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ABSTRACT

An empirical taxonomy of tourists' information search strategies is developed based on a survey of a large sample of tourists. The taxonomy reveals five different information search strategies. Each search strategy consists of the combination of individual information sources used by tourists in pre-trip planning. The five information search strategies are related to select tourist demographic characteristics, trip activities, accommodation choices, and general media preferences. The results indicate a multivariate relationship between tourist demographics and information search strategies. Furthermore, information search strategies are related to tourists' preferred trip activities and choice of accommodations. Implications of the taxonomy for tourism marketing and research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The travel and tourism industry in the United States is very large generating an estimated 7.6 million jobs and direct tourism sales of \$746.2 billion in 2009 (Zemanek 2011). Indeed, as the United States manufacturing industry continues to move off shore and the economy continues to move toward a service-based economy, many communities are placing higher reliance on tourism as a way to bolster their economic base. This trend impels tourism-related organizations to garner a more thorough understanding of tourist consumer behavior.

One important area of research on tourist buying behavior and decision making is the information sources, and combinations of information sources, which are used when choosing travel destinations and attractions within destinations. Unquestionably, understanding information source use is central to developing effective tourism promotion strategies. Insight into tourist information source use can assist hospitality and tourism marketers in most efficiently employing promotional funds and allows for the development of improved promotional programs to attract tourists to destinations and attractions. Given the large number and wide diversity of tourist attractions and destinations, tourism organizations need to direct their communications in the most efficient manner possible. Thus, understanding tourists' preferences for various information sources represents an important topic of tourism research.

Information search is well recognized as a key activity in the consumer decision making process, and has received considerable attention in the tourism literature. Tourists have access to many different sources of information, some of which will be more or less important depending on the nature of the trip. The manner in which tourists combine individual information sources can be regarded as an information search strategy (Snepenger et. al. 1990, Fodness and Murray 1998). For this research, an information search strategy is the set, or combination, of individual information sources used in tourist decision making. Across tourists, these information search strategies are likely to differ with respect to both the pattern of individual sources used and the extent to which each information source is used. Some tourists will use every information source available to them, while for others a few select sources will meet the tourists' information needs.

Early research has focused considerable attention on the relative importance of information sources to tourists (e.g., Nolan 1976), and on certain variables that influence relative importance rankings (e.g., Capella and Greco 1987). However, research focused on developing a classification of the actual information search strategies that tourists use, or on identifying personal or situational characteristics that relate to how information sources are used in combination is still relatively sparse.

The purpose of this paper is to develop an empirical taxonomy of tourist information search strategies and to evaluate how information search strategies differ as a function of select personal and trip-specific characteristics. The study is based on data from a large sample of tourists planning a trip to a local vacation destination, and the results should contribute to an improved understanding of tourists' information search strategies. The empirical classification approach taken in this study should assist marketing decision makers in thinking about the most appropriate blend of promotional elements, and sheds light on a number of important managerial issues. For example, many tourism organizations now realize that they cannot appeal to the "mass" market, but must employ a target marketing approach developing separate marketing mixes for specific target market segments. The development of an empirical taxonomy based on tourist information source use can facilitate the tourism organization's ability to implement the target marketing approach by providing a tourist classification scheme using elements of the tourist organization's promotional mix. In addition, the resulting tourist information search strategy groups can be associated with other elements of the tourism marketing mix (e.g., tourism activities, lodging preferences, etc.) providing tourism marketing managers with a rich base of information from which to develop comprehensive strategies to target various markets.

The following section will review the work of previous authors exploring tourist use of information search strategies. Next, the study reports the development of an empirical taxonomy of tourist information search strategies. Subsequent sections relate the empirically derived taxonomy of information search strategies to select personal and situational variables. Finally, managerial implications are addressed. The study is based on data from a large sample of tourists planning a trip to a focal vacation destination, and the results should contribute to an improved understanding of tourists' information search strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From a general marketing perspective, theories of consumers' use of information sources are nested within the overall process model of consumer decision making. Although there exist different permutations of consumer decision making process models, most suggest that consumers engage in pre-purchase activities (problem recognition and information search), purchasing activities (alternative evaluation and purchase decision), and post-purchase activities (consumption and post-purchase evaluation) (e.g., Wilke 1986).

Within the pre-purchase information search stage, information is gathered that allows a buyer to evaluate alternative purchasing options. Key factors that influence the extent and nature of consumer information search are the levels of perceived risk and uncertainty surrounding the purchase decision (Stem, Lamb and MacLachlan 1977). As perceived risk and/or uncertainty increase, consumers are motivated to engage in more extensive search. Moreover, the information sources chosen are those which the buyer believes would most likely reduce their decision making uncertainty (Howard and Sheth 1969).

One common distinction made with respect to information search is between internal and external search. Internal search involves reliance on memory and past experiences as information sources. Consumers are posited to engage in internal search before consulting external information sources, and to only engage in external search if the results of internal search yield insufficient information to make a decision (Bettman 1975; Lynch and Srull 1982). Other common information source classifications based on conceptual dichotomies include personal-impersonal sources, and commercial-noncommercial sources (Kotler 2003).

Tourist Information Source Use

The information sources used by tourists when making their vacation decisions have been of interest to researchers for many years (e.g., Nolan 1976). Generally, this research indicates that the degree of reliance tourists place on various information sources depends on both situational and personal characteristics. Some studies have revealed that the relative importance of a particular information source depends on characteristics such as trip motivation and trip-related activities. For example, Woodside and Ronkainen (1980) found that a larger percentage of tourists reported using travel agents than motor clubs or self-planning when the motivation of the trip was visiting historical points, attending business meetings and conventions or visiting friends or relatives. When tourist vacation motivation was pleasure, Gitelson and Crompton (1983) found that tourists relied primarily on friends/relatives, followed by guidebooks, brochures magazines, auto clubs and travel agencies. These findings were corroborated by Luo, Feng and Cai (2004), who found that pleasure travelers relied primarily on friends/relatives while business and personal travelers mostly used travel agents.

