



# Tourist information search and destination choice in a digital age

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## ABSTRACT

This study provides empirical evidence of self-reported impacts of selected electronic and other information sources on international tourists' destination choices regarding a popular, mature and mainstream summer holiday location. It is shown that traditional information provisions such as direct word-of-mouth, Web 1.0 sources and own experience are highly resilient and influential when tourists to a well-known destination area decide where to spend their summer holiday. Moreover, results indicate a complementary nature of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. In this context of destination decision-making, utilitarian information values seem more relevant than socialisation opportunities.

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## 1. Introduction

Information search is considered crucial to tourists' destination choices. Sources of information can be both external and internal, the latter gathered from the latent cognitive system (e.g., Hansen, 1972). Characteristically, repeat visitors to a place may not always wish to collect additional information from external sources as they can rely much on past experiences, while external information search seems typical for newcomers to a destination (e.g., Fodness & Murray, 1997). External search consists not only of collecting information from the marketplace but also from a variety of more or less independent or unbiased sources such as news media, guidebooks, and acquaintances. It is also maintained that information and communication technologies (ICT) may have a considerable and increasing impact on several tourism aspects. From supply of products to information search processes and consumption patterns, tourism experiences and their preparations are assumed to be progressively transformed by advances of ICT (e.g., Buhalis, 1998; Buhalis & Law, 2008). Expansion of computer use, developments of the Web and increased ICT skills in the population at large have helped tourists in the Western world to reach higher levels of self-organisation.

Gradually, numerous tourists have also become more independent of intermediaries such as traditional travel agencies and tour operators. The direct sale of travel products has increased for various reasons, including a general appeal of independent travel, often

lower costs due to supply and price transparency through the Internet, and easier on-line booking. Direct selling accounted for 64% of online travel sales in the European market in 2008, while intermediaries accounted for only 36% (Marcussen, 2010). One may say that the information age has resulted in the advancement of a new type of empowered individual: the ICT-skilled tourist.

ICT and the Internet are partly employed for practical pre-departure purposes such as travel planning, booking, and payment of tourism products (Hyde, 2008). In addition to accounts from acquaintances and in print media, ICT and the Internet are among sources utilised for the pleasure of anticipating impending holidays (e.g., Parrinello, 1993). Also second generation websites based on participatory and interactive software solutions – the Web 2.0 phenomenon – have possible impacts on tourist information search behaviour (Musser et al., 2007).

Earlier research has found that many tourists wisely combine various available information sources (Fodness & Murray, 1998). In addition to long-established and commonly recognised tourism information sources such as guidebooks and other destination specific material, news media, travel companies, knowledge passed on directly from acquaintances/family and own experience, this study encompasses information from electronic social networks and blogs, two main types of social media considered increasingly relevant (e.g., Huang et al., 2010; Volo, 2010; Wenger, 2008), and examines their relationship to destination choice. Although several studies of tourists' information search for destination choices have been conducted, there is still a deficiency of empirical studies that include tourist assessments of possible impacts of Web 2.0 and selected electronic social media on tourist information search and acquisition (e.g., Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) for destination choice in the context of well-known, mature and mainstream holiday locations with large numbers of international summer vacationers. Consequently, this article examines tourists' information searches – including

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the relationship to some electronic social media – among peak season Scandinavian holidaymakers in Mallorca, Spain. The study measures tourists' subjective knowledge and has three main objectives:

1. Provide empirical evidence of the self-reported impact of certain information sources including some Web 1.0 and 2.0 platforms on tourists' destination decision-making.
2. Discuss central variables such as first-timers versus repeaters and tourists' level of independency in relation to selected information source impacts on their holiday location selection.
3. Contribute to expanding the knowledge-base on information search in a digital age.

## 2. Literature review

Information search is in many ways a well-established field of research, and the idea that people undertake an explicit, external information search preceding consumption decisions has been presented in various marketing and consumer studies (e.g., [Gursoy & McCleary, 2004](#); [Hyde, 2008](#)). Destination information originates not only from people returning from their trips. Newspapers and magazines regularly include tourism supplements and travelogues, and travel reports are increasingly shown on television. Additionally, guidebooks are commonly used for destination decision-making and have been an extensive part of the publishing industry (e.g., [Steinecke, 1988](#)). Also, most tourism enterprises, national tourism organisations and local destination marketing organisations disseminate considerable amounts of information, increasingly through the Internet.

The phenomenon of social electronic media such as Facebook and their possible tourism influences have resulted in numerous and diverse scholarly contributions, which are still predominantly of an exploratory character. For instance, it is indicated that there has been increased use of electronic word-of-mouth and other Internet sources in tourist decision-making processes and travel purchase intentions in the first decade of the twenty-first century ([Huang et al., 2010](#); [Litvin et al., 2008](#)). Research has shown that people who book travel services online are inclined to maintaining positive attitudes to Web sources as well as utilising them more intensively ([Morrison et al., 2001](#)), and they have access to and make use of the immense amount of tourism information available through the Internet. Particularly younger tourists make intensive use of Internet-based networks and they have thus been called the Net generation ([Tapscott, 2009](#)) and digital natives ([Prensky, 2001](#)).

