

Research article

# Gender differences in online travel information search: Implications for marketing communications on the internet

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## Abstract

Gender has been and continues to be one of the most common forms of segmentation used by marketers in general and advertisers in particular. In general, males and females are likely to differ in information processes and decision making. The growing predominance of Internet use has further highlighted the need for understanding online users' attitudes and behaviors from a gender perspective. Reflecting this research need, the purpose of this study was to examine gender differences within the context of online travel Website functionality and content preferences as well as search behavior. The data used for this study were obtained from the *Internet Tourism & Travel 2001 Study* conducted for the Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC). There was a usable sample of 1334 qualified respondents in this study. The results indicated that there were substantial gender differences both in terms of attitudes to information channels and travel Website functionality preferences. The implications of such differences for online tourism Website message design were discussed. © 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Gender difference; Information search process; Destination website

## 1. Introduction

The revolutionary development of information technology has dramatically changed society and people's everyday lives, including the way travelers search for information and plan trips. Recent studies by NFO Plog Research show that the Internet has become one of the most important information sources for travel information acquisition (Lake, 2001). Tourism by nature is an information-oriented phenomenon due to structural reasons (Schertler, Schmid, Tjoa, & Werthner, 1995). For consumers, decision-making and consumption are separated in time and space. These distances can only be overcome by the information about the product, which is available in advance and which can be gathered by the consumer (Werthner & Klein, 1999). As a result, information quality has emerged as a major research topic and providing relevant and meaningful information search

experiences is perceived as essential for the success of tourism organizations.

Acknowledging gender differences arising from factors such as "biological factors" (Buss, 1995; Everhart, Shucard, Quatrin, & Shucard, 2001; Hall, 1984; Saucier & Elias, 2001) "gender identity" (Bem, 1974; Fischer & Arnold, 1994; Spence & Helmreich, 1978), and "gender role attitudes" (Buss & Schaninger, 1987; Douglas, 1976; Eagly, 1987; Fisher & Arnold, 1990, 1994; Schaninger & Buss, 1985), gender has been frequently used as a basis for segmentation for a significant proportion of products and services (Putrevu, 2001). The fact that men and women are different is commonly acknowledged in most societies. The prevalent research question, however, has focused on whether biological make-up or social factors drive these gender differences. That is, the study of gender differences encompasses several unexplored dimensions that lately have attracted research attention. Within the context of information search processes, relatively little research has been done on gender differences. An intriguing question facing consumer researchers is whether gender differences

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can be translated into consistent differential patterns in information-processing and judgment. In order to deliver products and services that cater to the unique needs and aspirations of each gender, marketers need to understand the origins and psychological differences between the two genders. Accordingly, the purpose of this research was to provide a review of the literature on the information-processing differences between females and males, empirically examine the gender differences in online information attitudes, preferences and behaviors within the domain of travel-related information, and discuss the major implications of such differences for more effective marketing and advertising strategies.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Characteristics of tourism information

Various typologies of information sources have been proposed. There is general consensus, however, that information search can be divided into internal search, which is a scan in long-term memory for relevant product knowledge, and external search, which happens when an internal search cannot provide sufficient and adequate information and consumers need to collect information from the external world (Bettman, 1979; Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 1990; Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1998; Mullen & Johnson, 1990; Wicks & Schuett, 1991). Based on these two concepts, Fodness and Murray (1997) conceptualized tourist information search as “a dynamic process wherein individuals use various amounts and types of information sources in response to internal and external contingencies to facilitate travel planning.” For external sources, travelers rely on both marketing-dominated and non-marketing-dominated information sources to search for travel-related information and plan their trips. The former information sources include advertising and commercials in the mass media, travel brochures, guidebooks from clubs and welcome centers; the latter includes friends, relatives and personal experiences. Further, tourist information search may vary depending on the purpose of the trip (Fodness & Murray 1998), planning horizon (Gitelson & Crompton 1983; Schul & Crompton 1983), motivation (Gitelson & Crompton 1983; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998), and level of involvement (Crotts, 1999; Kerstetter, & Cho, 2004; Lehto, O’Leary, & Morrison, 2004).

Many studies have indicated that the major purpose of information search is to support decision-making (i.e., reduce risk and uncertainty) and product choice in which the information search behavior strengthens the decision-making and choice behavior (Bettman, 1979; Bloch, Sherrell, & Ridgway, 1986; Moorthy, Ratchford, & Talukdar, 1997). For tourists, information acquisition is necessary for choosing a destination and for onsite decisions such as selecting accommodations, transportation, activities, and tours (Fodness & Murray, 1998; Gursoy and Chen, 2000; Snepenger, Meged, Snelling &

Worrall, 1990). In many aspects, tourist information-processing is different from that of other consumers. The differences are mainly due to structural reasons (Schertler et al., 1995). Tourists have to leave their daily environment, having to move to geographically distant places to consume the tourism product. According to Werthner and Klein (1999), the tourism product normally cannot be tested and controlled in advance. Thus, decision-making and consumption are separated in time and space. These distances can only be overcome by the information about the product, which is available in advance and which can be gathered by the consumer (Werthner & Klein, 1999).

Another reason is due to the characteristics of the tourism product. In consumer behavior research, Nelson (1970) suggests that goods can be classified as possessing either search or experience qualities. Search qualities are those that “the consumer can determine by inspection prior to purchase,” and experience qualities are those that “are not determined prior to purchase” (Nelson, 1974, p. 730). With respect to classification, tourism is a confidence good; an a priori comprehensive assessment of its qualities is impossible. This requires information from the consumer and supplier sides, entailing high information search costs and causing informational market imperfections (Williamson, 1985). Tourism organizations rely on an exchange of information with travelers through various channels to market products and build customer relationships. Travelers depend on travel-related information for functional needs such as travel planning and also other social, visual, entertainment, and creativity needs (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Recent studies show that travelers use different combinations of information sources to plan trips such as personal experience, friends and family, travel agencies, travel brochures and guidebooks, highway welcome centers, magazines and newspapers. These sources are influenced by different search contingencies and individual characteristics (Fodness & Murray, 1998).

In addition, the tourism product is a complex product; it is a set of basic products, delivered by a large number of suppliers (Werthner & Klein, 1999). The basic products are aggregated by some intermediary entities. The product aggregation and consolidation process is also information intensive. Products have to have well defined interfaces so that they match consumer needs, processes, and distribution channels. For example, a hotel may be packaged with different transportation arrangements or combined with demand-generators such as sports or cultural events. These packages can be sold to different consumer groups, if the product attributes and the consumers’ interests can be mapped onto each other. Another important feature of tourism products is their perishability (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 1999). They have to be consumed when they are available and cannot be stored. This is true for nearly all components of the tourism product; a hotel bed not sold for one night represents lost income, and the same is true for a seat on an airplane or for a sports event. Thus, suppliers bear high risks and are vulnerable if consumers

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