Others have reported that the relative importance of information sources depends on demographic variables. Unfortunately, some of the study results contradict each other. For example, in a study of elderly (i.e., over 60) consumers, Capella and Greco (1987) found that family was the most important information source overall for choosing a vacation destination trip, followed by past experience. They found that males placed more importance on family than females, and neighbors as an important information source was related to higher education. However, in a study of middle aged tourists, Luo, et al. (2004) found that a larger proportion of females relied on friends/relatives while a larger proportion of males relied on travel agents. Conversely, Snepenger, Meged, Snelling, and Worrall (1990) found that travel parties comprising a larger proportion of males relied on sources other than travel agents while travel parties comprising a smaller portion of males relied on travel agents and other sources.

While studies like these add to our understanding of the relative importance of tourists' information source use, they also clearly indicate that multiple information sources are used for travel decision making. Therefore, rather than looking at the contextually determined relative importance of individual information sources, the premise of this research is that the combination of information sources relied upon in given situations should be the major focus. The following section discusses research whose primary focus has been on exploring tourist use of combinations of information sources (i.e., information search strategies).

Information Search Strategies

Research exploring information search strategies can be divided into two categories depending upon the approach used to derive the categories. Some of the research pre-specified categories of tourists using conceptually relevant variables and sought to determine the influence strategies employed by the different categories of tourists (i.e., the deductive approach, a.k.a., “logical partitioning”). Bunn (1993) pointed out some of the weaknesses that are typical to the conceptual approach to classification; (1) they often provide little basis for specifying functional relationships between variables, (2) attributes of the classes are often confused with the determinants of the classes, and (3) the classes are often not supported by empirical scrutiny.

Other research on tourist use of information search strategies sought to empirically derive groups of tourists using similar information sources and then relate these groups of information strategy tourists to conceptually relevant variables (the inductive approach). While both deductive and inductive research inform each other with respect to theory development, inductive research, and the development of classifications based on empirical observation plays a fundamental role in a discipline’s development. As Hunt (1991) noted:

“Classification schemata play fundamental roles in the development of a discipline since they are the primary means for *organizing* phenomena into classes or groups that are amenable to systematic investigation and theory development (p. 178-9).”

McKelvey (1975) viewed taxonomy development as a critical element in the health of organizational science by testing to see whether homogeneous groupings can be produced and from which theories can be formed and hypotheses tested.

Finally, it is important to note that the taxonomy developed herein does have theoretical underpinnings. Indeed, research on consumer decision making, information processing and external and internal information search has informed the choice of information sources used to build the taxonomy.

Research on tourists’ information search strategies – the particular *combination* of information sources tourists use – has been rather limited. Generally, past research has explored differences in information strategy use cross-culturally, by previous destination experience and other factors.

Cross cultural differences. In a study of cross-cultural information strategy use, Uysal, McDonald and Reid (1990) looked at the differences in information search strategies employed by German, French, British and Japanese travelers to the U.S. They found that West German and French visitors placed primary emphasis on word-of-mouth from friends and family and travel agents, while visitors from the United Kingdom placed primary importance on travel agents followed by word-of-mouth, and those from Japan relied primarily on print media, including books as well as brochures and pamphlets.

Chen and Gursoy (2000) found similar cross-cultural information search strategy differences between first-time travelers and repeat visitors. For first-time German travelers the top three information sources were travel agencies, state/local government travel offices, and friends and relatives, whereas for repeat travelers they were travel agencies, state/local government travel offices and travel guides. For first-time British travelers the top three information sources were travel agencies, friends and relatives and newspapers and magazines, whereas for repeat travelers they were travel agencies, airlines, and friends and relatives. Finally, for first-time French travelers the top three information sources were travel agencies, friends and relatives, and travel guides, while for repeat travelers they were travel agencies, airlines and corporate travel offices.

Previous destination experience. In a study of destination-naïve tourists (no past experience) to the state of Alaska, Snepenger, Meged, Snelling and Worrall (1990), conducted a cluster analysis that revealed three information search strategy groups: those who 'only used travel agents' (44% of the sample), those who consulted 'travel agents and other information sources' (25%), and those who used 'sources other than travel agents' (31%).

Using a sample of travelers to the state of Virginia, Gursoy (2003) examined whether prior knowledge (familiarity and expertise) had an influence on travelers' information search behavior. He found that expert travelers were more likely to use internal knowledge than familiar travelers and that travelers with high familiarity relied more on destination-specific information sources, while travelers with low familiarity were more likely to utilize friends and relatives than other travelers.

Using face-to-face interviews with a convenience sample of destination-naïve international vacation tourists to New Zealand, Hyde (2006) examined the importance of six information sources (friends and relatives, guidebooks, travel agents, brochures, television and movies, and the internet) across five planning tasks (air travel, transportation, accommodations, destinations and within destination attractions). Results of the analysis suggested a six group solution including one low search group, four moderate search groups, and one high search group.

Other factors. Fodness and Murray (1998) developed a three dimensional model of tourist information search strategies including spatial, temporal, and operational dimensions. The spatial dimension distinguished between internal information search (relying on personal experience) versus external information search (using the other information sources). The temporal dimension differentiated ongoing information search (e.g., search using magazines and/or newspapers) from pre-purchase search strategies (relying on one or more other information sources). Finally, the operational dimension distinguished between information sources likely to be used in conjunction with each other or those more likely to be used alone, and was labeled decisive information sources. The resulting information search strategies were related to pre-planning time, travel party composition, trip purpose, roadway vehicle type, family life cycle stage and income, as well as length of stay; destinations visited; attractions visited, and spending (Fodness and Murray 1999).

Bieger and Laesser (2004) studied information strategy use prior to trip choice among a group of leisure travelers in Switzerland. As part of the analysis, the authors developed pre-trip information source clusters. Their pre-choice information strategy results suggested three groups of travelers which they labeled as the 'informal' group (relying mainly on friends and relatives), the 'direct' group (relying on at destination information and friends and family), and the 'professional' group (using brochures, travel agents and friends and family).

Finally, employing a sample of air travelers departing a major destination in Central Florida, DiPietro, Wang, Rompf and Severt (2007) found that at-destination information strategy use varied based on the service decision faced by the traveler (e.g., lodging, dining, etc.).

Summary

Past research has found that information search strategies vary cross-culturally, by past trip experience and other factors (e.g., involvement level, travel party characteristics, trip characteristics, and service-venue decision). Following in the tradition of earlier research, the present study proposes that tourists will combine information sources in systematic ways and will use these combinations of information sources as search strategies. Furthermore, this research proposes that information search strategies are related to demographic and situational characteristics of tourists. The next section describes the methods used to develop an empirical taxonomy of tourist information search strategies. Subsequent sections present the sample-level information source preferences and the information search taxonomy, a test of the relationship between information search strategies and

the demographic and situational characteristics, and provide summary descriptions of the information search strategies. The paper concludes with a discussion of the research and managerial implications of the results.

