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Priorities in Tourists' Decision Making Research in the 1990s and Beyond: From a North American Perspective

John L. Crompton

The decision making procedures for most tourists involves a complex process of evaluating and eliminating various choices. The individual's thought processes are engaged at the micro level regarding the nature of the experience, service quality, or satisfaction and at the macro level which is concerned with the social or economic impacts of the choices. There are numerous choice sets that a tourist may select from, however, choosing from the Initial Consideration Set and the Late Consideration Set often provide conflicting marketing implications. By identifying the characteristics of the people in each choice set by using geographic, sociographic, or behavioral descriptors, it is possible to define market segments by their choice set patterns. Cumulative attractions and multi-destination trip behaviors are also discussed, as well as tourists' motivations.

Key words: Initial Consideration Set, Late Consideration (Evoked) Set, cumulative attractions, multi-destination trip behaviors, tourists' motivations.

Tourism research efforts can be classified into the four major categories shown in Figure 1. Before the tourism trip commences, individuals go through a decision process to determine which destination they desire to visit. The aggregate decisions of these individuals constitute the total number of visitors to a destination which become the data used by researchers engaged in visitor forecasting studies. After a trip has been completed, research at the individual unit of analysis focuses on issues such as exploring the nature of the experience and the perceived quality and satisfaction of the trip. At the aggregate or macro level, post-trip research is concerned with impacts: economic, social/cultural, physical/environmental, crowding/congestion, community attitude, and etc.

The author of this paper has current or past research programs in all four categories shown in Figure 1, but comments in this paper are confined to research into the individual's decision process. Within the decision making process, this paper focuses on four research program endeavors which I have been involved with during the past decade: choice sets, trip patterns, motivations and positioning. These areas will likely remain as the primary topics on my tourism research agenda for the next decade.

THE ROLE OF CHOICE SETS

Central to all the models of the tourist's decision process which have appeared in the literature is the notion of vacation choice sets. Choice sets are particularly prominent and useful when a purchase is perceived to be new and/or high risk. Expanding the market for international visitors to South-East Asia, will require targeting individuals who perceive such a trip to be new and/or high risk in terms of the potential monetary, time, fear of the unknown, and embarrassment costs. Hence, understanding where South-East Asia, as a region, or where specific countries within the region are located in an individual's choice set will be a key factor in identifying potentially responsive target markets and developing effective promotional programs for them.

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A taxonomic structure of choice sets is shown in Figure 2 (Crompton, 1992). The conceptual difference between the Early and Late Consideration Sets is that the period of time between them is long enough for individuals to evaluate and reduce the list of destinations from a broad set of possibles to a narrower set of probables. Between Stages 1 and 2, changes are likely to be the result of pull factors or facilitators—that is, the relative appeal of the destinations.

Between Stages 2 and 3 (Figure 2) inhibitors or constraints are likely to be decisive in selecting a final destination from the set of three or four probable destinations which typically characterize the Late Consideration Set. The Action Set describes individuals who commit resources to find out more about a destination—the bigger the investment, the more likely an individual is to commit to the destination. The Interaction Set encompasses those who are exposed to personal selling related to a destination. This provides opportunities for representatives to overcome any negatives which may otherwise lead to a destination's rejection.

The model in Figure 2 is shown to be linear and one-way, but it is reversible. Situational factors are dynamic and may change during the decision framework time period. For example, a country about to be selected may experience an unexpected political upheaval which can cause the individual to reverse his decision. Alternatively, a reversal may occur with the sudden availability of discount airfare which leads to a destination being preferred, that was previously discarded because of cost constraints.

Finding where countries are located in the choice set structure of the individual's selected target markets, is critical for developing, monitoring and evaluating promotional efforts. Successful marketing implies having the destination included first in the Initial Consideration Set, and then in the Late Consideration Set, rather than in one of the excluded sets. If the destination is not in the Initial Consideration Set of a large proportion of a target market, it suggests that an intensive advertising campaign is needed. If it is in the Inert Set, a promotional strategy such as comparative advertising may be effective. If it is in the Late Consideration Set, but not the Action Set, then offering an incentive
for potential tourists to contact the destination's representatives may be a useful strategy. Generally, if a destination disappears from the selection track late in the process, then the problem is likely to be associated with the personal follow-up procedures rather than with promotion. For example, if prominent discarding occurs at the Interaction Set transition point, then attention needs to be directed at the destination's sales personnel or the travel agents who serve as their representatives.

