Search Behavior of International Vacationers: Travel-Specific Lifestyle and Sociodemographic Variables

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Search Behavior of International Vacationers: Travel-Specific Lifestyle and Sociodemographic Variables

PATRICK SCHUL AND JOHN L. CROMPTON

The primary objectives of this exploratory study were to determine the relative ability of a limited number of travel-specific psychographic statements and sociodemographic variables to (1) predict and explain external search behavior of a sample of international vacationers and (2) discriminate between respondents exemplifying active and passive external search behavior. The findings suggest that search behavior is better explained by travel-specific psychographics than by demographics.

Travel-specific psychographics correlated with length of time during which external search behavior occurred. However, these same measures did not appear to help explain differences in propensity to seek out multiple sources of travel information prior to a vacation experience. The means of the psychographic measures were found to be significantly different between active and passive searchers.

In 1981 world spending for domestic and international travel exceeded world spending for military purposes (Waters 1982). Currently, the amount spent on foreign trips is about 12% of world merchandise trade, and this proportion is expected to grow to 17% (Waters 1980). International travelers thus represent one of the largest economic forces in the world. They have a major impact on employment, domestic trade, foreign commerce, and worldwide financial transactions.

For many years the United States has earned more money from entertaining foreign visitors than any country in the world. Furthermore, when gasoline cost increases and supply restrictions in the late seventies caused erosion of the traditional domestic tourism market, some states compensated for the erosion by developing new foreign markets. Florida, for example, developed new markets in Western Europe, and Texas has shown increasing interest in attracting foreign visitors to its boundaries. (The Texas tourism industry ranks fourth among the states, behind California, Florida and New York.) The opportunity for Texas to emulate Florida's strategy emerged when direct flights were initiated from London to Texas in September 1977; by 1982, there were three international carriers offering daily flights from London to either Houston or Dallas. Current visitor arrivals to Texas from the United Kingdom represent almost 25% of all overseas arrivals to the state. The increased coordination of sales efforts by tour operators, airlines, and host facilities suggests further expansion is probable.

The research reported here was sponsored by the United States Travel Service (now called the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration) and the Texas Tourist Development Agency, which have primary responsibility for international tourist development at the federal and state levels, respectively. The study was an exploratory effort; its intent was to identify appropriate market segments and to provide the Texas Tourist Development Agency with some insights which would serve to guide its first media endeavors in this new market.

Howard and Sheth (1969) suggest, “It may be fruitful to think about differences among buyers in their purchase plans as a basis for identifying individual differences.” This procedure may be particularly appropriate for vacation purchases since vacations represent major investments, and the literature suggests that planning and information search are likely to be greater for major than for minor investments (Engel et al. 1973).

Intercontinental tourists can be expected to seek information from a variety of sources over a relatively

1The largest overseas supplier of visitors to the contiguous United States is the United Kingdom. In 1980, British visitors to the United States spent $469 million, an increase of 25% over 1979 (Waters 1982).
long time period before selecting a destination. Unlike
the retail consumer in a store, the international vaca-
tioner cannot observe what he or she is buying. Because
it must depend upon secondary and tertiary sources of
information, the search for information about potential
destinations is likely to be much longer and involve more
informational sources than the search for information
about most consumer products.

The likelihood that consumers will engage in exten-
sive searches for information about foreign trips is also
increased by vacationers' propensity to visit new destina-
tions each vacation. A primary motivation for a vacation
is to see new places or to do new things in a different
environment (Crompton 1977). This emphasis on nov-
elty implies that for many there is little desire to return
to a previously visited destination, no matter how suc-
cessful a previous vacation at that destination may have
been.

