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ABSTRACT

This research attempted to examine the effects of perceived tourism benefits on travel behavior based on the model of attitude importance. The results showed that the three factors of perceived tourism benefits – experiential, health, and relaxation benefits, had positive albeit weak effects on travel behavior through attitude importance, while the direct effects of the three benefit factors on travel behavior were not supported, which indicates that the tourism industry can encourage people to travel more by convincing them taking vacations is beneficial.

Keywords: *benefits of tourism, attitude importance, travel behavior*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, defined as taking a pleasure trip outside an individual's usual environment, is seen as an integral feature of human life for many people in the developed world (Richards 1999). Therefore, scholars from different disciplines have endeavored to investigate the contribution of tourism to subjective well-being (Gilbert and Abdullah 2004; Sirgy, Kruger, Lee, and Yu 2011), health (de Bloom, Kompier, Geurts, de Weerth, Taris, and Sonnentag 2009; Fritz and Sonnentag, 2006), and recovery from stress experienced at work (Etzion 2003; Kühnel and Sonnentag, 2011). These studies have demonstrated that people often feel happier, healthier, and more relaxed after a pleasure trip. However, there is a lack of research on how people perceive the benefits of tourism and how these perceptions influence their travel behavior. Thus, the primary purpose of this research was to examine the effects of perceived tourism benefits on travel behavior based on the model of attitude importance (Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, and Fabriga 2005).

According to Boninger et al. (1995), attitude importance refers to the extent to which an individual ascribes psychological significance to an attitude. It has been demonstrated that important attitudes might instigate the process of knowledge accumulation, and subsequently influence thinking and action (Boninger et al. 1995; Holbrook, Berent, Krosnick, and Boninger 2005). Previous studies have also showed that people are more likely to attach personal importance to an attitude when they feel their own well-being may be directly influenced by an issue, their (Boninger et al., 1995; Holbrook et al. 2005). Therefore, the model of attitude importance provides a linkage between perceived tourism benefits and travel behavior.

Moreover, the concept of attitude importance is more likely to be apparent in situations of deliberative processing that people have to deliberately plan out their thoughts and behaviors in order to make a decision (Boninger et al., 1995a). Given that tourism products are intangible, purchasing a tourism service often involves deliberative processing of both internal and external information (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). Therefore, it is argued that

attitude importance should be an important concept to understand the dynamics behind the purchase of tourism services.

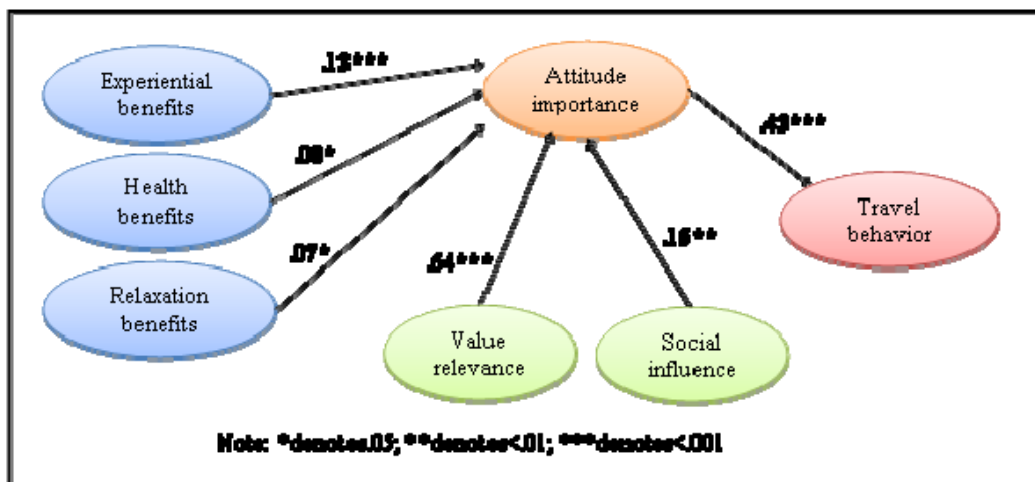
METHODS

Before examining the effects of perceived benefits, a reliable and valid scale of perceived benefits of tourism was needed. Unfortunately, existing scales of perceived tourism benefits seemingly failed to incorporate some of the fundamentally important items or factors related to tourism benefits, particularly the perceived health benefits of travel. Therefore, a total of three online panel surveys were implemented based on the procedures of scale development as suggested by Churchill (1979) and Netemeyer et al. (2003). These three studies included: (1) a preliminary study (n=566) to elicit new benefit items, (2) a pilot study (n=434) to trim down the number of items and initially assess scale reliability and validity, and (3) a main survey (n=559) to finalize the scale. The participants in the three surveys were randomly selected from a list of qualified online panelists from a survey company's database. As a result, several items associated with health benefits were elicited from the preliminary study; in the later stages of scale development, these items were identified and validated as a convergent dimension of perceived benefits. The concept of perceived tourism benefits was also shown to be the composite of experiential, health, and relaxation benefits.

RESULTS

Several hypotheses pertaining to the effect of perceived tourism benefits on travel behavior and the applicability of the attitude importance model in tourism were tested. As shown in Figure 1, the results showed that the direct effects of the three benefit factors on travel behavior were not significant ($P > .05$). However, each benefit factor had an indirect effect on travel behavior through attitude importance even when the effects of social influence ($\beta = .15$, $P < .001$) and value relevance ($\beta = .64$, $P < .001$) on attitude importance were controlled. In general, the variance associated with travel behavior was mostly explained by value relevance (nearly 7%), while the three benefit factors only explained about 1% of the variance. Therefore, it was concluded that: (1) the applicability of the attitude-importance model in a tourism context was supported; and, (2) the three factors of perceived tourism benefits – experiential, health, and relaxation benefits, had positive albeit weak effects on travel behavior through attitude importance, but the direct effects of the three benefit factors on travel behavior were not supported.

Figure 1
Study Results



CONCLUSIONS

These results had several theoretical and practical implications. First, while previous tourism studies on tourists' information search have tended to incorporate information search behavior in the context of vacation planning, this research demonstrated that the accumulation of product-related knowledge can be on a regular basis. Second, while previous tourism studies have a strong preference for the evaluative features of attitudes, this research found demonstrated that attitude importance as a dimension of attitude strength is relevant in tourism in that perceived importance of vacationing was shown to have a positive effect on travel behavior. Finally, the experiential, health, and relaxation benefits were shown to have positive effects on travel behavior, which indicates that the tourism industry can encourage people to travel more by convincing them taking vacations is beneficial.

It is worth noting that the effects of the three benefit factors on travel behavior were shown to be weak. One of the explanations is the heterogeneity of the respondents in terms of their beliefs about tourism benefits. Moreover, this research operationalized travel behavior as frequency of travel, while other dimensions of behavior - such as the amount of travel days or travel spending, were not included in the analysis. Therefore, operationalizing travel behavior as frequency of travel is a limitation of this research, which might also contribute to low variance explained for travel behavior.

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