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The Importance of Hypertext in the Tourist Destination Choice from Web Sites

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1. Introduction

The global economy in the next century will be driven by information technology, telecommunications, and tourism. The international focus of the tourist business will be based on the nature of tourist activity itself. This defines very specific characteristics of the tourist sector which need to cope with the large distances usually involved between the origin and destination of travelers. Also, new tourist business will be influenced by the intangible nature of tourist products which are usually sold away from the place of consumption. In this respect, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are offer great potential concerning with the worldwide, timely and up-to-date information provision (Stratigea & Giaoutzi, 2006).

E-Commerce can be defined as the marketing, buying and selling of products and services on the Internet (Awad, 2004). By means of E-Commerce, companies are selling and buying goods and services to consumers around the world, thus, generating business transactions and improving ordering and payment processes. Now, E-Commerce, is used everywhere for everything across the entire world and can be defined in several ways.

From a communications perspective, E-Commerce entails the ability to deliver products and perform business processes via Internet networks. From a market approach, E-Commerce is a worldwide network offering companies a global webstore front. Finally from a business-process perspective, E-Commerce offers the possibility of establishing B2B processes like supply-chain management, or B2C process as merchandise delivery.

The fast adoption of ICT) around the world and the expansion of Internet have affected a great proportion of industries like tourism in many countries in Europe and America. Only in the last few decades, ICTs have deeply affected the way business is performed and the way that organizations compete (Buhalis & Licata, 2002). As a powerful tool, Internet has shifted the traditional way in which tourism and travel products are distributed (O'Connor & Frew, 2000). Tourism suppliers took advantage of the new opportunities and developed E-Commerce applications by allowing users to access directly their products (Buhalis & Licata, 2002). The increasing rate of online transactions and the fast growth of online users provide clear evidence of the popularity of the communications technology. Customer-oriented and information-intensive tourism enterprises are increasingly adopting E-Business models to achieve their organizational goals (Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010).

Today, the understanding of travel information searchers' behavior on the Internet is essential to the design of useful Internet-based technology. Searching through the Internet is an interactive process between travelers and hypertext (the Internet) implemented through a computer and a web browser. Then, the understanding of travel information searchers' behavior on the Internet is essential to the design of useful Internet-based technology.

Travel planning involves many sub-decisions and can be viewed as a dynamic and contingent process where the central decisions are made at the beginning of travel planning (Fesenmaier & Jeng, 2000). The Internet is an interactive hypertext system where information nodes are "hyperlinked" according to their relevance (Boechler, 2001). Travelers may consider "where to go" or "what to do" as the most important element in travel planning process; however, the tourism destination marketers may display other information on the first page of their websites. In this way, when travelers' search for information on the Internet, their choices of links are determined by the value of relevance of the link anchors (linked texts, pictures or contextual information). Then, the Internet allows a great variety of different tools that enable communication and sharing of data as E-Mail, Usenet, Listserv, Gopher, Telnet and others tools such as HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) which provide for convergence of information processing through the World Wide Web (WWW).

2. Tourism and E-commerce

2.1 Tourism and the web

Tourism is a key element of modern societies. It has contributed to local and regional economic development. Probably no other technological development has affected people's behavior so noticeably in such a short period the way the Internet has. In 2005, approximately 61% of the US population consisted of Internet users. The use of the Internet is similarly high in other countries, such as South Korea: 66%, Australia: 60%, Japan: 57%), Canada: 56%, UK: 53, and Germany: 50% (Gertner, Berger, & Gertner, 2006).

Use of Internet has grown 146.2% between 2000 and 2005 around the world. Several regions of the world have grown even faster. For example, the number of Internet users in Latin American and the Caribbean Countries grew 211.2%. By 2011, the number of worldwide Internet users was reached nearly two billion out of a population of approximately 6.93 billion (Stats, 2001). As we can see, changes in the economic, cultural and technological environments have definitely encourage consumers to increase the use of the Internet in their quest to save time and money by means of popular search engines, such as Yahoo and Google which are constantly improved to provide faster access of information for travelers (Mitchell, 2006).

Distribution becomes one of the most critical factors for competitiveness in tourism business. Appropriate distribution systems allow the building of bridges between destinations and travelers providing mechanisms for purchasing tourism products and destinations. To the degree that distribution systems facilitate the transactions they extensively influence the prosperity of tourism enterprises and destinations around the world.

Internet has strengthened the relevance of electronic intermediaries and changing their positions as strategic suppliers to a degree that they can substitute traditional distribution channels.

On-line communications assist travelers to access communication channels at a general level or a special interest level, Virtual communities can be established between people with common interests enhancing the global knowledge basis by sharing advice based on personal experience (Buhalis D., 2003). The ways that consumers search for already evaluated travel information is currently changing with the rising popularity of websites that contain content submitted by real travelers (e.g., TripAdvisor, Lonely Planet, MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube) (Cox, Burges, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009). This is possible now using Web 2.0, which refers to the second generation of web-based services letting people collaborate and share information online in more sophisticated ways. Web 2 enables any individual to post their own content, opinions, videos, audio, or imagery on the web for other users to see and respond to. Also, Web 2.0 is changing the way that consumers engage with information presented via the Internet.

It is generally accepted that the Internet can serve as an effective marketing tool in tourism. The fast development of E-Commerce has dramatically changed the tourism industry (Buhalis, 2003; Ho & Lee, 2007; Buhalis & Law, 2008). One of the most recent developments in E-Tourism application is at the destination level. By employing Internet, Intranet and Extranet, many tourism organizations have successfully integrated this function in promoting destinations, providing tourists with pre-trip and in-trip information, helping small and medium tourist enterprises to promote their products, and internal management tasks (Buhalis D., 2003; Buhalis D., 1998; Xiaoqiu, Buhalis, & Song, 2003). The strategic and efficient implementation of technology within a business can reduce the operation costs and enable the delivery of better products or services to customers. This will help the company to gain competitive advantage by either maintaining its price leadership in the market or differentiating its products and services, which will eventually lead to the increase in value added to the company (Xiaoqiu, Buhalis, & Song, 2003).

Personal computers (PC) do much more than a mainframe in the past. They have revolutionized the modern business world introducing a great variety of processing capabilities to Internet users. In tourism, a wide range of ICT technologies are used in order to reduce the cost and time required for undertaking particular activities. Networking is also a key factor supporting communications and interconnectivity between tourism companies and/or travelers. Electronic data interchange enables organizations to transfer data such as passenger lists, invoices and other documents maximizing the efficiency and effectiveness of their business operations. Computer reservation systems (CRSs) and global distribution systems (GDSs) represent technological solutions and transaction mechanisms between travel agencies, hotels, airlines, tourist destination, car rental firms, etc. CRSs and GDSs empower Internet travel portals enabling tourist enterprises to reach travelers directly. In this way, small and medium tourism enterprises benefit from ICT technologies and can pool the resources of their partners within extranet tools and compete with other larger companies.