Woodside and Sherrell (1977) point out that the use of choice sets is likely to produce marketing implications different from those obtained from asking a general question such as: "What places are you considering for your vacation next year?" Effective comparative advertising messages may be developed by identifying a major competitive vacation destination in the traveler's Late Consideration Set. The need to improve destination facilities and services may be pinpointed by learning why many travelers locate a destination in the Inert Set. Direct action promotional programs may be developed for a vacation destination often found in a traveler's Late Consideration Set and consequently not visited. If the vacation destination is found often in the traveler's Inert Set, there may be a need to build awareness and positive attitudes by using a public relations program.

As the process evolves, tourists eliminate destinations that were in their Initial Consideration Set. If a discarded destination is assigned to the Reject rather than the Inert Set, it is important to find this out and to discover the reasons why an initial positive predisposition become a negative. Once it is in the Reject Set, it is likely to be excluded from future Initial Consideration Sets, unless reasons for the negativism can be identified and the problems addressed.

By using a survey approach marketing managers can identify what percentage of a target market is in each choice set. They can also identify the characteristics of the people in each choice set using geographic, sociodemographic, or behavioral descriptors to determine whether it is possible to define market segments by their choice set patterns.

From a basic, rather than applied, research perspective at least three research questions remain to be answered about the formulation of choice sets. First, are the criteria used to evaluate destination alternatives different at each stage? Second, are the sources and types of information sought and used to assist in making these evaluations different? Third, are the decision rules used to discard alternatives at each stage different?
TRIP PATTERNS

Most models of tourists' decision making or demand forecasting that have appeared in the literature have, in large part, been predicated on the assumption that when travelers leave home, they go to a single destination. In many cases, this assumption is fallacious. The single destination assumption simplifies the modeling task, but it substantially reduces the accuracy of the resultant models. Part of the reason more emphasis has not been given to incorporating multi-destination trips into decision making and forecasting models, may be attributable to the failure of tourism organizations to collect data that provide insight into this phenomenon and that can be used to calibrate and test these models.

Alternative destination choices cannot be accurately conceptualized by considering the attributes of the alternative major destinations alone, since in tourists' minds these alternatives are related to other attractions in the proximity. Traditional decision making and spatial models have been misleading in treating each trip as an independent unit of analysis, rather than considering similarities and differences among sets of destinations.

Multiple-destination trips are conceptualized as the outcome of a choice process in which an individual decides that a combination of alternative combinations of destinations and benefits sought will be selected. A potential tourist is likely to view multi-destination visits as a rational behavior pattern that reduces the time and cost associated with travel, and therefore, increases the potential benefits that may accrue.

The typology shown in Figure 3 suggests a number of important implications for understanding the spatial pattern of vacation trips. According to Kim and Fesenmaier (1990), the spatial structure of the supply of recreation opportunities is likely to affect the nature and extent of participation in pleasure travel. If A1, A2, A3, A4, and A5 are five destinations being considered for a trip and it is assumed that they are equidistant from the home origin and identical in every respect, then it is likely that they have an equal probability of being selected for the trip (Lue, Crompton, and Fesenmaier 1993). However, when the destinations in Figure 3 are examined more carefully, it is apparent that A2, A3, A4, and A5 provide extra opportunities (B, C, D, E, and F), for securing additional benefits for relatively small increments of costs, because these attractions can relatively easily be incorporated into the trip. Hence, it seems likely that destinations A2, A3, A4, and A5 will be preferred over A1.

Figure 3 identifies five distinctive spatial patterns that may be adopted by pleasure travelers. The spatial pattern selected is likely to be dependent on the types of destinations available, their accessibility from different origins, and the type of area in which the origin is located. Some proportion of visitors to a destination may exhibit the characteristics of all five patterns, but until those proportions and the structures of each pattern are known, cooperative marketing efforts are unlikely to be efficacious.

The notion of cumulative attraction offers a conceptual underpinning for multi-destination trips. It states that a given number of attractions will do more business if they are located enroute, in proximity, or in a logical sequence to each other, than if they are widely scattered. Two basic types of cumulative attractions have been recognized: one involves similar attractions, which together can draw more visitors than apart; the other consists of complementary attractions, which are compatible entities with a high incidence of visitor interchange. Both types represent shared business. The extent of an attraction's compatibility lies in the answer to the questions of whether attraction A down the road helps attraction B, or whether it harms attraction B, or whether it has no apparent effect on attraction B.