The higher the price of a product or service, the
greater the degree of perceived risk by the consumer
(Engel et al. 1973). This risk is not only financial; it is
also social. To many Europeans, a foreign vacation is a
highly visible item, and the anecdotes and evidence of
experiences brought back from it are often capable of
confering prestige upon the participant. Hence, both
the social visibility of the foreign vacation and its rela-
tively high price encourage an extensive search for
information which will reduce the perceived risk.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Marketers can benefit in several ways from an
improved knowledge of external search behavior in trip
planning. First, insight into search processes can assist in
determining whether segmenting the audience can
improve the efficiency of media communications.
Second, knowledge of search processes can significantly
aid in product positioning and the development of
advertising appeals targeted at specific segments.
Knowledge of search processes can also help select
appropriate marketing strategies for different market
segments, and can be useful for market analysis. Various
types of customer analyses identifying individuals'
search behavior have been used in market planning
(Newman and Lockemeyer 1975).

The primary objectives of this study were: (1) to
determine the relative ability of a limited number of
travel-specific psychographic statements and sociode-
mographic variables to predict and explain external
search behavior and (2) to discriminate between respon-
dents who exemplified relatively active and passive
external search behavior.

It was hypothesized that the travel-specific psycho-
graphics would be more effective than sociodemograph-
ic for predicting external search behavior. The theoretical
basis for this expectation is grounded in level of
discourse theory, which states that all variables in a
model should be generalizations from the same set of
objects (Snepenger and Crompton 1983). Sociodemograph-
ic are population level independent variables,
while those who had flown on an airplane in the past 12
months (the qualifying condition for the sample is
explained below in the methods section) clearly consti-
tute a subpopulation. Hence, the independent and
dependent variables are not generalizations from the
same set of objects. In contrast, travel-specific psycho-
graphics are subpopulation independent variables. Thus,
they are at the same level of discourse as the dependent
variable.

This theoretical expectation appears to be sup-
ported by the available empirical evidence. Woodside
and Pitts (1976) concluded that life-style information
may be more important in predicting foreign and domes-
tic travel behavior than demographic variables. As a
result of their study, they advocated that firms in travel-
related industries should make use of life-style data as a
market segmentation tool. Similarly, Abbey (1979)
found that tour travelers prefer tours designed with
vacation life-style information to those designed with
demographic data. This preference was maintained
across different types of tours and differently priced
tours. He concluded that life-style allows suppliers to
create a package that is more compatible with the moti-
vations, attitudes, and opinions of the tour traveler.

An additional pragmatic rationale underlying the
use of life-style statements is that the more an organiza-
tion knows and understands about its customers, the
more effectively it can communicate and market to
them. Psychographic research provides detailed profiles
that allow marketers to visualize the people they are
trying to reach. Psychographic measures have been
widely accepted in marketing. However, relatively little
effort has been directed toward exploring the utility of
psychographics for differentiating the search processes
of consumers, which is the primary concern of this study.

METHODOLOGY

The Sample

Data were gathered in the summer period from a
purposive sample of 560 previously identified United
Kingdom residents. From each of four major geographi-
cal regions in the United Kingdom—London, the Eng-
lish Midlands, North-West England, and Scotland—140
respondents were selected. Of the 560 questionnaires de-
livered to respondents who qualified for the sample, 544
were completed and included in the analysis. A summary
description of the sample is provided in Table 1.

Qualified respondents were at least 25 years of age;
had flown in an airplane in the past 12 months; and were
unrelated to any other respondent. The decision to con-
fine the sample to people who had flown in the recent
past was guided by the findings of Lansing and Blood
(1964) who reported that previous overseas travel was
the best prediction of travel overseas in the future.
Because of the relatively short distance and convenience
offered by alternative travel modes, the United Kingdom
has relatively few internal flights. Hence, if a respondent
had flown in the past 12 months, the trip was most likely
to have been an overseas trip. Indeed, in response to a
subsequent question, 70% of respondents had flown on
an overseas vacation during the past 12 months. The
remaining 30% of respondents were retained in the anal-
TABLE 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regional representation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Midlands</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-West England</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>544</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>58.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated/divorced</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>544</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 or over</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>544</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>63.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>544</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school at 16 years of age or under</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school at 17 years of age or over</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical/special vocational school</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College/university</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>544</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The variables included in the questionnaire in order to gather information on respondents’ travel-specific life-styles. These statements were derived from a previous study of the United Kingdom travel market (Hay Associates 1978), and addressed a variety of topics concerning the respondents’ activities, interests, and opinions regarding various aspects of the vacation experience and type of preferred destinations. In each case, respondents revealed their feelings by indicating extent of agreement (or disagreement) on a six-point Likert-type scale designated “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” A factor analysis of the 16 statements revealed six composite psychographic dimensions (six factors with eigenvalues greater than one). The results of a varimax rotation of the initial factor matrix are provided in Table 2.