RESEARCH METHOD

A survey was developed and administered during a three month period to 2108 tourists stopping into the tourism office serving a six county area in the southern Appalachian region of the United States. Because the cluster analysis procedure employed in this study is a multivariate procedure it requires data that is complete with respect to all of the clustering variables (the information sources). Thus, the analysis was conducted on the 1,259 surveys that provided complete responses on the information source variables (a usable response rate of 60%).

Measures

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the following information sources when they planned their trip: billboards, brochures, vacation guides, internet, magazines, newspapers, previous visits (an internal information source), radio, television, and welcome centers. Each information source was measured on a five point Likert scale anchored by: (1) "Not Very Important," (5) "Very Important." This scale provides a measure of relative information source *reliance*, as opposed to past studies of tourist information strategies that measure information source use on a dichotomous "use/do not use" basis.

In addition, respondents were asked demographic questions (age, education, and income). Age was measured by asking respondents their year of birth. Education was measured using an scale where (1) was "high school," (2) was "some college," (3) was "Bachelor's Degree," and (4) was "graduate school." Income was measured as a continuous variable.

Respondents also were asked a series of situational questions including whether they were day trippers or overnight visitors, their pre-trip planning horizon, leisure time activities, and lodging preferences. Pre-trip planning was measured using an scale which asked respondents how far in advance they made their trip plans: (1) "less than 1 week," (2) "1 - 2+ weeks," (3) "3 - 5+ weeks," (4) "6 - 11+ weeks," and (5) "more than 12 weeks." Leisure time activities and lodging preferences were measured using categorical scales. The leisure time activities were measured by providing respondents with a comprehensive list of area activities and attractions and asking them to check all that applied. Lodging preferences were measured by asking respondents to check the type of lodging establishment they were patronizing while visiting the area.

Finally, respondents were asked about their media behavioral habits including the primary type of radio station they listened to as well as the types of publications they read, both categorical scales. They were also asked how frequently they used various internet web sites, which was measured using a Likert scale anchored by (1) "Not Very Frequently," and (5) "Very Frequently."

Sample Profile

Overall, 18.85% of respondents were day trippers and the rest were overnight visitors. The mean age of the sample was 44.2 years. Respondents indicated an average income of \$63,866. Fifty-eight percent of the sample held at least a Bachelor's degree and 59 percent report spending three or more weeks in planning their trip. The information source preferences of the sample are considered later in the analysis and results section. The following provides a profile of the sample with respect to planned activities, lodging preferences and media habits.

Tourist activities. Respondents were asked to indicate the activities that they would engage in while on the trip. In rank order they included: the Blue Ridge Parkway (61.87%), visiting a scenic mountain (51.71%), shopping (51.63%), visiting a local theme park (30.34%), hiking and biking (30.18%), visiting caverns (27.08%), visiting historic sites (26.29%), attending festivals (23.99%), visiting museums (19.62%), attending music and theater events (15.97%), rafting (13.03%), fishing (12.47%), visiting orchards and wineries (12.39%), golfing (12.07%) and attending sporting events (3.97%).

Lodging preferences. Respondents also indicated the type of lodging establishment they were patronizing while on the trip. In rank order they included: staying in a condo/cabin/house (26.56%), with friends/family (20.73%), in an independently owned hotel/motel (16.77%), in a chain hotel/motel (14.38%), in an RV/campground (11.98%), and in a bed & breakfast (5.52%).

Radio station preferences. This sample of tourists preferred country stations (29.94%), followed by rock (23.51%), Christian/gospel (20.25%), classical (11.68%), pop (10.17%), rhythm & blues (6.59%) and jazz (6.35%).

Print readership. The largest proportion of tourists in this sample reported reading the daily newspaper (51.87%). This was followed by Southern Living Magazine (32.41%), general women's magazines (28.99%), AAA publications (28.12%), news magazines (26.53%), travel magazines (21.76%), entertainment magazines (19.46%), the state travel magazine (15.49%), a regional country magazine (10.96%), men's magazines (10.01%) and weekly newspapers (9.69%).

Internet web sites. Two internet web sites fell above the scale midpoint of frequency of use and were (in rank order) Google and Yahoo. The other web sites followed these two and were, in order, MSN, newspaper web sites, AOL, and the state tourism web site.

Statistical Procedures

A fundamental premise of this study is that tourists rely on different mixes of information sources in planning their trips, which represent information search strategies. Consistent with this view, a two-stage analysis was conducted. In the first stage, cluster analysis was used to identify different information search strategies. The second stage of the analysis used multiple discriminant analysis to test the significance and nature of the relationship between the information search clusters that emerged from the cluster analysis and select demographic measures. These analyses were then supplemented with analyses of tourists' pre-trip planning horizon; plans for leisure-time activities; lodging preferences; and radio listening, print readership, and internet website usage.

A hierarchical clustering procedure (Ward's minimum variance method) was used to identify an initial cluster solution. Hierarchical clustering is especially appropriate for providing preliminary cluster solutions when there is no a priori basis for specifying the number of clusters (Punj & Stewart, 1983). The hierarchical clustering procedure was applied to two randomly created sub-samples. In each, based on measures of internal cohesion (root-mean-square standard deviation within clusters) and external isolation (Euclidean distances between cluster centroids), a five cluster solution provided the best result based on within-group homogeneity and among group heterogeneity. Cross validation via multiple discriminant analysis indicated that the five cluster solution was a stable solution in both sub-samples. Therefore, the full dataset was clustered using Ward's method to generate the initial five cluster solution.

