

The Importance of the **Internet** in **Travel Planning** and **Destination** Choice of the **Independent Traveller**

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Abstract | This paper sees the Internet as an important source of information for independent travellers, but that it is predominantly used in conjunction with more traditional information sources. It also concludes that the Internet cannot be considered as a single resource, as the Internet has the ability to transcend the divides between commerciality and personalisation. In order to establish this importance, and the contribution that the Internet has made to the way in which independent travellers select their destinations, a quantitative survey of independent travellers was conducted. This survey investigated the relationships between the Internet and destination choice by testing a series of hypotheses. This study explores the importance of this technology to the independent traveller, and how use of the Internet as a tool for the distribution of information on a destination can have a bearing on the independent travellers' decision-making and planning processes.

Keywords | Independent Traveller, Destination, Backpacker, Online Traveller.

Resumo | Neste artigo considera-se a Internet uma fonte de informação importante para viajantes independentes, mas que é utilizada predominantemente em conjunto com outras fontes de informação tradicionais. Conclui-se também que a Internet não deve ser considerada apenas como um instrumento tecnológico, na medida em que esta permite ao utilizador a personalização e a comercialização do produto. A fim de analisar esta importância e a influência que a Internet tem tido no modo como os viajantes independentes seleccionam os seus destinos, foi realizada uma pesquisa quantitativa. Nesta pesquisa investigaram-se as relações entre a Internet e a escolha dos destinos testando várias hipóteses. O estudo explora a importância desta tecnologia para o viajante independente, e analisa como o uso da Internet enquanto ferramenta de distribuição de informação de um destino pode apoiar o processo de tomada de decisão dos viajantes independentes.

Palavras-chave | Viajante Independente, Destino, *Backpacker*, Viajante On-line.

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1. Introduction

Hanna and Millar (1997) believe the Internet is a great marketing tool for tourist regions. This is backed up by Liddell (2003) who discusses the huge growth in the online travel market and claims that this is the ideal medium for searching for travel products. The use of this technology in the market place has also been seen as crucial to the expansion of the industry (Buhalis, 2003). It is with this in mind, that the study seeks to explore how important this technology is to the tourists themselves; focusing on independent travellers and the influence that the Internet has had on their destination choice and holiday planning.

Whilst the effect of the Internet on the marketing and distribution of tourist products and services is well documented, the influences that this may have on the choice of destination has not been fully explored. Through exploration of the factors behind destination choice this study aims to prove the following research question:

What contribution has the Internet made to the way in which independent travellers select their destinations and plan their journeys?

2. Independent travel and destinations

The literature covering the motivation for travel has been well documented, as has that for demand. This is in contrast to the literature covering the technological aspects, which are in academic terms relatively new developments. Whilst the range and application of these technologies is well documented, less is known about how this may impact on the destination choice for the consumer. The destination life cycle is of great importance, as it is influenced by the motivation and demand of the tourists. Technology fits in as a tool to enable destination managers to convey information,

promote and facilitate travel to their area, but it is not known how such technology influences the decision-making of the tourists themselves.

2.1. Motivation and demand for travel

Numerous factors motivate people to travel; therefore a need for understanding of these forces is important to those who are involved in the industry in order to better understand the consumer. One such method of analysing the motivational forces behind a tourist's willingness to travel is the identification of a "hierarchy of needs". This suggests that some things in a person's life need to be fulfilled before they progress to the next level (Maslow, 1987 as cited in Holloway, 2002:65). It is claimed that tourism and travel help in the fulfilment of these psychological needs (Holloway, 2002).

Besides motivation there are additional factors that influence the demand for tourism. These are known as "determinants" (Cooper *et al.*, 1998:40). These have a bearing on a person's opportunities for travel, and have the potential to impede it if the conditions are not favourable. Both motivators and determinants coexist and are reliant upon each other, so both factors must be present in order to fulfil the demand. On a simple level, the determinants are factors such as money, time, health, climate and access to the destination; all of which are factors that could restrict the demand.

Cooper *et al.* (1998:40-46) segregate these determinants into two groups, termed lifestyle and life cycle, although it is made clear that these are interrelated. Lifestyle determinants feature income and employment. An individual's demand for tourism needs to be financed in some way, so that income is an important indicator. Those with a higher disposable income have increased opportunities for travel. The other factor associated with income and employment is the amount of time available for travel. This category also includes education, mobility, race and gender.

The second category is that of life cycle determinants. This claims that their age, marital status and number of dependants affects the demand and ability of a person to travel. Torkildsen (1992, cited in Hall and Page, 2002:37) classified influences on participation in leisure. These classifications are: personal, social and circumstantial, and opportunity factors. The purpose of these groups is to aid in identification of the barriers that prohibit people from participating in tourism.

The influences identified within the groupings are numerous, but by no means exhaustive. The "personal" influences constitute basic factors such as age, gender, marital status and number of dependants along with more complex aspects such as personality traits and cultural backgrounds. The "social and circumstantial" grouping designates education, income, environmental factors and time amongst its influences. The final classification, "opportunity factors" lists resources, access and facilities within its constraints.

The main characteristic of this model is that it identifies two forms of suppressed demand. Deferred demand is the state, in which the suppliers of tourism products and services cannot fulfil the demand. This is distinct from the situation of potential demand, which implies there is a willingness to travel, but that it is suppressed by factors in the person's life, whether economic or social, thus inhibiting a person from acting upon their motivation. The other pinpointed variants of demand are, "effective demand"; which constitutes the existing market or those who are already participating in tourism, and "no demand", the final category which distinguishes those with no desire to travel or a lack of motivation. This final form renders the "determinants" irrelevant.

2.2. Independent travel

The term "independent traveller" is commonly used, but is often very ambiguous in its meaning.

