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A Dual Process Approach to Understand Tourists' Destination Choice Processes

Introduction

Individuals' mental representations of destinations, often referred to as destination image, is a key research area in the tourism discipline (Dolnicar and Grün 2013) as it enables researchers and managers to understand tourists' choices of destinations. Albeit being a fundamental concept in tourism research, it has suffered from substantial conceptual and operational shortcomings, resulting in frequent calls for a better understanding of how individuals use information about destinations to arrive at destination choices (e.g. Beerli and Martin 2004; Fakeye and Crompton 1991; Ramkissoon and Uysal 2011). We add to this assertion that studies on mental destination representations over the recent four decades focused almost exclusively on the structure of these representations but not on how individuals mentally process these representations to arrive at destination choices. In other words, destination choice processes are only scarcely investigated while destination image studies are frequently conducted.

Recently, two studies by Kock, Josiassen and Assaf (2016) and Josiassen, Assaf, Woo and Kock (2016) suggested that individuals understand and judge a destination by forming and using not one, but multiple distinct mental representations about that destination. This recent multi-dimensional conceptualization, the destination content model (DCM; Kock et al. 2016) enables us to develop a theoretically anchored dual-process model of mental destination representations. Specifically, while Josiassen et al. (2016) conceptualize and Kock et al. (2016) measure the components of mental destination representations, we theoretically develop a conceptual framework that outlines how these representations are factored in destination choice processes.

This study draws on the dual-process theories in psychology and applies them to the study of destination image by developing a theoretical model that explains how the three DCM components serve as inputs for destination choice processes. Dual-process theories and the idea of two co-existing mental operating systems are prevalent in the literature on reasoning (e.g. Evans 2008; Sloman 1996), preference construction and decision making (e.g. Kahneman and Frederick 2005). The assumption of a dual mental state has motivated considerable research across disciplines and is implicitly assumed in different academic areas such as marketing (e.g. Homburg, Koschate and Hoyer 2006), stereotyping (e.g. Cuddy, Fiske and Glick 2007) or social judgements (e.g. Forgas 1994). However, understanding tourists' preference towards a destination as a result of a 'dual mind' process has not been investigated before. The present study addresses this potentially insightful issue.

Dual processing theories of the mind

When people engage in mental activities such as forming impressions, evaluating or selecting alternatives, research indicates that they make use of two different processing strategies. Dual-process models (Chaiken 1980) are one of the oldest and most influential approaches to understand the complex nature of human thought. For decades in cognitive and social psychology, dual-process models explain how people understand, store and retrieve information (e.g. Evans 2008). All these models have in common the distinction between processes that are controlled and conscious, and those that are relatively automatic and unconscious. Specifically, research has used various labels to describe and study the idea of two co-existing mental systems, such as intuitive/analytic, reflexive/reflective, experiential/rational, System 1 and System 2 or heuristic/systematic processes.

In the following, we apply dual processing theories of the mind to the established DCM and its three components. We develop a destination choice model that explains how the components in the DCM resemble distinct processing modes. By doing this, we aim to significantly extend researchers' understanding of how destination image is mentally processed and translates into behavioral intentions. As such, this study addresses the call from Kock et al. (2016, p. 42) that "future research needs to provide an understanding of the mental processes that exist among these mental structures".

Destination Choice Processes

The DCM is organized in three distinct, yet related components: destination imagery, destination affect and destination image. We argue that these components that co-exist in the mind of individuals serve different purposes and are differently processed.

Destination Image

Destination image (DI) is an overall cognitive evaluation the individual holds about a destination. It is not a host of different and more or less descriptive associations about a destination but an evaluative condensate of these associations that exist in the mind of an individual (Kock et al. 2016). It does not have to be formed for each evaluation or choice but exists in the mind of the individual (Josiassen et al. 2016). Individuals can use it as a readily accessible mental shortcut to make judgments and decisions about a destination efficiently. DI may therefore be processed when involvement with the object of the decision is low or cognitive effort is limited (e.g. time pressure).

We suggest that the concept of DI is theoretically anchored in the System 1 processing that reflects an intuitive and heuristic mental processing mode. According to the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken 1980), heuristic processing involves the use of simple and readily accessible mental cues that are stored in the mind of the individual. This study defines heuristic processing as a “strategy that ignores part of the information, with the goal of making decisions more quickly, frugally, and/or accurately than more complex methods” (Gigerenzer and Gassmaier 2011, p. 454). A heuristic assesses target attributes (e.g. whether the destination is worth visiting) by another single property (i.e. substitution). This single property (i.e. a single cue) comes more readily to mind, has higher valence and direct implications (Kahneman and Frederick 2005). That is, instead of systematically weighting various beliefs to arrive at a decision, a heuristic is a mental short-cut that informs decision-making right away.

