



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Destination Marketing & Management

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

Research Paper

The antecedent role of online satisfaction, perceived risk online, and perceived website usability on the affect towards travel destinations

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Affect
Usability
Satisfaction
Online risk
Website experience

ABSTRACT

Tourists nowadays rely predominantly on the Internet for their travel decision-making and for purchasing travel products. Given this, websites have become the most important medium to induce positive affect towards a destination, through safe and satisfactory online experiences. However, some travelers are still reluctant to purchase travel products online due to perceived risk. The aim of this study is to explore whether consumer satisfaction during online browsing, consumer risk perception online, and perceived usability of the travel website can predict consumers' affect towards a travel destination. A website promoting a fictional travel destination was used for data-collection purposes. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the validity and reliability of user satisfaction, perceived risk online, perceived website usability, and affect towards a travel destination, while a regression model was employed to explore the predictive power of these constructs on users' emotional response towards the target destination displayed on the website. Results show that a higher level of consumer satisfaction with the online browsing experience and greater perceived website usability generate positive affect towards a travel destination. In the conclusions section, the practical implications of these findings are discussed in relation to destination marketing and branding.

1. Introduction

Online searching starts long before a decision is made about where or how to travel for over 65% of leisure travelers, according to the Google-commissioned Ipsos MediaCT report (2014). Within this context, the Internet remains a predominant source of information for travel planning and for choosing a travel destination, with 74% of tourism-related information searches being conducted on the Internet. Given the rapid growth of the Internet and e-commerce, websites have also become the most important medium for eliciting positive affect towards travel destinations. Affective evaluations of a destination website correspond to individuals' feelings about a travel destination and, consequently, their future travel behavior (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015). Since the images displayed by destination websites have a substantial impact on consumer purchasing behavior, the role of images from the destination has been extensively examined in tourism and

hospitality research (Beerli-Palacio & Martín-Santana, 2017; Bott, 2014; Chung, Lee, Lee, & Koo, 2015; Moufakkir, 2013). However, while many previous studies explore the images of the destination in the context of traditional promotion, far fewer do so in the online realm (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Lepp, Gibson, & Lane, 2011). It is still unclear which elements and website components can elicit positive feelings towards a travel destination in the virtual environment. It is important to understand how users perceive or emotionally react to websites, not only because tourism is an experience-based product of unknown quality prior to consumption (Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini, & Manzari, 2012) but also because the Internet is a predominant communication channel that strongly affects consumer purchase behavior (Frías-Jamilena, Del Barrio-García, & López-Moreno, 2013).

Here it should be noted that, in a virtual environment, cognitive evaluation of a destination website and its affective appraisal are strongly influenced by the website design and characteristics

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(Alcántara-Pilar, Del Barrio-García, Porcu, & Crespo-Almendros, 2015). Nielsen and Loranger (2006) noted that good design, in terms of website usability, is related to the speed and ease with which users are able to carry out their tasks on a given site. Achieving high usability requires the site design to focus on Internet users' needs and organize browsing to make the online shopping experience easier. Therefore, highly usable destination websites provide a positive browsing experience to users through appropriate content organization, clear and concise information on the products and services at the destination, easy browsing, and so on (Nielsen & Norman, 2000).

Furthermore, a positive browsing experience contributes to online consumer satisfaction, which is widely accepted to be one of the most influential components of post-purchase behavior and a key element in building successful, long-lasting relationships with consumers (Valkonen, 2009). It is generally acknowledged that individuals' level of overall satisfaction with browsing will positively affect their perception of the destination website (Szymanski & Hise, 2000), heighten their affect towards the travel destination, and enhance their intention to visit the destination (Castañeda, Muñoz-Leiva, & Luque, 2007). Therefore, users' affect towards a destination is strongly influenced by how satisfied they feel during their browsing experience (McKinney, Yoon, & Zahedi, 2002; Szymanski & Hise, 2000), the relevance of the information available on the website (Chen & Tsai, 2007), and the site's perceived usefulness (Castañeda et al., 2007).

Despite the factors positively related to affective image, previous studies have reported perceived risk online to be one of the key factors that can make users feel unsure and vulnerable during their online experience and, hence, distract them from purchasing (Chung et al., 2015; Vainikka, 2013). Shankar, Urban, and Sultan (2002) noted that consumers' perception of risk online is negatively related to good usability and positive image, which are both considered to be experiences of trust online.