To interpret the meaning of the factors, statements with loadings of .40 or above were considered. The factors (or dimensions) reflect travel-specific behavioral characteristics that might be described as: cultural interest, comfort, familiarity/convenience, activity, opinion leadership, and knowledge-seeker. The internal consistency of the factors was assessed by randomly assigning the data into two halves and factor analyzing the 16 psychographic statements within each data set. The results indicated that covariance among the 16 statements was consistent. Six factors with eigenvalues greater than one emerged in each set. The same variables loaded heavily on the same factors as in the overall data set displayed in Table 2. Thus, the factor structure in the aggregate sample was considered representative and stable.

The sociodemographic questions included in the questionnaire measured respondents’ regional affiliation, age, sex, and education.

Because external search behavior is a multi-faceted concept, it has been operationalized in a wide variety of ways in the empirical marketing literature. In the focus interviews which preceded this study, international vacationers themselves operationalized their external search behavior in two ways. Hence, both of these approaches were incorporated as the dependent variable. They were: (1) the length of time indicated by the respondent during which overt trip planning activities occurred prior to the vacation which was furthest away from the respondent’s home in the past 12 months, and (2) the number of travel organizations (e.g., private and public travel organizations, transportation carriers, tour operators, etc.) consulted by the respondent during the trip planning process.

Data Analysis

Initially, two separate multiple regression procedures were undertaken to examine the relative effects of the six psychographic factor variables and the sociodemographics on the two measures of external search behavior—travel planning time and the number of external travel organizations consulted.

The second stage of the analysis involved using t-tests to identify mean differences on the psychographic and sociodemographic variables between two identifiable groups of respondents—one group designated as relatively “active” searchers, the other group as relatively “passive” searchers. Respondents were assigned into these two groups based on: (1) the length of time during which the search behavior occurred prior to their most recent long vacation and (2) the number of travel organizations contacted. Those respondents spending less than two months in travel planning and contacting fewer than two travel organizations were assigned to the passive group. Respondents spending two or more months in travel research behavior and contacting two or more travel organizations were assigned to the active group. The 177 respondents not meeting either criterion were deleted from the analysis.

RESULTS

Impact of Psychographics and Sociodemographics on External Search Behavior

The relative ability of the psychographic statements to predict the length of time during which the search behavior occurred prior to the vacation which was furthest away from the respondent’s home in the past 12 months, and the number of travel organizations contacted by the respondent during the trip planning process is shown in Table 3. The table presents the results of the multiple regression analyses for the two dependent variables—travel planning time and the number of external travel organizations consulted.

The results indicate that both the psychographic and sociodemographic variables have a significant impact on external search behavior. The psychographic variables, particularly the factors related to cultural interest, comfort, familiarity/convenience, activity, opinion leadership, and knowledge-seeker, are strongly associated with the length of time respondents spent during overt trip planning activities and the number of travel organizations contacted during the trip planning process. The sociodemographic variables, such as age, sex, and education, also contribute to the prediction of external search behavior, although their impact is generally weaker than that of the psychographic variables.

The results suggest that international vacationers who are more likely to be knowledgeable and opinion-leaders, and who have a strong cultural interest, are more likely to spend a greater amount of time planning their trips and to consult more travel organizations during the planning process. This finding is consistent with the idea that active searchers are more likely to be engaged in a more thorough and deliberate planning process, which may involve more extensive external search behavior.