Therefore a clear definition of what independent travel represents is required in order to investigate and explore the concepts surrounding it. Plog (1977) classified tourists and destinations on a scale ranging from allocentric to psychocentric. Psychocentric tourists tend to seek familiar surroundings and are unadventurous in their destination choice. For these reasons this typography of traveller would be likely to feel most comfortable on either an escorted tour or a package holiday.

Independent travellers are not always as well received as their mass counterparts. In Bhutan a ban was imposed on such travellers as they were seen as a threat to the *gross national happiness* of the country (Wood and House, 1991 as cited in Scheyvens, 2002a: 146). Some governments discourage independent travel because of the lack of regulation and control that can be opposed on such tourists. This is particularly true in the case of communist states such as North Korea who are keen to attract the foreign earnings from overseas visitors, but wish to maintain strict control over their movements (Wood, 1998). Such policies will obviously impact upon the destination choice of such travellers.

However, the main opposition to independent travel comes from governments who associate it with backpackers and budget travellers. Both of whom are perceived as offering little economic benefits to the destination due to their limited spending power. However, those travelling independently on a budget and/or for extended periods are likely to contribute more to the local economy because of their likeliness to purchase local goods and services (Hampton, 1998; Scheyvens, 2002b).

2.3. Backpackers

Many terms have been used to describe backpackers including: "drifters" (Cohen, 1973), "wanderers" (Vogt, 1976) and "budget travellers" (Riley, 1988) as cited in Hampton (1998:641).

Whichever term is applied, it is generally thought that backpacker tourists can be defined as:

“people desirous of extending their travels beyond that of cyclical holidays, and, hence the necessity of living on a budget... they are escaping from the dullness and monotony of their everyday routine, from their jobs, from making decisions about careers, and the desire to delay or postpone work, marriage and other responsibilities” (Riley, 1988:317)

These people can quite clearly be identified by their allocentrism according to Plog’s classification, and in most cases they are viewed as being at the extreme of this scale. The market for this form of travel has expanded enormously due to greater awareness and the changing nature of the industry. This is particularly so in South East Asia and Latin America where many backpackers congregate on travel routes that have been well established in catering for these travellers (Hampton, 1998; Mann, 1999).

2.4. Budget and youth travel

Riley (1988) used the term “budget traveller” to describe the phenomenon of backpacker tourism. But whilst backpackers are likely to be travelling on a budget, there are other categories of budget traveller. Even domestic tourists can be viewed as budget travellers if they have opted for domestic travel due to financial restraints.

The student travel market forms a large proportion of this sector. Whilst this does incorporate “gap year” students and those on long-term and working holidays, including backpacker expeditions, it is by no means exclusive to these forms of travel. Many school groups and educational visits are taken by students each year and whilst many of these are booked through specialist agents and tour operators, there are a great deal of trips undertaken that constitute independent travel. Indeed educational

and independent travel is a much larger market in terms of younger travellers than is the “sun, sea, sand and sex” tourism that is commonly associated with this age group (Clarke, 1992).

3. Destination choice

The choice of destination is the subsequent problem posed to the traveller once they have decided to travel. To attempt to understand this process numerous models have been devised to try and explain how such decisions are made. The factors influencing such decisions are classified into two groups; “push” factors that come from the individual themselves, such as attitudes, knowledge and preferences; and “pull” factors which are external influences on the individual’s choice.

A differing approach is taken by Um and Crompton (1990) who propose two phases in the destination choice process. Phase one, whether to travel or not, and phase two, where to go. The foundation to this theory is that there is a trade-off between the attributes of the product (destination) and the attitudes of the consumer. Seddighi and Theocharous (2002) apply a combination of a product characteristic approach and a consumer oriented approach, as they feel that whilst a basic concept of destination choice is possible, it needs to have both methodological and theoretical elements to aid in the identification of the process. In this respect their work and Um and Crompton’s product/consumer model would seem to offer a clearer perspective and more simplified explanation of the process.

Van Raaij and Francken (1984) propose a five-point sequence of decision-making¹. This sequence begins with a generic decision, which is then honed into a specific destination by the acquisition of information, followed by a joint

¹ Adapted from those proposed by Engel and Blackwell (1982).

decision-making process in the case of more than one traveller. The final two factors deal with holiday activities and any satisfaction or complaints. This sequence is meant to highlight the stages in which the travel industry seeks to undermine the concept that travel expenditure is discretionary. This is backed up by Sirakaya, Sönmez and Choi (2000) who view tourists as rational decision makers who allocate their disposable income to travel in the same way as other goods and services.

3.1. The destination life cycle

As with most products, it is suggested that destinations also have a life cycle (Butler, 1980). This is very closely linked with destination choice, as if a destination is to continue to attract tourists it must be aware of their decision-making processes. Not only can this assist in the retaining of the current market for that particular location, but the attraction of a new market segment could also have a profound impact (Hovinen, 2002).

The image of a destination is crucial in this process and this may not necessarily be within the control of the destination itself. One example of this would be acts of terrorism, since if such a risk were perceived it has the potential to destroy the image of the area concerned (Sönmez and Graefe, 1998). This is plausible even in situations where it is a neighbouring, or similar region that carries such a risk and therefore may attract unwarranted or unfounded perception of risk within the destination region.

3.2. Trip planning

The choice of destination is the biggest decision in planning any trip, although it is not necessarily the primary concern. There is evidence to suggest

that those who are high consumers of information regarding their destination tend to participate in more activities and spend more per day in the destination area (Woodside and King, 2001). Such information comes from a plethora of sources including commercial organisations wishing to promote their product, governments promoting their country to attract tourism, those wishing to share their experiences, and other information providers such as guidebook publishers.