The aim of the present study is therefore to examine whether consumer satisfaction during browsing, perceived risk online, and perceived usability of travel websites can influence consumer affect towards a travel destination. While the majority of previous works focus on the website's functionality (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2006), little empirical work has been devoted to exploring whether the particular features of a website and the outcomes of its use can elicit positive affect towards a travel destination.

2. Literature review

2.1. Affect towards a travel destination

Affect as a conscious, subjective aspect of an emotion has been studied for many decades, mainly in psychology (Nowlis, 1965; Russell, 1980; Schlosberg, 1952) but more recently in a wide range of behavioral sciences (Hwang, Yoon, & Park, 2011; Pappas, Kourouthanassis, Giannakos, & Chrissikopoulos, 2016; Servidio, 2015). In the context of tourism and hospitality research, affect has been mainly used to describe emotional states, feelings, or moods in relation to an object of interest. However, it should be noted that this construct has been used interchangeably in the conceptualization of attitude towards a destination (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015), response to advertisement, and brand attitude (Hwang et al., 2011). In the present work, emotions towards a travel destination are examined in the context of the affective image of the destination, generated by specific website features and functional characteristics. It is important to understand how potential travelers build positive feelings towards a destination in a web-based environment, and – perhaps even more challenging for marketing practitioners – how to create a satisfactory browsing experience that will lead to favorable affect towards a destination website.

Destination image is one of the most widely explored constructs in the field of tourism and hospitality (Gallarza, Gil, & Calderón, 2002; Moufakkir, 2013). Since the first work of Hunt (1971), there have been numerous and varied approaches to defining destination image. However, in general, it is accepted among scholars that image comprises at least two closely-related components: cognitive evaluation and affective appraisal. The cognitive component refers to an individual's knowledge and beliefs about an object (Pike & Ryan, 2004), while the affective component corresponds to an individual's feelings toward that object (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997). There is general consensus that tourists build their feelings as a function of beliefs and opinions about a given destination of interest. Furthermore, some authors also argue that a third, behavioral (conative), component should also be included in the conceptualization of destination image. The conative component of image is analogous to the real action of choosing a destination (brand purchase) and/or actually traveling to that destination (Nicoletta & Servidio, 2012). The three hierarchically-interrelated components represent behavioral manifestation on the part of the traveler in the process of destination image-formation (Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014). This theoretical framework has guided many studies on destination image. However, Mazanec (2009) argued that such a wide conceptualization of destination image, considering all its components, might 'dilute' the construct to the extent that it fits every type of semantic content.

Hence, many researchers have relied predominantly on a cognitive (Pike & Ryan, 2004; Stepchenkova & Mills, 2010) or/and cognitive-affective-centered measurement approach (San Martín & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2008). Some scholars, such as Yu and Dean (2001), have noted indications that affect is a better predictor of behavioral intention than cognition, because behavior may be influenced by the affective quality of an environment, rather than directly by its objective properties (Russell & Snodgrass, 1987). Therefore, several scholars who support this notion have recently focused on the affective component when exploring destination image in an online context (Alcántara-Pilar & Del Barrio-García, 2015; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015).

2.2. Tourist satisfaction during browsing and affect towards a travel destination

Customer satisfaction is considered to be a basic parameter for evaluating the performance of tourist products and services. According to Oliver (1993, 2010), customer satisfaction involves evaluation and judgment of a product or service that successfully provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment. The relationship between satisfaction and travelers' future intentions has been firmly theoretically established by a number of previous works confirming a significant positive relationship between satisfaction and continuous use and/or repeat-visit intention (Assaker, Vinzi, & O'Connor, 2011; Sirgy & Su, 2000; Valkonen, 2009). In those studies, satisfaction was studied either as a direct predictor of continuous use and/or repeat-visit intention (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Anderson, Fornell, & Lehmann, 1994; Churchill & Surprenant, 1982) or as a mediator variable of relationships that lead to continuous use and/or repeat-visit behavior (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; Assaker et al., 2011; Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001; Jalilvand et al., 2012).

Consumer satisfaction in an online context can be defined as the user's contentment with their purchasing experience on the Internet (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003). The use of new online intermediaries has brought dramatic changes and increased the complexity of the tourism market. The rapid growth of the online tourism market has been tracked by a number of publications on consumer satisfaction with online services (Anderson & Srinivasan, 2003; Bai, Law, & Wen, 2008). All these works empirically prove that a satisfactory online experience

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