2.2 Promoting tourist products by websites

From its emergence in the world of business, the Internet has been adopted by many companies in the marketing of products and, today, the web is an important advertising medium (Hanna & Millar, 1997). Businesses, including customer-oriented and information-

intensive tourism enterprises, are increasingly adopting E-Business models to achieve their organizational goals. ICTs and particularly web based advertising tools have been used to redefine tourism and deliver products to end consumers (Law, Qi & Buhalis, 2010; Aaron, 2006; Gretzel, Yuan & Fesenmaier, 2000).

Internet advertising significantly impacts travel and purchase behavior (Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Tierney, 2000) and provides a medium to disseminate information to consumers in the form of interactive scenarios between travelers and companies. Tourism literature has found that attractive and stimulating advertising content design produces a positive perception of destinations promoted in websites (Wu, Wei, & Chen, 2008).

The Internet's ability to bring travel and hospitality services and products "live" to consumers and the consumers' ability to access the information without time and space limitation are surprising. Travel is one of the most popular items people tend to be comfortable with purchasing over the Internet. Considering the continuous growth of and interest in the Internet, travel marketers must pay attention to the Internet application on marketing strategies and travel information distribution (Lin, 2005).

According with several survey companies (US Destination Marketing; Forrester Research, Trip Advisor; Bust Media, AC Nielsen) and other related travel organizations, features such as room availability and rates, travel promotions, travel bulletins and alerts, chat/forum links and, information about travel destinations are those that most encourage internet user to utilize travel websites around the world. Over one-half of travel web users traveled to cities featured in tourism portals and approximately one-third of them research trips via internet.

Everyday increases the number of tourist destinations utilizing websites to compete in tourist markets at local, regional or international levels. This is not a unilateral decision but a competitive strategy focused to cope the new forms of searching information by travelers more and more independents from traditional communication channels. Forecast statistics demonstrate that in USA online leisure and individually booked business travel sales are projected to reach US \$162.4 billion in 2012, and travel planning online increases spectacularly by means of the literally thousands of websites (e.g. Lonely Planet, Travel Online, Travel Notes, Itravel net, When We...Get There, etc.) existing now around the world (Miller, Washington, & Miller, 2009).

Compared to traditional media, the Internet is instantaneous and low-cost. It provides a medium to disseminate information to consumers in the form of interactive scenarios; it also aids destination managers in identifying target markets and in accurately matching traveler's demands, hence, websites benefit enterprise-consumer relationships, help increase brand value, and allow the creation of a tourist image.

Traditional media were previously used to deliver messages; if consumers noticed a tourist-destination advertisement, they had to physically travel to a store to make a purchase. Now, Internet stores combine both advertising and purchasing, thus enabling consumers to make a purchase instantly. The websites, therefore, encourages impulsive purchasing compared to traditional media.

Successful tourist websites draw customers into purchasing or viewing the product or a company in a more favorable light. Recall is higher when we are exposed to continuous and

visual stimuli that tourist websites offer to potential travelers. Diverse studies demonstrate that 85% of advertising, marketing, and sales companies believe online advertising aims to increase traffic to the websites promoted. Viewing a banner on a website can convey a message; therefore, regardless of whether the consumer clicks or not, simply viewing a banner increases the chance of a purchase. (Wu, Wei, & Chen, 2008).

Tourist websites content is a key success factor in Internet promotion and, if the content is congruent with traveler attitudes, beliefs, and values, the effect of promotional ads is enhanced. Online promotional sites content includes variables such as: web interface, background colors, pictures, sound effects, textual content and dynamic techniques that also contribute highly to advertisements' results. Studies conducted in Asian consumers establish that consumers recall advertisements more effectively if they display images and texts. In contrast, confusing website designs have negative effects on the perception of tourist products and destinations, and decrease purchases generated by the website. Furthermore, others studies found that animated information is more likely to be recalled correctly; however these studies also establish that animation does not help the recall of advertisements. Furthermore, users may remember animations on web pages, those animations are not necessarily related to advertising content (Wu, Wei, & Chen, 2008).

Finally, the degree of personal involvement is a significant mediator for tourists' attitudes toward the website and its promotional effect. It has been determined that websites that engage and entertain travelers are more likely to be "clicked". Certainly, the degree of need, the value placed upon, and interest generated by a tourist destination and/or tourist attraction affects consumer interest levels.

3. Consumer behavior in the E-commerce

3.1 The use tourists make of the web

Information communication technologies have been applied in tourism since the early adoption of Computer Reservation Systems (CRS) in airlines in 1950s. The evolution of ICT application in tourism is evident in the transformation of CRS to Global Distribution Systems (GDS).

Due to the widespread use of the Internet as an important source of information, many tourist enterprises have shifted from printed brochures to the Internet during the last few years. By using the Internet, tour operators, intermediaries and DMOs can customize information and increase the speed of information transmission to potential travelers. Today, millions of travelers use the Internet to make travel plans such as getting information on destinations or checking prices and schedules. Various studies have shown the direct fit of the Internet environment for the marketing of travel and tourism products (Lin, 2005; Buhalis & Licata, 2002).

The Internet is widely used as a means to deliver up to-date content. As a result, it created the conditions for the emergence of a wide range of new tourism E-Mediaries (Buhalis & Licata, 2002).

Web site development and Internet access have become popular and easy to use, broadening the scope of the production and consumption of this media. Most Internet users are from the western world (e.g. European and North American countries) and most

alternative tourist destinations are in the less developing nations. The United States, Europe, and Japan account for near of 81% of the world's Internet population, adding up to 41% of foreign tourism expenditure. The typical user visits 25 websites a week spending as little as 48 seconds on each site. Hence, this short amount of time means that alternative tourist destinations are advertised seductively for the virtual tourist's gaze, designed specifically to attract the hurried user (Holman, 2011). However, the study carried out by Pan & Fesenmaier (2006) established that travel planners can also stay for longer periods of time searching on tourist websites in order to choose the right leisure place, and, if the Web site contains the information that potential tourists are looking for, the information search process will be more efficient and satisfactory.

Consumer behavior concerns the process that consumers use to select, use and dispose of products, services, experiences or ideas to satisfy their needs and desires. All marketing strategies and sales tactics are based on implicit beliefs and concepts about consumer behavior. Decisions based on consumer behavior theory are more likely to be successful than decisions that are based solely on intuition. Thus, knowledge of consumer behavior can be an important competitive advantage for tourism enterprises.

To survive in a fiercely competitive environment, companies must provide target consumers with more value than is provided by competitors, but it is important to understand what value means from the customer perspective, because providing superior customer value allows companies to do a better job of anticipating and reacting to consumer needs than the competition (Hawkins, Mothersbaugh, & Best, 2010). Basically, a marketing strategy is a set of decisions and commercial actions focused to provide superior customer value to target markets. This set of decisions and actions constitutes the marketing mix; that is to say, the product, price, communications, distribution and services provided to the target market.

