

Decision Making through online reviews :
Critical Factors for travelers of selecting a
destination before traveling.

Bachelor Thesis for Obtaining the Degree

Bachelor of Business Administration

Tourism and Hospitality Management

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Affidavit

I hereby affirm that this Bachelor's Thesis represents my own written work and that I have used no sources and aids other than those indicated. All passages quoted from publications or paraphrased from these sources are properly cited and attributed.

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Introduction

The year 2012 marked the advent of one billion international tourist arrivals in one year for the first time with the growth in tourism seeing an increase of four percent and despite the ongoing worldwide economic challenges, growth of international tourism is expected to rise at a similar pace (UNWTO 2013). The aforementioned data shows a promising trend and a continuous growth for an already existing multi-billion dollar industry. It is an industry that benefits small businesses to multinational corporations. With the ease of transportation and access to information, tourism will be on the rise in the coming years. Where many businesses face difficulties in tough financial times, tourist-dependent businesses look for ways to increase revenues. In order to figure out an approach to this, it is important to get to the core which is decision making. What are the critical factors in selecting a destination for tourists in the 21st century?

Over the last 12 years, the Internet has completely transformed how travel is bought and sold. With the advancement of Internet technologies, increasing numbers of travellers are using the Internet to seek destination information to conduct transactions online. According to a survey conducted in 2005 by the Travel Industry Association of America, 67 percent of the US travellers have used the Internet to search for information on destinations or check prices or schedules. In addition, 41 percent of US travellers have booked at least some aspect of their trip via the medium. However, the emphasis in the online experience began to shift from selling, searching, and consuming to creating, connecting and exchanging (Sigala et. al. 2012: p. 207). By figuring out the decision-making processes, tourist dependent businesses or economies would be able to use this information to their advantage and influence greater tourist traffic as a result.

Social media is defined by Merriam-Webster as “forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and micro blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content (“Social Media” 2011)”, has seen an exponential growth in recent years with networks like Facebook, Twitter and Flickr and

travel-specific websites like TripAdvisor gaining enormous momentum on the Internet.

Social Media is becoming increasingly crucial to hospitality and tourism businesses due to the intangibility and the experiential nature of tourism products and lowering of technological barriers for average travelers enabling them to contribute information online. Different from the tradition one-way communication in most mass media channels, social media represents two-way communication between consumers. Social media has revived the older decision-making process prevalent before the emergence of mass media, when the exchange of opinions between one's peers was the basis for purchasing decisions. As the digital version of word-of-mouth, social media represents the materialization, storage and the retrieval of word-of mouth content online (Pan 2012: p. 73).

While current findings provide some important insights for understanding social media in tourism, there is still a lack of studies that have empirically investigated how social media is used and created by travelers. Further, the rapid changes in the social media field create a need for more theoretically grounded research that can describe and explain new consumer behavior beyond a specific social media application (Yoo, Gretzel 2012: p.190).

With the aforementioned issues in mind, the research question is as follows:
Given the growing dependency of travelers on Online Social Networks, how has the decision making process changed in selecting a destination and what impact does it have on existing Decision-Making Models?

Some of the concerns that will be catered to include users' pattern of use of social media, the impact on trip-planning and decision making and last but not least, the characteristics and variables of travel-related social media users and creators. While analyzing the factors, an attempt at making an updated version of a decision-making model that integrates the online social network will be conducted.

1.) Traditional Travel Decision-Making Processes

Understanding the Consumer's Complexity:

A thorough understanding is required to comprehend the complexity in the traveler destination decision-making process. Due to the importance of decision-making in destination selection, a range of theoretical models have been penned down and analyzed by researchers. What these models have in common is that the consumer's decision to purchase is a multi-stage process. (Hanlan J. et al. 2006: p. 2-3).

Many destination-marketing organizations focus on consumer behavior and thus investigate purchase decisions (product, brand, store, mode of payment, etc.) as they allow businesses to sell their goods and services. Choice and use decisions are also of great importance, not only for the consumer themselves, but also for marketers and policymakers. Consumer decisions are omnipresent as there is no way that the consumer can escape decision-making (Decrop 2006: p. 5).

However, the final purchase is only the visible part of the iceberg, since that is the materialization of the whole decision-making process, with the starting point going way back with the recognition of a problem (need) (Decrop 2006: p. 5).

Several attempts have been made to explain consumer decision-making giving way to a number of theories. The 'Classical Theories' portray the consumer either as a risk reducer, a problem solver or an information processor (Decrop Alain 2006: p. 5).

Risk in this case is defined as the personal anticipation that a particular action will result in a loss or the uncertainty about the consequence of a purchase. Risk can be psychological or physical; it may be connected with money, product performance or social acceptance. Risk-reduction theory assumes that consumers tend to reduce risk to an acceptable level in their market decisions. Information search is very limited, unless it helps to make safer choices. Risk reduction involves strategies like brand loyalty, repeat purchase and buying the most expensive or well-known brands (Decrop 2006: p. 5).

