



Competitive analysis of cross cultural information search behavior

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate German, French, and British travelers' information search behavior. This study used the data collected from a series of in-flight surveys on German, British, and French travelers to the US between January and December 1997. To visualize tourists' information research behavior, a correspondence analysis was employed. The results from correspondence analysis revealed two-dimensional solutions: the first was labeled as business/leisure dimension, and the second was identified as dependent/independent information search behavior. In addition, four distinct market segments based on the information search behavior emerged from the analysis. In conclusion, future study in respect to cross-cultural choice behaviors was advocated. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Understanding travelers' information-search behavior is critical for strategy development and service delivery. Indeed, the emergence of a large number and variety of travel destinations has increased the importance of understanding the travelers' information-search behavior. As a result, it is not surprising that conceptual and empirical study on tourist information-search behavior was one of the more important in marketing research. However, in the tourism literature, there is a little study that has specifically focused on cross-cultural information search behavior.

To date, one of the major gaps in tourist information-search behavior literature is the lack of a cross-cultural perspective. While it is true that the literature contains some information-search studies conducted on the samples outside of the United States (Uysal, McDonald, & Reid, 1990) the scope of these studies has been too limited to permit placement of the knowledge regarding tourist information-search behavior into a cross-cultural context.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to expand the concept of tourist information-search behavior by identifying and simultaneously analyzing external information sources used by German, French, and British travelers who traveled to the United States in 1997. In this study, each market (country) was segmented based on the travel purposes embodying business, convention, visiting family and friends, and leisure vacation. It is believed that analysis based on these segments will provide a better understanding of cross-cultural tourist information-search behavior.

2. Tourist information search

Like any other consumer product, information acquisition is necessary for selecting a destination and for on-site decisions such as selecting accommodation, transportation, and tours (Filiatrault & Ritchie, 1980; Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1998; Jenkins, 1978; Perdue, 1985; Snepenger, Meged, Snelling, & Worrall, 1990). However, the types and purposes of travel may influence the levels and types of information needed and therefore, may impact on the levels and types of information search employed. Routine trips may require little or no external information search, whereas overseas vacations

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may require considerable external information search (Snepenger & Snepenger, 1993).

Information search can be defined as “the motivated activation of knowledge stored in memory or acquisition of information from the environment” (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1990, p. 494). As the definition suggests, information search can be either internal or external; internal search is based on the retrieval of knowledge from memory; on the other hand, external search consists of collecting information from the marketplace (Engel et al., 1990).

When the internal search provides sufficient information regarding a trip decision, then external search is obviously unnecessary (Beatty & Smith, 1986). Whether travelers rely solely on internal information search will heavily depend on the adequacy or quality of their existing knowledge. For example, travelers may not need to collect any additional information from external sources for a routine trip to family or friends, or for repeat visitation of a certain destination because they may utilize only past experiences (Etzel & Wahlers, 1985; Snepenger & Snepenger, 1993). However, even experienced travelers may need to undertake external search. Travelers may search for external information even before a routine trip to visit family or friends because of a change in route or some side trips (Perdue, 1985).

When the internal information search proves inadequate, the travelers may decide to collect additional information from external sources. Travelers tend to use four broad, external information sources when planning their trips. These are (1) family and friends, (2) destination specific literature, (3) media, and (4) travel consultants (Snepenger & Snepenger, 1993). Travelers may utilize any of these external information sources for pre-purchase information search or ongoing information search. Pre-purchase information search can be defined as the external information search that is driven by an upcoming purchase decision whereas ongoing information search can be defined as acquisition of external information regardless of sporadic purchase needs (Bloch, Sherrill & Ridgway, 1986). Bloch et al. (1986) suggested that pre-purchase search is influenced by involvement in the purchase, while ongoing search is influenced by involvement with the product.

The degree of pre-purchase external information search is directly related to the type of product consumers intent to purchase. Consumers tend to engage in more search when purchasing higher priced, more visible, and more complex products which intrinsically create greater perceived risk (Beatty & Smith, 1986) such as overseas travels. Woodside and Ronkainen (1980) found that only about 20 per cent of travelers to South Carolina utilize travel agents, motor clubs and tour operators to help plan their trips. They also noted that overseas, first time travelers to a destination were prone to using travel agents and tour operators more frequently (Woodside

& Ronkainen, 1980). Snepenger et al. (1990) studied the information search strategies of first time visitors to Alaska. Their study indicated that a large segment of first time visitors (destination naïve travelers) to Alaska utilized travel agents as the main source of external information. Fesenmaier and Vogt's study (as cited in Snepenger & Snepenger, 1993) on the use of information at state welcome centers suggested that a majority of travelers stopping at the welcome centers did not utilize any external information sources prior to their trip. However, they reported that most of these travelers collect information during the trip. These findings implied that these travelers employed internal information search before they made their travel decision.

Fodness and Murray (1998) examined how travelers make systematic use of information available to them for vacation planning. They found that leisure travelers combine available information sources rationally. Travelers do not depend on one type of information source. Even though travelers use a combination of available information sources, they distinguish information sources on spatial, temporal, and operational dimensions. Travelers use a limited set of information strategies and each of these strategies exhibits unique combinations of the spatial, temporal, and operational dimensions (Fodness & Murray, 1998).

Indeed, most research works on the information-search behavior of travelers have focused on US travelers, only a few cross-national information search behaviors can be found in the current tourism literature (Snepenger & Snepenger, 1993). Uysal et al. (1990) studied the information search behavior of German, French, British and Japanese travelers who travel to the United States. They found that travelers from different countries were more inclined to utilize different types of information with varying frequency. British travelers tended to use travel agents as the main source of external information source followed by family and friends, brochures and pamphlets, and magazine and newspaper articles. “Family and friends” is found to be the most important external information source for German travelers followed by travel agents, brochures and pamphlets, and books and library materials. Like German travelers, “family and friends” is found to be the most important external information source for French travelers, followed by travel agents, brochures and pamphlets, airlines, and articles in magazines and newspapers. Japanese travelers are more likely to use books and other library materials first, then brochures and pamphlets, family and friends, and travel agents.

3. Research design

The data used in this study were based on the results of the in-flight survey and a comprehensive study of

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