Consumer behavior on the web has been the subject of considerable research in the last few years because online consumers are both shoppers and computer users. In this new context, online consumers perform all the functions of traditional consumers on a computer while interacting with a system, thus, the physical store has been transformed into a virtual store through many tools of ICTs. Web-based stores use networks and Internet technology for communications and transactions between companies, but also between enterprises and consumers.

In last seventeenth years, online consumer behavior has become an emerging research area with an increasing number of publications per year. Results of this research have been published in a variety of journals and conference proceedings in the fields of information systems, marketing, management, and psychology. Most of the components of consumer behavior theory have been applied to the study of online consumption, however, results demonstrate that there are significant differences between offline and online consumer behavior that warrant a distinguishing conceptualization.

Between 1994 and 2002, close to three hundred and fifty articles concerning online consumption were published in more than thirty journals around the world. The major subjects of these publications refer to well developed theories such as the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT) and the Innovation Diffusion Theory (IDT) (Cheung, et al., 2003).

Early studies on online consumer behavior largely were oriented to explore how consumers adopt and use Internet tools. Later, other studies found that: a) personal innovativeness is a key personality trait that explains consumer online purchase, b) internet shopping is strongly affected by the presentation mode, search engines, and navigation structure of product items, c) trust in an Internet store is a salient determinant of online shopping, and, d) consumer trust and satisfaction were the key antecedents of continued purchase.

In recent years, studies seem to be oriented to build models to understand the main aspects of consumer behavior online (e.g. information acquisition, purchase decision, reasons for not shopping online, etc.). Several studies aim to determine if online consumers think and act differently than offline consumers; other studies attempt to explain why online consumers are more demanding and utilitarian in their shopping expeditions; and, finally, diverse studies try to determine the reason by which customer loyalty on the web is generally low in comparison with offline customers.

On the other hand, business-to-consumer (B2C) electronic commerce depends not only on consumer acceptance of Internet technologies as viable transaction means, but on consumer recognition of web retailers as reliable suppliers. Because it exist a spatial and temporal separation between consumers and web retailers, the Internet infrastructure generates an implicit uncertainty around on-line transactions. Certainly, a risk of monetary loss exists, since consumers have to rely on electronic information and thus become vulnerable to incomplete or distorted information provided by web retailers, and also, a risk of loss of privacy derived from providing personal information to web retailers (Pavlou, 2003).

In the new electronic competition, web stores have responded to the call for customer control by providing various site features like internal search engines and systems to enable consumers to easily find what they need, learn more about products/services and quickly purchase them. Thus, product information search can be a fun-seeking experience and can improve consumer decision making through complex, nonlinear, and nondirected queries being an important incentive for people to shop online (Koufaris, 2002). Other studies about on-line adoption of consumer search and purchase behavior for textile and apparel products demonstrate that there exists a positive and significant relationship between: 1) the perceived benefits of Internet shopping, 2) the frequency of shopping on-line, 3) the frequency of purchasing, and 4) the amount of time spent shopping online. Indeed, results also showed that perceived benefits were a positive predictor of future intentions to visit and purchase online while risks related negatively to future intentions to purchase online (Forsythe, Kim, & Petee, 2004).

Five major domain areas seem to emerge in the literature concerning online consumer behavior: consumer profile, environmental influences, product/service features, medium characteristics, and online merchant and intermediary characteristics.

Consumer profiles refer to the factors such as demographics, personality, value, lifestyle, attitude, consumer resources, consumer psychological factors behavioral characteristics, motivation, and experience. Environmental factors like culture, social influence, peer influence, and mass media play an important role in consumer purchasing decisions.

As well as in offline purchasing, price, quality, and product type constitute three key elements in shaping consumers' perception online. Attributes such as ease of use, quality,

security and reliability are included in the study of electronic commerce systems. Indeed, web specific factors such as ease of navigation, interface and network speed are also considered. Finally, factors pertaining to merchant and intermediaries characteristics like service quality, privacy and security control, brand/reputation, delivery/logistic, and post sales services integrate the broad field of online consumer behavior (Koufaris, 2002; Pavlou, 2003; Cheung et al., 2003).

3.2 The tourist destination choice from websites

Through the increased use of the Internet, the tourism website has emerged as a useful lens with which to examine the shifting nature of global flows of information, experience and consumer behavior. Nowadays, in tourism business, destinations must design online marketing strategies to succeed in their efforts to attract visitors. The business of promoting travel destinations online has become very important. In 2005, a survey of 18,000 online consumers in 18 countries showed that in 14 of those countries the web was the most important source of information employed by Internet users in deciding where to go for their vacations. Today, there are several developers whose specialty is the creation and hosting of country websites. For example, Virtual Countries (www.virtualcountries.com) creates websites that provide information to viewers interested in topics about the countries in question. Countries can be taught to use marketing to manage their promotional activities in creating a brand that facilitates worldwide tourism.

A strong country brand with a clear focused image can be used to attract tourists, investors, and businesses that will stimulate the economy and create economic growth. In Europe the shaping of image and marketing of a country has been put into action in countries such as Germany, France, Portugal, Estonia, and Poland.

Tourism destinations are being treated as commodities by commercial operators, public sector managers and other organizations. Destinations are treated as products and specifically, holiday destinations are considered place-products within a marketing system. However, there are a number of intrinsic characteristics of place-products that are distinctly different from most traded goods and services. The influence of these characteristics of the place-product upon the marketing process is fundamental to understand the tourist behavior.

To describe a tourism destination as a tourist product is to treat a place simultaneously as both a container for an assemblage of products and as a product in itself. Thus, if the tourist-destination product is an assemblage of differentiated elements located at, or relating to, a place, then, it is not the totality of all potential elements which is in itself the product. In this sense, we can consider that tour operators and other intermediaries sell an assembled group of items but equally each individual destination is unique to the extent that the experience derived from each element in the destination is unique to a particular traveler. Hence, each tourist destination being sold is likely to be different than that which is being bought. Indeed, destinations are sold as products not only to potential tourists but to many other groups of travelers. Precisely the same physical space, and also, the same facilities in that space are sold simultaneously to different travelers as quite different products.

Destination branding involves the creation of a single, strategic idea that captures what the country/destination has to offer. Nevertheless, destination marketers must be sure that the

country can deliver on the promises made, because as marketing theory suggests, an image must be founded in reality with discernible substantiation via events, attractions, people, and accommodations. In sum, the positive associations of a country's name have the potential of influencing attitudes toward the country's products (Kotler & Gertner, 2002). By creating a strong, viable image, the country hopes to transfer the image to the various products and services it markets.

The capacity to offer travelers a flexible and personalized relationship is probably one of the most important advantages offered by E-Commerce to tourism retailers. It allows them to provide accurate and timely information to consumers which, in turn, often generate additional sales. Also, personalization increases the level of loyalty consumers hold toward a retailer.

