Monograph: Information Technology in the Tourism Industry
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Specific Inter-Cultural Features in On-Line Distribution

Roman Egger, Mario Jooss, and Sabine Schmeisser

Poon’s statement (1993) that "information is the lifeblood of tourism" is certainly one of the most quoted sources in the relevant scientific literature. And not without reason, as tourism proves to be an extremely information-intensive, complex and dynamic industry. At the same time, the Internet has become established as the most important medium of information that users turn to when preparing a journey. If a hotel aims to remain competitive, a resort to the web – and especially direct marketing via the Internet – is inevitable. It is imperative that the right information is communicated to the predefined target group at the right time via the right channel. In this paper, the information search behaviour of leisure travellers is analysed against this background. In addition, the focus is on cultural particularities guests display in preparing their journeys on the web. Hence, taking account of distinctive cultural features to achieve optimum communication with the defined target group is a decisive competitive edge within the hotel trade and has become indispensable given the increasing competitive pressure and the information overload on the Internet.

Keywords: Culture Tourism, eTourism, Hotel Trade, Hotel Rating Portals, Information and Communication Technologies, Information Search Behaviour.

1 Introduction

Information search behaviour plays a central role in the process of purchasing a tourism product. Because of the intangible character of tourism services, consumers depend to a high degree on high-quality, reliable and trustworthy information [1, p. 21]. This applies to both primary decisions about the travel destination and secondary decisions, such as the choice of accommodation [2, pp. 13-16].

In tourism-relevant marketing literature, information behaviour is one of the most thoroughly researched fields. The majority of studies, however, deal solely with the information search behaviour guests display when deciding on their travel destinations and do not address the choice of hotels. The need to investigate the information search behaviour of guests with special focus on the hotel trade is consequently high [3, pp. 165-176]. What is lacking in particular are findings on the information search and use behaviour at national level, even though these aspects would be especially relevant for tourism and the hotel trade. The use of information and communication technologies provides SMEs with the great opportunity of optimising their business transactions and operational processes, of using new distribution channels, improving their quality management and, in general, of achieving cost savings which in turn can improve their competitiveness.

2 General Information Search Behaviour

To elucidate the influence of travel motivation on tourists’ information search behaviour when it comes to deciding on a vacation it can be said that a general distinction needs to be made between pull and push factors. [4, p. 186]. Only detailed knowledge about the push and pull factors of leisure travellers make it possible for suppliers in the tourism trade to address their target groups appropriately. The intensity of information sourcing must be seen as a function of some determinants. First, it is influenced
by the product-related knowledge the consumer possesses. If the consumer can fall back on previous experience of purchasing and/or using tourism products/services, the intensity of information sourcing declines as the consumer will need only limited or no additional information.

Secondly, the intensity of information sourcing increases the higher the relevance (high involvement) of a purchasing decision and the higher the purchasing risk as perceived by the customer [5, p. 128 et seq.].

Thirdly, by deciding on purchasing a specific product or service, other products are rejected, which often triggers a feeling of uncertainty or cognitive dissonance as it is called [6, p. 185]. In order to minimise this feeling of uncertainty, consumers thoroughly search for information with the aim of finding the optimum alternative among all the offers [5, p. 129].

The fourth determinant in the context of information sourcing intensity is the degree of complexity of the decision. It increases if the choice of alternatives is wide, the number of relevant product features high and/or differences between the individual products great [5, p. 130]. A closer look at these determinants reveals a high degree of intensity of information sourcing in the tourism context.

The times when the Internet simply served as a mere source of information for vacation planning have long been over. In the year 2008, for example, 80 percent of the 30 million Germans experienced in planning and booking travel, prepared, planned or booked their holidays on line. [7].

The sub-category of booking portals, such as Expedia or Travelocity, websites of service providers in the tourism trade (airlines, hotels) and destination websites make up some 70% and thus the most important on-line information sources for travel decisions. [8].

The development of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) and the tremendous increase in the amount of information on the web, attach a whole new importance to recommender systems (on-line recommendation systems). Consumers use on-line rating platforms, such as Tripadvisor or Holidaycheck, to look for general information, with the perceived quality of the product and/or service as seen by the peer group being particularly important in addition to corporate information. In summary, destination websites, booking and rating portals and the websites of service providers in tourism play the most important role in information provision of tourism contents.