This initial taxonomy was then refined using a variant of the K-means iterative partitioning approach (Dillon & Goldstein, 1984). Iterative partitioning methods are preferred once initial cluster centroids have been estimated because they reclassify observations among clusters to more clearly separate the clusters (Anderberg, 1973; Punj & Stewart, 1983). This procedure uses sequential

discriminant analyses as an alternative iterative partitioning approach (Anderberg, 1973). With the initial five-cluster results from the Ward's procedure, the clusters were the group variable and the information sources were used as predictors. At each iteration, observations were classified into clusters based on the criterion of maximum probability of group membership. The procedure was applied for five iterations, at which point there was no marginal improvement to be gained (i.e., the final solution was stable). The final cluster statistics are: Canonical Correlation .947; Mahalanobis Distance Between Clusters (minimum) 9.6 and (maximum) 85.92. This is a common approach to cluster analysis in marketing applications (e.g., Bunn, 1993; Cannon & Perreault, 1999). The following section discusses the total sample average information source preferences and the cluster analysis results.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

For comparison with past research, Table 1 provides the information source mean scores for the total sample. Table 1 also displays the means for each information source by cluster, as well as the number of tourists in each group.

Total Sample Analysis

The mean scores for the total sample in Table 1 indicate that previous visits are the most important information source for trip planning, followed by the internet, brochures and guides. All other sources of information are below the midpoint of the five-point scale – including welcome centers, magazines, newspapers, radio, television and billboards. A different picture emerges when the cluster analysis results are considered.

Information Search Strategy Clusters

Examination of the means in Table 1 indicates that among the five groups of tourists there are both differences in the overall levels of information source use, and distinct patterns in the relative importance of individual information sources.

Table 1
Means for information source reliance by information search strategy

Information Source	Cluster					Overall Sample
	1 Information Nonusers	2 Aggressive Searchers	3 Limited Searchers	4 Balanced Searchers	5 Past Visitors	
Billboards	1.27 ^d	3.77 ^a	1.87 ^c	2.32 ^b	1.67 ^c	2.14
Brochures	1.45 ^c	4.36 ^a	3.54 ^b	3.61 ^b	3.38 ^b	3.29
Guides	1.43 ^d	4.31 ^a	3.38 ^{b/c}	3.53 ^b	3.17 ^c	3.17
Internet	1.21 ^d	4.33 ^a	4.08 ^b	3.53 ^c	3.93 ^b	3.39
Magazines	1.21 ^e	4.36 ^a	1.51 ^d	3.07 ^b	1.82 ^c	2.36
Newspapers	1.22 ^d	4.45 ^a	1.34 ^{c/d}	3.04 ^b	1.44 ^c	2.31
Previous Visits	2.65 ^c	4.56 ^a	1.17 ^d	3.96 ^b	4.55 ^a	3.58
Radio	1.12 ^c	4.53 ^a	1.07 ^c	2.46 ^b	1.11 ^c	1.89
Television	1.15 ^c	4.57 ^a	1.20 ^c	2.68 ^b	1.24 ^c	2.06
Welcome Centers	1.44 ^e	4.37 ^a	2.36 ^c	3.37 ^b	2.06 ^d	2.75
Size	301	141	191	314	312	1259
Percent	23.91%	11.20%	15.17%	24.94%	24.78%	100%

Note: Means within a row with matching superscripts are not significantly different, $p < .05$, following Duncan's multiple range procedure.

In the following section, more complete descriptions of each cluster are developed when cluster profile characteristics are considered. At this point, however, it is useful to briefly describe each cluster's pattern of information source use.

Cluster 1 (23.9% of sample): "Information Non-Users"

This segment consists of tourists who, as a group, do not rely on any of the information sources in the study. The highest mean score is for previous visits, which is still noticeably below the sample average.

Cluster 2 (11.2% of sample): "Aggressive Searchers"

This cluster of tourists places very high importance on each and every information source. While their reliance on billboards is not as high as for the other information sources, it is noticeably higher than for the total sample.

Cluster 3 (15.2% of sample): "Limited Searchers"

Tourists in cluster three rely on a limited set of information sources. They report high reliance on the internet, brochures and guides, and low reliance on the remaining information sources.

Cluster 4 (24.9% of sample): "Balanced Searchers"

The reliance these tourists place on any and all of the information sources exceeds that of the total sample. However, this cluster does not display the heavy reliance of cluster two. While relying on a broad range of information sources, cluster 4 places relatively more importance on past visits, brochures, guides and the internet. Their reliance on magazines, newspapers, and welcome centers is also moderately high.

Cluster 5 (24.8% of sample) "Past Visitors"

Cluster five also displays reliance on a limited set of information sources. They place heaviest reliance on past visits, coupled with the internet and brochures. Their reliance on guides matches the average for the total sample.

While the summary labels and brief descriptions of each cluster may oversimplify the precise nature of the five clusters' information source reliance, they depict the major features of each cluster, and facilitate subsequent discussion.

Differences in Tourist Demographics

The mean scores for tourist age and income for each cluster and for the total sample are reported in Table 2, along with measures of education level and how far in advance tourists planned their trip. Table 2 also reports the percentage of each cluster that were only visiting for the day. The univariate F-ratios in Duncan's multiple range test was conducted on age and income to isolate the subsets of means which are statistically different across search strategy clusters. Within each row of Table 2, means with matching superscripts are not significantly different at $p < .05$. For example, the average age in cluster 1 is not significantly different from that of cluster 2, but is significantly different from the average age in clusters 3,4 and 5. Likewise, only cluster 2 has significantly different income versus the other clusters. The significant X^2 statistics indicate significant differences in education, advanced planning and in the percentage of day-trippers across clusters. A more integrative view is provided by a multiple discriminant analysis treating information search strategy as the dependent variable and tourist demographics as independent variables.

Table 2
Tourist demographics by information search strategy

Demographic	Cluster					Overall Sample
	1 Information Nonusers	2 Aggressive Searchers	3 Limited Searchers	4 Balanced Searchers	5 Past Visitors	
Age	46.9 ^a	44.7 ^{a/b}	40.9 ^c	43.6 ^{b/c}	43.8 ^{b/c}	44.2
Education ¹	65.4%	38.2%	52.3%	53.9%	65.2%	57.5%
Income	\$66,049 ^a	\$55,769 ^b	\$62,043 ^a	\$63,667 ^a	\$66,746 ^a	\$63,866
Advanced Planning ²	56.2%	49.9%	60.5%	57.7%	67.2%	59.3%
Percent Day Trippers ³	19.67%	32.86%	16.75%	20.06%	11.86%	18.85%

Note: Means within a row with matching superscripts are not significantly different, $p < .05$, following Duncan's multiple range procedure.

¹ Proportion of cluster reporting educational attainment of Bachelor's degree or higher ($\chi^2 = 40.64$, $df = 12$, $p = .000$).