Problem solving is considered the most popular approach to consumer decision-making. A substantial number of consumer behavior models are based on that paradigm. Its basic assumption is that any consumer need or desire creates a problem within the individual and thus, the consumer undertakes to solve that problem by deciding a course of action in order to satisfy this need or desire (Decrop 2006: p. 5).

The information-processing approach assumes that consumers are continuously looking for and processing information in order to improve the quality of their choices. In line with problem solving, it endorses bounded rationality, as it postulates that consumers have limited resources for processing information (Decrop 2006: p. 5). However, with the ongoing expansion of Internet technology, this assumption can be counter-argued with consumers having almost unlimited resources due to the ever-growing database of the Internet.

It is also to be noted that the most popular approach is mentioned to be “problem-solving” but with the gradual increase of data on the Internet and with users trusting the data, the “information-processing” approach should replace the problem-solving approach in popularity.

The outlined approaches are not the same, but are interrelated in a way that a user would narrow down information choices to reduce risk, and then process as much information as possible regarding the selected choice and as a result, solve the problem by taking a particular course of action. Phillip Kotler outlined that consumer’s decision-making consists of the following stages: (1) need recognition; (2) information search; (3) evaluation of alternatives; (4) choice of product and service; (5) post-purchase evaluation. It is to be noted that not every purchase goes through each of the aforementioned stages (Hanlan J. et al. 2006: p. 3).

One of the main benefits of Kotler’s model is that it recognizes that the buying process is likely to commence before the actual purchase and continue after the purchase has occurred. This highlights the facts that there is a need to focus on

the entire buying cycle rather than one purchase decision (Hanlan J. et.al. 2006: p. 3).

In the current market economy characterized by ever-new technologies and competitive pressures, consumers are often confronted with a large number of alternatives, and are overwhelmed with information from many resources. Uncertainty about product use and performance, as well as difficult trade-offs (such as price vs. quality), result in serious market dilemmas for consumers. This stream of information technology and the multi-faceted nature of the consumer decision-making have resulted in the emergence of post-modern theories. Two major streams consider the consumer as hedonistic or adaptive decision maker (Decrop 2006: p. 6).

In the hedonic (experiential) perspective on consumer behavior, the focus does not lie on the decision-making process as such but rather on the consumption experience of products. However, it does have implications on decision-making and mental constructs. Hedonic consumption pertains to those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory (for example: tastes, sounds, scents, tactile impressions and visual images), fantasy and emotive aspects of one's experience with products. Consumers seek to make the decision that will maximize their pleasure and emotional arousal. This newer view of consumer behavior focuses on product usage, consumption experience, and hedonic and symbolic dimensions of the product. Products are no longer considered as objective entities, but rather as subjective symbols associated with emotional responses, sensory pleasure, daydreams or aesthetic perceptions. This hedonic and experiential perspective is particularly relevant for class of products such as novels, cultural manifestations, sporting event or vacation (Decrop 2006: p. 6).

This approach also has a post-evaluation implication as a strong emotional attachment is considered to be positive for the brand image and a repeat of vacation by the existing user or word-of-mouth for potential customers. A lot of media such as books and movies also evoke such emotional responses and trigger potential travelers to make a decision. One such example is the best-selling book and movie "Eat, Pray, Love" shot in India, which resulted in many

viewers to take up a trip to India to experience what was experienced in the novel by the protagonist.

Adaptive (Contingent) Decision-Making is based on the assumption that consumers are flexible in the way they respond to a variety of task conditions. First, decision-making is contingent in that decision strategies are adapted to the properties of the decision problem, such as the number of alternatives, time pressure (task variables) or the level of similarity and dominance of alternatives (context variables). Second, individual differences also affect how a person decides to solve a particular decision problem. Cognitive ability, prior (product) knowledge and expertise are major influences. Third, decision-making depends on many social factors. On the one hand, individual decision can be influenced by the accountability to relevant others, such as friends or family members. On the other hand, many decisions involve multiple stakeholders; this leads to problems connected with group decision-making (communication, role playing, conflicts, etc.). In short, problems, person, and social context factors provide an outline of the major aspects affecting contingent consumer decision-making (Decrop 2006: p. 6-7).

A more recent development is the Garbage Can Model paradigm that comes from organizational behavior representing an even more radical break with classical theories. This paradigm has important implications for consumer decision-making. First, problem definitions are variable: they change as far as new problems or people are attached to choice opportunities. Second, other tenets of classical consumer behavior theory are disregarded: information is often collected but not used; preferences are unclear and may have little impact on choice. Third, evaluation criteria are not available beforehand but rather are discovered during and after the decision-making process. Fourth, a particular choice can be made even when no problem has been noticed or when the problem relates to other choice opportunities. In contrast, no choice is made when a number of problems are attached to the choice opportunity because it exceeds the energy of the decision maker (Decrop 2006: p. 6-7).

The garbage can model is a classic example of the indecisiveness and overflow of information a consumer is faced with due to the excess information available over the Internet. It also highlights that many travelers make decision spontaneously factoring in the ease of transportation and the flexibility of time for many travelers in recent times.