Such information is seen as both a threat and an opportunity for destinations. This is because it has the potential to influence attitudes and behaviour, which cannot be altered without new information or experience. Fodness and Murray (1997) identified external and internal typologies for information searches. Initial searches are said to be internal, which is associated with prior experience. If this proves insufficient then the search is extended wider to include external sources².

The reason for such an extensive search is based on the fact that holiday purchase carries far more risk than most other day-to-day purchases (Holloway and Plant, 1992). Woodside and Ronkainen (1980) found that the level of planning increased when the distance to be travelled was greater. This backs up the theory that planning is largely about risk reduction.

4. The internet and tourism

The previous chapter sought to understand the reasoning behind the will to travel and the choice of destination. The identification of the "push" and "pull" factors within the destination choice decision is an important one, since it is the "pull" factors that can be manipulated by the destination itself through marketing and other means. Technology can play a big role in this, since the world of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) is opening up new means of communication and bringing

² Money and Crofts (2003) and Kozak (2002) investigate if national culture can affect this process.

greater access to information. Consequently, such technologies are capable of bringing a big change in the way people select their destination and are becoming a major influence in stimulating both a desire to travel and a wider and more informed choice in the destination decision-making process (Archdale, 1996).

4.1. The online travel marketplace

Technology plays an important role within the tourism industry particularly with the rapid development of the sector. As a result of this ICTs have altered the relationships between the supplier, the customer, and the intermediary (Sheldon, 1997). This is a result of new technology enabling new competitors to enter the market, particularly with the Internet affording a low-cost distribution channel and breaking down the barriers to entry. Buhalis (2003) cogitated the idea that consumers lacking in time appreciate increased efficiency in the process of travel planning and booking, often more than differentiation of the product or cost savings.

The Internet and the advent of "Internet applications" that can provide interfaces allowing easier access to online information (Rischpater, 2001) are assisting widely in making this efficiency a major source of competitive advantage in the industry. Low-cost airlines have proved to be the biggest success in capitalising on the Internet as a distribution tool (Calder, 2002), using it both to increase efficiency in the booking process and to take advantage of the costs savings such technology has over traditional distribution channels (Buhalis and Laws, 2001).

4.2. The online destination

Santana (2001) views information technology as a crucial development tool for destinations. At the heart of this are the possibilities for suppliers to *act*

on a global basis (Santana, 2001:88). This is said to contribute to making the world a much smaller place for the suppliers and ultimately leading to the rapid growth of new and emerging destinations. Hanna and Millar (1997) believe the Internet is a great marketing tool for tourist regions. This is backed up by Liddell (2003) who, on the huge growth in the online travel market, claimed that this was the ideal medium for searching for travel products. The use of this technology in the market place has also been seen as crucial to the expansion of the industry (Buhalis, 2003).

A further benefit of such technology is the marketing information and opportunities that it can provide. With the growing importance of information and the ability to store and process this data continuously developing, such technology is seen as critical to success in the online travel world to gain a competitive advantage (Wöber, 2003). This is true not just of travel service providers, but also of the destinations themselves. This is increasingly so in an age where disintermediation is occurring and more people are avoiding agents and making their own travel arrangements (Anckar and Walden, 2000).

Destinations have taken technology as a means of promoting their products, and these are said to be a possible source of reducing negative impacts of a social, cultural or environmental nature (Buhalis, 1997). Such technology also provides a means for travellers to share information on a destination, posing many benefits and challenges for those involved in destination management and promotion (Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier, 2002). Consumer access to computer systems needs to become increasingly easy, so that larger proportions of the public feel comfortable using it (Sheldon, 1997). Such systems are constantly being developed and will consequently assert greater influence on the destination planners and promoters.

Buhalis (2000) professes that tourist destinations are amalgams of tourist products. The evolving technology of the Internet is providing a means; therefore, forming a greater tailored "package" that

is the independent traveller’s destination. This is as a result of the ability to pick and choose individual elements of the tourist product from numerous sources and thus create a unique experience for the individual(s) concerned.

4.3. Destination management systems

Destination managements systems (DMSs) are systems that utilise technology for the provision of information on locally available attractions and tourist information. The aim of these systems being to stimulate interest and ultimately, higher numbers of visitors (Sussmann and Baker, 1996). It is said that one of the benefits of using such a system is to reduce seasonality problems with visitor flows by *spreading and balancing tourism demand* (Buhalis, 2003:95).

4.4. Online travel planning

Before the advent of the Internet facilitated the process of researching and planning a trip many people relied upon their own experiences and “push” factors dominated the destination choice decision. But this does not mean that traditional sources of destination information have been rendered obsolete, indeed guidebooks such as those published by Lonely Planet are more popular than ever, having increased from a single publication in 1973 to a range of 650 guidebooks in 2003. (www.lonelyplanet.com, 2003).

Lonely Planet is also targeting independent travellers in their adoption of new technology as a means of distributing their travel information. One such development is the creation of an “online bulletin board” known as Thorntree that allows travellers to discuss and communicate with each other. However, in a shift away from technological innovation, the company decided to abandon its guidebook updates that were available via the

Internet, in favour of publishing more frequent editions of its traditional guides (www.lonelyplanet.com, 2003).

It is said that those planning travel online carry out a variety of tasks, with the most popular being searching for fares and timetables, looking for accommodation and acquiring maps or directions (Buhalis, 2003). A survey in the United States found that frequent leisure travellers were using the Internet for around 50% of their travel planning and had been using the Internet in excess of two years (TIA, 2001 as cited in Buhalis, 2003:124). However, research suggests that many Internet users still use traditional intermediaries to book their trip (Buhalis, 2003).