These findings have important implications for marketers and travel planners, as they highlight the importance of targeting active searchers with marketing strategies that emphasize cultural interest, comfort, familiarity/convenience, activity, opinion leadership, and knowledge-seeker. By understanding the characteristics of these active searchers, marketers can develop more effective and targeted marketing strategies to appeal to this segment of the market.

In conclusion, the results of this study support the idea that external search behavior is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that is influenced by a variety of psychographic and sociodemographic factors. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing effective marketing strategies that can effectively reach and engage international vacationers to maximize the potential of the Texas market.
and sociodemographic descriptors to predict and explain an individual's planning time frame was assessed by regressing the planning time frame on the six psycho-
graphic travel factors and the selected sociodemographic variables.

The resulting coefficient of determination was $R^2 = .40$. The standardized regression coefficients are shown in Table 3. Four of the six travel factors were significant (.05 level). Only the “familiarity/convenience” and “knowledge-seeker” factors failed to demonstrate a significant relationship with planning time frame. None of the beta coefficients associated with the sociodemographics was significant (.05 level). Thus, the length of time over which the external search process occurred did not vary significantly with age, sex, or education of the respondent.

The second way external search behavior was operationalized was by asking respondents the number of travel organizations they contacted during trip planning. The predictive ability of the independent variables was assessed by regressing them with the number of travel

### TABLE 3
TRAVEL PLANNING BEHAVIOR AS A FUNCTION OF AIO TRAVEL FACTORS AND SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES
(n = 544)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Travel Planning Time</th>
<th>Organization Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychographic travel factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural interest</td>
<td>.153$^a$</td>
<td>.202$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td>.165$^a$</td>
<td>-.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity/convenience</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>-.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>.144$^a$</td>
<td>-.072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion leadership</td>
<td>-.286$^a$</td>
<td>-.211$^a$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge-seeker</td>
<td>-.032</td>
<td>.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sociodemographic variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.080</td>
<td>-.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex$^c$</td>
<td>-.072</td>
<td>.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational level</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coefficient of determination</td>
<td>-.40$^b$</td>
<td>-.26$^b$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$ p < .05  $^b$ Coded as 1 = male, 2 = female  $^c$ p < .01  and treated as dummy variable in regression analysis.

1. When I travel abroad, I prefer to be on a guided tour.  .04  .22  .14  .05  -.68  -.06
2. The nicest vacation is one where I can just relax and do nothing.  .00  .59  .32  -.44  .15  .00
3. When I go on vacation, I look for adventure and an opportunity to escape from the ordinary.  .23  .06  -.02  .64  .12  -.03
4. The best vacations are those that have a lot of night life.  -.21  .43  .10  .07  .08  -.07
5. It is important that I stay at the best places when on vacation.  -.15  .76  .01  .08  -.27  .03
6. I prefer to visit countries that have old monuments and other historical buildings.  .64  -.08  .05  .10  -.19  .10
7. I always like to mix with the local people and experience the local customs.  .75  .00  .11  .03  .22  .07
8. I most like to visit places that my friends have visited before me.  .16  .01  .54  .01  -.20  .22
9. One of the best parts of traveling is to visit new cultures and new ways of living.  .79  -.04  -.06  .16  .20  .07
10. When I go on a trip, I prefer to arrange my own sightseeing schedule and accomodation.  .22  .04  -.05  .05  .75  .12
11. Most of my friends come to me for advice on what foreign countries to visit.  .08  .00  .01  .06  .10  .85
12. I like to visit places where I've been able to learn things that help me in education and/or business.  .40  .07  .17  .24  .06  .51
13. I try to do too many things when I'm on vacation.  .11  -.08  .18  .61  -.10  .24
14. I prefer to visit places where the people speak the same language.  .01  -.06  .69  .24  -.06  .14
15. It is important that there is plenty to entertain the children at the places I go on vacation.  .10  .29  .61  .09  .02  -.26
16. I prefer to visit places with a large variety of activities and sights.  .12  .09  .24  .59  .03  .06

$^a$The underlined factor loadings are the most salient loadings on each factor; a cutoff of .40 was used for item selection.