### 3 Central Approach to explaining Information Search Behaviour of Tourists

From a marketing perspective, it is of enormous importance to understand the customer with respect to those information processes that can be seen as preceding the actual decision, as a precursor stage from which optimised communication structures can be derived and established [9]. Scientific literature provides a wealth of explanations for the information, reception and decision behaviour in tourism from various disciplines. Table 1 shows a selection of models.

Albeit a large amount of research has been carried out on the topic of information search and decision-making behaviour of tourists, studies on the use of the Internet for holiday planning are scarce. The models can be broken down to three general approaches that are also used in the context of tourism. These are the psychological-motivational, the economic-functional and the process-oriented approach, with the latter also being covered in the framework of the psychologically-motivational approach so that it can be neglected in the treatise below.

**The psychological-motivational approach** focuses mainly on socio-demographic features in explaining the information sourcing behaviour. Age, education, income, gender and culture\(^1\) are the decisive parameters of influence here. The importance of recommendations of friends and acquaintances and the tourist’s own experience becomes higher the older the person is. Studies have shown that the determinant factors of education and income are closely

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<th>Author/Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pan &amp; Fesenmaier 2006 [10]</td>
<td>Semantic Mental Model</td>
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\(^1\) Culture is here seen as "mental programming" in the definition of Geert Hofstede [17], but where not only geographic, but also gender or class-specific cultural areas are to be subsumed.
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linked to the intensity of the information search. The cultural aspect in particular, when seen from a geographic point, opens up an interesting view angle for tourism-specific issues. Numerous studies have proven the significant difference in the use of sources of information in different cultures and show that navigation, search and interaction patterns as well as the perceived user-friendliness are strongly influenced by culture.

The psychologically-motivational approach is oriented along the sources of information used, the number of sources included in the information process, as well as the search complexity, always in dependence on the respective travel. In this context, in [14] the importance of a trip’s features is underlined. Length of trip, travelling experience, form of travelling, travelling party as well as distance have a major impact on the information process. The intensity of information sourcing is higher the longer the trip, the farther away the destination and the bigger the party.

The economically-functional approach, also referred to as the cost-benefit approach, is often used in literature when the information phase is to support the purchasing decision. The expenses incurred during the search – in the form of time, money and energy – are measured as to their perceived informative value. The number of information sources used and the intensity of the information search are oriented along the success that can be expected and that can be seen as the basis of an optimum purchasing decision. Tourism provisions are highly complex and cannot be tested beforehand and therefore involve a high risk. The cost-benefit approach not only takes success (benefit) but also possible failure into account. The risk reduction achieved – which is consequently inherent to the economic-functional approach – displays distinct cross-references to the psychologically-motivational approach. The costs accepted in the search of information about unknown destinations and long-haul journeys are, for example, disproportionately high.

4 Findings of Relevance for Practice

Based on the theory elucidated above and the illustrated relevance of this topic for practical applications, some central statements of a study carried out by the authors are presented below. These statements could be used as possible solutions and for practical implementation. The authors looked into the question of what information from what sources needs to be available for German, Italian and British leisure travellers and at what time in order to have a positive effect on the booking of a hotel. The survey was conducted in the autumn/winter of 2008. During the period under review, 238 guests were interviewed with the help of highly structured written questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed upon the defined leisure travellers’ arrival, i.e. after the hotel had been selected and booked. The results of the empiric investigation are based on a number of 151 valid questionnaires.

As already explained, the information sourcing behaviour is a decisive process in the purchasing decision of a tourist. Leisure travellers make their decisions on booking a hotel on the basis of a very limited number of criteria and limited information. To ensure a purchasing decision, the relevant information content for leisure travellers are the criteria of “central location”, “price-performance ratio”, “hotel category”, “reputation and/or rating”, “photos” and “hotel furnishing and equipment”. These criteria need to be captured as well as possible by hotels in the main information sources of their target group. The importance of these criteria for the purchasing decision in percent is as shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: Top Criteria for Choice of Hotel.](image-url)
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Broken down by nations there are, however, very distinct differences between the relevant selection criteria. The criteria of ‘central location’ and ‘price-performance ratio’ are the most decisive ones for all three nations in terms of purchasing decision. It was shown, however, that ‘ratings and/or the hotel’s reputation’ is of a distinctly higher relevance for the purchasing decisions of British travellers than for German and Italian ones. In contrast, German leisure travellers more often use hotel photos to select a hotel.

