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Lee, Woojin and Andereck, Kathleen, "The Effect of Travel Magazine Features and Photos on Tourist Decision Making" (2016). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 5.
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The Effect of Travel Magazine Features and Photos on Tourist Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

It has been claimed that travel experience is generally pleasure-based and consumed through images such as photographs and stories. It is often assumed that travel oriented publications such as travel magazines have substantial effects on people's travel decisions, however the influence of these informal information sources has not been investigated to any great extent. The purpose of this research was to investigate the effect of feature stories and photos in an ongoing source of information, a travel magazine, on travel decisions.

For the current study, a path analysis was conducted to validate the hypothesized relationships (Figure 1), which assumes that the feature stories and photos have an influence on enhancing the interest in traveling in Arizona and on the perceived helpfulness of the magazine during ongoing information search, which can lead to influence on travel decisions and evaluation of the magazine as a source of travel information.

Keywords: *travel experience, photographs, stories, on-going information processing, travel magazine, travel decisions.*

INTRODUCTION

Information search is the process of consulting various sources before making a purchasing decision. Consumers recognize the need for more knowledge, which activates the decision to search for information about alternatives (Moutinho 1987). Prepurchase information search precedes a specific and imminent purchase decision, while ongoing information search is the acquisition of information regardless of impending purchase needs and is primarily motivated by the need to make better consumption choices (Bloch, Sherrell and Ridegeway 1986). Ongoing search takes place for two reasons: to create a knowledge base for decision making or for the satisfaction of the search activity in and of itself (Bloch et al. 1986; Fodness and Murray 1998). It has been claimed that travel experience is generally pleasure-based and consumed through images such as photographs and stories (Boorstin, 1961; Urry, 1990). It is often assumed that travel oriented publications such as travel magazines have substantial effects on people's travel decisions, however the influence of these informal information sources has not been investigated to any great extent. The purpose of this research was to investigate the effect of feature stories and photos in an ongoing source of information, a travel magazine, on travel decisions.

Though little research specifically considers the influence of magazine and/or newspaper publicity on people's travel decisions, it is clear that these information sources are used by some segments of the traveling public. Fodness and Murray (1998) found that nearly 15% of the respondents in their sample of welcome center visitors used magazines as an information source while Gitelson and Crompton (1983) found 14% of welcome center visitors used travel magazines and 10% used other magazines. Andereck and Caldwell (1993), Capella and Greco (1987) and Henshall, Roberts and Leighton (1985) all found magazines rated as an "important" information source. Fodness and Murray (1998) found a clear division of magazines and newspapers from all other information sources investigated in their study. They also found a small but distinct cluster of travelers who are the heaviest users of magazines and/or newspapers as contributory information sources. They suggest the reason for this is magazines and newspapers are used in ongoing, as opposed to prepurchase, information search. Travelers who use magazines and/or newspapers to plan a trip acquire their information on a regular basis regardless of an impending purchase (Bloch et al, 1986). Magazines also tend to be used in conjunction with several other external information sources that provide more specific and detailed. The other cluster that used magazines fairly extensively was made up of travelers who use a mix of several contributory information sources.

Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) found evidence that ongoing information search occurs because consumers have information needs that go beyond the functional, or simply to gain needed knowledge. One of these, hedonic, is the perspective which suggests information search can be a pleasurable leisure experience itself. Another, aesthetic, views information as a stimulus to visual thinking, imagery, and envisioning of a place that is real and obtainable. These aspects of information search seem especially pertinent to a travel magazine.

METHODS

The data collection phase of this study involved two survey efforts. The first survey was administered via mail to a sample of 1,200 out-of-state *Arizona Highways Magazine (AHM)* subscribers, stratified according to self (n=604) versus gift (n=596) subscriptions. The second mail survey was administered to a sample of 811 in-state *AHM* subscribers and was stratified by self-subscriptions (n=610) versus gift subscriptions (n=201). The Dillman method (2000) was used for survey distribution. The final sample sizes and response rates were 777 and 56% for in-state subscribers and 1,174 and 52% for out of state subscribers, respectively.

Several questions in the questionnaire were posed to respondents regarding use of the magazine and how it influenced their travel decisions and behavior. The variables of interest for this paper include: 1) an evaluation of the influence of feature stories and photographs on making travel decisions (1=not influential to 4=very influential); 2) evaluation of the magazine with respect to increased interest in traveling in Arizona (1=not increased to 5=greatly increased) and helpfulness as a source of travel information (1=not helpful to 5=very helpful); and 3) the extent to which the magazine influenced decisions about specific aspects of the trip such as attractions and travel routes (1=not influential to 4=very influential). Data were analyzed by performing exploratory factor analyses using principal component method with varimax rotation to examine the dimensionalities of travel decisions. Furthermore, descriptive analysis and path analysis were used to investigate the impact of feature stories and photos in the travel magazine, and in turn, examine how they can influence travel decisions and evaluation of the magazine as a source of travel information.