Fodness and Murray (1997) classified the range of sources available to the travel planner in a matrix (Figure 1). Whilst useful in its classification the model is not exhaustive in the range of materials identified and is more likely to represent those consulted by a mass tourist. This is because independent travellers are likely to be more thorough in their planning and therefore draw on a greater number of resources (*ibid.*). The reasoning being that such travellers incur greater financial restraints, are travelling greater distances from home and are likely to be spending extended periods abroad. Therefore, the risk involved is far more critical for such travellers.

		Type of information	
		Impersonal	Personal
Source of information	Commercial	Brochures Guidebooks Local tourist offices State travel guides	Auto clubs Travel agents
	Non-commercial	Magazines Newspapers	Friends or relatives Highway welcome centres Personal experience

Source: Fodness and Murray, 1997: 506.

Figure 1 | Classification of tourist information services.

Further criticism of Fodness and Murray's model is necessary, as it fails to reflect the advances in technology and the breadth of resources currently available for travel planning, the Internet being the most notable of these. This model is also an American one and includes sources such as highway welcome centres and auto clubs, which are tourist information centres in motorway service stations and motoring organisations respectively. These may not be of relevance in other parts of the world where such information is not provided from those sources. Besides this, the Internet is restructuring this model by blurring the distinction between the classifications. This is particularly true in the case of commercial and non-commercial information sources.

The Internet may be considered a single communications tool, but in fact it is an integrated package of communications functions. Whilst the majority of online travel planning focuses on the World Wide Web and the searching of online resources via the use of a web browser, this is not the sole means of travel information acquisition. Electronic mail, chat rooms and online conferencing can all be used as an integral part of retrieving information via Internet resources.

As a result of this there are "online communities" where people can meet and discuss their travel experiences over the Internet (Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier, 2002). This is supported by Buhalis (2003) who reports on Lonely Planet's electronic equivalent of its guidebooks and the decision to encourage feedback on travel experience for others to view. It is said *consumers trust consumers better than the industry* (Buhalis, 2003:103); therefore these online discussion groups are likely to become more common, particularly amongst independent travellers.

5. Research methodology

5.1. Research objectives

This research focuses on the Internet and destination choice and asks how important the role of the Internet is in the planning of independent travel. The study is of a hypothesis testing nature utilising a quantitative research design. The reasoning behind this choice is the need to gauge the importance of the Internet in the destination choice of the independent traveller and that a hypothesis testing approach affords this as a result of its ability to explain the nature of relationships, establish differences among groups, or the independence of two or more factors in a given situation (Sekaran, 2003).

This study will test specific hypotheses in order to achieve these objectives. These hypotheses are as follows:

- H1 There is no significant relationship between gender and the resources, experience of online travel resources, destination characteristics and future behaviour.
- H2 There is no significant relationship between previous visits to a destination and the resources, experience of online travel resources, destination characteristics and future behaviour.
- H3 There is no significant relationship between age and the resources, experience of online travel resources, destination characteristics and future behaviour.
- H4 There is no significant relationship between the level of education and the resources and experience of online travel resources, destination characteristics and future behaviour.
- H5 There is no significant relationship between the level of Internet use and the resources, experience of online travel resources, destination characteristics and future behaviour.

H6 The six independent variables of future behaviour, questions 1 and 2, and experience of online travel resources, questions 2 to 5, will not predict independent travellers' importance of the Internet in travel planning.

5.2. Data collection methods

5.2.1. Primary data

The collection of primary data was conducted in the form of a structured questionnaire. This is because such a format provides the ideal medium for the testing of the formulated hypotheses; designed to test the importance of the Internet in destination choice.

The collection of data based on non-probability sampling was carried out at London Heathrow airport. This was because it is the largest airport in the United Kingdom, with 63 million passengers in 2004 and offering a choice of over 90 airlines and 170 destinations (www.baa.co.uk). The questionnaire was administered to those leaving the UK and before they had checked-in, on the basis that this would afford the opportunity of identifying independent travellers more effectively.

Observing the luggage of travellers, first of all to note if they were taking a backpack or camping equipment, which might indicate they were travelling on a budget or for extended periods, was the first stage in identification. Those meeting these conditions were then approached and asked if they were travelling either with a tour group or independently. On the basis of this the questionnaire was then administered to the suitable respondents.

5.3. Questionnaire design

5.3.1. Questionnaire structure

The structure of the questionnaire was one that consisted primarily of close-ended questions.

It consisted of three distinct sections of questions and was designed with the concept of obtaining information by introducing broader questions first before probing deeper. A total of forty-seven questions, including two that were open-ended, were structured across the three sections. The questionnaire was concluded with an open-ended question to allow for an unstructured response to any issues raised.

Within section B of the questionnaire several of the questions were grouped together to test four specific areas, or constructs. These were questions 1, a to l, which form the resources construct; 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, which form the experience of online travel resources construct; 7, a to k, that formed the destination characteristics construct; and questions 8 and 9 that form the future behaviour construct.

5.4. Questionnaire sequence and layout

The questionnaire consisted of two printed pages (double-sided) in three sections, each question being clearly identified in bold text with each section being headed in white on black background to ensure clarity and ease of reading. The questions were also logically numbered within each section and tick boxes provided for an easy and clear response where appropriate. The seven point itemized rating scales used in section B were designed to be answered through the circling of the appropriate number corresponding to the respondents attitude. Therefore, specific instructions were given in the question to avoid any ambiguities in the responses.

Section three contained the personal details section, incorporating questions on age, marital status, education, income and employment. Postponing such questions until the final section of the survey was designed to "help reduce respondent bias if the individual is vexed by the personal nature" (Sekaran, 2003:247). These questions were also laid out in a columnar format in order to reduce the number of pages and provide easier readability.