To ensure optimum target group communication, it is essential that information about the travelling motivation is included in the communication policy. Crucial driving forces for the motivation of city travellers and for German leisure travellers are ‘leaving every-day life behind’, ‘entertainment’ and ‘gift’. It must be noted here that the ‘gift’ motivation has so far been mostly neglected by general motivation research. This motivation shows that city trips are seen as perfect gifts, which leads to the recommendation to proactively promote gift vouchers in hotels’ marketing measures, especially in their communication with German guests. The predominant motives for Italian leisure travellers on the other hand are ‘trips with the family’ and ‘recovery’. Consequently, the focus of marketing activities should be on the ‘family’ aspect and family-friendly services should be underlined to ensure a competitive edge in the customer’s decision. The development of information and communication technology has brought about major changes in the information sourcing behaviour of tourists and the influence of the Internet on tourists’ information search is undisputed. There is, however, disagreement as to whether offline sources could be fully replaced by on-line sources of information or if these are to be used also in future as supplemental information. 78 percent of leisure travellers use up to three sources of information – on-line and off-line sources together – in their search for information about hotel accommodation; 19 percent use four sources of information, and only 1 percent each use five and six sources of information.

The most important on-line sources of information are hotel websites, booking portals and hotel rating portals (see Figure 2). What is especially noteworthy is the considerably smaller relevance that destination websites have for the sourcing of information about hotels. In the search for hotels, off-line sources of information are nearly entirely replaced by on-line sources. However, the stress here is on “nearly”. The importance of the most relevant off-line sources, i.e. travel agency, travel guide and recommendation, especially for the first step of the information search process, must by no means be disregarded. This holds true, in particular, for target group communication with British and Italian guests. British guests in particular tend to shift between media, which means that a well-balanced combination of on- and off-line marketing is of high relevance for these travellers. Even though off-line sources now play a

Figure 2: Sources of Information used by All Leisure Travellers.

- Hotel website: 73,50%
- Booking website: 51,70%
- Hotel ratings: 40,40%
- Search engine: 35,10%
- Email to hotel: 15,20%
- Recommendation: 14,60%
- Website of tourism association: 11,30%
- Travel agency: 11,30%
- Travel guide: 10,60%
- Categories of offline sources: 7,60%
- Email to travel agency: 6,00%
- Travel guide: 5,00%
- Travel guide: 4,00%
- Email to travel guide: 3,00%
- Other categories of offline sources: 2,00%
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relatively subordinate role for the communication with target groups of leisure travellers from nearby source markets, the information provided in selected off-line sources should not be neglected in future.

The use of sources of information is subject to distinct cultural difference, just like the other two aspects presented above. Table 2 illustrates these differences.

At first glance, there seem to be no cultural differences, as hotel websites are the most important sources of information for all three source markets. A closer look at the top 5 information sources of the three nations reveals clear differences as from the second source. German leisure travellers resort considerably more often to search engines than British and Italian tourists. In contrast, booking portals are of higher relevance for these two nations than for German travellers. The national differences are particularly striking in the use of hotel rating portals, recommendations and other off-line sources. While 57.1 percent of British holiday makers used hotel rating portals for their search for hotels, this tool was used by only 35.3 percent of the Italian and 29.4 of the German guests surveyed. Italians, on the other hand, have recommendations as a top 5 source of information, while this source is only ranked eighth among German and British travellers. In order to translate the importance of recommendations to marketing activities, bonus systems are recommended to enforce recommendations of Italian guests. German guests quote off-line sources (categorised) far more often. These sources include tourist associations – a source only contacted by German guests, contacting the hotel by telephone, travel magazines, hotel brochures and hotel guides. Since German guests contact tourist associations also for direct hotel inquiries, it is recommended that hotels establish good links to such associations.

