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The Effects of Mindfulness as an Intervention in the Destination Selection Process

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Abstract of Work in Progress:

Purpose of the Study

Competition among destinations in the tourism industry is growing as places are becoming increasingly substitutable and more difficult to differentiate (Pike, 2005). While traditional marketing media may have been an appropriate solution in the past, in this time of scarce resources, destinations need to find the most efficient channels to reach their target markets. Pike (2005) explains that destinations are far more multidimensional than consumer goods and the opportunities to effectively market this complex product are limited because destination management or marketing organizations often have difficulty finding funding that supports an effective strategy. With restricted budgets, destination managers must have a heightened level of consciousness about the choices that they make in developing and communicating their brand messages.

Similarly, tourists are relying more on the convenience of online information sources. The prevalence of online information sources has dramatically changed tourism marketing as it has progressively become more dependent on the Internet (Loda, 2011). The rapid advancement of technology has changed the behavior of online information seekers and tourist behavior while searching the Internet needs to be studied further (Luo, Feng, & Cai, 2004). The purpose of this study is to understand tourists' use of information from online sources during the destination selection process. The objective of this study is to inform destination managers on the most efficient ways to use online information sources in their marketing plans.

Review of Relevant Literature

The process of how tourists make their destination choices is prevalent in the literature. Many of the models are based on models by Um and Crompton (1990) and Goodall (1991). In Goodall's (1991) proposed destination selection process, the initial opportunity set is composed of the universe of possible destinations. That set is narrowed down as the decision maker may not be aware of certain destinations or have other constraints which make some destinations unattainable. The list is eventually condensed into approximately three destination choices in the decision set before the tourist makes their final decision (Goodall, 1991).

Another component of the destination selection process is the balance of cognitive and affective reasoning. Gartner (1993) explains that cognitive reasoning is the knowledge and belief about a destination while affective reasoning describes one's feelings towards a destination. Initially travelers may sort destinations into quantitative categories such as how long

it will take to reach the destination and how much a trip there will cost but then tend to use more emotional processing when making the final destination selection. Beerli and Martin (2004) agree that destination images are formed by both the reasoned and the emotional interpretation by the consumer.

The branding literature suggests that having previous experience with a product's characteristics can determine attitudinal position toward that product (Gartner, 1993). However, when a consumer is facing a buying decision for a product class in which they have no experience, branding plays a crucial role. If a tourist does not have actual experiences in a destination, Gunn (1988) explains that there are two types of sources where they receive information about the destination brand; organic images come from sources like mass media, friends and relatives, while induced images are from sources of information controlled by the destination such as advertising, travel agents, and tour operators. Gartner (1993) elaborates that the key difference between the two types is whether the destination has control over what is being presented. Tourists' use of online information sources is an area of research that needs to be explored further because Govers and Go (2009) explain that the prevalence of the internet has offered word of mouse as a new means of receiving organic information that the destination cannot control.

Mindfulness theory has been used to support research in the tourism field but never before has it been used to understand the destination selection process. Much of the seminal academic work on mindfulness theory was published by Ellen Langer and stems from the theory of dual-processing in psychology. Dual-processing explains that humans process information through one of two systems: automatic or analytic (Evans & Curtis-Holmes, 2005). Automatic processing can result in bias because it uses fast short-cuts, or heuristics, while analytic processing is slower and more likely to result in correct or logical decisions (Evans & Curtis-Holmes, 2005). Based on these principles, Langer defined mindlessness as automatic processing and mindfulness as analytic processing (Moscardo, 2009). Essentially, mindfulness is associated with actively processing available information (Frauman & Norman, 2004) which may result in heightened sensitivity to one's environment and openness to new information (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000a). The manipulation of mindfulness has been used in experiments in the education field and results indicate that inducing mindfulness can improve attention, memory, and increase curiosity and liking of the task (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000b).

The focus of the present study specifically toward online information sources is based on the need to study travelers' online attitudes and search behavior (Jang, 2004). Internet has become a crucial medium for tourism information delivery because tourists' have a high involvement level in the destination selection process (Luo et al., 2004). Despite the growing trend to use online information sources, new technologies are still under-utilized and under-exploited in terms of their potential to impact tourism marketing (Tsiotsou & Ratten, 2010). Ultimately, a greater understanding of the use of online information sources will allow destinations to take full advantage of how to use the Internet to meet their marketing needs (Luo et al., 2004).

Proposed Research Methods

This research project proposes to use experimental design to evaluate the effects of mindfulness as an intervention during the destination selection process. Subjects in the control group will be provided access to a computer and prompted to select a tourist destination through

bounded criteria. In the treatment group, the subjects will be asked to consider the most important features of a destination and provide weights for each feature. The intent of this exercise is to bring the selection criteria into their conscious awareness and prime them for mindfulness similar to the prime used for conscious thought by Dijksterhuis and van Olden (2006). Following the exercise, the treatment group will be given the same prompt as the control group and online behavior for subjects in both groups will be tracked and the websites they visit will be coded as organic or induced sources to see if there are differences in the types of sources used based on the mindfulness prime in the treatment group.

Once the subjects have compiled three destinations into their decision set, a random selection of study subjects from the control group will be asked to evaluate the three destinations and make their final decision while speaking aloud. This stream of consciousness will be recorded and follow the established procedures for obtaining verbal protocol (Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Cahill, Marion, & Lawson, 2007). A random selection of study subjects from the treatment group will be reminded of their selection criteria in order to be primed for mindfulness and asked to complete the same verbal protocol task. The criteria used by the subjects in both groups while making their final decision will be coded as cognitive or affective to see if there are differences in the style of information processing based on the mindfulness prime in the treatment group.

Expected Outcome

The potential outcomes from this research design will indicate whether the types of information sources and style of information processing used during the destination selection process are different based on the level of mindfulness of the tourist. The literature implies that mindful tourists may be more likely to seek a wider variety of information sources including a higher percentage of organic sources while mindless tourists may not seek new or conflicting information sources. If a significant difference is found, destination managers may be able to use the findings to more efficiently allocate their resources to the types of sources sought by their target markets. The literature also implies that mindful tourists may be more likely to use a logical and cognitive style of information processing compared to mindless tourists who may be more likely to use instinctual or affective information processing. If a significant difference is found, destination managers can tailor their marketing messages to the style of information processing exhibited by their target markets.

The use of mindfulness theory in tourism is growing but this study would be the first to use it as a foundation for understanding the tourist in the pre-trip stage of destination selection. Results also have the potential to make a contribution to the body of knowledge concerning tourists' use of online information sources and may indicate whether Goodall's (1991) destination selection process is supported in an online environment. The use of different methodologies has been suggested to help triangulate the research findings on destination image as there is an over-reliance on field surveys in the industry (Tsiotsou & Ratten, 2010). Experimental design is an under-utilized method within the tourism field and this study will address the usefulness of this method and inform future experimental research.

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