Consumer decision process intervenes between the market strategy-as implemented in the marketing mix- and the outcomes. This is, the outcomes of the firm's marketing strategy are determined by their interaction with the consumer decision process. A company can succeed if consumers see a need that its product can solve, choose this product, proceed to buy it and become satisfied with the results of the purchase. Thus, consumer satisfaction is a major concern of companies. A central component of consumer decision process is the problem recognition. Problem recognition involves a discrepancy between consumers' desired state (what they would like) and their actual state (what they perceive as already existing). Hence, if this discrepancy is sufficiently large and important, consumers will search for solutions.

Once a problem is recognized, relevant information from consumers' memory (internal search) or from external sources is used to determine if a satisfactory solution exists. Memory of past searches, personal experiences and learning are the mayor internal sources. Personal sources (friends, family, product trial, etc.), independent sources (magazines, government agencies, consumer reports, etc.) and marketing sources (websites, advertising, promotional activities, etc.) represent the primary sources of information available to consumers.

Today, a most relevant external source of information used by consumers is the Internet or World Wide Web (WWW). The Internet is a network of computers that any computer with access to a phone connection can join. WWW consists of search engines, websites, specific addresses or files in the network, to access to those with the requested characteristics.

The Internet contains market data in the form of advertising messages associated with search, entertainment, and general information sites and Internet presence Sites (IPS) also called home pages. A home page is a Web site created and maintained by organizations (enterprises, government agencies, altruist organizations, cultural organizations, etc.) or individuals that provide detailed product and organizational data. The presence of a Web address in an advertisement enhances a variety of aspects of the firm's image, including being customer-oriented, responsive, sophisticated, and successful (Hawkins, Mothersbaugh, & Best, 2010). Also, into the Web pages, banner ads are a very important promotion tool. Banner ads represent today a powerful mean to lead consumers to the company or product home page. In tourism industry, the banners ads play a very important role connecting travelers with thousands of websites of travel agencies, hotels, transportation companies, restaurants, car rental companies, etc. and, maybe more important, with thousand of tourist destination sites available to be chosen.

In this context, tourist destination managers must visualize major decisions concerning the use of Internet. In effect, they must decide to create or not a Web site to promote their travel destination. Having a destination Web site, they need to decide if the site should be active or passive. A passive Web site focused on providing only specific information about a tourist destination whereas an active Web site allows the destination managers to develop a relationship with visitors over time and provide them with additional information related to the site facilities and other tourist attractions and services. However, no matter if a Web site is active or passive, it needs to be easy to access, up-to-date, logical and oriented to travel needs. The more complete and interactive the Web site, the more effective and useful it will be for marketing and commercial purposes.

The term Web 2.0 refers to a second generation of web-based services that allow people to collaborate and share information online in previously unavailable ways. Thus, Web 2.0 enables any traveler to post their own content, opinions, videos, audio, or imagery to the web for other travelers to see and respond to. Web 2.0 includes the ability to integrate information in new forms, the desire to harness distributed knowledge, and the need to engage users as codevelopers (Cox, Burges, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009). In a study realized by Gretzel (2007) about the impact of on-line travel reviews on consumers, results reveal that looking at other consumers comments/materials on online travel review sites' was the most frequently used source of information. Indeed, Hyung-Park, Lee, & Hang (2007) establish that online consumer reviews are often considered more trustworthy and credible than information which is provided by suppliers of products and services, presumably because consumers provide more trustworthy information.

As potential travelers increasingly visit tourist websites, their expectations for easily accessed and useful information shown in an entertaining format will increase. Consumer characteristics of travelers affect perceptions about benefits and search costs of use websites. A satisfying experience with a particular destination increases the probability of a repeat choice of this destination. In contrast, a negative travel experience decreases the likelihood of travel to the same place and/or choice a similar destination. Travelers who are highly involved with a destination category normally seek information relevant to the destination category on an ongoing basis. This ongoing search reduces the need for another kind of search before a choice. Research has demonstrated that tourists use different types of online information sources depending on where they are at in the travel planning process—that is the pre-trip, during trip and post-trip stages (Choi, Letho, & O'Leary, 2007; Seabra, Abrantes, & Lages, 2007). However, other studies have found that consumer purchase behavior is occasionally impulsive.

Regarding how travelers make destinations choices, they can follow sequential process based on attributes or on attitudes about alternative places to be considered. Attribute-based choice required the knowledge of specific and distinctive attributes of each place and attribute-by-attribute comparison across places. On the other hand, attitude-based choice involves only the use of general attitudes, impressions and intuitions about places without making comparisons.

In the field of tourism, it is extremely important for destination managers to understand how travelers search for and review information at the various stages of their travel decision making process (Choi, Letho, & O'Leary, 2007).

Research has demonstrated that the meaning of the product is one of the variables that predict searching and buying behavior. Meaning is derived from the practical utility of the product and is intrinsically linked to its convenience, efficiency, and the exchange value per se (Vaz & Pérez-Nebra, 2007).

The symbolic meaning is the result of social experiences, which lead to the subjective categorization of the product, by means of social institutions, communication systems, and the culture of a society. Basic human values have a direct influence on consumer choice when individuals evaluate the symbolic meaning of a service, and therefore make an affective judgment about it. In the field of tourism, research has found that tangible and abstract attributes of tourist sites influence destination choice behavior. These attributes can be considered by tourists as symbolic meanings of places affecting their destination choice process (Klenoski, 2002).

Jeng & Fesenmaier (2002) note that travelers generally collect and review various forms of travel information early in the travel decision making process in order to minimize the risk of making a poor destination decision. Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) note that travel consumers tend to seek information related to 10 key subdecisions regarding the trip-travel partners: the destination; expenditure required; activities; travel dates; attractions to visit; transportation providers; length of trip; rest stops; and food stops. The central role that individual consumers have in submitting, reviewing, and responding to online content is reflected in terms such as user-generated content (UGC) or consumer-generated media (CGM) that are commonly used for Web 2.0 (Gretzel, 2006, 2007). In marketing terms, UGC sites are effectively a form of consumer to consumer e-marketing. They equate to electronic word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing, whereby somebody who has an opinion about a product or service shares their views, beliefs, and experiences with other people (Ahuja, Michels, Walker, & Weissbuch, 2007).

3.3 The roll of the hypertext in the tourist destination choice from websites

Visiting destinations is the final goal of travel. Destinations satisfy the need for travelling and are recognized as a set of products, facilities and services that comprise the total tourist product. All destinations bring together many tangible elements and attractions (e.g. museums, theatres, parks, monuments, etc.) and also a number of intangible aspects (e.g. art, ambience, culture, etc.) as well as facilities and services (e.g. hotels, restaurants, information offices, etc.) for tourists.

With the continuing growth of the Internet and, in particular, the World Wide Web (WWW) a new marketing potential exists for tourist destinations. Websites offer information on a variety of categories, including travel, geography, tourist information centers, reservation services and an events calendar. However, despite the prevalent use of Internet sites in the travel planning process, there is still limited research available on the information search process and decision making behavior related to online vacation planning (Ho & Liu, 2004; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006)

A vital aspect of Web pages is to be visually attractive to their readers. The main problem is that many Web pages tend to contain too much text, too little graphics and not enough attractive appearance. Another point relating to page design concerns the page content.