The columns were broken at the end to allow improved presentation of the final open-ended question and more space for a response.

A cordial note of thanks was provided at the end of the questionnaire to thank respondents for their time taken in completing the survey and for their help and cooperation in taking part. This was omitted after the pilot study in favour of providing this information orally, for the same reasons as the introductory words. The opportunity was also taken at this stage to remind respondents to ensure that they had not inadvertently missed any questions.

5.5. Questionnaire contents

The initial section of the questionnaire dealt with the specifics of the journey that the respondent was undertaking. The first of the questions was designed to ascertain the region to which they were travelling. Although such data could be obtained through observation, the reason that the question must be posed is not just to understand which region they were flying to, but all the regions that they will visit during their trip. The classification of destination regions was based upon that used by guidebook publishers Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com).

This was then followed by asking if they had previous experience of travel in the region(s) they were travelling to, and how long they anticipated spending abroad on this trip. A response of "unknown" was also allowed for in this question to take into account those respondents that may be engaging in long-term travel and may not know when they anticipate their return. A question on whether or not the respondent used the Internet to book any of their travel arrangements concluded this section, as this was considered more relevant at this stage and to differentiate booking from travel planning.

The second section provided the bulk of the data by examining the use of information resources in travel planning, before probing more in depth with regard to the use of the Internet. This section

of questions dealt with the fundamentals of travel planning, with the first question making use of an interval scale to assess the importance of a range of resources that the respondent may have used in the travel planning process. This question was based upon the work of Fodness and Murray (1997) and Money and Crotts (2003) and adapted to incorporate a wider range of resources, including the Internet and online services.

Subsequent to this, respondents were asked how long they spent in planning their trip, and this was measured in terms of weeks. Following this a two-part combined open and close-ended question examined if the respondent made use of the Internet in their travel planning and asked them to provide the address of any website that they relied heavily upon in this planning process. Related to this the ensuing questions measured the level of Internet use that the respondent engages in outside of the work environment.

A seven-point Likert scale measuring the likelihood of the respondent to use Internet resources in their planning for a future trip of a similar nature, and similarly scaled question on the likelihood of recommending such information resources, adds more in-depth measurement of Internet use in the travel planning stages. This preceded a block of questions on the attributes that are inherent in influencing the choice of destination, based on similar scales and characteristics developed by Seddighi and Theocharous (2002) and Kozak (2002). The final set of questions in this section employed five, seven-point bipolar semantic differential statements to measure the general importance, significance and usefulness of the Internet in travel planning.

The final section dealt with the personal details and background of the respondents. There was no need to identify the respondent within the survey and, thus, anonymity of the respondent could be assured. Ranges of response options were offered for each question to avoid seeking exact figures, which were unnecessary and too obtrusive.

The questionnaire concluded with an open-ended question to afford the respondents an opportunity to comment on any aspects of it that they may wish to do so. The purpose being to allow feedback of a qualitative nature on any of the issues raised within the questionnaire and to allow the respondent to add his or her opinion on any areas that they felt needed to be addressed. The questionnaire ended on a courteous note, with the researcher thanking the respondent for their time and contribution to the survey.

6. Data analysis and findings

6.1. Data collection

The data for this survey was collected from a number of points in and around London Heathrow airport. Permission was sought from the British Airports Authority (BAA) to interview respondents within the check-in areas of Heathrow's terminals. However, their response was that this permission must be obtained from the individual airlines whose passengers would be part of the survey. Due to time constraints therefore, such an approach was not possible. Consequently the survey was conducted in Heathrow's Underground station, refreshment areas and on London Underground services en route to the airport, where permission to carry out the survey was easier to obtain.

The data was collected over two days (Monday 14th July 2003 from 1pm to 8:30pm; Friday 17th July 2003 from 8am to 3pm), with one hour taken for lunch on both days, as were frequent refreshment breaks. The researcher and an assistant who had been fully briefed on how to administer the questionnaire carried out the collection of the data. All terminals were visited over the two-day period, as the intention was to cover as wide a range a sample of people as possible. As previously explained in chapter five, potential respondents were initially

identified by observation of their luggage before independent travel status was ascertained by asking briefly and politely if they were embarking on such a trip.

Data was collected from a total of 110 respondents. Some respondents did inadvertently miss questions, but in the majority of cases the researcher observed this and the respondent was asked if their non-response was intentional. None of the respondents claimed to have intentionally missed questions and were happy to complete them once the omission had been pointed out. Six responses were deemed to have been spoiled as a result of missing questions that had not been noticed at the time of collection. Therefore, these were rejected and did not form part of the analysis.

6.2. Profile of the sample

The majority of respondents were male and accounted for 11,6% more respondents than females. An examination into the age group of the respondents clearly demonstrated that the majority of the independent travellers were under the age of 34, with those between 16 and 34 years old accounting for 78% of all respondents. This was fairly evenly split between the two lower boundaries of age group, with those 16 to 24 forming 38% of the sample and the 25 to 34 age group 40%. The higher age ranges saw progressively lower numbers, with no respondents over the age of 64.

The overwhelming majority of respondents were British nationals. Eighty two of the 104 respondents were British, whilst the second most frequent nationality were Australians with 5 respondents. German respondents numbered 3 and Chinese, Jamaican and Japanese two each. There were single respondents from a further 8 different countries. Analysis of the educational level of the respondents reveals that almost half of those questioned had an "A" Level or equivalent qualification as their highest educational level. Those with undergraduate degrees

accounted for 32%, with higher degrees and PhD educational levels only forming 8% of respondents collectively.

This clearly indicates that a large number of the independent travellers were students, as these formed 47% of the sample. The second largest grouping was of those working in administration at 10%. Those who were unemployed accounted for 5%, with the remainder of the occupational groupings being fairly evenly distributed. There were no respondents in the consulting, housewife/husband, research and development, retired, or self-employed occupational groupings.

