



Deciding not to choose: Delegation to social surrogates in tourism decisions



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HIGHLIGHTS

- In travel with others, decisions are frequently delegated formally or informally.
- Median of 25% of destination choices and 50% of in-trip decisions were delegated to social surrogates.
- This provides an exception to individual decision-making models.
- Understanding tourist behavior may require considering who is responsible for choices.
- Decisions may be categorized as individual, group, or delegated decisions.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the phenomenon of tourists delegating decisions to others. An American survey ($n = 404$) found a key exception to individual decision-making models. Rather than making their own decisions, respondents frequently delegated decisions, including where to go, what to do, and where to eat to others traveling with them (called “social surrogates”). A median of 25 percent of respondents delegated destination choice, and 50 percent delegated dining and activity decisions while traveling. Because individuals may not make all of their decisions, all customers may not be of equal importance to tourism marketers. Some have little to no role in choice (as they defer decisions), while others (social surrogates) may hold great influence over others (by making decisions). Thus, identifying actual decision makers, rather than just considering all tourists, may be necessary to understand tourist consumer behavior. It is proposed delegated decisions are theoretically distinct from individual or group decisions.

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1. Introduction

There is a plethora of tourism consumer behavior studies, as researchers have used various methods to describe tourist decision making. Process models have described consumer behavior as a decision-making process, in which the decision maker proceeds consecutively through a decision (e.g. Van Raaij & Francken, 1984; Woodside & King, 2005). Structural models have demonstrated ways in which consumers narrow down or funnel their choice sets into a final decision (e.g. Um & Crompton, 1990). While some researchers have considered who makes decisions among couples and families (e.g. Litvin, Xu, & Kang, 2004), the vast majority of tourists' decision making literature has assumed that individuals make their own decisions. Yet, because travel is social, and the vast majority of travelers travel with others, it has been recommended

to investigate decision making in situations other than individual choice scenarios (Decrop, 2006). McCabe, Li, and Chen (2015) also challenged rational choice models—proposing a number of heuristics that tourists may use in making decisions.

While decision-making models are useful, there seem to be many behaviors in tourism that do not follow a linear decision-making model. In many group travel scenarios, it appears that one person often makes a decision, and others are either invited or go along with the plan. A student may ask friends to join on a spring break trip to Florida. In this instance, the fellow travelers may have no input on where to visit. At other times, a person may expressly delegate decisions, taking little or no role in final choice. A traveler may ask her companions to choose restaurants for dinner, or a traveler may rely on friends in their destination city to choose attractions to visit.

These situations do not fit within existing theories or traditional models of tourist choice. In these situations, it appears that travelers delegate decisions to others. This delegation may be formal

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(“Can you pick out a place to eat dinner?”) or informal (“I will go along with you to visit the air museum.”). In either case, the decision (e.g. where to go, what to do, where to eat, and even whether or not to take a vacation) was made by someone else. A traveler’s decision may simply be binary: to go along or not to go along.

Decrop (2005) acknowledged this decision delegation (allowing another to make a decision on one’s behalf) in tourism environments. In a small sample of groups of friends he observed that agreement and consensus were generally more important than the actual decisions which were made. Other researchers (e.g. Gitelson & Kerstetter, 1995; Rompf, DiPietro, & Ricci, 2005) also found evidence of decision delegation within larger studies, but did not investigate it in detail.

Consumer behavior researchers have identified surrogates, such as travel agents, wine stewards, and stock brokers, who are formally procured to make decisions on behalf of others (Aggarwal & Mazumdar, 2008; Solomon, 1986) However, informal decision delegation, to a friend or family member, appears to be a separate phenomenon. This is believed to be the first study to explicitly investigate the phenomenon of decision delegation in travel outside of formal surrogate relationships. For the purposes of this study the term “social surrogate” will be used for an individual who is entrusted or delegated to make or facilitate decisions or purchases on behalf of another, without a formal or business-type agreement or arrangement.

While there are limitations to any consumer choice studies, and consumer choices often include a variety of variables, this study hopes to:

- 1) Identify circumstances in which decision delegation occurs in tourism;
- 2) Determine the role social surrogates have in tourism decisions; and
- 3) Quantify how common decision delegation is while traveling with others.

