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## Influence of a Travel Magazine on Leisure Travel Decisions

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Authors	Andereck, Kathleen;Vogt, Christine
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# **Influence of a Travel Magazine on Leisure Travel Decisions**

## **Introduction**

A major factor influencing consumer purchase decisions is information sources about the product or service (Yacout and Hefny 2015). *Information search or information seeking* is the process of consulting sources before making a purchasing decision. Consumers recognize the need for more knowledge to satisfy uncertainty and/or risks, which activates the decision to search for information about alternatives (Moutinho 1987). Travelers often use a portfolio of sources to make trip decisions that are frequently complex, although researchers have shown how different types and amounts of sources are used depending on trip goals and information needs, perceived and actual risks, the type of trip, distance traveled, and amount of money spent on the trip (Choi et al. 2012). Many studies have considered traveler use of destination information, but to our knowledge, no research specifically considers the influence of travel magazines alone on people's travel decisions. Studies have found magazines and newspapers combined to be important among information option choices and many publishers specialize in travel magazines as leisure reading and for trip planning (Choi et al. 2012; Fodness and Murray 1998; Hsu and Song 2013; Kim et al 2015; Tsang et al. 2011).

## **Literature Review**

Research based on information search theory has documented that some individuals tend to plan various aspects of a vacation in advance (Petrick et al. 2007; Walter and Tong 1977). 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 (Choi et al. 2017; Raitz and Dakhil 1989). One way to temporally view information search is to divide it into pre-purchase and ongoing searches. Pre-purchase 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). Bloch and others suggest pre-purchase search is influenced by purchase involvement, while ongoing search is related to product involvement. Pre-purchase 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).

Much pre-purchase search is functional in nature; it is done primarily to gain product knowledge, reduce uncertainty, gain utility, and increase efficiency (Vogt and Fesenmaier 1998). However, information search is used not only to find useful information, but also to search for fun, entertainment, and social status, and for symbolic reasons (Li et al. 2009; Vogt and Fesenmaier 1998), characteristics that can be associated with on-going search. Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) developed the most comprehensive framework looking at these affective dimensions and found evidence that ongoing information search occurs because consumers have information needs that go beyond their functional needs. They proposed four needs that are met by ongoing information search: hedonic captures the pleasurable aspect of information search; innovation suggests that there is a segment of consumers who adopt new products; aesthetic is viewed as a stimulus to visual thinking, imagery, and envisioning of a place that is real and obtainable; and sign which encompasses the interpersonal, social, and symbolic aspects of information acquisition.

Travel magazines are generally used as an ongoing information source by subscribers. Limited research specifically considers the influence of magazine publicity on people's travel decisions. Magazines and newspapers are usually lumped together in studies rather than being considered separately, but are clearly used by some segments of the traveling public. Fodness and Murray (1998) found about 15 percent of the respondents in their sample of welcome center visitors used magazines as an information source, while Gitelson and Crompton (1983) found 14 percent used travel magazines and 10 percent used other magazines. Andereck et al. (2003) found 19 percent of travelers who requested information from the Arizona Office of Tourism used magazines. Andereck and Caldwell (1993), Capella and Greco (1987), and Henshall et al. (1985) all found magazines rated as an "important" information source. Even in recent years, with online sources of information increasing and print media use decreasing, magazines and newspapers are still considered to be important and influential (Choi et al. 2012; Hsu and Song 2013; Tsang et al. 2011). Kim and others (2015) found that between 18 percent and 22 percent of respondents used magazines and newspapers for planning, while Choi and others (2012) reported that 21 percent of their respondents used magazines for planning purposes.

Fodness and Murray (1998) found a clear segment of travelers who used magazines and newspapers distinct from all other information sources investigated in their study. They also found a small but distinct cluster of travelers who were the heaviest users of magazines or newspapers as contributory information sources. They suggested the reason for this is that magazines and newspapers are used in ongoing, as opposed to pre-purchase, information searches. Travelers who use magazines or newspapers to plan a trip acquire their information on an ongoing basis regardless of an impending purchase. Magazines and newspapers also tend to be used in conjunction with several other external information sources that provide more specific and detailed information such as where to stay and where to eat.

Although there is clear evidence that magazines are important travel information sources, there is little documentation of their singular influence on travel in the literature. The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of a travel magazine on leisure travel decisions. Based on the literature it is hypothesized that:

H1: There is a positive relationship between ongoing information search (length of subscription) and a) perceived magazine credibility, b) influence of the magazine on destination knowledge, and c) influence of the magazine on destination perceptions.