The notion of cumulative attraction recognizes that much of the tourism business is shared. An attraction secures its visitation not only as a result of its own generative power, but also as a result of the generative power of other attractions. This business is represented by those who visit an attraction, but also have, as their principal purpose for being in the vicinity or on that route, plans to visit other attractions. Thus, a new attraction that elects to locate near existing tourism attractions is likely to receive some secondary visitation associated with primary visits to the existing attractions, in addition to its own primary visitation. Despite the conceptual richness of the notion of cumulative attraction, there has been little empirical field or experimental research conducted to verify it and define its nuances.

A better understanding of multi-destination trip behavior is likely to result in:

- longer visits and greater expenditures in a given area;
- improved cooperative marketing efforts with other attractions, agencies or countries;
- establishing which types of tourism activities or resources should be located close to each other to maximize the financial returns for all parties involved;
- improved accuracy of forecasts of travel behavior patterns and demand numbers.
TOURISTS’ MOTIVATIONS

Many tourism destinations have an "edifice complex." They invest public money in major attractions such as museums, sports arenas, convention centers, parks, themed attractions or whatever. Their emphasis is on "hardware"—structures, facilities or programs. This ignores what we know about the role of motives in tourists' decision processes. Tourists don't go to see things; rather they go to experience them and to derive desired benefits from that experience. They do not want to engage in programs or services; they want to undergo experiences. The "hardware" is simply a vehicle for the user to benefit from while interacting with it. This distinction has enormous significance for the way in which tourism suppliers define their business.

Tourists' motivations can be classified as either push or pull factors (Crompton, 1979; Crompton and McKay, 1996). The push factors are social-psychological motives. The pull factors are motives aroused by the destination rather than emerging exclusively from within the traveler himself. Pull motives reflect the influence of the destination in arousing them to act.

Much of the tourist industry's modus operandi is based upon the assumption that tourists are attracted to a destination by the particular cultural opportunities or special attributes that it offers. However, the research literature suggests that tourists do not go to particular locations to see cultural artifacts; rather they go for social-psychological reasons. Nine social-psychological motives are generally recognized. They are:

- escape from a perceived mundane environment
- exploration and evaluation of self
- relaxation
- prestige
- regression
- enhancement of kinship relationships
- facilitation of social interaction
- novelty
- education

The future research needs in the area of motivations are two-fold. First, to develop good, reliable, and valid instrumentation which accurately measures each of these motive domains (Lee and Crompton, 1992). Second, for destinations to determine how they are positioned in the eyes of their potential visitors on these motives.

POSITIONING

Positioning is the process of establishing and maintaining a distinctive place for a destination in the minds of potential visitors within target markets (Crompton, Fakeye, and Lue, 1992). In contrast to "image," positioning requires a frame of reference which is provided by competitive destinations. Positioning involves identifying potential visitors' perceptions of the strong attributes of a destination, comparing them with their perceptions of the attributes of competitive destinations, and selecting those which differentiate a destination from its competitors. These features are then emphasized and form the cornerstone of marketing strategy. Success is most likely if a small number of differentiated features are emphasized since a larger number may result in a less incisive, more nebulous image.

Positioning shares the micro-economic roots of market segmentation. It is a stage subsequent to market segmentation at which the marketer determines which of the visitor target market's important needs a destination is better able to service than its competitors. Positioning is concerned with three issues: the segmentation decision, image, and selection of the destination's features which should be emphasized. The positioning decision is the most critical strategic decision that a destination makes because it is central to determining visitors' perceptions and their choice decisions. Because of the intangible nature of a destination, an explicit positioning strategy is valuable in helping prospective visitors get a "mental fix" on it, that may otherwise be amorphous. This is the key to developing an effective competitive posture and providing the focus in developing a marketing program.

The six stages involved in developing a positioning strategy are (Crompton, Fakeye, and Lue, 1992):
1. Identify the competitive destinations.
2. Identify potential visitors' perceptions of the destination of interest; particularly, its strengths and weaknesses.
3. Identify the benefits sought by the potential visitors in the target market.
4. Identify potential visitors' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the preferred competitive destinations.
5. Determine how potential visitors perceive the destination relative to its competitors.
6. Select the optimum position for the destination.
REFERENCES


Figure 3
ALTERNATIVE SPATIAL PATTERNS OF PLEASURE VACATION TRIPS

3. base camp pattern

4. regional tour pattern

2. en route pattern

5. trip chaining pattern

1. single destination pattern