

A closer look at tourist information search behaviour when travelling abroad: what is the role of online marketing in choice of destination?

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Abstract

Information search and the decision-making process of tourists have received great attention in tourism research literature and both are considered to be important theoretical and practical topics. This study contributes to these topics by studying international tourists during their trip in a destination using qualitative interviews and by focusing on the role of online marketing in tourists' decision-making process. Altogether 57 international tourists in Savonlinna, Finland were interviewed during summer 2016 to find out the factors that affected their decision to come to Savonlinna. The results demonstrate how important it is for destinations to understand their international customers and understand what is the destination they should actually be promoting. Banners and social media do not seem to play an important role in new customer acquisition, but search engine optimisation and content marketing as well as product quality are at the top of the list.

Keywords: destination choice, information search, social media, online marketing, decision-making

1 Introduction

For decades academics and practitioners have studied how tourists search for and use information. Information search is a crucial part of tourists' destination choice (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). We know there are various types of decision-making models in tourism literature (Decrop & Snelders, 2005) and the process by which tourists choose the destination they are going to travel to is well established (Crompton, 1993). Information evaluation has become a core element in any destination decision (Tham et al., 2012). Tourism destinations and businesses try to influence tourists' decision-making process so that the tourists choose their destination, but we are still lacking information on how to do that. Effectiveness of destination marketing is, especially regarding branding and positioning, still in question (Pike & Page, 2014).

We are now living in the age of social media and Web 2.0. Social media has tremendously changed the way people search for and use information according to existing literature (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Öz, 2015). Consumer-centric social media studies in travel and tourism have generally focused on the use and impact of social media in the research phase of the travel planning process (Leung et al., 2013). For destinations, this is especially interesting as they have to balance their marketing resources amongst many different channels and target groups. Hays, Page and Buhalis (2013) identified that even among national tourism organisations, social media is still largely experimental and that strategies vary significantly. According to Jacobsen and Munar (2012), there is still a lack of empirical studies that include tourist assessments of possible effects of social media and Web 2.0 on tourist information acquisition and search. Social media has also become an important part of search engine results in tourism as searching has become an increasingly dominant mode in travellers' use of the Internet (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009). This has also led to ever-increasing use of social media by online tourism marketers as they try to get their message heard among potential customers. It has become an industry norm for a destination or tourism business to have a social media presence (Pesonen, 2011) and a huge number of destinations have their own Facebook-page and accounts on Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, among others. It is clear that marketing has the potential to have a great impact on intention to visit a destination and destination choice (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989), but it still remains unclear which type of marketing destinations and businesses can employ to have the largest impact and greatest effectiveness.

We know the influence of friends and relatives in travel decision-making (Gitelson & Kerstetter, 1995), the influence of children in tourist group holiday decision-making (Thornton, Shaw & Williams, 1997), the use and impact of online travel reviews (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008), the influence of terrorism risks on international tourism decisions (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998), the influence of e-word-of-mouth on travel decision-making (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Hernández-Méndez Muñoz-Leiva & Sánchez-Fernández, 2015; Murphy, Mascardo & Beckendorff, 2007) and the importance of information sources in travel decisions (Bieger & Laesser, 2004). What we are constantly missing is how marketing influences decision-making of tourists when they are choosing their destination. We know that marketing is part of the information search and decision-making process, but so far the literature has failed to examine exactly what is this role and in which points of the information search process. Gursoy and McCleary (2004) state that marketers of a destination should have an overall picture of how tourists acquire information. Destination marketers also need to be aware of what is the actual destination the tourists are visiting as it is a central theme in many marketing messages (Reinhold, Laesser & Beritelli, 2015, Beritelli, Bieger & Laesser, 2014). Discussion of which measure of information search is the most accurate and managerially useful (Fodness & Murray, 1997) is still ongoing and this study positions itself within this research topic.