H2: There is a positive relationship between a) perceived magazine credibility, b) influence of the magazine on destination knowledge, and c) influence of the magazine on destination perceptions, and the extent of use of the magazine as an information source on the most recent trip.

H3: There is a positive relationship between extent of use of the magazine on the most recent and trip decisions.

Though readership rates of both digital and print travel publications experienced a significant COVID-19 bump (Miles 2021; Stevenson n.d), in recent years, subscriptions to print travel magazines had declined (Sheivachman 2017) so the importance of this information source to prospective travelers is of great significance to magazine publishers as digital platforms dominate the media landscape. It is also useful for destination marketing organizations that dedicate scarce resources to hosting travel writers who publish articles about their trips in travel magazines and pay for advertising placements. From a theoretical perspective, this research pulls

travel magazines out of the consumer information mix as a source with unique characteristics that may influence consumers in ways other sources do not.

## Methods

This study used *Arizona Highways Magazine (AHM)*, an award winning travel magazine, to address the research purpose. An *AHM* subscribers' survey included both a mail and an internet questionnaire to measure the influence of *AHM* on digital and print subscribers' travel decision-making and related behavior. The two versions were identical in content and flow. The mail survey was administered to a stratified random sample of *AHM* subscribers drawn from the magazine's subscriber list. Likewise, the internet survey was sent to a stratified random sample of subscribers for whom email addresses were available. For the internet survey Qualtrics online survey software was used. The samples were stratified to represent proportionate numbers of in-state subscribers and out-of-state subscribers, as well as gift and self-subscribers. The sample was drawn to ensure a good chance of a reasonably representative sample from each geographic stratum (resident and non-resident). A modified Dillman (2000) survey design technique was used for the survey. This technique employed a series of mailings/e-mailings to achieve maximum response rates. In total, 5,059 subscribers were surveyed with a response rate of 33%.

Survey questions to test the hypotheses and provide descriptive statistics, included: 1) length of subscription (number of years) as a measure of ongoing information search; 2) assessment of the magazine as a travel information source (14 items with 5-point scales); influence of the magazine on perceptions of the state as a travel destination (5 items with 5-point scales); extent of use of the magazine as a travel information source on the most recent trip (1 item with a 5-point scale); and influence of the magazine on specific travel decisions (11 items with 4-point scales). Using factor analysis and reliability testing, several multi-item variables were developed from the questions with multiple scales. Assessment of the magazine resulted in two factors: magazine credibility and destination knowledge. All other sets of variables resulted in a one-factor solution (Table 1). A model of the relationships among these variables based on the literature was tested with path analysis.

## Results

Subscribers to *AHM* used it for planning and making decisions about their most recent trip. Subscribers had been receiving the magazine for an average of ten years indicating a history of ongoing information search. They rated it highly as a credible information source ( $m=4.3$ ) and for positively influencing their knowledge about travel in the state ( $m=3.7$ ). Subscribers also reported high levels of agreement when asked to indicate the magazine's effect on their perceptions of the state as a destination ( $m=4.6$ ). *AHM* was used to a moderate extent for the most recent trip ( $m=2.9$ ). The magazine was moderately influential on decisions about the most recent trip overall ( $m=2.0$ ) but had more influence on some kinds of decisions than on others (Table 1).

Table 1. Study variables and factor analysis results

Items and Constructs	Mean	Factor Loading	Variance Explained	Alpha
<i>Years as subscriber</i>	10.4			
<i>Magazine credibility</i> <sup>1</sup>	4.3		66.8	.97
<i>AHM</i> portrays Arizona positively	4.6	.76		
<i>AHM</i> provides useful travel information	4.4	.77		
The travel information in <i>AHM</i> is professional	4.4	.84		
<i>AHM</i> provides helpful travel information	4.4	.85		
The travel information in <i>AHM</i> is trustworthy	4.3	.87		
The travel information in <i>AHM</i> is credible	4.3	.89		
<i>AHM</i> provides a variety of travel information	4.3	.81		
The travel information in <i>AHM</i> is reliable	4.3	.87		
The travel information in <i>AHM</i> is authoritative	4.1	.80		
The travel information in <i>AHM</i> is official	4.0	.76		
<i>Destination knowledge</i> <sup>1</sup>	3.7		8.5	.88
<i>AHM</i> has increased my interest in exploring/ traveling around Arizona (removed)	4.4			
I am knowledgeable about Arizona as a travel destination because of <i>AHM</i>	3.8	.90		
I am familiar with Arizona as a travel destination because of <i>AHM</i>	3.7	.91		
<i>Destination perceptions</i> <sup>1</sup>	4.6		73.3	.91
Arizona has beautiful scenery and natural attractions	4.8	.88		
Arizona has interesting cultural attractions	4.6	.87		
Arizona has an unspoiled environment	4.2	.70		
Arizona has interesting historical attractions	4.6	.90		
Arizona is an attractive travel destination	4.7	.91		
<i>Extent of use of magazine for most recent trip</i> <sup>2</sup>	2.9			
<i>Most recent trip decisions</i> <sup>3</sup>	2.0		56.1	.92
Specific attractions or destinations	2.7	.79		
Taking trip in general/ Arizona as a primary destination	2.3	.77		
Travel routes	2.3	.79		
Specific recreation/entertainment	2.2	.80		
Specific special events/festivals	2.0	.79		