² Proportion of cluster reporting pre-planning of 3 weeks or more ($\chi^2 = 34.12$, $df = 16$, $p = .005$).

³ $\chi^2 = 63.07$, $df = 20$, $p < .000$.

Multiple Discriminant Analysis Results

Table 3 reveals two significant discriminant functions. Table 3 also indicates that all of the tourist characteristics differ significantly across search strategy clusters. To facilitate interpretation of these two functions, the discriminant loadings were rotated according to a varimax criterion. The effect of such a rotation is to simplify the pattern of loadings (Perreault & Spiro, 1978).

The rotated discriminant loadings in Table 3 were used to interpret the two significant functions. The loadings represent the correlations between the individual characteristics and the underlying discriminant functions. Thus, those variables with relatively high loadings on a function are the variables which best characterize the function. All of the variables have a rotated loading greater than .60 on one or the other of the two functions, and no variable loads (above .2) on more than one function. Thus, the rotated solution achieves a "simple structure" that facilitates interpretation.

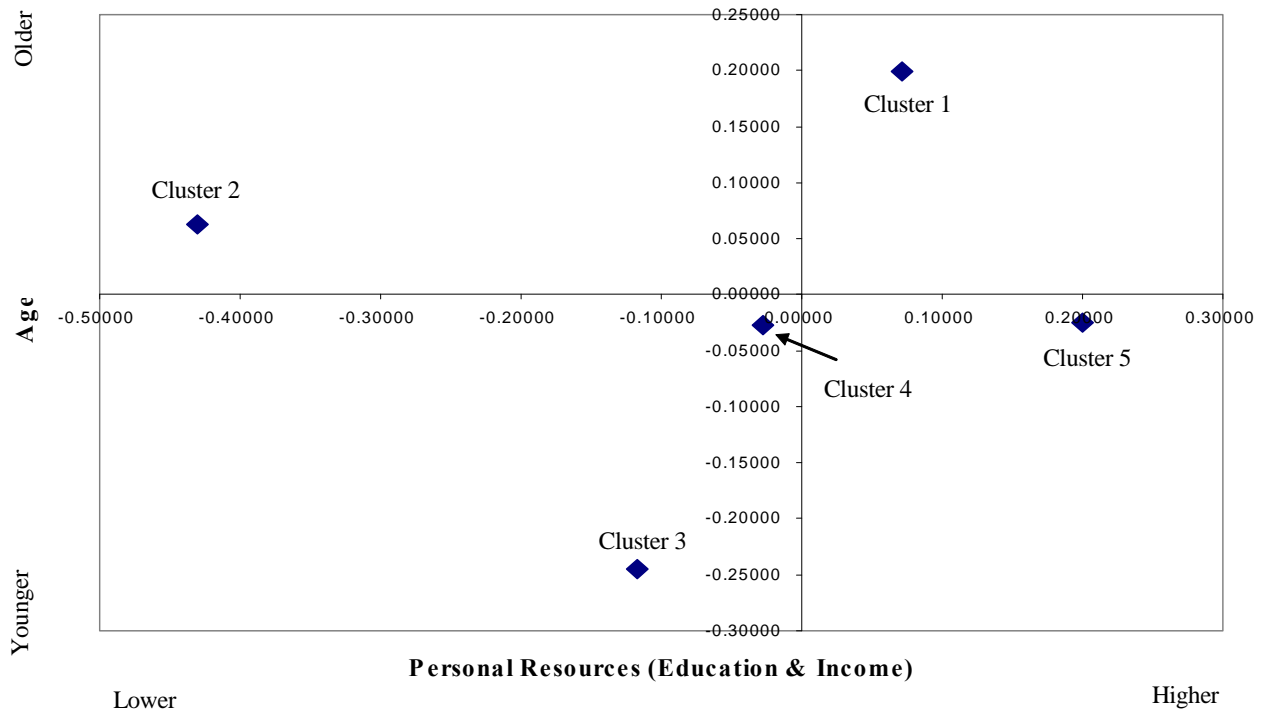
The two discriminant functions may be considered as underlying dimensions which differentiate among the information search strategies of each cluster. Figure 1 provides a plot of the rotated group centroids on the two discriminant functions, showing the relative position of the five clusters with respect to the tourist demographics. The following broad interpretations are drawn from Table 3 and Figure 1, and supported by the statistics in Table 3.

Based on the rotated loadings in Table 3, the first function is associated with education (.97) and income (.62). Considering these two variables together, this first function may be thought of as a continuum representing *personal resources*. The high end of this continuum represents tourists with higher levels of these resources. Figure 1 shows that this function separates all five clusters. Cluster 2, the "Aggressive Searchers," is the group with the lower level of personal resources, with both the lowest income and lowest educational attainment of the five clusters. Cluster 3, the "Limited Searchers," Cluster 4, the "Balanced Searchers," and Cluster 1, the "Information Non-Users," are all intermediate on this dimension. Cluster 5, the "Past Visitors," has the highest level of these personal resources. The second function is almost exclusively characterized by the age variable (.94). Cluster 1, the "Information Non-Users," is at the high or older end of this continuum, with Clusters 2, 4 and 5 in the middle, and Cluster 3 at the low or younger end of the continuum.

Table 3
Multiple Discriminant Analysis of Tourist Characteristics

Canonical Relationships	Discriminant Functions			
	I	II		
Canonical Correlation	0.18	0.13		
Multivariate F-ratio	3.98	2.79		
Degrees of Freedom	12:2384	6:1804		
Probability (less than)	0.001	0.01		
Discriminant Loadings			Univariate	P
			F-ratio	
Age	0.31	0.90	4.01	.0031
Education	0.98	-0.05	7.54	.0001
Income	0.61	-0.12	2.98	.0184
Rotated Loadings				
Age	0.10	0.94		
Education	0.97	0.17		
Income	0.62	0.02		

Figure 1
Differences Among Information Search Strategies Based on Age and Personal Resources



Summary Profiles of the Five Information Search Strategy Clusters

Before discussing the implications of the study, it is useful to summarize the results presented in Tables 1, 2, 3 and Figure 1 in a more descriptive and integrative way. So far, the results have shown that the five clusters differ with respect to both their levels and patterns of information source use. Moreover, the multiple discriminant analysis shows that these differences in information search

strategies are related to select demographic characteristics. To further enhance the descriptions of the five clusters, the types of activities each cluster planned to include in their trip (Table 4), and the types of lodging sought by each cluster (Table 5) were examined, as were each cluster's radio listening habits, print readership and internet website usage (Tables 6, 7 and 8). The data in Tables 4-8 are all categorical. Table 9 facilitates comparisons across clusters, and together with the brief descriptions that follow, provides summary information for and highlights key aspects of each information search strategy group.