It can be seen that respondents tended to be low earners, with 36,5% claiming to have no earnings. No respondents stated that they were earning in excess of £30,000 and a clear trend indicating that respondent numbers decrease as salary levels rise is distinctly noticeable. Given the large number of respondents who were students, this would account for the high levels of respondents in the lower earning boundaries.

In asking the respondents for their destination of travel, multiple responses were permitted to take into account those people that were travelling to more than one region. South East Asia was the most popular choice of destination with 29 of the 104 respondents visiting this region. Western Europe was the second most popular region with 28 respondents. None of the respondents was travelling to the Middle East and only one to Central Asia.

Analysing the percentage of respondents using the Internet to book any elements of their trip showed that 62% of the respondents had used the Internet to book either all, or some elements. Access to the Internet was also examined in the survey, with levels of both home and work access compared. Only private Internet access was considered, since all users would have public access through public libraries, Internet cafés or public places. Only 30% of those questioned as part of the survey did not have Internet access at home. Similar levels of access were found in the workplace, with access at 76%. It is

important to note however, that these figures include students who have access at their place of study.

7. Presentation of survey output

Hypothesis 1 – Independent samples *t*-test

With the exception of membership publications, the difference in means between male and female respondents was not significant. The use of membership publications was marginally favoured by female respondents, with a mean of 2.04 compared to that of 1.59 by males ($p < 0.05$). Despite this significance in membership publications, it was the only item to show any significance and therefore the alternate hypothesis $H1A_A$ was rejected, as were all the other hypotheses.

Hypothesis 2 – Independent samples *t*-test

The statistics for the *t*-test of hypothesis $H2A$ identified only one significant relationship. This indicated that those who had some previous experience of the region they were travelling to considered guidebooks marginally more important. This is likely to be because they have already attained a basic knowledge of the area but wish to explore it in greater detail.

Two significant relationships were discovered in the testing of hypothesis $H2C$. The first of these was facilities ($p = 0.001$), with those who had some experience of a previous visit to a region deeming these more important in their decision making process, the mean score being 4.38 in comparison to 3.64. Secondly, the relationship with events ($p = 0.006$) also proved to be significant; those with previous experience placing more importance on these with a mean of 4.04 compared to 3.55.

Hypothesis 3 – ANOVA test for differences between age groups

From the results of the ANOVA test for hypothesis $H3A$, it can be observed that there are two significant

relationships. The first of these is TV travel shows ($p=0.017$), of which the statistics demonstrate that those over the age of 45 are far more likely to rely on this medium in their travel planning, with a mean of 4.33, than younger age groups. Additionally, the higher age groups are more likely to rely upon previous experience ($\mu=4.00$). This indicates that whilst the majority of resources are used by people of all ages, it is more likely that older people will have greater opportunity to gain travel experience and can thus rely on this more heavily.

No significant relationships were identified in the analysis of hypothesis $H3B$, thus the alternate hypothesis $H3B_A$ was rejected. In testing hypothesis $H3C$ no significant relationships were found and the alternate hypothesis $H3C_A$ was rejected. The testing of hypothesis $H3D$ also showed no significant relationships and thus the alternate hypothesis $H3D_A$ was also rejected. With all alternate sub-hypotheses rejected, the main alternate hypothesis $H3_A$ was also rejected.

Hypothesis 4 – ANOVA test for differences between level of education

Two significant relationships were exhibited in the analysis of hypothesis. The first of these ($p=0.037$) reveals that the importance placed on the use of membership publications increases according to age. A similar trend is witnessed with business publications ($p=0.001$). This meant that the alternate hypothesis $H4A_A$ was rejected, as these were the only significant relationships.

As detailed in the above table, the alternate hypothesis $H4B_A$ was also rejected, since no significant relationships were discovered.

Three relationships proved to be significant, with the mean scores of visiting a new place ($p=0.011$), encountering other cultures ($p=0.002$) and heritage and history ($p=0.002$) all increasing with education level. This proves that some elements of a destination's characteristics are favoured by those with a higher level of education, whilst other elements prove to be universal appealing.

Hypothesis $H4D$ showed two significant relationships with the higher the level of education the greater the likelihood to use ($p=0.022$) and recommend ($p=0.003$) the Internet as a means of travel planning. Therefore, the alternate hypothesis $H4D_A$ was accepted.

Hypothesis 5 – ANOVA test for differences between level of Internet use

The testing of hypothesis $H5A$ clearly demonstrates that those using the Internet for the longest periods were more likely to rely on online travel resources, with electronic newsletters ($p=0.040$), online forums ($p=0.046$) and travel provider websites ($p=0.049$) all proving significant. These people were also more likely to place importance on the use of a traditional guidebook in their planning ($p=0.030$; $\mu=6.43$). Additionally, business publications were deemed more important to those using the Internet for between 1 and 2 hours a day. In combination this evidence substantiates the alternate hypothesis $H5A_A$.

The testing of hypothesis $H5B$ provided similar results, with those using the Internet for longest rating more important, up-to-date, significant and helpful than those who used it for shorter periods. Therefore, the null hypothesis $H5B_0$ was accepted.

The ANOVA test of hypothesis $H5C$ yielded no significant relationships and consequently the alternate hypothesis $H5C_A$ was rejected. The testing of hypothesis $H5D$ also yielded no significant relationships and consequently the alternate hypothesis $H5D_A$ was also rejected.

Hypothesis 6 – Multiple linear regression analysis

The R score given (0.80) represents the correlation of the six independent variables with the dependent variable; whilst the R Square score (R^2) is the explained variance. Since the F value of 30.23 is significant at the 0.05 level, it can be stated that 64 per cent of the variance (R^2) in gauging the importance of the Internet to independent travellers

can be explained by this model. This substantiates the alternate hypothesis $H6_A$.