Items and Constructs	Mean	Factor Loading	Variance Explained	Alpha
Dining choices	2.0	.77		
A specific tour	1.8	.76		
Hiking/biking/horseback riding on a specific trail	1.7	.62		
Other accommodations	1.7	.75		
Specific shopping areas/facilities	1.7	.76		
Camping areas/facilities	1.5	.63		

<sup>1</sup>1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree

<sup>2</sup>1=not at all to 5=a lot

<sup>3</sup>1=not influential to 4=very influential

The path analysis results indicate that length of subscription had a direct positive relationship to assessment of the magazine as a credible information source ( $\beta=.07$ ) and to destination knowledge ( $\beta=.09$ ), so longer term subscribers were more likely to find the magazine a helpful source of information and report a higher level of knowledge about Arizona due to the magazine. This supports hypothesis 1a and 1b. Length of subscription was not significantly related to destination perceptions suggesting little influence on subscribers' views of the state as an attractive travel destination and provide no support for hypothesis 1c. In support of hypothesis 2a and 2b, credibility of the magazine and destination knowledge had direct positive relationships to use of the magazine as an information source on the most recent trip ( $\beta=.12$  and  $.29$ , respectively) suggesting that those who found the magazine useful and helpful, and felt it provided them a higher level of knowledge about the state, were more likely to use it on their most recent trip. However, analysis found a negative relationship between destination perceptions and use of the magazine on the most recent trip ( $\beta=-.09$ ), so respondents who reported a higher level of agreement about the influence of the magazine on their perceptions about Arizona were less likely to have used the magazine for planning their most recent trip. This result is the opposite of what was predicted in hypothesis 2c. Destination knowledge ( $\beta=.22$ ) and using the magazine as a source on the recent trip ( $\beta=.49$ ) had direct positive relationships to making specific trip decisions suggesting that those who knew more about the destination and those who used the magazine to greater extent than others tended to make specific trip decisions based on *AHM*. The relationship between use of the magazine on the recent trip and trip decision is particularly strong supporting hypothesis 3. The direct relationship between destination perceptions and specific trip decisions was negative ( $\beta=-.12$ ) so similar to the perceptions-use relationship, those with positive perceptions of Arizona were less likely to use the magazine to make trip decisions. The final model is presented in Figure 1.