[McIntosh and Goeldner \(1990\)](#) have argued that a primary motive for undertaking an information search is to enhance the quality of the tour. In consumer behaviour literature it is commonly also maintained that people engage in information searches prior to purchase decisions in order to minimise risks (e.g., [Gursoy & McCleary, 2004](#); [McCleary & Whitney, 1994](#)). Risk reduction is considered particularly crucial to non-routinised and extensive decisions regarding acquirement of expensive and complex products (such as certain holiday tours), when people often are strongly involved in decision-making processes. Such risks might be monetary (wasting money), functional (not meeting requirements), physical (causing personal illness or injury), social (unfashionable or lower status), and psychological (damaging self-esteem or engendering guilt) ([Solomon, 1992](#)). For instance, [Roehl and Fesenmaier \(1992\)](#) found financial, psychological, satisfaction and time risks to be the most frequent risks associated with pleasure travel. Typically, people do not want to spend some of the most precious days of the year in the wrong place, and risks may thus be related also to visits to mainstream destinations, as fellow vacationers obviously influence destination atmosphere (e.g., [Jacobsen, 2002](#); [Morrison, 1989](#), pp. 37–38).

A typical assertion is that people will expand search efforts as long as alleged benefits exceed perceived costs ([Fodness & Murray, 1999](#), p. 225). Earlier consumer literature maintains that experts engage

less in pre-purchase external search than do novices, partly because expertise regularly leads to faster solutions and partly because experts are able to rely on information acquired on previous occasions (e.g., [Alba & Hutchinson, 1987](#), pp. 418–421, 427). Correspondingly, studies have suggested that electronic social media such as Facebook may be beneficial as a risk-reduction and virtual selection mechanism, as consumers then assist each other in effectively making sense of information available on the Web ([Brogan & Smith, 2009](#); [Qualman, 2009](#)). Social network sites such as Facebook or microblogging sites like Twitter are therefore increasingly employed as information channels by tourism organisations (e.g., [Munar, 2011](#)).

In an overview of research on tourist information use, [Kerstetter and Cho \(2004\)](#) revealed inconsistency in findings: Some studies have shown that as experience with a destination increases, search for external information decreases, while other studies have indicated the opposite. [Baloglu \(2001\)](#) uncovered that first-timers tend to use commercial information sources, while repeaters often use both commercial and noncommercial sources. Contrary to much of the consumer behaviour literature, [Shanka and Taylor \(2004\)](#) found that repeat visitors employed a wider variety of information sources than did first-timers. Further, a study conducted by [Lehto et al. \(2004\)](#) indicates that tourists' information search endeavours are not necessarily reduced as experience with a destination increases. However, previous research varies in measurement methods applied to information search. Some studies comprise tourists' self-reported assessments of information sources in relation to the entirety of a journey (e.g., [Fodness & Murray, 1997](#)), while other studies concentrate on specific decisions, such as destination choice (e.g., [Gursoy & McCleary, 2004](#)).

For some people the information search will continue also in situations when there is no obvious functional benefit, as it is perceived to be of interest in its own right. For instance, [Parrinello \(1993\)](#) has focused on anticipation as a pivotal aspect of holiday travel. Besides relying on the recollection of earlier enjoyment, anticipation is typically based on various types of mediated information ([Parrinello, 1993](#), p. 244). A somewhat similar feature to consider is the aesthetic pleasure that people might take in travel-related information (e.g., [Vogt et al., 1993](#)), including photographs transmitted by mobile phones and travel blogs and holiday photographs posted by friends on their profile on Facebook, the dominant social networking site in Scandinavia and in other parts of Western Europe at the time of this study.

Information may be acquired purposely for dissemination to others (e.g., [Hirschman & Wallendorf, 1982](#), pp. 25–31), for instance in order to act as opinion leaders (e.g., [Lazarsfeld et al., 1944](#)) or as attempt to build or strengthen cultural capital, that is, wealth in the form of knowledge or ideas, which legitimate continuation of status and superiority ([Bourdieu, 1984](#)). Drawing on the reasoning of [Douglas and Isherwood \(1980, p. 57\)](#), it is likely that tourist information search and acquisition cannot be understood independently of activities such as seeing the sights, enjoying the beaches of a destination, and savouring local food. Enjoyment of travel itself is only a part of the benefits gained; the other part is enjoyment of knowing and sharing names (cf. [Douglas & Isherwood, 1980, p. 75](#)). To a proportion of tourists, it seems imperative to have ample knowledge of, for instance, renowned or previously 'secret' qualities of their destinations, partly in order to establish their own travel narratives, partly in order to fulfil holiday dreams.

An aspect that is sometimes overlooked in traditional marketing models is the credibility of information sources ([Dann, 1996, p. 138](#)). For instance, [Gunn \(1972\)](#) has distinguished between 'induced' sources originating from efforts of destination promoters, and 'organic' sources derived from more or less unbiased informers, independent of destinations and their collaborators ([Gartner, 1993, p. 210](#)). The success of tourism information sources often depends on how trustworthy they become as vehicles of information exchange and social interactivity ([Brogan & Smith, 2009](#)).

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