Further analysis of this model allows the identification of the most important variables in explaining the variance in the importance of the Internet to independent travellers. The column of beta values indicates that "helpful" (0.359) is the most important, "significant" (0.337) is second and "recommend" (0.161) is third, all of which are significant at the 0.05 level. Consequently, the respondents see these as the most important attributes in measuring the importance of the Internet in their travel planning.

Qualitative Data

The questionnaire included two open-ended questions, the first asking the respondent to identify any website that they relied on more than any other. Of the 104 respondents, fifty-six claimed that they had relied on one particular site more than any other they might have used. Of these fifty-six respondents, thirty provided details of the website used. The majority of these (nineteen) were commercial websites offering travel products and services, with those offering air tickets the most popular.

Of the remaining eleven responses, eight provided the name of an online travel information provider, with Lonely Planet the most frequently visited site with six out of the eight respondents naming their site. The final three responses named web search engines, with "Google" the most popular.

The second of the two open-ended questions provided an opportunity for the respondents to add any additional comments that they felt might have been important or not covered by any of the previous questions. Only two of the 104 respondents took this opportunity, with one stating that they felt that online resources were too commercially oriented. The other respondent said that they "planned offline, booked online".

8. Summary of findings

A brief summary of the main findings is presented below:

- The profile of a typical respondent was a British male of 25 to 34 years of age, educated to "A" level standard or equivalent and a non-working student. They are most likely to be visiting South East Asia and to use the Internet in booking their travel arrangements.
- Despite females having a greater preference for membership publications, the gender of respondents proved to have no significant link to the way in which independent travellers planned their trips.
- Those with previous experience of the region(s) they were travelling to place more importance on the events and facilities that were available in the destination. But this did not affect the resources they consulted in planning or the importance they attached to the Internet in this process.
- Older travellers proved to attach more importance to TV travel shows as a source of information on their destination. They were also more likely to rely on previous experience.
- The higher the level of education a person has, the more likely they are to use membership and business publications in their travel planning. There was no such relationship with use of the Internet with the majority of information resources being used equally by independent travellers, regardless of their level of education.
- Those with higher levels of education placed more emphasis on visiting new places, encountering cultures and heritage and history. They were also more likely to be using the Internet for future travel planning and were more likely to recommend it to others.

- The longer a person spends using the Internet, the more likely they are to use Internet based information sources in their travel planning. They were also more likely to rate their experiences of such resources more highly.
- Guidebooks were more popular with those who spent more time on the Internet. They were also considered the most important source of information by all independent travellers.
- In assessing the importance of the Internet in travel planning, it was found that the helpfulness, significance and likeliness to recommend such services were the most influential variables.

9. Conclusions

This final chapter aims to build on the summary of findings provided in previous chapters. These findings are examined in greater depth, with consideration given to their implications and possible reasoning behind the phenomena. The contribution of the study in both managerial and academic settings is outlined along with a discussion on possible areas of further research.

It is apparent from the findings that the Internet is a valuable tool in the travel planning of independent travellers, whether enabling a wider consumer choice of products, or providing an additional and unique source of destination information. It can also be said that both independent travel and the Internet have come to be viewed as synonymous with the “new” tourism proposed by Poon (1994a).

The findings raised a number of issues. Firstly, the respondents were predominantly aged between 25 and 34 years old. Overwhelmingly, it was the younger age groups that were embarking on independent travel journeys, but this may in part be explained by the time of year in which the study was conducted. This is a result of the summer being a time when many students were travelling, either

after finishing courses and taking a year out before further study or employment, or shorter trips before returning for the start of the next academic year.

The majority of those surveyed were travelling to South East Asia, if only in passing. Whilst this is widely considered one of the most popular areas for independent travel, it was not anticipated that it would have been the most popular amongst the respondents. This was because it was felt that the lower travelling costs to Europe and the fact that many of the travellers would have been students on a summer break, would have made European destinations the most frequent choice amongst those surveyed. It was also felt that the effects of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the residual concerns over terrorism would have impacted upon the number of travellers visiting East Asia.

Whilst both the age ranges and destination choices of the respondents are in keeping with the character of a typical backpacker, as defined in chapter two, it is perhaps surprising that South East Asia was the dominant destination. With many people, particularly students, travelling just for a few weeks during their summer break it was anticipated that the respondents would have been mostly short haul travellers to Europe.

Females had a greater preference for the use of membership publications in planning their trips. It could be deduced that they are more likely to be subscribers of such publications, hence their higher level of use of these information sources. This is an area that needs further investigation in order to understand if it is the case that females are more likely to be subscribers of such publications and if so, why.

It was found that a person with previous experience of the region they were travelling to places more significance on the events and facilities available in the destination than those who had not. This would indicate that these people had gained some prior knowledge of what to expect from the destination and, therefore, were comparing destinations within the region based on a more

detailed approach, taking in the events and facilities as differentiating factors.

Television travel shows were favoured as a source of information by older travellers, over their younger counterparts. It was anticipated before this study was conducted that the reverse result would have been the likely outcome. This assumption was made on the basis that younger travellers would have been more influenced by television through having greater exposure to this information medium.

One possible explanation for older travellers being more influenced by television is that broadcasters tend to focus their attention on an older target market for these programmes. Many such programmes try to cover a diverse range of destinations and markets in order to appeal to a mass audience, but generally do not focus on young independent travellers as they would be seen as a minority in terms of peak time television viewing.