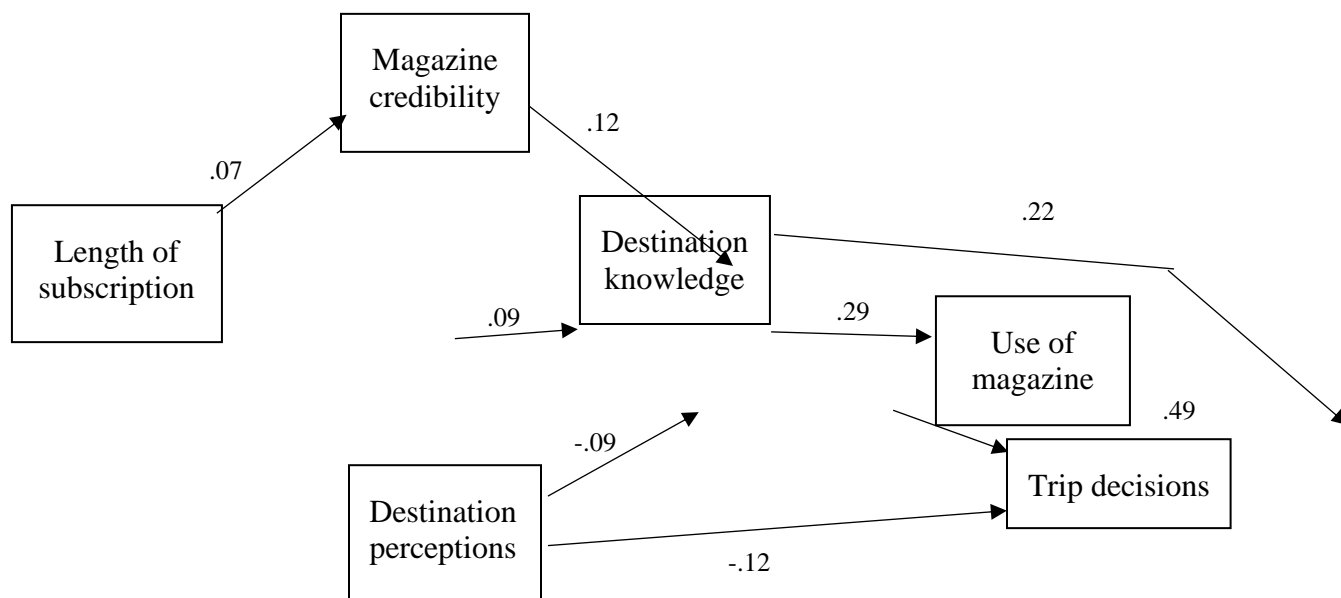


Figure 1. Information search and decision making for most recent trip (all paths:  $p < .01$ )

### *Discussion and Conclusion*

Previous research reported use of magazines and newspapers as a useful source of information for travelers even in the age of electronic media (Choi et al 2012; Hu and Song 2013; Kim et al. 2015). This study extends this work and contributes to information search theory by focusing in-depth on a travel magazine as a singular source of travel information and how it functions in the travel information search process. The travel magazine had an influence on prospective visitors' knowledge of a destination and the trip decisions they made. Subscribers reported high levels of confidence in the credibility of the magazine and its influence on knowledge about the destination. They also noted high levels of agreement that the magazine influences their perceptions of the destination. While the influence of the magazine on travel decisions was moderate, there were differences in influence on different type of decisions with more influence on the more general decisions such as selected an attraction or destination ( $m=2.7$ ) and taking the trip in general ( $m=2.3$ ) that on specific decisions such as shopping areas ( $m=1.7$ ) and tours ( $m=1.8$ ). These findings support other studies that suggest ongoing information search primarily provides a knowledge base for decision making and ongoing interest in a destination rather than pre-purchase search that is more oriented toward making better and more immediate decisions (Fodness and Murray 1998; Pearce and Kang 2009; Punj and Staelin 1983).

The longer a subscriber receives the magazine as an ongoing information source the more they learn about the destination and view the magazine as a helpful source of travel information. These variables then result in use of the magazine for information about the most recent trip, subsequently leading to specific trip decisions. These findings are consistent with others that have found information source credibility is related to purchase decisions (Choi et al. 2017). The ongoing information search via the magazine does not appear to be influential on subscribers'

perceptions of the state as a travel destination. There is a negative relationship between destination perceptions due to the magazine and extent of magazine use for the most recent trip as well as between perceptions and well as trip decisions. This suggests that if a subscriber's perceptions of some of the characteristics of a destination such as its cultural attractions and beauty are more positive they are less likely to have used it for planning their most recent trip and for making decisions. This is not necessarily a negative finding as these kinds of destination characteristics can be influenced by many information sources including previous experience travelling in the destination. Those with more positive perceptions may not feel a need for use of the magazine for their trip pre-planning and decision making for specific trips (Fodness and Murray 1998).

The outcome of this study is good news for magazine publishers; even though subscriptions to magazines have been declining there is still a desire for travel magazines and they are still used as influential information sources. Likewise, investment by DMOs in trips for travel writers continues to be a wise use of resources. The findings indicate there is a utilitarian and a leisure role for a magazine brand that provides travel information in many forms (print and digital), and the search and consumption of information can be a leisure activity on its own with subscribers finding the magazine more helpful and learning more over time. For these subscribers, the magazine is an important source of travel information as well as a leisure activity itself; many are long-time subscribers who keep and use the magazine to inform their travel in the state, to be entertained, for aesthetic stimulation, to learn about new places, and for sharing of information with others (Vogt and Fesenmaier 1998).

While this study adds to the travel information search literature, additional research is needed to more thoroughly understand the role of travel magazines in the mix of information sources available to travelers. It is important to point out that this is a magazine published in print, and more recently also online, monthly since 1921 that features one specific state and what it has to offer with high quality photos and in-depth stories. It also includes specific sections such as the scenic drive of the month that directly highlight specific types of experiences undoubtedly drawing attention to those kinds of activities. The magazine brand offers other products widening its influence including digital features such as a Facebook page, digital photography on Instagram, retail products and a television show (produced by an outside organization). Even so, the results of this work clearly demonstrate that a travel magazine can have considerable influence on perceptions of a destination and travel decisions.

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