This paper studies how online marketing, and especially social media marketing, affects tourists' choice of destination from a tourist point of view when a tourist is travelling abroad. This study has two research topics:

- 1) How tourists define the international destination they are visiting and

2) How international tourists perceive the role of destination marketing in their decision-making process

The objective of this paper is to increase our knowledge of how tourists use information channels when travelling abroad and especially what the role of online marketing in destination choice is. There is still a lack of qualitative information on how online marketing affects destination choice. It is widely accepted that destination management organisations invest heavily in online marketing and especially social media marketing. We examine here how tourists in a destination perceive the online marketing that a destination does and how it affected their decision-making process. The results of this study are based on 57 detailed interviews conducted in Savonlinna, Finland during the summer of 2016 with international tourists.

2 Literature review

2.1 Information search

Information search is a well-established research topic in tourism (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). Tourists search for and use a lot of information before they make their final decision of where to travel and what to do in the destination and a lot of this information search is conducted to reduce risks (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). To understand tourists' information search, various models have been proposed and utilised, and especially process view has gained considerable support (Bieger & Laesser, 2004).

There are two types of information sources available for tourists: internal and external (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). According to Gursoy and McCleary (2004), an increase in time cost to acquire information can cause tourists to look elsewhere. Destination marketers and managers need to understand that different tourists have different types of information needs (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004).

Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) identified functional information as the most important type of information that tourists generally look for. Tourists collect and use information largely for functional reasons or to plan and take trips, but there are also other kinds of information needs.

Information needs vary based on the destination a tourist is travelling to. Travelling to a new destination without previous knowledge requires more information search as a tourist cannot use internal information about the destination (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). There are considerable differences between tourists in their information search behavior based on their familiarity with the destination (Fodness & Murray, 1997) and tourists can also combine various available information sources (Fodness & Murray, 1998). There are also cultural differences that the marketers need to be aware of (Money & Crotts, 2003).

Pearce and Schott (2005) call for more detailed analysis of the booking and purchase behaviour of tourists to understand the distribution process from the visitors' perspective. Information search is connected to the decision-making process and often these topics are discussed together (Fodness & Murray, 1997).

2.2 Destination choice

Information search leads to destination choice. Choice sets have been identified as a useful tool to analyse destination choice (Decrop, 2010). Decrop (2010) reviews earlier literature on the topic and presents a typology of seven choice sets. Using qualitative methods, Decrop (2010) demonstrates that choice sets are continuous and undergo turnarounds and that final destination choice is driven by constraints and opportunities. Destination marketers have the ability to affect consumer choice of destination through marketing and/or social environment. Tourists typically have zero to four destinations in their evoked sets that they then evaluate and choose from, unless marketers manage to introduce them to a new destination possibility during the information search process (Decrop, 2010). Decrop (2010) particularly mentions offers such as early booking or last-minute discounts as an excellent possibility for marketers.

Um and Crompton (1990) conceptualise travel destination choice as a two-stage process. First, a destination is added to an evoked set of destinations from an awareness set. Then a travel destination is selected from the evoked set as the travel destination based on a comparison of destinations in the evoked set.

Literature strongly suggests that Internet presence is something that destinations and tourism businesses have to focus on. For example, Castañeda, Frías and Rodríguez (2007) argued that the more satisfied tourists are with a destination's Internet presence, the fuller his or her enjoyment is of the holiday. The more useful information a tourist can find, the more they can enjoy their holiday. According to Jalilyvand and Samiei (2012), tourism destinations should focus on creating electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communication among tourists as eWOM has a significant impact on tourist attitudes towards visiting a destination, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and intention to travel. Also Wang (2015) argues that user-generated content (UGC) greatly affects consumers' decisions. Wang (2015) emphasises that UGC is an especially important information source for travellers to support their travel decisions, but Tham, Croy and Mair (2013) state that we are still in an exploratory stage when it comes to investigating the influence of social media on destination choice.