From a theoretical perspective, this research intends to extend the models of decision making from individual and family scenarios. In particular, it seeks to uncover the prevalence and characteristics of decision delegation, the observed phenomenon of individuals making decisions on behalf of others, as well as individuals permitting (either explicitly or implicitly) others to make travel decisions on their behalf. It focuses on the process of decision making, rather than outcomes, which Cohen, Prayag, and Moital (2014) and Smallman and Moore (2010) found to be a key omission in tourism consumer behavior research. Following the recommendations of Cohen et al. (2014) and Decrop (2010, 2014), this research also hopes to build a better understanding of groups of individuals traveling together outside of nuclear families.

From a marketing perspective, it may shed light on another way to delineate customers by how decisions were made and/or who made them. It is possible that while two customers may have similar spending profiles, one may be consuming because of the social influence (or direct choice) of a social surrogate (such as a fellow traveler or diner). It is believed that destination management professionals would want to understand this phenomenon. From a marketing perspective, it is possible that some travelers (those who make decisions) are more important than others (those who delegate decisions).

1.1. Defining the social surrogate

Decision delegation, allowing another to make a decision (or part of a decision) on one’s behalf, has been referred to as “subcontracting” of a decision (Rosen & Olshavsky, 1987). Consumer behavior

researchers have used the term “surrogate” for the individual to whom part of a decision is delegated (e.g. travel agent, stock broker, or wine steward). This study considers the “social surrogate” as an individual who is entrusted or delegated to make or facilitate decisions or purchases on behalf of another, without a formal or business-type agreement or arrangement. These “social” surrogates differ from “formal” surrogates. First, social surrogates are proposed to be part of an informal relationship (e.g. friends, family, social groups) rather than a formally engaged (paid or unpaid) business relationship. Second, the social surrogate often takes part in consumption (unlike a travel agent, who does not go on the trip). For example, an individual may go on vacation with a friend and allow the friend to choose the hotel. Following these premises, this research will investigate decision delegation within a traveling party.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Decision-making theory

Decision-making theory in tourism has evolved from decision-making models in consumer behavior. Engel (1968) identified four major steps in decision making: problem recognition, external search for alternatives, evaluation of alternatives, and the purchase process. This logical and linear progression describes the process an individual goes through while selecting a consumer product, but Engel (1968) recognized that it would not be appropriate for all decision-making scenarios because “there simply are not enough hours in the day” (p. 16) to use a complex process for simple purchases. Post-purchase outcomes were added to a later version (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1990) of this model: 1) motivation and need recognition, 2) search for information, 3) alternative evaluation, 4) purchase, and 5) outcomes. Engel et al. (1990) explained exceptions to their advanced model which included: extended problem solving, impulse buying, and “habitual decision making.” These exceptions suggest that decision making is more complex than was previously thought.

Another key ancestor of the research into tourism decision making is Howard and Sheth’s (1969) theory of buyer behavior, which focused on *brand* choice behavior, considering motives, alternative courses of action, and decision mediators. They proposed that a buyer simplifies the alternatives through use of “sets” and logically orders the decision process.

2.2. Decision making in tourism

Tourism decision-making theory has borrowed from consumer behavior theories, although there are limitations in applying goods-based decision principles to experiential purchases. Theoretical development has primarily focused on destination choice (e.g. Um & Crompton, 1990, 1992), although others have considered sub-decisions (such as lodging and activities) (e.g. Jenkins, 1978; Litvin et al., 2004). This has resulted in many models of tourist decision-making behavior, which several authors have summarized in more detail (see Cohen et al., 2014; Decrop, 2006, 2014; Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005; Smallman & Moore, 2010).

Sirakaya and Woodside’s (2005) review of tourism decision-making research concluded that consumers are believed to follow a funnel-like process, that destination choice decisions are assumed to be sequential in nature (Van Raaij & Francken, 1984; Woodside & King, 2005) and may be comprised of sets (Decrop, 2010; Um & Crompton, 1990, 1992; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). Decrop (2006) added a decision-making category of “interpretive frameworks,” arguing that decisions may be more complex and ongoing than described in previous models.

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