

## THE INFLUENCE OF VISITOR MOTIVATION AND CHARACTERISTICS ON VISITOR INFORMATION SEARCH BEHAVIOR

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate factors affecting information search behaviors and assess how search strategy influences trip outcomes of pleasure visitors to the state of West Virginia. Data for this study were collected through a structured questionnaire from 373 leisure travelers to West Virginia. There were significant and non-significant relationships between information search sources and visitor motivation, and trip outcomes. Specifically, significant relationships existed between information search strategy and: visitor motivation, length of stay, total budget, and number of activities.

### 1.0 Introduction and literature review

Market segmentation enables tourism organizations to use greater precision in targeting and communicating with their potential visitors. There are several segmentation methods including: purpose of travel, buyer needs, motivations and benefits sought, demographic, economic and geographic profiles, psychographic profile, and price (Fyall and Morgan, 2009). Visitor information search behaviors are believed to be an appropriate way to segment the leisure tourism market (Fodness & Murray, 1999).

Information search is “the motivated activation of knowledge stored in memory or acquisition of information from the environment” (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995). Information acquisition comes from both internal and external sources. When a person decides to travel, he/she gathers information to make informed travel decisions. Information search behaviors have also been seen to influence outcomes such as length of stay, spending, and number of attractions visited (Fodness & Murray, 1999). However, information search is affected by many factors including, but not limited to: consumer demographics (Fodness & Murray, 1999; Luo, Feng & Cai, 2005); trip characteristics (Fodness & Murray, 1999; Luo et al., 2005); experience (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Lehto, Kim & Morrison, 2006; Snepenger, Meged, Knelling, & Worrall, 1990); and culture (Gursoy & Umbreit, 2004; Money & Crotts, 2003). Fodness & Murray (1999) suggested three basic information search dimensions present in any purchase situation including: spatial, temporal, and operational. Spatial focuses on the locus of search, whether internal or external. Temporal reflects the timing of information search, whether it is pre-purchase or ongoing, while operational represents the conduct of information search.

The operational dimension shows whether a particular source of information is used to complement other sources in the decision making process or is decisive by itself. The current study drew upon Fodness and Murray's study, but added tourists' motivation as one of the factors associated with search behaviors not included in their study. The relationship between travel motivation and information sources choices was examined and deemed as very important information for marketers in an early study (Kim, Weaver, & McCleary, 1996). Some other studies also attempted to segment travel situations by investigating travelers' motivations and information sources (Bieger & Laesser, 2000). And thus it is of great importance for motivations to be included in this study. Purpose of travel included in Fodness & Murray's model was not used as a variable in this study because the study only focused on leisure visitors whose purpose of travel is to either visit family/friends or have leisure activities.

## **2.0 Study method**

Data for this study were collected through a structured questionnaire in summer 2012. Two graduate students approached visitors who stopped by West Virginia Centers at I-68 west bound and I-70 west bound respectively. About 891 surveys were completed of which 373 were leisure visitors.

The questionnaires included 9 types of common information sources such as the Internet, brochure, television, etc. Visitors' motivation was measured with 17 items derived from previous literature. Travel characteristics were measured in terms of group size, transportation mode, accommodation type, and trip outcomes (expenditure, length of stay, and activities to participate in).

Data were input and managed in SPSS 21. Descriptive analysis was used to examine leisure visitors' demographic characteristics; cross tabulation was utilized to investigate the associations between choices of information sources and visitors' motivations and travel characteristics, respectively; one-way ANOVA was used to detect any significant information search method differences in trip outcomes.

## **3.0 Results and discussion**

The majority of respondents were non-residents of West Virginia (83%). The proportion of female to male was about the same, 49.6% and 47.7% respectively. About 69% of the respondents were 50 or older. Respondents were mostly of medium to high income (55% had annual gross income of \$56,000 and higher), and highly educated overall (81.4% had an undergraduate degree or higher). Results revealed that the respondents' top motivations to travel were to: have fun ( $\mu = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ), relax ( $\mu = 4.20$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), get away from home ( $\mu = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ), and indulge self/family ( $\mu = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ).