Then, the challenge for Web pages is to offer relevant travel-related information together with useful links and graphical illustrations of tourist attractions.

Being a substantial notion in ICT technologies, computer hypertext can be defined as a “text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails. In this kind of text, there are “many networks interacting without any one of them being able to surpass the rest”. This text has an enormous number of signifiers (Landow, 2009).

Hypertext is a term originally used by Theodor H. Nelson in the 1960s. It refers to a form of electronic text that follows a nonsequential writing and “allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen”. In essence, hypertext is a medium of gathering information linking verbal, non verbal and other forms of data. Hypertext expands the notion of text beyond the solely verbal concept, linking passages of written discourse to images, maps diagrams and sounds (Landow, 2009).

By means of hypertext users have the possibility of creating, adding, connecting and sharing information from diverse sources, and the possibility of acceding to documents in nonsequential way, unlike more traditional information systems in which the access is naturally sequential. This flexibility allows readers to navigate across different documents and/or the Web pages interlinked around a central subject.

4. Methodology

4.1 Study framework

Academicians and practitioners agree that websites are a very important source of information for prospective travelers when they are in the research phase (i.e. information search) of the travel planning process and, particularly when they need to choose a leisure destination. Despite the common use of websites in the travel planning process by travelers around the world, there is still limited research concerning the role performed by the Web site features on the decision making behavior related to travel destination choice.

One of the most unclear and understudied issues in the travel industry is the role that Web site links (e.g. hypertext tools) have in the users’ travel behavior and decision making processes. Studies realized in the USA demonstrate that approximately one third of website users are influenced by links with social content sites when making purchase decisions (Cox, Burges, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009). Another important issue of study is the extent to which Internet users trust the information posted on travel websites because readers cannot easily gauge the credibility of the information provided. This seems to suggest that the potential for websites to have a strong and credible influence on travelers’ destination choice depends on how credible and transparent is the information appearing in these sites.

To assess the importance of hypertext in the tourist destination choice from websites, a quantitative study was conducted using a survey of individuals who were known to use the Internet to gather information when choosing leisure destinations. The survey was developed based on website features such as texts, photographs, videos, links with tourist services and other web page elements. It contained two sections: the first section was focused on discovering the type of links considered by travelers as the most useful when

they search information about leisure places and, more important, when they choose a tourist destination. The final section asked for the demographic characteristics of participants.

4.2 Measure instrument

A questionnaire of ten questions was designed and used to collect the information needed. Question 1 was utilized to determine the three most important features in a tourist Web page. Question 2 was designed to know the use of links appearing in tourist Web pages. Question 3 was utilized to know the importance of links appearing in tourist Web pages in terms of their promotional effectiveness. Question 4 was used to determine the links preferred by users of tourist Web pages, and questions 5 and 6, to evaluate the influence of links on tourists' destination choice. Questions 7, 8 and 9 were utilized to collect the demographics: gender, age and occupation, respectively. Question 10 was included to know the Internet usage frequency of individuals interviewed. The questionnaire was written and applied in Spanish (see Appendix 1).

4.3 Sampling

Since this study is an exploration of hypertext effects on tourist destination choice, the subjects were experienced Web browsers. In order to determinate the proportion of Web browsers, the questionnaire was applied to 1000 individuals over a two-week period in the city of Puebla, Mexico, in diverse university campuses and travel agencies. Experience of Internet use was, therefore, a filter, and non-users were excluded from the survey.

The proportion of Web users was 66% and the proportion of non users was 34%. To obtain effective measurement tools, the questionnaire was submitted to a pilot-test. Also, during this stage, the questionnaire was refined and the size of sample was determined following the probabilistic-proportions method using the formula:

$$n = \frac{Z^2(p)(q)}{E^2} \quad (1)$$

Where:

Z = Confidence level. In this case 95% (Z= 1.96)

P = Population's proportion of Web browsers, in this case = 0.66

Q = (1-p) = 0.34

E = Level of risk = 5%

Substituting in (1):

$$n = \frac{1.96^2(p)(q)}{0.005^2}$$

$$n = \frac{3.8416(.66)(.34)}{0.0025}$$

$$n = 345 \text{ individuals}$$

The survey process was carried out applying 365 valid questionnaires (more than the required sample size calculated, anticipating a 5% of invalid questionnaires). The survey took approximately three minutes to complete. The database was processed using the

software SPSS 18 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). No missing values were considered for further analysis.

5. Results

Respondents were split between male 134 (36.71%) and female 231 (63.27%) individuals (See figure 1).

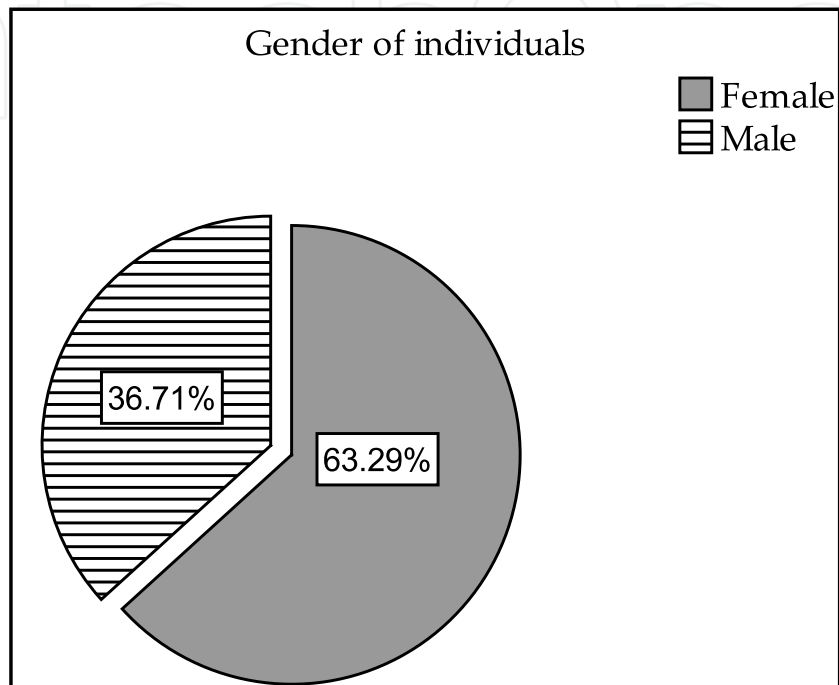


Fig. 1. Gender of individuals

Ages ranged from 18 years to 57 years, with a mean of 21.3 years ($\sigma = 2.83$) (See figure 2).

