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International Visitors' Personal Involvement Levels A Factor-Cluster Segmentation Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Involvement, a widespread concept in marketing, leisure and recreation, has played a more limited role in tourism studies. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the influence of visitors' personal and trip characteristics on the involvement dimensions in a tourism context, thereby offering a segmentation perspective of visitors' involvement levels. The Involvement Profile scale was administered to 1000 international visitors in Mauritius at various beach resorts. The importance and pleasure dimensions merged to form the attraction dimension while risk probability items loaded as per the original scale. The results confirm the existence of different visitor groups based on involvement, but it is not yet conclusive whether the IP scale is applicable to visitors in a tourist destination context. Given the various results generated from the application of involvement scales in tourism contexts, there is a need to revisit the construct for visitors to tourist destinations using qualitative methodologies.

Keywords: *involvement profile, destination, tourism, segmentation, research methods, Mauritius.*

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous and varied definitions of the personal involvement concept in the literature (Havitz & Dimanche, 1990). Most studies have conceptualised involvement in terms of personal relevance (Kyle & Chick, 2002), which reflects the degree to which a person devotes himself or herself to an activity or associated product (Zaichkowsky, 1985). It also refers to the strength or extent of the cognitive linkage between the self and the place. While the application of personal involvement remains widespread in marketing, leisure and recreation literatures, its role and influence in the choice of a tourist destination has received limited scholarly attention (Gross & Brown, 2008; Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003; Hwang, Lee, & Chen, 2005). Despite the pioneering works of Zaichkowsky (1985) and Laurent and Kapferer (1985) having greatly contributed to the understanding of the involvement construct, few studies have assessed the impact of visitors' socio-demographic and trip characteristics on their personal involvement levels. In this context, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the influence of visitors' personal and trip characteristics on the dimensions of personal involvement in a tourist destination context, thereby offering a segmentation perspective of visitors' personal involvement levels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The personal involvement construct

In the consumer behaviour literature, involvement has been described as a state of energy that a person experiences with regards to a consumption-related activity ranging from low levels to high levels of involvement (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010). Involvement has been

defined in different ways including ego involvement, commitment, purchase importance, extent of information search, persons, products and situations (Rothschild, 1984). Among these, personal involvement has been described as an unobservable state of motivation, arousal, or interest towards a product that is evoked by a particular stimulus or situation that possesses drive properties (Rothschild, 1984) and its influence on consumer behaviour is well documented (Havitz & Howard, 1995; Houston & Rothschild 1977; Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998; Rothschild, 1984). In the tourism, leisure, and recreation literatures, personal involvement is also described as a motivational state induced by an association between an activated attitude and the self concept (Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003; Havitz & Howard, 1995; Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998; Johnson & Eagly, 1989). Therefore, the decision process for the choice of a holiday destination is one that involves a high level of personal involvement given that potential visitors spend a great amount of time and effort in the search, evaluation and choice of a destination (Gross & Brown, 2008; Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003). Personal involvement has also been described as an attitude that is formed and learnt during interaction with the social environment (Sherif & Sherif, 1967) and shaped by individual differences and experiences (Madrigal, Havitz, & Howard, 1992). Therefore, antecedents of involvement can be viewed as consisting of two general factors, individual characteristics and social-situational influences (Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998), which can be used to classify individuals and to predict attitudes and behaviours (Havitz & Dimanche, 1990, 1999).

Measurement of personal involvement

The two scales mostly used for measuring personal involvement are Zaichkowsky's (1985) 'Personal Involvement Inventory' (PII), and Laurent and Kapferer's (1985) 'Consumer Involvement Profile' (CIP). The two scales differ in that PII is uni-dimensional, while CIP is multi-dimensional. Multifaceted scales have stronger content and face validity (Havitz & Dimanche, 1997). However, this multi-dimensionality remains the subject of much discussion and attention in the leisure and recreation literatures (Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004). For example, there is growing recognition that the various components of involvement do not equally influence an individual's involvement profile and that different patterns of involvement exist according to activities, products, or individual characteristics. There is also evidence of weaknesses in all instruments proposed and used to date (Gross & Brown, 2008; Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003; Havitz & Dimanche, 1997).