The evaluation of the most important information sources for purchasing decisions provides comparable results, as shown in Figure 3.

Hotel rating portals are the most important sources of information for leisure travellers when it comes to taking a purchasing decision. This is especially true for British and Italian travellers. It must be noted that hotel rating portals are of considerably higher relevance for British travellers along their entire information process. An optimum presentation in on-line recommendation systems is therefore an absolute must for hotels in their communication with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Great Britain</th>
<th>Italy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top 1</td>
<td>Hotel website 74.5%</td>
<td>Hotel website 79.6%</td>
<td>Hotel website 66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 2</td>
<td>Search engine 45.1%</td>
<td>Booking site 59.2%</td>
<td>Booking site 52.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 3</td>
<td>Booking site 43.1%</td>
<td>Hotel rating sites 57.1%</td>
<td>Search engine 35.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 4</td>
<td>Hotel rating sites 29.4%</td>
<td>Search engine 24.5%</td>
<td>Hotel rating sites 35.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 5</td>
<td>Offline sources 25.5%</td>
<td>E-mail to hotel 16.3%</td>
<td>Recommendation 19.6%</td>
</tr>
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Table 2: Top 5 Sources of Information Broken Down to Nations.

Figure 3: Relevant Sources of Information for Purchasing Decision.
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British guests. Hotels are called upon to promote positive inputs of satisfied British guests. Given the higher relevance of on-line hotel ratings, the focus in communication with British and Italian guests should also be on the great importance of customer satisfaction and ideal complaint policies of a company. Behind rating sites, hotel websites are the decisive source of information for the selection of the hotel, before booking portals. The survey clearly showed that it is above all German travellers who refer to a hotel’s website to take their final purchasing decision.

To address travellers at the right time during their information sourcing process, the search process needs to be examined as to the order in which the respective information sources are used. The information sources ‘booking portals’ and ‘search engines’ are the two starting points. All in all, four predominating search processes of leisure travellers were determined, as shown in Figure 4.

27.8 % of leisure travellers use booking portals to start their information search. Hotel websites and/or hotel ratings follow in relevance.

23.8 % of leisure travellers prefer search engines as their primary source of information. As far as the search process according to nations is concerned, German leisure travellers start their information search mostly in search engines (search processes 3+4, seen in Figure 5), while the first steps of searching of British and Italian guests are mainly done on booking portals (search processes 1+2); these two nations also resort more often to travel agencies than German holiday makers. Italians use search engines often only as a second step of their search for information to search for additional information about the hotel selected. According to these findings, targeted search engine management is therefore recommended to address German guests; i.e. it is important to be displayed above the fold in the organic listing of search engines. As far as keyword optimisation of the hotel website is concerned, reference is made to the relevant information for hotel selection and travel motives as described above. To address British and Italian travellers, hotels must ensure the best possible ranking on booking portals in order to be found right at the beginning, when the tourist starts his/her search for information. Since travels with the family are of high relevance for Italians, it is also recommended to offer rooms labelled "family rooms" in booking portals and list in detail all the family-friendly services in the description of the hotel’s offers.

In terms of the timing of information searches it can generally be said that leisure travellers from closer source markets start looking for travel destination and hotel information at the same time and that they search for information at relatively short notice, i.e. up to three months before setting out to their journey.

5 Discussion

Scientific literature lists points of critique for the applied research method of the quantitative survey. These were taken into account by the authors when selecting the method. The most important point of critique in terms of recording information behaviour of leisure travellers by means of surveys is that the survey is only conducted after the information search has been completed so that only the consciously controlled and remembered part of information absorption is queried [6]. The authors were aware of this limitation when they selected the empiric method. Due to lacking scientific investigations of the field of research for the hotel trade, this paper aimed at analysing the basic sources and steps of information behaviour. The problem was also by-
passed by means of the list of categories of the most relevant sources of information in tourism that were developed based on literature and helped the respondents. And it should also be said that nearly 80 percent of the respondents were polled within three months after their search for information.

References