RESULTS

Factor analysis facilitated grouping of the 10 items that described different kinds of tourism decisions into two reduced dimensions: pleasure tourism decisions and nature-based tourism decisions. The result of the analysis indicated two factors with an Eigenvalue greater than one and which explained 54% of the variance of the pleasure tourists and 10.3 % of the variance of the nature-based tourists, respectively. A Cronbach's alpha reliability score for each factor group is presented as $\alpha=.903$ and $\alpha=.764$. The current study included six total constructs including feature stories, photographs, raising interest of the magazine audience, the perceived helpfulness of the magazine, pleasure tourism decisions and nature-based tourism decisions. Based on the value of all the correlation estimates between the associated constructs, all values fell in the acceptable range ($p<.85$, $p>.10$) which indicated that the discriminant validity of the constructs was supported.

A path analysis was conducted to validate the hypothesized relationships (Figure 1), which assumes that the feature stories and photos have an influence on enhancing the interest in traveling in Arizona and on the perceived helpfulness of the magazine during ongoing information search, which can lead to influence on travel decisions and evaluation of the magazine as a source of travel information. Amos 16.0 software using the ML estimation method (Arbuckle, 2007) was utilized to perform the path analysis with all the casual relationships being tested simultaneously. All of the goodness-of-fit measures in the study fell into acceptable ranges with scaled $X^2/df=2.5$, $CFI=.99$, $GFI=.98$, $NFI=.99$; $RMSEA=.05$, thus it can be claimed that the path model for this study provided an excellent fit to the data.

This study was able to explore the impact of the feature stories and photographs in a travel magazine on enhancing the interest of the magazine audience and on the perceived helpfulness of the magazine, which can be presented as the aims of ongoing information search. The result of this study demonstrated that the enhanced interest and the perceived helpfulness of the magazine had a strong effect on tourism decision making. The feature stories in the magazine had a significant contribution to increasing the interest of the audience and on perceived helpfulness of the magazine ($\beta=.40$, $p<.01$, $\beta=.22$, $p<.01$). On the other hand, even though the photographs in the magazine had an influence on raising interest in travel, they did not directly affect the perceived helpfulness of the magazine ($\beta=.25$, $p<.01$, $\beta=.06$). Interestingly, the enhanced interest in travel more strongly influenced pleasure tourism decisions than nature-based tourism decisions ($\beta=.65$, $p<.01$, $\beta=.16$, $p<.01$). Similarly, the perceived helpfulness had an effect on the pleasure and nature-based tourism decision making ($\beta=.20$, $p<.01$, $\beta=.09$, $p<.05$).

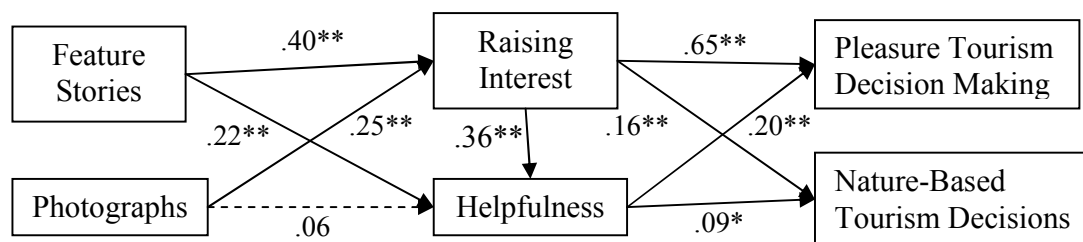


Figure 1 Results of Path Analysis ($p<.01$, * $p<.05$)**

APPLICATION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study strongly emphasize a need for providing travelers with a variety of information sources. Although travelers perceive a variety of benefits from using tourism brochures and magazines (including online magazines), and report actual changes in their trip

planning behavior, there is still great room for improvement in affecting their decision making. Potential travelers seek information not only to acquire and broaden knowledge about the destination, but also to have fun and enjoy the experience of seeking the information. Tourism marketing organizations need to focus on understanding what type of information sources can be more attractive in relation to the different types of tourism decision making. Given the experiential nature of tourism and the enjoyment many travelers derive from planning their trips and their desire to obtain more reliable information regarding the potential destination, improving and diversifying the information sources on travel magazine is important.

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