



Tourist destination and experience choice: A choice experimental analysis of decision sequence effects



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This study tests how destination and experience information affect holiday choices.
- Compares two choice experiments that differ in how attribute information is presented.
- Findings show that presenting an attribute early in the task enhances its importance.
- This effect is stronger for geographical destination than for experience type information.
- The study tests these effects across eight destinations and eight experience types.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT

Which option set should be shown first to maximise the choice probability for a particular destination-experience combination?

Destination options

| | | |
|------|-------|--------|
| Bali | Perth | Sydney |
|------|-------|--------|

or

Local experience options

| | | |
|--------------------|---------------|--------------------------------|
| Event and festival | Food and wine | Sports, outdoors and adventure |
|--------------------|---------------|--------------------------------|

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ABSTRACT

While many studies have investigated travel motives and modelled holiday destination choices, none have directly modelled choice of type of holiday experience and how these two choices interrelate. This study tests whether early exposure to geographical destination or experience type information in a decision task influences consumers' final choices when choosing a holiday. The study compares two choice tasks that have the same instructions and attributes but differ with respect to which attribute is exposed first and is used to label the choice options: the destination name or the experience type. Findings show that early exposure to either attribute enhances the importance of the attribute, although the effect is less pronounced for experiences than for destinations. The findings are explained using the psychological notions of leader primacy, complacency and induced mindset. The research, conducted in Australia, shows that sequential effects can be very important in shaping tourism consumption choices and decision-making.

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1. Introduction

Tourism marketers display an increasing interest in 'experiences' as alternative ways for framing or promoting holiday offers. For example, Tourism Australia actively supports tourism providers in developing experience offers (Tourism Australia, 2007). Many

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holiday offers present packages that are described not only by the destination name and possibly accommodation details and travel components, but also highlight some kind of local activity or experience. The experience may even be the key selling point of the offer. For example travel companies advertise 'beach holidays', 'culture travel', or 'adventure trips'. Experiences are also increasingly available as gift items, offered via companies such as Accor or the Australian company Red Balloon. By offering 'experiences', tourists are invited to first explore and consider aspects other than price or geographical destination when selecting their holiday. Indeed, since King (2002) argued that destination marketers need to shift from promoting destinations to creating and promoting experiences, as competition and available choice have expanded, the marketing of experiences has become common practice in tourism. Similarly, many online product providers in tourism use categories that allow tourists to first select their preferred type of travel destination and activities and only then provide travel options in terms of geographical destinations. Categorization by experience type instead of by region not only informs and supports visitors in making their selections but also allows highlighting particular experience types.

Despite this increasing practice of offering 'holiday experiences', little is known about how this alternative way of categorizing and presenting travel options influences tourist destination choices. It is, in particular, unclear how the presentation of travel options as 'experience types' fits with the traditional choice set approach, which views destination choice as a narrowing down, or funnelling, from a large number of options to a smaller, more manageable set from which the final selection is made. The traditional choice set approach has been widely adopted in tourism and marketing and continues to be a useful method for pragmatic market research purposes. However, the idea that consumers at one point in time construct a list of destinations and then start pruning this list to a manageable size in isolation from further market influences is an assumption that may not reflect reality (e.g. Hyde, 2008; Prentice, 2006). The limitation of that assumption is also pertinent given that consumers can go online almost any time to search for helpful information (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2006), where they may encounter or search new alternatives any time during this process. Moreover, alternative selection and consideration set formation can also relate to attribute consideration, with different attributes possibly playing a different role at different stages of the decision process (Rewtrakunphaiboon & Oppewal, 2008).

Destination attribute search, consideration and choice hence merge into an integrated activity, particularly since tourism products are typically high-involvement products which generate substantial information search activity before consumers commit to a final choice (Thill, 1992). While there is a large body of literature on consideration sets and on the importance for destination marketers of having their destination/experience product competitively placed in this process, there is a need to better understand the sequential nature of the destination decision making process and the role of different product attributes and categorizations. In that context, the contribution of the present study is that it explores the effects of the presentation order of destination and experience information in the holiday decision process. The study in particular asks how early exposure to, or promotion of, a particular experience can increase a destination offer's attractiveness and help it to differentiate from its competitors. It specifically addresses the question whether early exposure in the decision process to a prominent experience component can help overcome poor competitive performance on other package attributes, in particular the overall image of the geographical name of a destination.

To address these questions, the present study conducts a choice experiment that, while including both destination names and

experience attribute information, presents these two attributes in different stages of the decision process. One condition initially only presents destination names, while in the other condition only experience information is presented initially to the respondent. Both conditions, however, include both sets of attributes in the final decision stage. More precisely, both conditions present a choice task in which the respondent is asked to select a holiday package after winning a prize. In one experimental condition, destination information is highlighted by initially presenting participants only with the names of the available destination options, plus the package price and a quality rating. Respondents subsequently receive extended information about the set of options, including the travel and accommodation arrangements and the 'experiences' the packages offer (e.g. 'beach holiday', 'food and wine', or 'nature'). Participants then make their final package selection. In the alternative experimental condition, respondents initially only receive the experience type information (plus package price and quality rating) and then receive further information about their set of options, including the travel and accommodation arrangements and the actual package destination. They then make their final package selection. Hence, while the attribute content at the final decision stage is identical across both experimental conditions, the conditions differ in terms of which attribute is highlighted and presented first: the destination name or the experience type. Differences in model parameter estimates between the two experiments reveal whether highlighting a particular package attribute enhances the attribute's influence on the final choice outcome.

The paper is structured as follows. We will first provide further background to the study problem, review the pertinent literature and develop our hypotheses. We then provide the details of our methodology and explain the attributes and choice task that were used in the study. This is followed by an analysis and results section. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings and study implications.

2. The tourist destination choice process

The tourist consumer decision process is complex and multifaceted and comprises a number of elements: whether to travel, where to travel and what to do, when to travel, with whom to travel, how long to stay, and how much to spend (Dellaert, Ettema, & Lindh, 1998; Hyde, 2008; Seddighi & Theocharous, 2002; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989; Woodside & MacDonald, 1994). Of these various elements, the questions *where* to travel to, and *what* type of holiday experience to seek, concern two particularly important conceptualisations of holiday choice. While the literature often leaves undefined what is meant by a 'destination' (Pearce, 2014), from a tourism marketing perspective a destination is typically assumed to consist of a named geographical location or place. It can however also refer to a particular set of activities that constitute a particular tourism experience (cf. Pearce, 2014).

The conceptualisation of destination choice in terms of the choice of a geographical location has received significant attention in the tourism literature. Indeed, there is a wealth of research examining specific aspects of why and how a tourist chooses a particular holiday destination location. That research has addressed aspects such as destination image (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Hong, Kim & Lee, 2006), destination loyalty and attachment (Alegre & Cladera, 2006; Hong, Lee, Lee, & Jang, 2009), the role of hedonic experience, novelty and fantasy (Bello & Etzel, 1985; King, 2002), cognitive distance (Nicolau & Mas, 2006), behavioural intentions (Lam & Hsu, 2006), and the effects of destination attributes on destination choice (Ewing & Haider, 1999; Huybers, 2003; Morley, 1994).

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