Table 4
Tourist activities by information search strategy ¹

Activity	Cluster					Overall Sample
	1 Information Nonusers	2 Aggressive Searchers	3 Limited Searchers	4 Balanced Searchers	5 Past Visitors	
Blue Ridge Parkway	53.16%	65.25%	64.92%	63.06%	65.71%	61.87%
Caverns	15.95%	25.53%	38.22%	28.03%	30.77%	27.08%
Festivals	22.92%	32.62%	12.57%	29.30%	22.76%	23.99%
Golfing	13.95%	9.22%	5.24%	17.83%	9.94%	12.07%
Hiking/Biking	27.24%	22.70%	32.98%	29.30%	35.58%	30.18%
Historic Sites	18.27%	24.82%	32.46%	25.80%	31.41%	26.29%
Local Theme Park	25.25%	41.84%	31.41%	28.98%	30.77%	30.34%
Rafting	8.97%	13.48%	16.75%	9.55%	17.95%	13.03%
Scenic Mountain	43.19%	47.52%	64.40%	49.04%	56.73%	51.71%
Shopping	52.16%	42.55%	44.50%	54.14%	57.05%	51.63%

¹All X² tests of association are significant at p < .05.

Table 5
Type of lodging by information search strategy ¹

Lodging	Cluster					Overall Sample
	1 Information Nonusers	2 Aggressive Searchers	3 Limited Searchers	4 Balanced Searchers	5 Past Visitors	
B&B	5.29%	7.29%	7.64%	2.67%	6.27%	5.52%
RV/Campground	7.49%	13.54%	14.65%	11.56%	14.12%	11.98%
Friends/Family	32.16%	22.92%	7.64%	23.56%	15.29%	20.73%
Chain Hotel/Motel	11.45%	10.42%	22.93%	14.22%	13.33%	14.38%
Independent Hotel/Motel	16.30%	16.67%	11.46%	17.33%	20.00%	16.77%
Condo/Cabin/House	23.79%	26.04%	29.94%	27.56%	26.27%	26.56%

¹All X² tests of association are significant at p < .05.

Table 6
Radio station type by information search strategy ¹

Radio Station	Cluster					Overall Sample
	1 Information Nonusers	2 Aggressive Searchers	3 Limited Searchers	4 Balanced Searchers	5 Past Visitors	
Christian	15.95%	22.70%	16.75%	25.48%	20.19%	20.25%
Country	24.25%	41.13%	32.98%	32.80%	25.64%	29.94%
Jazz	5.32%	5.67%	6.28%	9.87%	4.17%	6.35%

¹All X² tests of association are significant at p < .05.

Table 7
Print readership by information search strategy ¹

Print Media	Cluster					Overall Sample
	1 Information Nonusers	2 Aggressive Searchers	3 Limited Searchers	4 Balanced Searchers	5 Past Visitors	
Entertainment Mag.	15.28%	24.11%	19.37%	24.20%	16.67%	19.46%
State Travel Guide	7.31%	22.70%	18.85%	20.06%	13.46%	15.49%
Regional Country Mag.	7.64%	22.70%	7.33%	14.33%	7.69%	10.96%
Weekly Newspaper	6.64%	17.73%	7.85%	11.46%	8.33%	9.69%

¹All X² tests of association are significant at p < .05.

Table 8
Specific internet website usage by information search strategy ¹

Website	Cluster					Overall Sample
	1 Information Nonusers	2 Aggressive Searchers	3 Limited Searchers	4 Balanced Searchers	5 Past Visitors	
AOL	2.12 ^c	2.85 ^a	2.25 ^{b/c}	2.53 ^{a/b}	2.28 ^{b/c}	2.37
Google	2.89 ^b	2.78 ^b	3.60 ^a	3.33 ^a	3.39 ^a	3.23
MSN	2.16 ^b	2.65 ^a	2.61 ^a	2.73 ^a	2.64 ^a	2.55
State Tourism Website	1.42 ^c	2.36 ^a	1.57 ^c	2.00 ^b	1.52 ^c	1.72
Yahoo	2.43 ^b	3.16 ^a	3.36 ^a	3.25 ^a	3.23 ^a	3.07
Newspaper Website	2.29 ^b	2.94 ^a	2.20 ^b	2.81 ^a	2.38 ^b	2.49

Note: Means within a row with matching superscripts are not significantly different, p < .05, following Duncan's multiple range procedure.

¹Internet website usage was measured on a scale of (1) "Not Very Frequently" to (5) "Very Frequently."

Cluster 1: The "Information Non-users"

The "Information Non-Users" in cluster 1 are older and of moderate personal resources. Their trip planning horizon is just under three weeks, which is comparable to the sample average. They display very low reliance on any and all information sources. It appears that this cluster of tourists has some existing familiarity with the area, most likely through information from friends and family and previous visits. Table 9 summarizes this cluster's preferred activities and media characteristics.

Cluster 2: The "Aggressive Searchers"

The tourists in Cluster 2 report extremely high reliance on each and every information source. The Aggressive Searchers are lowest on the dimension of personal resources, and are in the middle of the age continuum. The trip planning horizon for these tourists is between 2-3 weeks, which is a slightly shorter time frame than for the other clusters. This group's heavy reliance on a broad range of information sources may be related to an element of time pressure, and a desire to make the most of their travel expenditures. Moreover, the aggressive search behavior of these tourists implies a higher level of uncertainty related to aspects of the trip. Table 9 highlights the activity and lodging choices of the Aggressive Searchers, which tend a little more toward friends and family, RV/campgrounds

and bed and breakfast establishments in comparison to the total sample. A lower percentage of tourists in this cluster stay in chain hotels/motels. Cluster 2 has the highest percentage of country radio listening of any cluster and relatively high listening to Christian radio. The Aggressive Searchers also report greater use of AOL, newspaper websites and the state tourism website than do tourists in the other clusters.