Destination image has often been regarded as a critical component in explaining why tourists choose a certain destination. According to Baloglu and McCleary (1999) "human behaviour is reliant upon image rather than objective reality, which suggests that the world is a psychological or distorted representation of objective reality residing and existing in the mind of the individual". The World Tourism Organization defines image as "an aura, an angel, and a subjective perception accompanying the various projections of the same message transmitter" (Konecnik, 2004). Destination image has even been named the most influential component in consumers' destination selection (Ramkissoon, Nunkoo and Gursoy, 2009; Tasci and Gartner, 2007) even though there is no consensus of an overarching approach to measuring destination image (Ramkissoon et al., 2009).

According to Di Pietro, Di Virgilio and Pantano (2012), we need more research for tourism destinations and businesses to develop tourism marketing and communication strategies to influence tourists' behaviour in a more efficient way. They recommend that hospitality marketers should provide incentives for tourists to post online reviews, videos and photos, thus increasing their destination eWOM.

Wu, Zhang and Fujiwara (2012) also state that a better understanding of tourists' destination choices is essential to successfully market and manage tourism. As tourists make various choices regarding their trip, including travel timing, travel company, duration, transportation modes and travel budget in addition to destination choice, researchers should attempt to integrate these factors more into destination choice research.

Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) reviewed earlier research concerning building and testing theories of decision-making by travellers. They state that tourism service offerings are often neglected in decision-making literature. Decision-making research in tourism does not reflect the unique characteristics of tourism services and researchers are trying to measure and understand a process that is unobservable and of which consumers are only partially aware. Nonetheless, travel marketers and destination developers need to understand how tourists make decisions (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). This helps them to develop effective marketing strategies.

To sum up the literature review, we already know quite well how a tourists' destination selection process works and how tourists search for information. The interplay between destination choice and information search is especially interesting as the literature suggests that online marketing affects information search and destination choice considerably, but we don't actually know how. Topics such as what marketing channels should be used and how are still under research. Pesonen (2013) states that the Internet is not only an information channel among others, but more detailed information on how people use the Internet for their travel decisions is required. Often in tourism, studies of quantitative information on which information channels tourists have used is obtained, but this information cannot be used to find out what information has affected their destination choice the most (Pesonen, 2013). This is true especially if we take into account that it becomes difficult for decision-makers to assign weights, derive values, compute overall utility indices and have a rational, quantifiable reason for choices when there are many alternatives with various attributes (Um & Crompton, 1990; Park, 1978). For this purpose, a qualitative and exploratory study was designed. The goal of the study was to gain information on how information search has affected their destination choice and how online marketing of a destination fits into this process.

3 Study methods

The data was collected with semi-structured interviews which had some characteristics of structured interviews as well. The questions and themes were decided beforehand based on literature, but there was still opportunity for interviewers to slightly change the order or the wording of the questions or probe more in-depth answers if needed. Semi-structured interviews were used since it was an efficient way to collect open-ended data from dozens of travellers concerning their destination choice and still have somewhat systematic and comprehensive material.

Large data was preferred to achieve as comprehensive an overall picture of the destination choice process as possible and achieve data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were also a good way to reduce variety when several interviewers and languages were used. Semi-structured interviews also made it possible to compare the data in a rather systematic manner. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008.)

The interview questions were translated from English to Japanese and Russian. Before the translation process, the interview questions were discussed and commented on by the researchers at the Centre for Tourism Studies and tested with two randomly selected international travellers in the Savonlinna region. Only minor changes were made to the questions after testing. The research interviews were conducted in August 2016 by three interviewers, of which one was a native Japanese speaker and one a fluent Russian speaker. All the interviewers spoke fluent English. Interviews were conducted at five famous tourist attractions in the Savonlinna region in Eastern Finland. In total, 57 recorded interviews were conducted. To help to organise the data, the answers were also typed on an electronic form one question at a time. For the purpose of this research, only responses connected to the topic of this paper were transcribed.