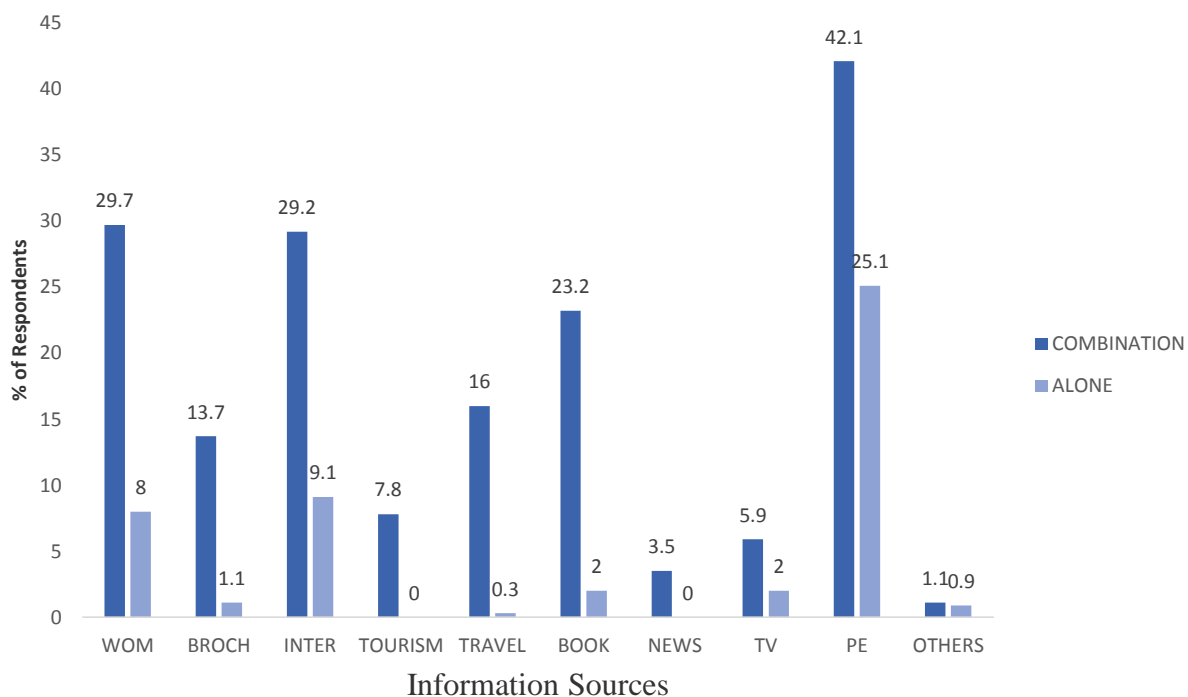
About 77% percent of respondents used their own vehicle as transportation. Hotel was reported as the primary accommodation by about 37% of the respondents. On average: travel group size was 4.59 adults, budget \$564.61, length of stay 5.73 days, and number of activities participated 2. The most popular activities included scenic drives, visiting protected areas and hiking.

### **3.1 Decisive information sources and complementary sources**

In terms of information source choices, both decisive and complementary sources were identified.

Figure 1 showed that the majority of the respondents tended to use personal experience (42.1%), Word of Mouth (29.7%), and the Internet (29.2%) as sources of information. The second groups of mostly used information sources were books (23.2%), travel agent (16%), and brochures (13.7%). The least frequently used information sources were newspaper (3.5%), television and radio (5.9%), and tourism welcome centers (7.8%). When information sources were examined in terms of being used alone as a sole and decisive source, only three distinguished groups were identified, namely, personal experience (25.1%), Internet (9.1%), and Word of Mouth (8%). These sources were referred to as the decisive sources because they were the leading information sources that were used alone as a sole source of information by most visitors when they planned their trip. All the others were complementary sources of information as they were mostly used in combination with other sources. Welcome centers and newspapers were never used alone as sole sources of information.

Figure 1. Information Sources Used by Respondents



Note. WOM: word of mouth; BROCH: brochures; INTER: Internet; TOURISM: tourism information center; TRAVEL: travel agency; BOOK: books & magazines; NEWS: newspaper; TV: television; PE: personal experience.