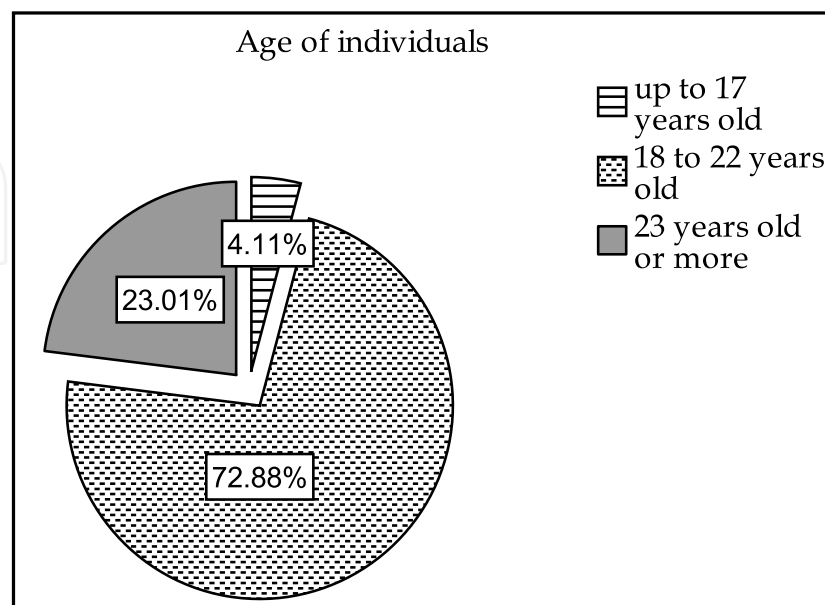


Fig. 2. Age of individuals

The great majority of respondents were students (98%) and, 83.3% of them use the Internet daily, whereas only 16.7%, some days a week (See figures 3 and 4).

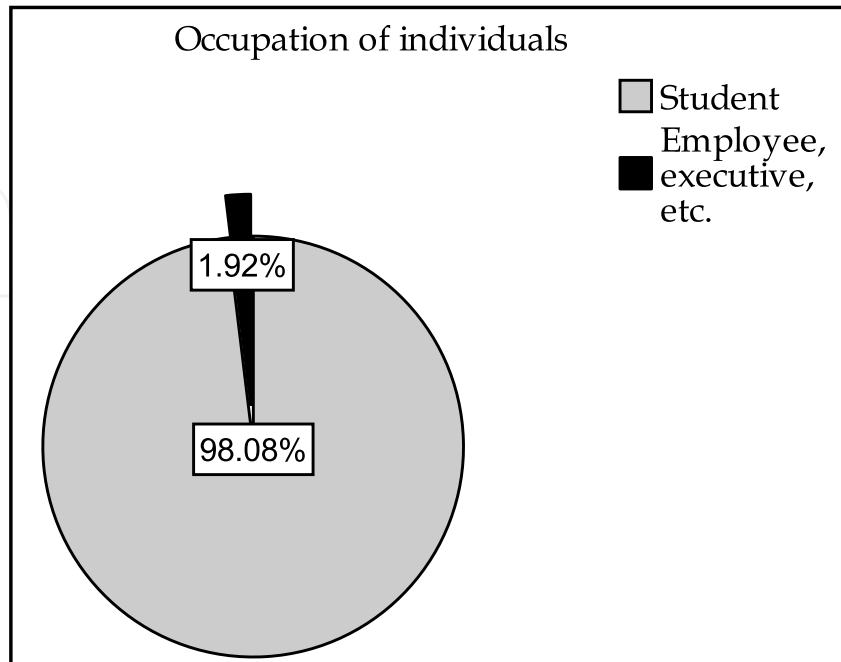


Fig. 3. Occupation of individuals

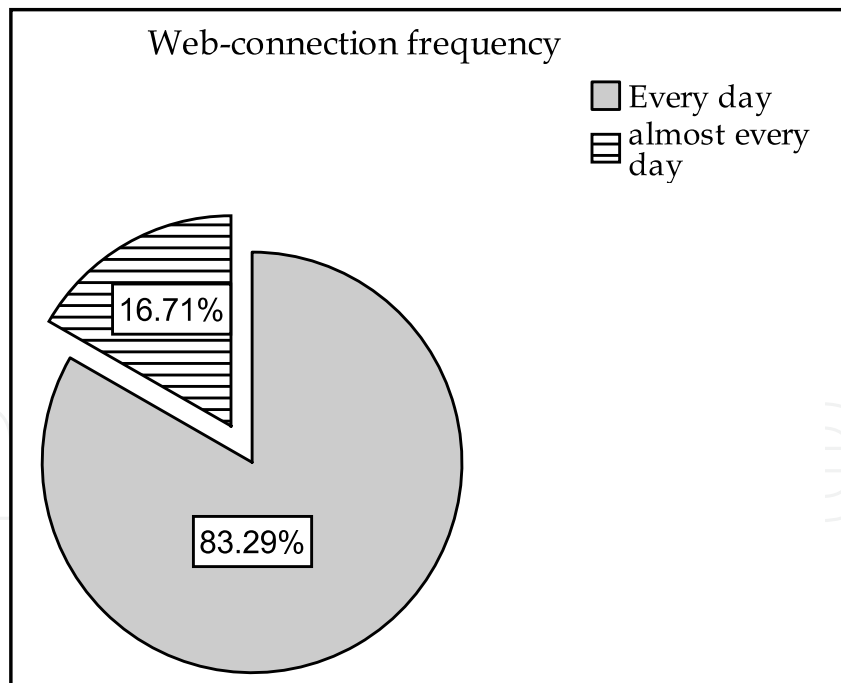


Fig. 4. Web-connection frequency of individuals

The importance granted by individuals to Web page links was measured by means of question 1 utilizing a 4-point ordinal scale, where the value of "1" is assigned to the most important link, the value of "2" to second in importance, the value of "3" to third, and the value of "4" to the less important link. Results demonstrate that the *images* shown, the *search*

section, and the *informative texts* are the three more important features of tourist Web pages (ranked first (53%), second (35%), and third (29%) respectively). Chi-squared tests were performed to identify if correlations between the three more important links identified by individuals and their age and gender exist. Results demonstrate that there are not statistically significant correlations between these variables (see table 1).

Variables	Pearson Chi-Square X ²	df	Sig.†
Web images vs. gender	3.880	2	0.140
Informative texts vs. gender	2.880	2	0.236
Search section vs. gender	0.383	2	0.826
Web images vs. age	30.692	30	0.431
Informative texts vs. age	37.098	28	0.117
Search section vs. age	14.035	16	0.595

† * Sig.<0.05; ** Sig.<0.01

Table 1. Correlations between the most important links and demographics of individuals

The use of links (hypertext) appearing in tourist websites (question 2) was evaluated by means of a 4-point nominal-type scale anchored at value 4 (*always use the links*) and 1 (*never use the links*). The most frequent answer was point 2 (*many times use the links*) with 48.5% of responses, followed by point 3 (*few times use the links*) with 47.7% of responses. Similarly, the importance of links in tourist websites (question 3) was determined using a 4-point nominal-type scale anchored at value 4 (*extremely important*) and 1 (*not important*). Results show that point 2 (*very important*) was the most frequent answer with 65.7% of responses. Thus, for Internet users, hypertext tools contained in tourist websites play a salient role in the search of information about tourist destinations. Indeed, Chi-squared coefficients were calculated to explore if gender, age and occupation of interviewers could be correlated with the use of hypertext links in tourist websites. Results show that *links usage* and *gender* are correlated variables, with women using the hypertext links more frequently. In contrast, *age* and *occupation* of respondents are not correlated with the *use of links* in tourist websites (See table 2).