The questions or themes concentrated on the decision-making process of international travellers. The questions were based on earlier literature summarised in the previous chapter. The aim was to discover the whole decision-making process from the initial consideration set to the late consideration set and all the way to the final selected destination (e.g., Crompton, 1992) - what affects the decision-making, what information channels are used and in what way, what is the importance of different information channels in the decision-making process, what is the time frame of this process and why travellers have finally ended up in Finland and moreover, in the Savonlinna region.

The data was analysed by using the Atlas.ti programme for qualitative data analysis. The analysis was built in a way that it would test the existing theories, which is characteristic of an extensive case study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The data was coded based on predefined propositions. In other words, the analysis was theory-based or deductive (Dudovskiy, 2016). Several codes regarding different information channels (internet, guidebooks, WOM etc.) as well as sub-categories for them were created in the process. The data was also analysed on the basis of which part of the decision-making process it represents and if the information search or decision-making was connected to destinations in general, to Finland, or to the Savonlinna region.

4 Results

Before turning to the results derived from qualitative data, we give a summary of the background of interviewed travellers since it might have an effect on the decision-making process and used information sources. For example, internet and social media are more commonly used by young travellers and their use also varies also between different nationalities. Further, since this was for most of the travellers the first visit to Finland, this might have an effect on the amount of information needed as well as used channels.

From the 57 international travellers that were interviewed, almost all were from Europe and only a few were from outside of Europe. From the German-speaking part of Middle Europe (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) came 14 of the interviewed travellers, 12 were from Mediterranean Europe (Spain, Italy), 10 from France, 7 from Russia, 3 from Nordic countries, 3 from Great Britain or Ireland, 3 from the USA, 2 from Japan, 2 from the Netherlands and 1 from Israel. The majority of them were male (64%) and the most common age groups were from 26 to 40 years old (38%) and from 41 to 55 years old (30%). For most of the international travellers, this was not only the first visit to Eastern Finland (83%) and the Savonlinna region (85%), but also the first visit to Finland (63%).

We asked the tourists first to state what destination or destinations they were visiting during this trip and what they considered as their destination during their current holiday. Mostly tourists preferred Finland as their current destination. Only three tourists mentioned only Eastern Finland and only five just the Savonlinna region. Most tourists were touring around Finland or Fennoscandia or were also visiting Russia or Estonia.

In the analysis of the data, it became obvious that most of the travellers planning a trip abroad have initially one or two potential destinations in mind when starting the decision-making process. This finding is rather similar to previous studies (e.g., Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). However, the number of potential destinations is rather small, many visitors only mentioned Finland. It seems that it is rather difficult for travellers to think back on the beginning of the process when they have already chosen the destination and are at the destination when answering these questions, although it was pointed out for them that we are only interested in the phase when they were making plans to go abroad.

When forming the structure of interviews, we decided to inquire more about the late consideration set that forms after the initial one, since the destinations in the late consideration set are those that a person genuinely thinks of as potential destinations in some given time (Crompton, 1992) and we were interested about their decision-making concerning the summer of 2016. Many travellers described this phase of the process through information search. It was common to initially find some information about competing destinations, but quickly most of the travellers started to concentrate their information search on Finland. In almost half of the discussions, the Internet was mentioned as at least one of the information sources when looking for more information to support their decision-making process, but word-of-mouth and surprisingly, also guidebooks were mentioned in at least one in five of the discussions in this initial process.

“We equally considered every country except India and looked for information. We looked for restaurants, hotels and hostels via internet, on Google and TripAdvisor, but mainly Google, and sightseeing places by Lonely Planet Italian language version. We mainly used internet, and additionally Lonely Planet”.

“We bought the travel guide Le Routard in French. And our cousin gave more information...We found the information in our travel guide, for example, information about restaurants”.

“We collected information from my friends, my network, and from the internet of which country would be easier to travel with kids, and everything”.