Cluster 3: The “Limited Searchers”

The Limited Searchers in Cluster 3 are the youngest group of tourists. Like the aggressive searchers of Cluster 2, these tourists are in the middle of the personal resources dimension. Their trip planning horizon is typical of the sample at approximately three weeks. The limited searchers rely on web sites as their primary source of information, in conjunction with brochures and guides. They rely very little on other information sources. Their very low reliance on previous visits implies these tourists may be first time visitors. The planned activities of this group are focused on historic, scenic and adventure pursuits. Of the five clusters, limited searchers are least likely to stay with friends or family. Their tendency to listen to country radio is slightly higher than the sample average, and their Christian radio listening is somewhat less. Their readership of entertainment magazines is typical for the total sample, and their readership of the state travel magazine is above the total sample. Like Cluster 1 Information Non-users and the Past Visitors of Cluster 5, their readership of the regional country magazine and weekly newspapers is low. The internet usage of the limited searchers primarily involves Google and Yahoo.

Cluster 4: The “Balanced Searchers”

The balanced searchers are in the middle of both the age and the personal resources dimensions. They place moderate reliance on most of the information sources, with relatively high reliance on previous visits, brochures and guides. The activities of this tourist cluster focus on the Blue Ridge Parkway, festivals, shopping, and, more so than any other group, golfing. Compared to the other clusters, balanced searchers are not particularly interested in rafting. Their lodging preferences are low for bed and breakfasts, and second highest for friends or family. As the label “Balanced Searchers” implies, the tourists in Cluster 4 have the highest percentage of both Christian radio and jazz listening, and like Cluster 3, are higher than the sample percentage for country listening. Like cluster 2, a higher percentage of balanced searchers read entertainment magazines and the state travel magazine, and this cluster has the second highest percentage readership of the regional country magazine and weekly newspapers. Web site usage is higher for Google, Yahoo, newspaper websites and MSN.

Cluster 5: The “Past Visitors”

Cluster 5 is the highest on the personal resources dimension, and in the middle of the age continuum. Previous visits represent their most relied upon information source, followed by the internet, brochures and guides. They are below the sample averages for all other information sources. This group has the lowest percentage of day trippers, and the longest trip planning horizon. Like Clusters 2, 3 and 4, this cluster plans to spend time on the Blue Ridge Parkway. In most other respects, the activity preferences of this cluster are highly similar to those of the Cluster 3 Limited Searchers: caverns, the scenic mountain, hiking and biking, historic sites, and rafting. Unlike Cluster 3, the Past Visitors cluster has the highest percentage reporting shopping as a trip activity. In this regard they are very similar to the Information Non-users (Cluster 1) and the Balanced Searchers (Cluster 4). A low percentage of the Past Visitors favor golf, and in this they are similar to the Aggressive Searchers (Cluster 2) and the Cluster 3 Limited Searchers. Lodging choices tend toward independent (local) hotels and RV/campgrounds, and are relatively low for friends or family and chain hotels. Table 9 summarizes the media preferences of the Past Visitors.

Table 9
Summary Descriptions of Information Search Strategies

	Title	Information Search Strategy	Tourist Characteristics	Related Behaviors
Strategy 1	Information Non-Users	Low reliance on any and all information sources	Older with moderate personal resources	Prefer festivals, golfing and shopping More likely to stay with friends or family Lower listenership of Christian, country or jazz radio Low print readership and web usage
Strategy 2	Aggressive Searchers	Very high reliance on each and every information source	Upper-middle of the age continuum, lowest on personal resources dimension	Prefer Blue Ridge Parkway (BRP), festivals, local amusement park. Low interest in shopping and golf. Lodging tends toward family/friends, RV/camping, and B&B's Prefer country and Christian Radio
Strategy 3	Limited Searchers	Websites as primary information source, along with brochures and guides	Youngest, in the middle of the personal resources dimension	Prefer BRP, scenic attractions, caverns, hiking/biking, rafting. Lodging favors condo/cabin rentals, chain hotels and RV/campgrounds. Tend toward country radio and State Travel Guide, Google and Yahoo.
Strategy 4	Balanced Searchers	Moderate reliance on most information sources, with relatively high reliance on previous visits, brochures and guides	Middle of the age continuum and the personal resources dimension	Prefer BRP, festivals and shopping. Highest preference for golf. Lodging favors friends/family and condo/cabin rentals Preference for all three radio station formats; high print readership; broad web usage.
Strategy 5	Past Visitors	Previous visits most heavily relied upon source, along with internet, brochures and guides Low reliance on other information sources	Middle of the age continuum and highest on personal resources dimension	Highest preference for shopping, otherwise activity preferences are very similar to Cluster 3. Lodging favors independent (local) hotels and RV/campgrounds. Radio listenership at or below sample averages; low print readership; average web usage.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING PRACTITIONERS

The results of this study support the basic premise that tourists show different patterns and levels of preference for specific trip related information sources. Moreover, these differences can be structured according to select personal characteristics of tourists. Specifically, two tourist demographic dimensions, age and personal resources (a combination of education and income) help to understand the varying information search strategies of tourists. The managerial implications of this research will be discussed from both a marketing strategy and promotional planning perspective.

Marketing Strategy Development

If a tourism organization wishes to follow a targeting approach to marketing (as opposed to a mass marketing approach), the development of its marketing strategy can be thought of as a process of segmenting the tourism market, targeting one or more of those segments, and positioning the tourism organization's offering such that the target market receives value superior to that offered by competitors' offerings. The taxonomy presented in this paper can be thought of as providing insight into the process of marketing strategy development. In this regard this study has identified 5 potential market segments from which a tourism organization may choose (cluster 1, information nonusers; cluster 2, aggressive searchers; cluster 3, limited searchers; cluster 4, balanced searchers; and cluster 5, past visitors).

In assessing the relative attractiveness of the market segments it would be prudent for the organization to examine the market potential of each tourist search segment in terms of metrics such as its size and growth rate, as well as the tourism organization's ability to serve the needs of the various segments (e.g., information non-users prefer festivals, golfing and shopping while limited searchers prefer scenic attractions, caverns, hiking/biking and rafting). Subsequent to this assessment the organization can develop the marketing positioning elements to attract the segment(s) (e.g., tourism venues, price levels, promotional strategies, etc.).