Variables	Pearson Chi-Square X ²	df	Sig.†
Links' use vs. gender	8.850	3	0.035*
Links' use vs. age	57.477	45	0.100
Links' use vs. occupation	7.728	15	0.934

† * Sig.<0.05; ** Sig.<0.01

Table 2. Correlations between link's usage and demographics of individuals

Similarly, to explore the possibility of correlations between the demographic characteristics of Web users and the importance assigned by them to hypertext links, Chi-squared tests were performed. Results also demonstrate that there are not significant correlations between these variables (See table 3).

Variables	Pearson Chi-Square X ²	df	Sig. [†]
Links' importance vs. gender	2.795	4	0.593
Links' importance vs. age	67.860	60	0.227
Links' importance vs. occupation	9.014	20	0.983

† * Sig.<0.05; ** Sig.<0.01

Table 3. Correlations between link's importance and demographics of individuals

Types of links preferred by tourist websites users (question 4) were identified by means of an ordinal scale where the value of "1" corresponds to the most preferred link, the value of "2" to second in preference, the value of "3" to third, and the value of "4" to the less preferred link. Surprisingly, the most preferred links (45.9% of responses) were those that connect users with tourist services (e.g. travel agencies, hotels, transportation firms, etc.) others than those appearing in the website. In second place, the links offering information about the website's attractions (41% of responses) and, in third place, the links containing information about tourist services available in the website browsed.

As well as in previous cases, Chi-squared coefficients were calculated to identify the existence of possible correlations between the demographic characteristics of Internet users and the three most preferred links explored by them. Again, Chi-squared coefficients showed that there are not significant correlations (See table 4).

Variables	Pearson Chi-Square X ²	df	Sig. [†]
Links connecting with tourist services in other places vs. gender	1.131	2	0.568
Links connecting with tourist services in other places vs. age	22.185	26	0.679
Links connecting with tourist services in other places vs. occupation	7.362	4	0.118
Links connecting with the site's tourist-attractions vs. gender	1.950	2	0.377
Links connecting with the site's tourist-attractions vs. age	15.486	26	0.948
Links connecting with site's tourist-attractions vs. occupation	3.760	6	0.709
Links connecting with the site's tourist-services vs. gender	0.692	3	0.875
Links connecting with the site's tourist-services vs. age	30.090	30	0.461
Links connecting with site's tourist-services vs. occupation	9.845	15	0.829

† * Sig.<0.05; ** Sig.<0.01

Table 4. Correlations between the most preferred links and demographics of individuals

Concerning the level of influence of hypertext links on tourist's destination choice (question 5) the opinion of Internet-users' was evaluated using a 4-point Likert-type scale anchored at values: 4 (*essential for make a choice*) and 1 (*non required for make a choice*). Following a normal distribution, answers to this question show a mean value of 2.79 ($\sigma=0.706$, mode=3, median=3) that, being close to value 3, this means that Internet users consider that

hypertexts exert a powerful influence on the destination-choice-processes of travelers. In addition, to explore possible differences between the opinions expressed by men and women concerning the influence of hypertexts on their destination-choice decisions, a *t*-test was realized. Results show that the responses of men and women are very similar ($t=-1.303$, $df=363$, $sig.=0.193>0.05$), thus, we can conclude that the gender of respondents does not influence their tourist destination choice.

Finally, an ordinal scale was used to rank the three more influential links (question 6) on the last tourist-destination choice of Web users. The statistical analysis of data shows that hypertext links having photos of the tourist site were ranked in first place (47%), the links containing information about the site's attractions were ranked in second place (45%), and the hypertext links connecting with tourist services (e.g. hotels, travel agencies, transportation services, etc.) available in the site (24%) were ranked in third place. No significant correlations were detected between these three more influential links and the demographic characteristics of individuals (See table 5).

Since this study aims to explore the importance of hypertext links on tourist destination choice, two correlation analysis were performed between the most important link of tourist websites and: 1) the most preferred link, and 2) the most influential link on the tourist-destination choice. Nevertheless, in two cases, results demonstrate a low level of correlation between these variables ($\rho=0.062$, and $\rho=0.195$ respectively). Thus, we can conclude that the use of hypertext links showing beautiful images of the site (the best ranked) are not correlated with the use of both the links connecting with tourist services others than those appearing in the website (the most preferred) and the links containing site's photographs (the most influential on the tourist-destination choice).

Variables	Pearson Chi-Square X ²	df	Sig.†
Links containing destination's photographs vs. gender	0.288	2	0.866
Links containing destination's photographs vs. age	42.719	30	0.062
Links containing destination's photographs vs. occupation	15.404	10	0.118
Links connecting with site's tourist-attractions vs. gender	4.09	2	0.129
Links connecting with site's tourist-attractions vs. age	26.189	28	0.563
Links connecting with site's tourist-attractions vs. occupation	3.394	6	0.758
Links connecting with site's tourist-services vs. gender	0.710	2	0.965
Links connecting with site's tourist-services vs. age	11.283	16	0.792
Links connecting with site's tourist-services vs. occupation	7.395	8	0.495

† * Sig.<0.05; ** Sig.<0.01

Table 5. Correlations between the most influential links and demographics of individuals

6. Conclusions

Tourism business destinations use online marketing strategies to attract visitors. Promoting travel destinations online is today a great business and many travel developers provide information to viewers interested in leisure destinations. In this context, this study examines the influence of hypertext links appearing in tourist websites on the tourist-destination choice of leisure travelers.

Three important conclusions can be drawn from the findings. First, hypertext links available in tourist websites must be considered as a very important promotional tool utilized by individuals when search and evaluate tourist destination alternatives. Results show that the use of links in tourist Web pages is a very frequent practice (48.5% of responses) for young individuals (21 years, average), and, principally, for female undergraduate students (64%).

Second, hypertext links appearing in tourist websites exert a powerful influence on the tourist-destination choice processes of Internet users. Hypertext links containing images of destinations, informative texts, and search tools are the three most important features utilized by tourist website browsers. Links connecting with accommodation services, travel agencies, transportation companies and other complementary tourist services were ranked the most preferred types of links used by individuals and, specifically, links containing photographs of tourist sites (47%) and informative texts (45%) were classified by individuals as the most influential features when they choose a tourist destination.