Destination affect

Destination affect (DA) is defined “as an individual’s overall affect attributed to a destination” (Kock et al. 2016, p. 33) and reflects basic feelings of good or bad that individuals experience towards a destination. Similar to DI, we argue that individuals also make use of their feelings as a heuristic cue that is readily available to inform choices. The heuristic nature of feelings has been most comprehensively elaborated in the affect heuristic theory (Slovic, Finucane, Peters and MacGregor 2007) that highlights the importance of feelings in guiding judgments and decisions because they imply highly accessible valence. Specifically, affective states are directly linked to rapid bipolar good-bad judgements as they occur without cognitive effort, are often unconscious and intuitive. Slovic et al. (2007, p. 1336) implicitly describe the nature of DA by describing the affect heuristic as a process in which ‘images, marked by positive and negative affective feelings, guide judgment and decision making.’ This theory argues that people attend to their feeling as a unique source of information and use the valence of their feelings to infer the direction of their predispositions and preferences towards the stimulus of their feelings, ultimately affecting behavior. DA is a manifestation of an individual’s heuristic reliance on his feelings, and thus informs it for intuitive judgments and decision-making at low mental cost.

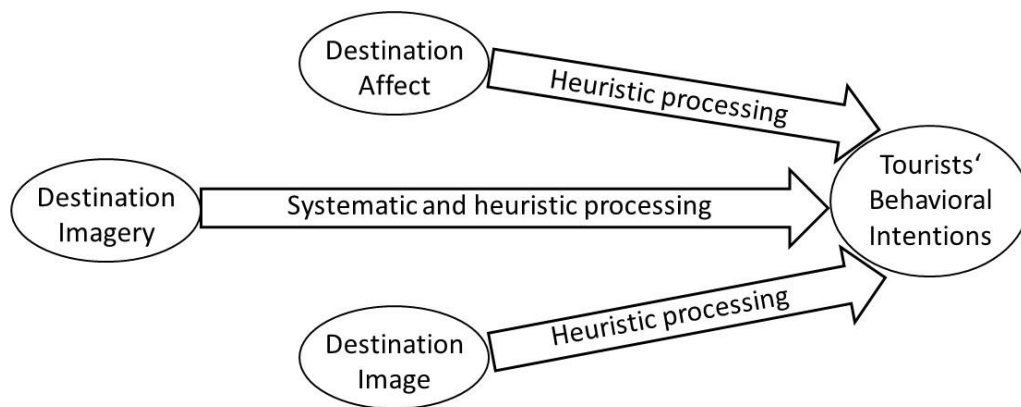
Destination Imagery

In addition to DI and DA, individuals also hold various, potentially unrelated associations or beliefs about a destination. Such mostly descriptive associations regarding a destination are labelled the destination imagery (DY), defined as “an individual’s diverse cognitive and affective associations relating to a destination” (Kock et al. 2016). These associations have been, consciously or subconsciously, collected by the individual from different sources, such as own experiences or media, and are stored as single associations in the individual’s memory.

We argue that DY, in contrast to DI and DA, serves a System 2 processing mode. System 2 is slower, systematic and effortful as it takes various associations into account (Evans 2008). When individuals make judgments or construct preferences based on their DY, they have to process the various

associations, weight and evaluate them in order to arrive at a choice. They do so by applying more or less computational elaboration that weights all the attributes and mentally reflects on their value. This systematic elaboration is reflected in the operationalization suggested by Kock et al. (2016) but can also be found in more traditional accounts of attitude formation (e.g. Ajzen 2001). However, specific associations that comprise DY may also serve as the input for less demanding cognitive processing. As such, individuals may draw on DY and perform heuristics such as elimination by aspects, constructed preferences or calculating comparative advantages. For example, a mental process guided by elaboration by aspects would filter the DY for a specific cue (e.g. ‘sunshine duration’) and arrive at a decision accordingly.

Figure 1 visualizes the destination choice model in the DCM:



Conclusion

Extending the destination image literature by applying mental processing modes provides important contributions for both academicians and tourism managers. Mapping distinct destination choice processes enables researchers to not merely measuring a destination image but to understand how individuals ‘use’ this image to make travel decisions. Importantly, many contextualized factors such as involvement, financial risk, physical risk or time pressure may determine whether individuals use systematic or heuristic mental processing, and thus on which component they draw. For managers, the different processing styles allow to develop a tourist typology. For example, some tourists may solely draw on their destination affect (‘gut feelings’) when choosing a destination while others may systematically weight all relevant attributes of a destination. Further, other tourists may use elimination by aspects and select, for example, the cheapest or safest destination.

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