

## Tourism Product Involvement and Information Search

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Andereck, Kathleen L., "Tourism Product Involvement and Information Search" (2016). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 42.  
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# **Tourism Product Involvement and Information Search**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*One of the major factors influencing consumer decisions to purchase a product or service is information sources about the product or service. Awareness of a particular product or service and resulting purchase decisions largely depend on the information consumers are able to gather and the credibility of such information. Often, purchase decisions that are considered risky or about which consumers have more uncertainty result in information search. Travel purchase decisions generally have attributes that encourage consumers to engage in information search. Numerous factors may influence a consumer's information seeking behavior. Several researchers suggest one factor influencing information search is a consumer's level of product involvement. This purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between product involvement and information search with respect to a tourism destination. A survey was conducted with prospective travelers to a destination in the U.S. Results suggest there is a relationship between involvement and information search, with more involved travelers having an interest in more information about a destination.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Understanding tourists' decisions to purchase specific tourism products or services is important to tourism marketing managers. The process of consumer behavior encompasses several stages: searching for information, purchasing a product or service, using a product, evaluating a product, and disposing of the product or service (Moutinho, 1987). One of the major factors influencing consumer decisions to purchase a product or service is information about the product or service. *Information search or information seeking* 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). Awareness of a particular product or service and resulting purchase decisions largely depend on the information consumers are able to gather and the credibility of such information (Raitz and Dakhil, 1989). The availability of information in tourism is especially important because often consumers are located far from the product or service of purchase, and/or the product or service is a onetime event (Wicks and Schuett, 1991).

Many studies have considered traveler use of destination information. Consumers search for information to help them reduce the risk of purchasing products or services. There is evidence that services, such as travel, are perceived as riskier purchases than goods (Murray, 1991; Zeithaml, 1981). Zeithaml (1981) contend that because services are more difficult and riskier to evaluate prior to purchase, consumers use different processes and cues than with evaluating goods. Although consumers tend to seek limited information in many situations, higher perceived risk, high price, many product alternatives, greater product importance, less experience with a product, and situational determinants will tend to encourage information

search (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004b; Capella and Greco, 1987). Vacation decisions often are associated with many of these factors suggesting that some external information search probably occurs (Money and Crotts, 2002; Capella and Greco, 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 (Bloch et al 1986). Prepurchase search is primarily motivated by the need to make better consumption choices (Punj and Staelin, 1983). Ongoing search takes place for two reasons: to create a knowledge base for future decision making or for the satisfaction of the search activity in and of itself (Bloch et al. 1986; Fodness and Murray 1998).

Past studies have found that consumers differ in their likelihood to seek out product knowledge (Moutinho, 1987; Thorelli and Becker, 1981), ranging from intensive seekers to those who engage in very limited searches. Consumers also differ in the number of sources consulted for product or service information and the importance placed on the sources; frequently consumers seek information from several sources prior to making a purchase decision. Numerous factors may influence a consumer's information seeking behavior. Past tourism related information seeking research based on information search theory has found several general relationships between consumer characteristics and search behavior (Money and Crotts, 2002; Snepenger et al., 1990; Raitz and Dakhil, 1989; Capella and Greco, 1987; Runyon and Stewart, 1987; Newman, 1977). Several researchers suggest one factor influencing information search is a consumer's level of product involvement.

The concept of product involvement has emerged in the tourism literature to some extent, but little has been done to investigate the relationship between product involvement and information search. Even within the broader field of consumer research, this relationship has been neglected with respect to services (Chaudhuri 2000; McColl-Kennedy and Fetter 2001). Bloch et al (1986) suggest pre-purchase search is influenced by *purchase involvement* while ongoing search is related to *product involvement*. The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between product involvement and information search with respect to a tourism destination.