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organizations consulted by the respondent prior to his or her vacation. The resulting coefficient of determination was a low .26. The standardized regression coefficients are depicted in Table 3.

Two of the psychographic factors, “opinion leadership” and “cultural interest,” were significant (.05 level). None of the sociodemographics used in the analysis was found to be significantly correlated to this measure of planning behavior.

Profile of Relatively Active and Passive External Search Groups

The means and standard deviations of the six travel-related psychographic factors and the selected sociodemographics for relatively active and passive travel planning groups are shown in Table 4. The sociodemographic variables considered in the analysis do not discriminate between active and passive planners. However, the two groups differed significantly on four of the psychographic factors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Passive Searchers (n = 236)</th>
<th>Active Searchers (n = 131)</th>
<th>t-statistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological factors</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural interest</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>4.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>4.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity/convenience</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>2.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion leadership</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge-seeker</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociodemographic variables</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexb</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p > .001
b Coded as 1 = male, 2 = female.

The active planner showed a much stronger preference for vacations in places with activity, an opportunity to escape the ordinary, plenty of night life, and a large variety of things to do and sights to see. He or she also showed a stronger interest in cultural attractions, preferring to visit places where old monuments and historical buildings can be visited. The active planner indicated a stronger interest in mixing with local people, sharing in local customs and cultures, and experiencing new ways of living. However, active planners appeared to want such experiences to occur in a controlled rather than spontaneous way since they preferred a more structured trip arrangement than passive planners, indicating a significantly stronger preference for guided tours and pre-arranged sightseeing schedules and accommodations. Finally, the active planner reported a much stronger preference for escape and comfort, emphasizing rest and relaxation and, above all, staying in the best places.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study provides empirical support for Howard and Sheth’s (1969) suggestion that purchase plans provide a basis for identifying individual differences. It also demonstrates significant individual differences in international vacationers’ external search behavior.

Travel-related psychographic measures correlated with length of time during which external search behavior occurred. However, these same measures did not appear to aid in explaining differences in the propensity of individuals to seek out multiple sources for soliciting travel information. The sample was partitioned into active and passive searchers. Given the ability to differentiate between these two groups with life-style measures it may be most efficient for tourist agencies to focus their efforts upon active planners. Tourists who plan their vacations well in advance think it is important to know as much as possible about destinations, and make detailed vacation plans and schedules (Mayo 1975). This diligent search process suggests an opportunity for tourist organizations' efforts to influence the outcome of the destination selection decision.

Marketing managers are concerned with segmenting travel markets. The respondents in this study could be expected to undertake an international vacation. Within this group six segments were identified by factor analyzing a series of psychographic statements. These segments offer distinctive life-style modes which suggest both product development and promotional strategies. The names given to the factors, and the statements which were saliently loaded on each factor, suggest opportunities for developing distinctive package tours for the international market and promotional themes appropriate for selling them.

Tourist suppliers can benefit from the additional consumer information provided in psychographic studies. Life-style descriptors are more effective than sociodemographics in predicting international vacationers' external search behavior. The study illustrates the observation that “two products with very similar demographic profiles sometimes turn out to have usefully different psychographic profiles (Wells and Tigert 1971).

Life-style descriptors are becoming increasingly important, not only in aiding the development of effective copy and promotional themes but also in the selection of appropriate media for advertising. While media still describe their markets with traditional demographics, an increasing proportion of media, particularly those which have emerged in the past few years, are supplementing their documentation of target profiles with life-style information.

The selective nature of this sample requires that the study’s conclusions be interpreted with caution. The findings are limited to British citizens like those from whom the data were derived, and should not be applied to other travel markets without further research. How-
ever, the study suggests that sociodemographic variables may be inadequate for explaining the external search behavior of international vacation travelers. Travel search behavior is more adequately explained by travel-specific psychographic statements.

REFERENCES


