



Analysis of tourism information sources using a Mokken Scale perspective



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Mokken Scale Analysis (MSA) was used to evaluate scalability of information sources.
- A sample of 594 questionnaires is used to evaluate information search effort.
- Scalability of information sources was demonstrated, identifying two different scales.
- Results indicate some variations into scales considering socio-demographic and travel behavioural variables.

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the analysis of information sources as a determinant of the travel decision-making process. It focuses on the use of Mokken Scale Analysis (MSA) as a new methodological approach to detect unidimensional hierarchical scale in the analysis of information sources. The paper shows how MSA can be applied in the tourism field. Findings reveal two different scales (active and passive information search scales) for classifying information sources in tourism. Variations in the scales are revealed, taking socio-demographic and travel behavioural variables into consideration. The conclusions clearly explain the implications for tourism marketers and make recommendations for future research.

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1. Introduction

Understanding information search behaviour has been one of the most widely studied issues in the tourism field in recent decades (Fodness & Murray, 1999; Gitelson & Crompton, 1983; Llodrà-Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco, & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015; Money & Crotts, 2003) especially as information sources have been postulated as one of the most influential factors in the decision-making process (Dey & Sarma, 2010).

Gursoy (2003) highlights the long tradition of tourism marketing literature by examining tourism information search behaviour, both conceptually and empirically. Former studies on information search behaviour have focused on identifying the most frequently used information sources (Fodness & Murray, 1999; Gitelson &

Crompton, 1983; Llodrà-Riera et al., 2015) by tourists at different stages in the decision-making process. These studies frequently try to determine the influence of an individual's socio-demographic characteristics and/or an individual's travel-specific differences (Bieger & Laesser, 2004). Fodness and Murray (1997) highlight the relevance of using a multiple source approach. Previous to their study, research had been centred on analysing users of single information sources. From this point of view, numerous studies have focused on analysing how many different types of sources were used (i.e. Gitelson & Crompton, 1983), and the interdependence among the various information sources tourists consult when organising their holidays (Gronflaten, 2009; Gursoy & Chen, 2000).

Until now researchers have outlined which types of information sources are most frequently used considering the various influencing factors mentioned above. However, there are no studies which detect whether specific information sources are a single latent dimension in a hierarchical scale.

Studying such a scale is important for tourism destination

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marketers to be able to determine the dimensions and hierarchy in which information sources are used. Studying the scale for socio-demographic and travel behaviour characteristics among users can be useful for understanding how different tourist profiles use the information sources and to identify whether differences in the scale structure exists between these characteristics. This information will give them a better understanding of the communication actions which should be carried out, so that they can be designed and executed more efficiently.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is twofold. First, to determine whether information sources in tourism belong to a single scale, and to detect if the items, which are represented by information sources are scalable, or hierarchically ordered, within the scale, Mokken Scale Analysis (MSA) will be used. Second, to conclude whether the resulting scale is comparable across socio-demographic and travel behavioural variables, in order to decide if communication strategy should be differentiated according to different market segments.

MSA technique has been extensively used in psychology for assessing the dimensionality and requirements for constructing scales (Meijer & Baneke, 2004; Smits, Timmerman, & Meijer, 2012), especially for personality traits (Wismeijer, Sijtsma, van Assen, & Vingerhoets, 2008), education (Vargas–Vargas, Jimenez, Meseguer-Santamaria, Montro-Lorenzo, & Fernandez-Aviles, 2010), political science (Van Schuur, 2003), marketing research (Paas & Molenaar, 2005), economics (Paas, 1998) and medical research (Roorda et al., 2005). In the tourism field, only Mazanec, Crotts, Gursoy, and Lu (2015) have made the first approach to this technique through their study of cultural values dimensions. Hence, the use of MSA in this article can be considered a contribution to the better understanding of information search behaviour. At the same time, it shows the adequacy of MSA in the tourism field in general, and particularly in information search behaviour.