Product involvement has been defined and measured in a variety of ways but is generally considered to be the personal relevance a product holds for an individual based on needs, values and interests, and influences their purchase decisions (Zaichkowsky 1986). In tourism it has been defined as "the interest or motivational intensity toward a vacation place with behavioral consequences" (Lehto et al 2004 p. 805). Because involvement is related to the importance and relevance of a product to an individual, it affects most aspects of consumer decision making related to products. The relationship between involvement and variables such as satisfaction (Kim 2008), service quality (Hwang et al 2005), opinion leadership (Jamrozny et al 1996), consumer loyalty (Kim 2008) and motives (Josiam et al 1999; Kim 2008) have been investigated. What has not been looked at to any extent is the link between involvement and information search, though one of the major factors influencing consumer decisions to purchase a product or service is information about the product or service. Highly involved consumers like to learn about the products and services to which they relate and feel are important. They pay more attention to advertising and seek out information about these products. They have been found to subscribe to specialty magazines, visit website, talk to salespeople about the product of interest, and discuss the product with friends (Lockshin et al 1997) suggesting there should be a empirical link between destination involvement and tourism information search. This relationship, among others, was hypothesized by Gursoy and McCleary (2004a) but not tested. They suggested

tourists' intrinsic involvement with a destination should be examined to understand information search instead of examining situational involvement.

The link between product involvement and information search has begun to emerge in the consumer behavior literature. As noted by Beatty and Smith (1987) the assumption of this research is that involvement is the motivational state arising from perceived importance of the product that causes information search, and individuals with low involvement engage in minimal search while those with high involvement engage in extensive search. Similarly, a relationship has been found between enduring product involvement and ongoing information search (Bloch et al 1986). More recently, McColl-Kennedy and Fetter (2001) investigated the relationship between involvement and the purchase of various services. They found there is a relationship between involvement and information search but that the relationship is complex. They concluded that the more important and interesting the service is perceived to be, the more likely a person will engage in external information search both with respect to sources and effort. For experiential services (an exercise club and a Caribbean vacation) they found the extent to which consumers feel the service is important was a stronger predictor of information search both in terms of source and effort than was interest in the service.

## METHODS

The data collection phase of this project involved three survey efforts, two of which are pertinent to this paper. The first survey was administered to a group that was hypothesized to have a large proportion of highly product involved respondents. It was administered 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 survey was administered via mail and the Internet to a general population of prospective visitors to Arizona who were hypothesized to be less product involved than the magazine subscribers. The general population sample of 1,433 non-residents was drawn from the Arizona Office of Tourism's information inquiry list. Self-subscribers had higher response rates (59%) than did gift subscribers (42%) for a total *n* of 612. With respect to the general population group, mail survey respondents (41%) had much higher response rates than did web respondents (18%) for a total *n* of 357.

Several questions in the questionnaire were posed to respondents regarding their travel decisions and behavior. The product involvement questions were based on the Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) and were specific to the U.S. state of Arizona as a destination. The measure was composed of 11 semantic differential items on a seven point scale (Table 1). The original PII was developed by Zaichkowsky (1985) and further refined and validated by McQuarrie and Munson (1987, 1992) and McColl-Kennedy and Fetter (2001). This study included the nine items used by McColl-Kennedy and Fetter with the addition of two items from McQuarrie and Munson (1992). Many of these items have been used in a tourism context by a few researchers including Chen and Tsai (2008) and Kim (2008). Information search source and effort questions included a series of seven slightly modified items measured on a five point scale as developed and validated by McColl-Kennedy and Fetter (1999) and again tested by the same authors in a later study (2001) (Table 2). A list of information sources that might have influenced the decision to travel were also included as a measure of specific information sources.

**Table 1. Arizona as a Destination -- means**

Response	Subscribers	General	Total
Unappealing / Appealing*	6.56	6.07	6.38
Not fun / Fun*	6.53	6.11	6.38
Undesirable / Desirable*	6.50	6.03	6.33
Unimportant / Important*	6.45	6.04	6.30
Boring / Interesting	6.38	6.06	6.26
Doesn't matter / Matters	6.04	5.99	5.79
Irrelevant / Relevant	5.84	5.16	5.57
Means nothing / Means a lot*	6.35	5.44	6.01
Dull / Neat	6.37	2.55	6.22
Unexciting / Exciting*	6.28	5.57	6.02
Of no concern / Of concern	5.97	5.41	5.75

All reported on 7-point scale: 1=negative, 7=positive, \*recoded to positive direction

