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Antecedents and outcomes of consumers' confusion in the online tourism domain



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ABSTRACT

From information recipient's perspective, this paper proposes a research model examining the antecedents and outcomes of online tourism information confusion faced by consumers. Three individual characteristics that are likely to influence information receivers processing capabilities are included as antecedents of information confusion, while five confusion reduction strategies derived from consumer confusion literature are regarded as the outcomes of information confusion. Data for this study were collected from 427 tourism website users and proposed hypotheses were tested utilizing structural equation modeling and regression analysis. Findings of this study provide important managerial implications for online tourism marketers.

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Introduction

The rapid advancement of online technologies has changed the way tourism organizations conduct business. In today's tourism market, most tourism businesses have adopted Internet as one of their primary distribution channels because of its low cost and high speed in disseminating information to prospective customers (Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010). Internet also provides many benefits for consumers such as providing immediate access to the most up-to-date information, comparing different

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product categories, interacting with current and previous users of different tourism products, and making various types of bookings online (Zhang, 2015). While the contributions of online technologies to tourism industry and consumers have been largely emphasized and researched, little research attention has been paid to the possible negative aspects of such tourism e-commerce model.

Consumer confusion (Matzler, Bidmon, Faullant, Fladnitzer, & Waiguny, 2005) might be a notable side effect of such tourism e-commerce mode. Research in psychology (e.g., Cowan, 2010) and marketing (e.g., Day, 2011) have suggested that humans have a limited capacity to process information and that an excessive amount of information would impair the quality of individuals' decision-making. As Choi, Lehto, and O'Leary (2007) argued, although online technologies have provided travel organizations (both public and private) with a speedy and efficient mode of delivery of rich information without geographical confinement, consumers are often bombarded with information provided by multiple sources and may feel overwhelmed during the information search process. In this regard, literature in tourists' information processing and decision making have also stressed the critical importance of tourists' pre-trip information search process, as this stage can have a significant impact on tourists' trip decisions (Jun, Vogt, & MacKay, 2007; Lu & Chen, 2014). Therefore, if consumers have difficulties in comprehending all available information pertaining to their trips, they may have hard time making purchase decisions for the trip (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a). Additionally, tourism services have unique features that differentiate them from manufactured products and other services, and this influences the amount of information consumers seek prior to the purchase (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). By definition, tourists must consume tourism services in a different place than where they live (Torres, 2015). Consumption of a tourism service (e.g. a vacation to other states or countries) usually takes a longer time to plan and costs more than the consumption of many other kinds of services. An individual must rely on the information available from destination specific sources, as well as personal sources such as friends and relatives, with no chance to experience the product before purchasing it (Xu & Gursoy, 2015). Due to these unique features, consumers tend to associate higher financial and emotional risks with many tourism purchase decisions (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004b). Therefore, consumers usually conduct an extensive information search to reduce perceived risk involved in the tourism purchase decisions (Xiang & Law, 2013). Nevertheless, more information search can lead to more confusion, which suggests confusion issue might even be more salient in the online tourism context. This issue, however, has not received much research attention in the tourism literature. As confusion has been associated with several unfavorable consequences, such as negative word-of-mouth (Matzler, Stieger, & Füller, 2011), dissatisfaction (Walsh & Mitchell, 2010), shopping fatigue (Garaus, Wagner, & Kummer, 2014), reactance (Sachse, Drengner, & Jahn, 2010), decreased loyalty and trust and confusing other consumers (e.g., Chen & Chang, 2013; Walsh & Mitchell, 2010), there is an urgent need for tourism practitioners and researchers to identify the causes and consequences of online information confusion. Thus, this study aims to empirically examine this issue from information receiver's perspective.

Individual differences might be important determinants of online information confusion, as individual features such as demographic variables, personality traits, learning styles, and motivations have been examined as important factors that could influence one's information search and processing approach (Kim, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Leung, Rong, Li, & Law, 2013). Normally, individuals who tend to put much effort and time on searching and processing online information are less likely to have confusion issues as opposed to those who spend less effort and time. Using this logic, online tourism marketers should strive to identify individual characteristics that can affect consumers' information search and processing effort, so that they can develop more customized online communication strategies for different segments to reduce or avoid the possibility of consumers' confusion. As planning a vacation online requires users to exert a significant level of cognitive effort due to the need of constantly browsing and processing large amounts of content from multiple sources, three individual characteristics: learning orientation, price consciousness, and the need for cognition are considered critical and worthy of investigation for the context of this study. Learning orientation is regarded as the extent to which individuals enjoy acquiring new information and gaining new knowledge and skills (Tajeddini, 2011), whereas need for cognition refers to the extent to which individuals are inclined towards effortful cognitive activities (Lord & Putrevu, 2006). By definition, both characteristics essentially represent one's level of intention to acquire new information and knowledge, and

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