This paper is organised as follows: the following section reviews the literature on tourism information search and the determinants and methods used for its analysis. In the next section sampling, data collection and data analysis are explained. Considering that Mokken Scale Analysis (MSA) is the main statistical method employed, the requirements needed to apply the method are described. This is followed by the results, and a final section where conclusions and adequacy of MSA for tourism research are discussed.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Tourism information search

As in many products and services, consumer behaviour in tourism begins with acquiring and selecting information, in order to make the right decision according to individual needs. In this context, Sirakaya and Woodside (2005, p. 827) state “a tourist is expected to be highly involved in the information search for tourism service purchases, than many other product or service purchases, because of high-perceived risk factor”. Information search is the motivated activation of knowledge stored in our memory or the acquisition of information from the environment (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995). This definition suggests that information sources can be internal or external. First, “internal information may have been acquired at one time from previous experience and past information searches, or passively through low-involvement learning where consumers are repeatedly exposed to marketing stimuli” (Money & Crotts, 2003, p. 193).

Second, external information is acquired from the environment, and this represents a conscious effort to seek out new information (Gitelson & Crompton, 1983). Along these lines, Gitelson and

Crompton (1983) highlight three main reasons to expect external searches in tourism. These are: (1) vacations are considered a high-risk purchase, (2) intangibility of the tourism product and (3) unfamiliarity with the new destination. According to Fodness and Murray (1997), external information sources can be classified in two ways: depending on whether the source is commercial or non-commercial; and whether it is received from a personal or impersonal communication, for a continuum of 11 different sources.

The types of information sources included vary substantially from one study to another. For example, Money and Crotts (2003, p. 193) detect four different categories: a) personal (e.g. word-of-mouth, or advice from friends and relatives), b) marketer-dominated (e.g. advertisements in print and electronic media), c) neutral (e.g. third-party sources such as travel agents and travel guides), and d) experiential sources—direct contacts with retailer; while Bieger and Laesser (2004) included 18 different types of information sources. In this context, Gitelson and Crompton (1983) used only 5 categories, based on the aggregation made by Nolan (1976). Furthermore, the emergence of Internet has increased the number of external information sources, and also the number of studies that differentiate between online and offline information searches (Li, Pan, Zhang, & Smith, 2009; Llodrà-Riera et al., 2015; Luo, Feng, & Cai, 2004).

Gronflaten (2009), on the other hand, highlights the need to differentiate between information sources (provider of the information) and channels (communication method). In this sense, Llodrà-Riera et al. (2015) advocate that Internet is a channel which comprises several information sources with different natures, and include 19 items in their study (e.g. search engines, official web-sites, forums, applications for sharing photos and videos, etc.). These are seen as separate from the 14 items classified as traditional information sources. In fact, there is no agreement on the number or type of variables that should be included when analysing information search behaviour.

In turn, information sources can also be classified according to whether the consumer is actively involved in the information search or not. Gunn (1972), in her seminal contribution, through the model of the seven-stages of travel experience, advocates the difference between organic and induced tourist images. These images are mainly differentiated by the information seeking behaviour of the tourist and whether this is passive or active. Gartner (1994), also points this out, asserting that word-of-mouth can be disseminated in an unsolicited manner.

Additionally, “numerous studies have emerged that attempt to assess the credibility of various sources of information ranging from advertising to word-of-mouth” (Mack, Blose, & Bing Pan, 2008, p. 135). Kerstetter and Cho (2004) argue that credibility of information sources is relevant to influencing decision-making process. In this regard, Gartner (1994) ranks credibility of various image formation agents, and highlights word-of-mouth from organic agents (solicited or unsolicited) as the most credible information source. And more recently, Camprubí, Guia, and Comas (2013) mention that the new Web 2.0 paradigm has maintained the credibility of organic agents, but it has increased its market penetration. Other recent studies confirm that tourists who share their travel experiences in virtual travel communities have high credibility among other members (Buhalis & Law, 2008). However Mack, Blose, and Pan (2008) concluded that blogs are less credible than face to face word-of-mouth communication.

In a nutshell, information search is a dynamic process (Bieger & Laesser, 2004), where individuals use various amounts and types of information sources, in response to internal and external information needs, to facilitate travel planning (D. Fodness & Murray, 1997). During this process, when there is insufficient internal information to make a decision, individuals move to seek external

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