**Table 2. Average Response on Travel Decision Statements -- means**

Response	Subscribers	General	Total
I would be interested in reading more about Arizona	4.08	3.73	3.96
I usually take many factors into account before selecting a travel destination	3.87	3.95	3.89
I usually talk about travel destination choices with other people	3.71	3.81	3.74
I usually spend a lot of time selecting a travel destination	3.48	3.77	3.58
I have compared characteristics among various destinations	3.52	3.49	3.51
I would be interested in reading other people's reviews of their travel experiences in Arizona	3.48	3.25	3.40
I usually seek advice from other people prior to selecting a destination	3.08	3.23	3.13

Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither agree nor disagree, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree

## RESULTS

A confirmatory principle components factor analysis (CFA) with varimax rotation was used to determine congruence of the items with other studies (Table 1). The information search items produced the same factors as did the McColl-Kennedy and Fetter (1999, 2001) studies with an information search sources factor and an information search effort factor. The CFA for the involvement items, however, produced somewhat different results with three rather than two factors and somewhat different variables in each factor, most likely due to the mix of items. Rather than an interest and an importance factor there was an interest ( $\alpha=.90$ ), an importance ( $\alpha=.81$ ), and an hedonic factor ( $\alpha=.91$ ). Nevertheless, there is still consistency with other studies that have used the PII or similar measures including Chaudhuri (2000), as well as a high level of convergent and construct validity. The factors for both of the analyses were then combined into

multi-item variables for further analysis. A preliminary analysis of variance (ANOVA) confirmed that *AHM* subscribers were more destination involved than the general population of prospective visitors with respect to all three multi-item scales (Table 4). The general population group noted less information search sources though a slightly higher amount of effort.

**Table 3. Factor analysis of information search and involvement variables**

Domains	Factor loadings	Eigen-value	Variance Explained
<b>Information search</b>			
<i>Information search effort (mean=3.6; s.d.=.72; <math>\alpha</math>=.67)</i>		2.8	39.7
I usually seek advice from other people prior to selecting a destination	.77		
I usually spend a lot of time selecting a travel destination	.72		
I usually talk about travel destination choices with other people	.70		
I usually take many factors into account before selecting a travel destination	.68		
<i>Information search sources (mean=3.6; s.d.=.77; <math>\alpha</math>=.75)</i>		1.3	18.8
I would be interested in reading more about Arizona	.84		
I would be interested in reading other people's reviews of their travel experiences in Arizona	.80		
I have compared characteristics among various destinations	.60		
<b>Product involvement</b>			
<i>Interest (mean=5.9; s.d.=1.2; <math>\alpha</math>=.90)</i>		6.3	57.6
Boring/Interesting	.79		
Irrelevant/Relevant	.79		
Of no concern/Of concern	.79		
Doesn't matter/Matters	.75		
Dull/Neat	.72		
<i>Hedonic (mean=6.4; s.d.=1.1; <math>\alpha</math>=.91)</i>		1.3	12.0
Unappealing/Appealing	.81		
Undesirable/Desirable	.81		
Not fun/Fun	.78		
<i>Importance (mean=6.1; s.d.=1.1; <math>\alpha</math>=.81)</i>		0.8	7.2
Means nothing/Means a lot	.78		
Unimportant/Important	.69		
Exciting/Unexciting	.61		

Next, multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between product involvement and information search (Table 5). The model regressing the three involvement scales on information search sources was significant ( $F=21.1$ ;  $p<.01$ ;  $R^2=.12$ ) with hedonic and importance emerging as significant predictors. The model regressing the three involvement scales on information search effort, however, was not significant. Analysis of variance was also done to determine involvement differences based on specific sources of information used. Those with higher levels of involvement were more likely than those with less

involvement to use their own past travel experiences and *AHM*; less likely to use the Arizona Office of Tourism (AOT) information packet and motor club information; but were equally likely to use friends and family, the AOT website, other web sites, information from a CVB, and travel books.