### 3.2 Information search strategy and trip outcomes

There was a significant information source difference in length of stay between those who used personal experience and those who used other sources,  $F(1, 337) = 3.38, p = .067$ . Those who used personal-experience had significantly shorter length of stay (Table 1). This finding could imply that these types of visitors are repeat visitors who visit frequently for specific targeted experiences, therefore, they don't need more time to learn and explore the destination as would be first-time or less experienced visitors. These visitors know the state and destinations well enough to just spend their time on specific experiences they enjoy.

Information sources that have significant effect on visitors' activities include personal experience,  $F(1, 337) = 10.05, p = .002$ , Internet,  $F(1, 337) = 10.03, p = .002$ , and word of mouth  $F(1, 337) = 11.10, p = .001$ . Visitors who utilized these sources tended to participate in more activities than those who didn't. The combined use of all the three resources significantly increased the number of activities participated in by visitors (Table 1)  $F(2, 336) = 12.94, p < .001$ .

In terms of total budget, there were significant differences between visitors who used both word of mouth and the Internet as information sources, and those who didn't,  $F(2, 333) = 2.62, p = .07$ . The former were associated with more spending than the latter (See Table 1).

Table 1

## Significant Relationships between Trip Outcomes and Leisure Visitor's Information Sources

Outcome Variables	Information Sources	Mean Difference	ANOVA
NO_DAYS	PE	4.1900	Yes<No*
NO. of ACT	PE	.0880	Yes>No**
	WOM	1.0322	Yes>No***
	INTER	1.7359	Yes>No**
	WOMINTER	1.6584	2>0***
		1.1525	2>1**
	WOMPE	2.0500	2>1>0**
	PEINTER	1.8952	2>1>0**
	ALL3	.92888	1>0*
		2.2092	2>0***
		3.1381	3>0***
	1.5794	3>2***	
TOTAL_B	WOMINTER	838.1900	1>2>0*

*Note.* WOM: word of mouth, PE: personal experience, INTER: Internet, ALL3: combination of WOM, PE and Internet. NO\_DAYS: length of stay, NO. of ACT: number of activities, TOTAL\_B: total budgets.

\*  $P < .10$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

### 3.3 Information search strategy and travel motivation

Significant relationships were noted between travel motivation and information search strategy. Travel books and magazines tended to be important sources of information for visitors driven by the need to, seek adventure,  $\chi^2(4) = 10.84, p = .028$ , and visit historical sites,  $\chi^2(4) = 10.95, p = .027$ , and mix with other tourists,  $\chi^2(4) = 13.68, p = .008$ . Personal experience was an important source of information for those whose motivation was to reconnect with friends and family,  $\chi^2(4) = 18.78, p = .001$ , and to engage in sporting activities,  $\chi^2(4) = 10.51, p = .033$ . Tourism information centers were also important to those visitors whose motivation was to reconnect with friends and family,  $\chi^2(4) = 14.61, p = .006$ , and/or to enjoy good weather,  $\chi^2(4) = 10.05, p = .04$ . Those visiting to reconnect with friends and family are most likely to be already familiar with the destination, but may need information on current events and activities they can engage in while visiting. And tourism information centers are a good source of that kind of information.

#### 4.0 Conclusion and management implications

The results showed personal experience (PE) as the most common source of information followed by the internet and word-of-mouth (WOM) in that order. However, results also show that these main sources were used mostly in combination with each other. There were significant and non-significant relationships between visitor motivation, trip outcomes and search strategy. Search strategy had significant effect on outcomes including: number of activities participated in, length of stay and visitor spending, which was in accordance with the findings in the literature (Fodness & Murray, 1999). Respondents with different motivations tended to have different preferences for information sources.

Findings from this study can help destination marketers select appropriate information channels for the variety of target markets they intend to pursue. It also helps marketers align their marketing resources and information sources with the desired outcomes. Based on the findings, the Internet should be used as an important channel to communicate with both current and potential visitors. It is also critical that destination management focuses on customer service and satisfaction, since both personal experience and word-of-mouth were seen to be important and decisive sources of information. Personal experience comes from repeat visitation and both repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth come from satisfied customers. As visitors with different motivations have certain preference in information sources, a destination should be clear about what kinds of visitors are its target market and learn about those potential visitors' characteristics, and then distribute destination information throughout the channels the visitors prefer.

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