Third, only the gender of respondents seems to be related with the use of links available in tourist websites. In contrast, their age and occupation are not related with the importance, use, and types of links preferred by them when browsing tourist websites. Hence, regardless of age, or occupation, individuals "click" on hypertext links that allow them to visualize destinations, to get relevant information about these places, and to contact tourist services suppliers that facilitate their travel decision.

7. Theoretical and practical implications

Appropriate electronic distribution systems provide good mechanisms for purchasing tourism products and destinations. More and more the Internet has impelled the relevance of tourist-product suppliers and has contributed to replacement of traditional distribution channels. Certainly, through Internet, tourism companies have successfully promoted a great variety of destinations.

The aims of this study concentrate in identify: 1) the most important hypertext links used by individuals when browse tourist websites and, 2) the major hypertext features influencing their tourist destination choice.

The findings of this study are expected to benefit researchers and practitioners by helping them better understand the importance and the role played by hypertext links in the context of tourist-destinations choice behavior. Previous studies have established that the search of travel destinations in the Internet is determined by the relevance of the link anchors as pictures, texts or other hypertext features. For managers of tourism destination companies, tourist wholesalers and other tourism business, the results of this study can serve as a reference to help them identify the strengths and weakness of their

websites and take competitive advantage in the market place because more effective tourist websites draw consumers into purchasing viewing destinations in a more favorable light.

Results of this study suggest that tourist websites designers must emphasize the inclusion of hypertext links containing attractive visual features, non extensive texts and search tools enabling Internet users to get relevant information about tourist destinations. Furthermore, results of this study also suggest that the demographic profile of individuals browsing tourist websites is not a salient factor influencing the destination-choice processes of individuals.

Thus, companies competing in tourism markets must include more attractive hypertext tools in order to improve the effectiveness of their promotional Web pages.

In general, studies concerning online tourism behavior have focused principally on consumers' profiles and tourist product characteristics, but they have neglected other factors such as the influence of website features on the destination-choice decisions of travelers. For academic researchers, this study expects to offer insights into new areas for further research on tourism websites design, application and evaluation. For this reason, this study focused on analyzing website hypertext links in different scope that other precedent studies. However, the motivations and attitudes underlying this behavior represent a challenge for future studies. However, it would be worthwhile for future research to analyze more deeply other important issues related to use of hypertext links and their implications on tourist behavior.

8. Appendix

ENCUESTA SOBRE LA IMPORTANCIA DEL HIPERTEXTO EN LOS SITIOS WEB QUE PROMOCIONAN DESTINOS TURISTICO	ID:	C. No.
Antes de iniciar el encuestador debe plantear la pregunta de selección: ¿Utiliza sitios en internet para buscar o elegir un destino turístico? Si la respuesta es negativa, no entregar el cuestionario.	Solo estudiantes	

El presente cuestionario pretende obtener información sobre la importancia del uso de las conexiones existentes en un sitio web (*links*) en el proceso de búsqueda de información para elegir destinos turísticos.

Solicito su amable colaboración respondiendo con sinceridad a las preguntas planteadas.

1. Cuando usted busca **páginas web** para elegir un **destino turístico**, ¿qué **elementos** de la página considera como **los 3 más importantes**? Asigne los números 1, 2 y 3 en el orden de su preferencia, siendo 1 el más importante.

() Los textos informativos () Las imágenes presentadas () Los *links* que contiene

() Los videos disponibles () Los *links* con otros sitios () La sección de búsquedas

2. ¿Hace usted **uso de los links** existentes en las páginas web que **consulta** normalmente? Marque con X solo en la casilla adecuada:

Siempre los utilizo En muchas ocasiones los utilizo En pocas ocasiones los utilizo Nunca los utilizo

3. Según su opinión, ¿qué tan **importantes son para usted los links** existentes en las páginas **web** que promocionan **destinos turísticos**? Marque con X solo en la casilla adecuada:

Extremadamente importantes Muy importantes Poco importantes Nada importantes

4. Cuando **usted abre links** en las páginas web que promocionan destinos turísticos, ¿qué **tipo de links elige preferentemente**? Asigne los números 1, 2 y 3 en el orden de su preferencia, siendo **1 el más importante**.

() *Links* con textos de información sobre el sitio () *Links* que enlazan con otros servicios turísticos en general (hoteles, transportes, etc.) () *Links* con videos sobre el sitio

() *Links* que enlazan a otros destinos turísticos () *Links* que enlazan con hoteles, transportes, restaurantes, etc. existentes en el sitio () *Links* con fotografías del sitio

5. Según su opinión, ¿qué tanto **influyen los links** utilizados en las páginas web para **elegir un destino turístico**? Marque con X en el espacio que se acerque más a su opinión:

Son indispensables para elegir un destino turístico

No influyen en absoluto para elegir un destino turístico

6. Piense en la última vez que **eligió un destino turístico a través de un sitio web**. ¿Cuáles fueron **los 3 links que más influyeron** para que usted eligiera ese destino? Marque con 1, 2 y 3 esos *links* siendo **1 el que más influyó en su elección**.

() El *link* que tenía textos de información sobre los atractivos del sitio () El *link* que tenía fotografías del sitio () El *link* que tenía enlaces con otros servicios turísticos en general (hoteles, transportes, etc.)

() El *link* que tenía enlaces con otros destinos turísticos () El *link* que tenía videos sobre el sitio () El *link* que tenía enlaces con hoteles, transportes, restaurantes, etc. existentes en el sitio

Perfil individual. Marque con X en la casilla adecuada:

7. Su género es: Masculino Femenino

8. Su edad es de: () años.

9. Su ocupación es:

Estudiante Empleado Funcionario público Ejecutivo en una empresa Atiende su negocio propio Otra ocupación

10. Como **usuario de internet**, usted se conecta a la red:

Todos los días Casi todos los días De vez en cuando Muy ocasionalmente

¡Muchas gracias por su colaboración!

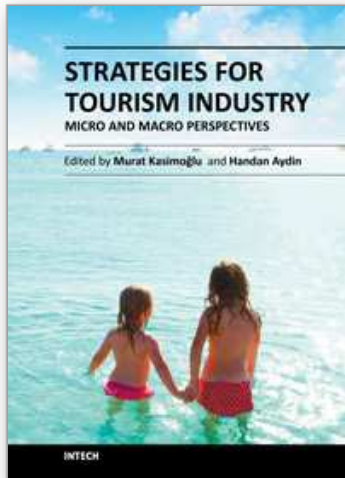
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Today, it is considered good business practice for tourism industries to support their micro and macro environment by means of strategic perspectives. This is necessary because we cannot contemplate companies existing without their environment. If companies do not involve themselves in such undertakings, they are in danger of isolating themselves from the shareholder. That, in turn, creates a problem for mobilizing new ideas and receiving feedback from their environment. In this respect, the contributions of academics from international level together with the private sector and business managers are eagerly awaited on topics and sub-topics within Strategies for Tourism Industry - Micro and Macro Perspectives.

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