The internet was mainly mentioned on a general level or just by mentioning the use of Google. Social media was brought up in only a couple of discussions and in those discussions, it was mentioned mostly related to looking for information about accommodation and things to do on TripAdvisor or Booking.com. In three interviews, travellers mentioned using blogs or other travellers’ diaries as a part of their decision-making. The most common and popular social media sites, Facebook and Instagram, weren’t brought up in any of the discussions.

In this late consideration set, the travellers were mostly making the decision on the national level, in other words, comparing countries and not destinations within countries. However, we also wanted to know at which point they had started to consider Savonlinna (a small town in Eastern Finland) as a destination, and why and how did they find out what this region had to offer. The choice of the country is, according to our data, the starting point of a more in-depth information search in order to choose one or multiple destinations within the country. Also at this point, most travellers mentioned the internet as an important source of information, but the comments were more precise than previously. Many named websites that they had used to make the decision of whether or not to come to the Savonlinna region. Google was still mentioned as one of the most important starting points of the information search, but many travellers also mentioned some Online Travel Agency website (mainly Booking.com or TripAdvisor) or websites of the National Tourism Organisation VisitFinland.com. However, only few mentioned that they had used the website of Savonlinna Destination or the website of the city of Savonlinna. This can be interpreted in two ways, either the travellers of these days count mainly on national level marketing material on the internet, Google and OTAs or they do not pay attention to which websites they visit during the decision-making process.

“According to an internet search, Savonlinna is a must-see place in Finland as it has beautiful lake land and sights, and the castle”.

“Internet. I think it was probably "visitfinland.com" and other sites in French. My father looked up TripAdvisor too”.

Not too many travellers referred to social media even at this point in their decision-making, the few ones that mentioned using some form of social media mostly talked about comparing hotels and attractions on Booking.com or TripAdvisor. Only three of the travellers mentioned using blogs or other travellers’ diaries when considering the Savonlinna region as their potential destination.

“We searched on the internet to find out if there was any similar route that had been taken by other tourists. We saw that probably the part with the lake is the best part to visit in the summer, so we decided to plan a tour with a car”.

Although social media was not that widely used, the traditional word-of-mouth seemed to have a big effect on the decision-making process of many travellers when finding out what to do and where to visit in Finland. For many it was friends, relatives or colleagues that gave the first push to even start to consider the Savonlinna region as a destination. And after that the focus turned to other information channels.

Guidebooks were also and even more often used at this point (than earlier points) when looking for possible destinations in Finland and more in-depth information about destinations.

“After the suggestion from my friend, I learned more about Savonlinna from a travel guide book”.

The data suggests that the reason for both starting to consider and actually travelling to Savonlinna all come down in the end to recommendations. Most of the travellers shared that they had ended up in Savonlinna because of the recommendation of a guidebook, a friend, relative or a colleague, or the recommendation of VisitFinland.com. The importance of electronic word of mouth that is assumed in most of the recent literature, does not show through in this data.

Quality is the keyword when it comes to websites of destination or individual businesses. The travel decision-making process is seen as having a higher risk associated with it than many other decision-making processes (e.g., Crompton & Ankomah, 1993). It is important to be able to reduce that risk and that can be done by offering plenty of accurate, useful, and practical information for travellers.

“One argument was that organising this [trip] by using the internet was easier than [going to visit] archipelago[another destination in Finland]. Oravi (district of Savonlinna) is well organised compared to other companies. I did not want to contact ten different destinations, so well organised web pages seal the deal”.

In former theories of destination decision-making, an action set is mentioned as one of the steps in the decision-making process. This means that the destinations that are contacted during the decision-making process have a higher probability to end up as the final selected destination. Our research does not support this idea. In the era of internet and Web 2.0 it seems more important that the traveller can get all the needed information from different sources, primarily from the internet. If the websites do not offer enough information or the information is too hard to get, the traveller might change his destination. Only a couple of travellers contacted companies or destinations before making the decision about their destination. It was more common to contact the companies after the decision was already made. One traveller even said that

“Actually I got the confidence to come here since there was the possibility to book online and I could check the availability every now and then. We planned our own routes by ourselves. For me it is important that I can plan and book everything by myself without the necessity to contact anyone”.