**Table 4. ANOVA test of destination involvement**

Variables	Means		F	p
	Subscribers	General		
<b>Involvement</b>				
Interest	6.10	5.61	18.00	.00
Hedonic	6.54	6.09	21.62	.00
Importance	6.38	5.74	45.00	.00
<b>Information</b>				
Sources	3.71	3.50	11.27	.00
Effort	3.55	3.67	4.07	.04

Means with the same subscript are not different at the .05 level.

**Table 5. Regression of involvement and information search**

Dependent Variables	Independent variables	Univariates		Model statistics		
		Beta*	p	Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	F	p
Information sources	Interest	.10	.09	.12	21.10	.00
	Hedonic	.12	.03			
	Importance	.17	.01			
Information effort	Interest	.10	.11	.00	1.51	.21
	Hedonic	.06	.39			
	Importance	-.09	.22			

## APPLICATION AND CONCLUSIONS

Decision making with respect to destination choice is influenced by many factors including information. Though the role of information sources in the travel decision making process has been frequently studied, the relationship between destination product involvement and information search has received little consideration. The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of destination involvement on information search.

To measure the constructs of interest the questionnaire developed for this project utilized a measure of involvement and a measure of information search initially developed and then further refined in the consumer behavior literature (Zaichkowsky 1985; McQuarrie and Munson 1987, 1992; McColl-Kennedy and Fetter 2001). The seven variables used to measure information search produced the same two factors as previous research, search effort and search sources, providing further evidence that these measures are valid and reliable with potential for additional usage with a variety of product types. The domains found using CFA for the involvement measures were somewhat different than these studies but not inconstant with the broader body of product involvement research. Due to the nature of the product that was being considered in this

study, the battery of items was revised slightly to be concise while accurately characterizing the feelings a traveler may have for a destination such as fun, characteristics that would probably not apply to many products that have been the subject of other involvement studies such as clothing or hair products.

This study postulated that respondents who were subscribers to a travel magazine specific to the destination of interest would be more product involved than a general group of prospective travelers. In this study, because *AHM* is specifically about travel in Arizona, one would expect those with the enough interest to have subscriptions to the magazine would also be more highly product involved than even people with enough interest in the state to request information. This result was supported by analysis indicating that subscribers to *Arizona Highways Magazine* were more product involved than a group of prospective travelers that requested destination information. This finding is consist with the work of Bloch and others (1986) who suggested ongoing information search, which characterizes the regular reading of a travel magazine, is related to product involvement. As well, Lockshin and others (1997) found involved consumers like to learn about their product of interest including subscribing to specialty magazines.

This study provides evidence that involvement with a destination does influence information search and that those who are more involved are more likely to search for more information about the destination than those less involved. They are especially motivated by the pleasure potential with respect to a destination as well as by the importance they attribute to the destination as has been found in other studies (Chaudhuri 2000; McColl-Kennedy and Fetter 2001). In this case, interest in a destination does not seem to strongly contribute to information search sources though these results are consistent with those of McColl-Kennedy and Fetter (2001). However, in contrast to other research, involvement did not predict information search effort, though it should be noted that there are mixed results for this relationship in the literature. Perhaps the differences we see with this study are a result of the different context. In other words, it is with reference to a specific and real destination with which most respondents have some level of interest and many have visited (75%) rather than a physical product or a more vague, unfamiliar, or hypothetical service such as an exercise club or a Caribbean vacation. Respondents are thus able to respond to the questions in a more knowledgeable manner.

Taken in conjunction with other product involvement research, this study suggests that the relevance of a destination to a consumer will influence their information search behavior which in turn effects their purchase decisions. From a promotional perspective it may be best to focus on the pleasure and importance aspects of a destination when communicating to prospective visitors as these seem to be related to additional information search. Other studies have also concluded that the hedonic aspects of a product may motivate ongoing information search by a consumers. It might behoove tourism managers to focus their efforts on media likely to be viewed by more product involved consumers such as specialty magazines. It appears that prospective visitors may be willing to consult additional information sources if they are reasonably easy to access given that search effort may not be affected by involvement.

Additional research is needed to fully determine the applicability of the measures used in this study with respect to tourism destinations and information search. More work is also need to continue to corroborate the relationship between destination involvement and information search, as well as the inclusion of additional variables to more completely understand the tourism destination decision making process.



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