formation in the tourism industry is particularly relevant given that tourists make their purchase decisions while building on expectations (Gartner, 1989). Tourists typically travel to a place different from their residence, and in several cases to a place where they have never been before. To explore or reduce the risk of unfamiliar product experimentation, tourists seek information (Dodd, Pinkleton, & Gustafson, 1996) and create destination expectations (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997). Hence, since consumers perceive tourism products taking into consideration their service expectations (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), these expectations become a major influence on consumer choices (Neelamegham & Jain, 1999).

Common sources of customized information are travel agents, institutional and commercial brochures, and the Internet. Marketers use these sources to build tourists' specific expectations with the goal of influencing future purchase decisions (Murray, 1991). Non-customized information might also affect tourists' product image. This information is typically not requested by consumers, but comes instead in the form of reports and advertising in mass media. It is our aim to develop a model that assesses the importance of non-media information sources, and their impact on expectations fulfillment and on the use of mass media information sources in future trip planning. In addition to mass media information sources, we include four non-media information sources: travel agents, institutional brochures, commercial brochures and the Internet. Tourists use these non-media information sources in information search to select the route to the destination, accommodation, and activities at the chosen destination.

This article is organized into the following sections. First we present an overview of the current literature. Then we introduce the different sources, test the conceptual

framework via a survey of 350 tourists, and present the empirical results. Implications for theory and managerial practice, limitations of the research and future directions are also considered.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Service consumers tend to evaluate information in a more complex and distinctive way than do consumers of goods because they are in a context of perceived risk and, therefore need much more information than when evaluating a good (Murray, 1991). Tourists seek information to explore or reduce the risk of unfamiliar product experimentation (Dodd et al., 1996). They create expectations by creating a destination image through many sources, such as non-media tourism information sources and mass media information sources (Gartner, 1989; Stabler, 1988).

In this study we develop a conceptual model (see Fig. 1) in a tourism context, where we analyze how the use of non-media information sources directly and indirectly influences future use of mass media information sources through consumer expectations.

3. Tourism information sources

Information search exists at the internal and external level (e.g. Bettman & Park, 1980). In this study we focus on the external level, namely on information sources that can be controlled by tourism institutions. External search is a conscious and motivated decision to acquire information from the consumer's environment (Murray, 1991). It is associated with the "degree of attention, perception, and effort directed toward obtained environmental data or information related to the specific purchase under consideration" (Beatty & Smith, 1987, p. 85). Consumers choose information sources in a limited number that will help them to plan their consumption process better, in such a way as to reduce the level of perceived risk (Murray, 1991).

Tourism search typically makes use of a variety of external information sources (Moutinho, 2000). These information sources form the basis for trip planning (Snepenger, Meged, Snelling, & Worral, 1990). When searching for tourist information, one must consider the variety of sources used (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Srinivasan & Ratchford, 1991). From both theoretical and practitioner perspectives, it is particularly useful to study the importance of specific information sources that tourists use for selecting services (see Brucks, 1985; Fodness & Murray, 1999).

Literature on services, namely in the tourism field, suggests that information search in this area involves more information sources than in the case of other products. Information acquisition is necessary for purchase decisions after the destination selection, such as choosing accommodation, transportation and activities (Filiatrault & Ritchie, 1980; Jenkins, 1978; Perdue, 1985). Information

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