5 Discussion and conclusions

The results of this study provide interesting information for destinations and businesses especially regarding online marketing to international tourists. First of all, destinations and businesses should really know their customers, not just the channels they use (Pesonen, 2013) but also how exactly are they using these information search channels. Qualitative interviews used in this study provide in-depth understanding of the information search and decision-making process of tourists. The results emphasise the fact that destination marketers need to know what the destination is that their

customers are visiting. In this case the destination was not Savonlinna, nor was it the Saimaa region or Eastern Finland. The majority of the international tourists interviewed for this study regarded Finland as their destination. They had chosen Finland as their destination based on the image of Finland and then they started thinking about what they can do while they are here.

According to this data, for the DMO, it seems important to concentrate at this point on visibility in search engines and collaboration with a national tourism organisation. It is also important for destination management organisations to pay attention to the quality of services as well as the quality of websites of the tourism businesses in the region. The results suggest that a good website is not enough to ensure that a tourist comes to the destination or visits a business, but a bad website guarantees that a tourist chooses another destination or company.

There are around 60 destination management organisations in Finland and almost a dozen in Eastern Finland (<http://www.visitfinland.com/destinations/>). The results demonstrate that these are supply-based organisations instead of demand-based organisations. Every international tourist interviewed in this study was on a trip that included destinations in various parts of Finland as well as destinations in Russia, Estonia, Sweden and Denmark. DMOs should work with each other to create products that are interesting for tourists. Focusing only on the tourism services in the geographically limited operating area of a DMO makes it more difficult to create experiences that tourists really want and need. DMOs need to stop focusing on geographically limited regions, especially regarding international tourists, as it limits the competitiveness of the destination. Tourists are not geographically bound to a single destination (Beritelli et al., 2014) and neither should organisations that cater to tourists' needs.

Since the word-of-mouth has such a big role in the decision-making process it is important to take good care of travellers and ensure a high level of services. This also naturally applies to electronic word-of-mouth. Although not so many travellers mentioned that they would have used UCG, it is fairly hard to avoid it these days as there are reviews and comments in TripAdvisor and nearly all the other OTA websites. A tourist comparing, for example, accommodation on the internet easily comes across UCG. Also Xiang and Gretzel (2010) point out the importance of UGC in search engine visibility. Tourism businesses need to be particularly aware of their search engine visibility among international tourists and know the key words that tourists use to find more information about their holiday. Customers are already moving to the direction where they do not want to contact the business they are going to visit. Online booking possibility must be a priority in online marketing. It also enables much more detailed conversion analytics than just e-mail reservation or phone calls, often used by businesses in the Savonlinna region.

Theoretically this study contributes to the interplay of information search and destination choice in tourism, deepening our understanding of how tourists choose the destination they are visiting. Internal information search seems to play a greater role when tourists are placing destinations into their consideration set (Decrop, 2010) and online marketing of destinations is crucial when tourists are choosing the destination from an evaluation set. Efficiently conducted online marketing and online visibility

decreases the likelihood that consumers change the destination into something else when they are searching for information to make their destination choice. Functional information especially (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 2008) still seems to be in the forefront of tourist information search.

This study is one of the few studies that collect data on tourist information search and decision-making using qualitative research methods in the destination during the holiday of an international tourist. This research method also increases our understanding of the topic as it is studying the actual behavior of the tourists, not just intention to visit.

Altogether, 57 interviews were collected. This is quite a lot for qualitative research, but a considerable number of interviews were required as the topic was multidimensional and tourists came from many different cultures. Data collection was stopped when data started to saturate. One source of error in this study are translations. Interviews were conducted by three researchers in Japanese, Russian and English and the data was translated by each researcher. However, great attention was paid to ensure that everyone understood the research objectives and research methods and interviews were also recorded to ensure that all possible errors could be double-checked later on if needed.

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