Despite this difference, the use of information sources by those with previous experience was comparable to that of independent travellers in general, meaning that despite their differing needs regarding the characteristics of their destination, they still relied upon the same sources of information and planned their trips in a similar manner. This applied equally to Internet sources, with no difference in the importance of online sources found between the two groups.

This suggests that either the sources are of a universal nature, encompassing the needs of all independent travellers, or that a wide range of sources exists targeted at specific sectors of the independent travel market. The Internet may be a contributory factor in this is because of its interactive capabilities and the fact that content can easily be customised to suit individual users. This is opposed to more traditional sources, which would require much greater investment, both in time and finance in order to be able to target specific areas of the independent travel market. To some degree the publishers are bound by the same difficulties as the television programmers, in the fact that they must try

to appeal to a broad audience in order to maintain as high a readership as possible.

Given that older travellers were also more likely to rely on previous experience and that the older a person is the greater their chances of having gained experience; a further plausible explanation is that older travellers without such experience may prefer to draw on the experience of others, with television affording an ideal way to convey this thanks to its ability to visibly show the destination to a wide audience. A further factor in this is that of lower Internet use by older age groups. This is likely to be a contributory factor in the preference for television, as it is a more established technology and therefore, older groups are likely to feel more comfortable in using it.

Analysis based on the education of the respondents produced some interesting results. Firstly, it was concluded that those with a higher level of education were more likely to be using membership and business publications. With regard to business publications, the most likely explanation is that those with higher levels of education have a higher probability of reading such publications through their chances of having higher positions or responsibility in their employment. It should also be noted that these people are likely to have higher salaries, and consequently a higher disposable income. This means that they are more likely to purchase such publications compared to lower earners, who are likely to prefer television or the Internet because as these services can be accessed for free or at low cost.

Similarly, these people might use membership publications more as they may be subscribing to them in a professional context. No such differences were identified in the importance or way in which those with more qualifications used the Internet. But they were more likely to recommend its use or use it themselves in any future travel planning.

No educational links were discovered amongst other information sources, although some links with destination characteristics were found. The more

educated a person was, the more they favoured destinations offering heritage and history or opportunities to encounter other cultures. They were also more likely to use the Internet in any future travelling planning and to recommend its use to others. A significant point raised by this is that, it is not just the price and facilities that determine the destination choice of independent travellers. These travellers do consider the other characteristics of a destination in their decision-making process.

It was found that those using the Internet the most relied on online information sources to a greater degree. They were also more inclined to rate their experiences of such information at higher levels. This is not surprising, given that their increased levels of usage would imply that they are comfortable in using this technology and are therefore going to be increasingly adept at using it. Despite the impact of the Internet printed guidebooks were still rated as the most valuable information source. It was interesting to observe that the value of guidebooks as a source of information was rated higher by those who were spending longer on the Internet.

An overall assessment of the importance of the Internet in travel planning identified that helpfulness, significance and the likeliness to recommend such services were the most important variables. With the helpfulness being rated quite highly and the significance rated at a similar level, it can be concluded that the Internet is of importance to the independent

traveller. The average for recommendations is also high, rating over five on a seven-point scale. This demonstrates that independent travellers do view the Internet as a significant and helpful tool in the planning process.

Because of this, travel information sources can no longer be depicted in set boxes. The Internet and associated applications have the ability to transcend the divides imposed by Fodness and Murray's (1997) model. Therefore, a new model is required in order to be able to establish the position of the Internet and new technologies. Figure 2 attempts this by depicting online travel information sources on a scale adapted from that of Fodness and Murray's.

This model retains the aspects of commerciality and personalisation at its core, but avoids the rigid structure imposed in the original model. This not only affords a more accurate picture of how the Internet cannot be labelled into a set box, but also demonstrates how the Internet as a travel information resource is more than a single entity.

This model merely depicts the Internet and online resources, but other sources of information such as guidebooks can also be plotted to reveal the differing natures of the media. Performing such an exercise would reveal how rigid other information sources are in comparison to online services.

If destinations and those with a stake in their tourism industry can harness the power of the Internet as a resource for independent travellers

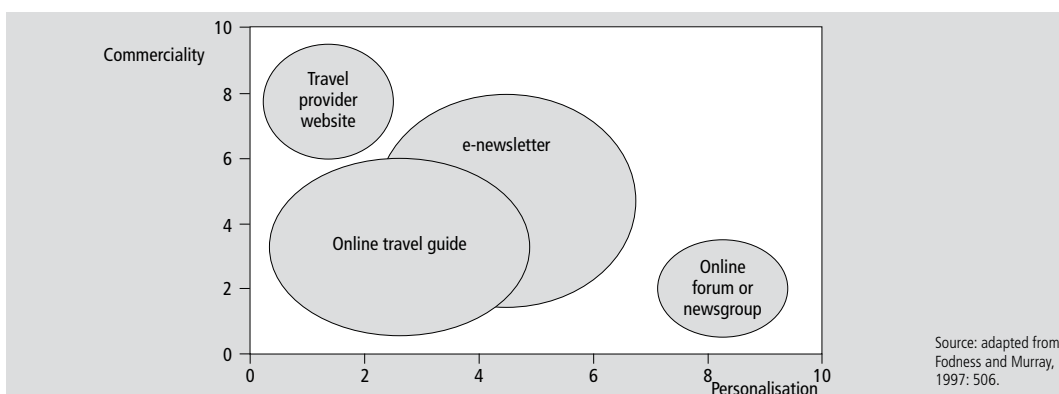


Figure 2 | Revised classification of tourist information sources.

it is possible that they will be able to gain a better understanding of the market. This study has shown that the Internet is an important source of information on destinations and they need to be aware of this. Traditional backpacker routes such as South East Asia have benefited from this technology as it has afforded a cheap and convenient means for people to share their experiences.

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