Dimanche, Havitz, and Howard's (1991) translation of the Consumer Involvement Profile (CIP) represents a benchmark with respect to dimensionality issues in the leisure and recreation fields. In particular, five dimensions are widely accepted as being representative of the construct. The first dimension "importance", refers to the interest in, or perceived importance of the activity or product. The perceived "pleasure" is the second dimension and refers to the value attributed to the activity or product. The perceived risk associated with the purchase or use of the product makes two sub-dimensions, risk probability and risk consequence. Risk probability refers to the perceived probability of making such a mistake (Dimanche, Havitz, & Howard, 1991) while risk consequence refers to the perceived importance of negative consequences in poor choice. The fifth dimension "sign", refers to the symbolic or sign value attributed by the consumer to the product, its purchase, or its consumption (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985). However, McIntyre (1989) and McIntyre and Pigram (1992) have shown the merger of the importance and pleasure facets into an "attraction" facet in leisure settings. In the tourism field, previous research (Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003; Hwang, Lee, & Chen, 2005; Jamrozy, Backman, & Backman, 1996) indicates that the application of CIP at the destination level results in contradictory findings and different dimensions.

METHODOLOGY

Dimanche, Havitz and Howard's (1990) scale was administered to a sample of 1000 international visitors at a beach resort destination: Mauritius. Mauritius is essentially a sun, sand and sea destination with a majority of visitors from Europe. Over the years, Mauritius has diversified its visitor and product base. Currently, more than 50% of visitors to the island are from Germany, UK, France, South Africa, and India. Consequently, these markets were chosen as the focus of this study. The sample was designed to include quotas of 200 visitors from each of the five generating markets described above. International visitors above the age of 18 years old staying at hotels in Mauritius were targeted as respondents for this survey. At the end of the data collection period, 733 questionnaires were returned, of which 705 were useable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The sample profile indicated that almost an equal number of males (49.5%) and females (50.5%) were interviewed. Visitors were mostly on holidays (85.1%) and the sample was almost equally split between first-timers (47.1%) and repeaters (52.9%). Factor analysis revealed the existence of five underlying dimensions that corresponded broadly to the original scale but individual items did not load on factors as per the original scale. The importance and pleasure dimensions merged to form the attraction dimension (McIntyre & Pigram, 1992) while items for the risk probability dimension loaded as per the original scale.

A K-means clustering algorithm was used to classify respondents based on the identified dimensions. A five-cluster solution was chosen as the optimal solution on the basis that it offered clusters of acceptable sizes and ANOVA results indicated significant differences between the clusters ($p < 0.001$). The first cluster, for example, comprised 93 respondents who on average rated items of 'Importance', 'Pleasure' and 'Risk Consequence' dimensions on the higher end of the scale while rating items of 'Sign' and 'Risk Probability' on the lower end of the scale. These visitors considered the destination to be important in their life and derived pleasure from on-site experiences but would be upset if the destination did not live up to their expectations. The validity of these clusters was verified using discriminant analysis.

An examination of cluster profiles using chi-square tests indicated for example that cluster one (High Attraction/High Risk) consisted mostly of visitors from South Africa, UK, and India. They are mostly non-Caucasians and with education level up to secondary school. Nationality, ethnicity, marital status and education level could be used to identify differences between clusters. Likewise, 'length of stay', 'traveling on a holiday package' and 'person traveling with' could also be used to identify differences between clusters.

These results confirm the existence of different sub-groupings of visitors based on their personal involvement. Supporting other studies (Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004; Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003; Havitz & Dimanche, 1997), this study suggests that consumers are unable to distinguish between the different facets of personal involvement clearly. Thus, it is not conclusive whether Dimanche, Havitz and Howard's (1990) scale of personal involvement is applicable to visitors in a tourist destination context. This is not surprising given the inconsistent results generated for different settings in the literature (Gursoy & Gavcar, 2003; Havitz & Dimanche, 1997). The construct is sensitive to measurement issues as well as to variation in settings.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, given the variability in results generated from the application of existing personal involvement scales to the tourist destination context, there is a need to start afresh with the conceptualization of the construct for visitors to tourist destinations using

qualitative methodologies. Riley and Love (2000) and Walle (1997) for example, have pointed to the lack of qualitative research methods in tourism research. Qualitative approaches appear nonetheless to be back in favour with researchers (e.g., Ateljevic, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2007; Hollinshead, 2006; Phillimore and Goodson, 2004). Tribe (2005) suggested a “new turn” in tourism research that reflects a desire to address tourism management and marketing research questions through qualitative methods that provide opportunities to better explain complex processes. Understanding consumer involvement in destinations and its impact on decision making is one of those complex processes that warrant the use of qualitative research. As Havitz and Dimanche (1999, p.145) concluded, much of the involvement story “remains to be discovered and written.”

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