Especially relevant to this study, market segments defined by information search strategies provide tourism marketers insight regarding the use of various promotional tools. In this sense then, the use of information search strategies as a basis for the identification of market segments makes it easier for tourist organization's to target the market(s) and position their tourism offering appropriate for each segment.

For example, while the Information Non-users in cluster 1 are not really a target for promotion, they are older and have moderate personal resources. This type of segment might be an appropriate target for a tourism area that offers festivals, golfing and/or shopping. The Aggressive Searchers in cluster two are middle aged, have the lowest personal resources and are information hungry. They prefer areas with festivals, amusement parks, and camping and can be reached through advertising on country and Christian radio stations.

The Limited Searchers in cluster 3 are younger with moderate resources. Their low reliance on previous visits indicates that they are first-time visitors, probably in need of information about what to do and where to go. They prefer areas with plenty of outdoor recreation such as scenic attractions, hiking/biking, and rafting. They rely on the internet along with guides and brochures – which should perhaps be displayed in relation to their preferred accommodations: RV/campgrounds, chain hotels, and local property management offices.

The balanced searchers of cluster 4 are middle aged and have moderate resources and prefer tourist areas that offer golf, scenic attractions, festivals and shopping. They can be reached via radio, print and web strategies. Finally, the past visitor (cluster 4) is a middle age tourist with high personal

resources. They tend to rely on past visits as the primary information source supplemented with the internet, brochures and guides and have the highest preference for shopping and outdoor activities and staying in local (not chain) hotels.

In summary, the taxonomy developed in this study offers insight into the key steps in the development of a tourism organization's marketing strategy including segmentation, targeting and positioning. Targeting specific segments allows a tourism organization to tailor its offerings to specific groups of tourists, enabling the organization to competitively differentiate itself from other tourism organizations while simultaneously increasing its ability to satisfy specific tourism groups.

Promotion Planning Implications

The results of this research highlights the importance of viewing information source and strategy use at the cluster (segment) level rather than at the overall sample level for promotion planning. Indeed, viewing information source and strategy use from the overall sample level can be misleading. For example, this research supports earlier findings that previous visits (personal experience) is the most frequently relied upon pre-trip information source by tourists. However, contrary to Luo et. al. (2004) who found no effects for income and education on information search and internet usage in particular, our taxonomy indicates that the internet is most important to cluster 2 Aggressive Searchers, who are younger and lower on the personal resources dimension.

Other results of this research also suggest the use of a segmentation approach to promotion planning. For example, previous research has consistently shown particular information sources, most notably radio and television, to be of only low to moderate importance for pre-trip planning (e.g., Gitelson & Crompton, 1983; Capella & Greko, 1987; Bieger & Laesser, 2004). For this study this is true at the overall sample level. However, both radio and TV are of high importance to the Aggressive Searchers in cluster 2.

Other aspects of this study support the use of a segment approach to the use of tourism promotional tools. The results of this study linked information search strategies to age and personal resources (education and income). These results contrast with Snepenger et. al. (1990), where age was not related to information search strategies. In addition, tourists who are low on the personal resources dimension place heavy emphasis on a wide range of information sources, supporting the premise that consumers in the lower social classes are less confident in their decision making (Perreault & McCarthy, 2002). Previous research examining the income variable found that *lower* income tourists relied on *very few information sources* (Fodness & Murray, 1999). However, in that study those tourists with lower incomes appeared to have more travel experience, and therefore, less uncertainty about trip planning. Our results also are consistent with past research that found a relationship between information search strategies and tourist activities (Snepenger et. al., 1990; Fodness & Murray, 1999) and accommodation choice (Snepenger et. al., 1990).

In summary, the development of empirical taxonomies of tourist information search strategies such as the one presented herein can facilitate the tourism organization's ability to develop marketing strategies and utilize the appropriate promotional tools to position and communicate the benefits of their offering to their market segments.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Several of the findings warrant further consideration. First, sample level (total market) measures can be misleading. At the sample level, only four information sources exceed the midpoint of the importance scale. The sample level results are generally consistent with past studies, which show that brochures, guides, previous visits and the internet are important sources of tourist information. A very different picture emerges when one focuses on the individual tourist clusters. Second, the

results indicate that there is a multivariate relationship between information search strategies and personal characteristics. Moreover, different information search strategy clusters exhibit different preferences and behaviors relative to planned activities, lodging, and general media habits.

When information source reliance is examined at the total sample level, the results of this study are generally supportive of past research. For example, previous visits were the most important information source in this study and were also reported as being the most important in research conducted by Woodside and Ronkainen (1980) and Capella and Greco (1987). Brochures were viewed as third most important by this sample of tourists and have also been reported as important in previous studies. Bieger and Laesser (2004) and Snepenger et al. (1990) reported brochures as being second most important, while Nolan (1976), Gilteson and Crompton (1983) also found them to be third most important. However, in examining the five information search strategies, previous visits and brochures are an important information source for only three of the five tourist groups.

The taxonomy presented here should be useful to tourism marketers planning promotion strategy. It is useful to consider each of the information search strategy clusters as a potential target market segment. Market segments defined by information search strategies provide tourism marketers insight regarding the use of various promotional tools. In this sense then, the use of information search strategies as a basis for the identification of market segments makes it easier for tourist organization's to target the market(s) and assemble marketing mixes appropriate for each.

Limitations and Future Research

Data collection for this study, similar to past studies in the area, used a convenience sample of tourists who stopped at the tourism office in a U.S. rural mountain resort setting. Thus, caution must be exercised in attempting to generalize the results across all tourists and travel settings. The information sources and situational variables used in the study were drawn from previous research. Neither set of variables is intended to be exhaustive. However, the information source measures used in this study did measure the *relative* importance of each information source to tourists, rather than just whether or not tourists used the information source. This study is delimited by its focus on information source reliance, and it does not evaluate information content or type.

The results of this study help in understanding differences in tourists' information search strategies and differences in the relative reliance on information sources across tourist segments. A logical extension would be for future research to examine how a specific information source is used and the content of the information sought or provided. For example, the internet is an important component of four of the five information search strategy segments. Yet, it seems unlikely that it is used for the same purposes, or that the same content is sought across segments. Additional research examining other demographic and situational descriptors would also be productive. Empirical taxonomies such as the one presented here are valuable because they can shed light on relationships and phenomena for future hypothesis testing and theory construction, but future studies should also test the reported relationships across other samples and contexts.

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