Much of the research available suggests that the strategy chosen by the traveler will differ depending on the number of alternatives available. When faced with decision problems involving just two or three alternatives, people often use decision strategies that process all relevant information and require one to decide explicitly the extent to which one is willing to trade the less of one valued attribute or dimension for more of another valued attribute (Payne et. al. 1993: p. 2).

When faced with more complex choice problems involving many alternatives, people often adopt simplifying (heuristic) strategies that are much more selective in the use of information. Further, the strategies adopted tend to be non-compensatory, in that excellent values on some attributes cannot compensate for poor values on other attributes. This strategy can be referred to as elimination-by-aspects process. The need to justify a decision to others causes the choice to be more sensitive to certain aspects of the decision task (Payne et. al. 1993: p. 3).

Because individuals adjust their decision strategies depending upon the decision task, decisions can sometimes be improved by rather straightforward, inexpensive changes to the information environments within which individuals make judgments and choices. In the Internet era, reviews and blogs are relevant in this aspect (Payne et. al. 1993: p. 7)

Just the availability of information is sometimes not sufficient enough to change consumer behavior; the available information should be processable (Payne et. al. 1993: p.7). The solar industry is a very good example for this phenomenon. Solar energy is now widely available, more eco-friendly and cheaper in the long run than other forms of energy. Some companies even provide free installation costs to consumers' homes and guarantee cheaper bills. However, it took years

and even decades for solar energy to become a niche market. However, due to word of mouth and a better perception the rate of solar conversions is increasing faster than before, however not fast enough than expected. The same goes with the tourism industry. There are great promotions all year around all over the world in the tourism industry. Sometimes the solutions provided by the destinations and hotels tend to be cheaper than your daily living (off-season rooms). However, it is this time when there is most vacancy. To tackle this problem, many hotels and tourist managers have resorted to online marketing. Sites like Groupon.com are overflowing with cheap holiday getaway offers.

Major Variables in the Decision-Making Process

Variables aim and help shape the decision-making process for a tourist and helps the stakeholders understand the process and the construction of decision-making models. Socio-psychological processes involved in decision-making helps understand how the tourist perceives information, processes it and makes decisions (Decrop 2006: p. 7).

Perception helps us to know our environment through translating stimuli coming from the external, physical world to the internal, mental world that each of us experiences. Stimuli may originate from the marketer (through the marketing-mix tools: product design, advertising message, etc.) or from other sources (previous experience and the social network). As external information becomes brain information, perception helps makes sense of the world. Three basic cognitive operations make perception a very selective and interpretive process: sensation, attention and interpretation. For example, Belgium may be interpreted through a semantic network of mental connections with other concepts such as chocolate, beer or a flat land; categorized as a small European country; and then perceived as beautiful in an inferential way (because 'small is beautiful'). Learning, another variable is related to perception giving birth to beliefs and feelings. For instance, a particular holiday destination may be connected with different attributes such as climate, culture, etc. as well as how the tourist feels about it. Attitude is a variable related to preference and the

feeling of liking and disliking. It implies taking a position that is the result of a comparative process (Decrop 2006 p. 7-8).

Personal variables include a traveler's motives, personality, lifestyle and emotions. Consumers may also be described in demographic terms (such as age, gender, education, social standing, etc.) and according to their resources (such as money and time). In addition to how, the question of why consumers behave in a certain way is of utmost importance in understanding the decision-making process. Motivation is a variable that refers to the process by which an individual is driven to act or behave in a certain way leading him/her towards a goal. Motives and needs drive a potential traveler to execute a vacation (Decrop 2006: p. 9-10).

Personality results from the person's history and goes far beyond socio-demographics. Following this approach, vacationers could be characterized as reflective, active, outgoing, and social. Air travelers could be described as very active and very confident while bus travelers can be characterized as dependent, sensitive, and hostile. Lifestyles also matter in terms of variables. The term 'lifestyle' refers to the unique pattern of thinking and behaving that characterize differences between consumers. Lifestyles offer insight into tourist's pattern of time, spending, and feeling. In contrast with the purely descriptive demographic data, lifestyles give indication about how people really live. Emotion is another personal variable that is expressed in terms of feeling towards a product. Advertising effectiveness depends upon the emotion content of the messages. The use of repetition and humor appeals is particularly powerful in eliciting emotional responses from potential travelers (Decrop 2006: p. 10-11).

To come to a complete understanding of tourist decision-making process, the environmental context (variables) must also be taken into account. This context refers to the environmental variables affecting what and how the tourist thinks, feels, learns and behaves. A distinction can be made between social and cultural influences, interpersonal variables and situational influences on the decision-making process. Social and cultural influences include beliefs, values, norms, signs, habits and non-normative behavior. Thus, culture also influences the way

the person behaves as a tourist. Sport has become an important cultural value and some vacations are solely based on the activity of performing sports or observing sports. Interpersonal variables have a major impact on plans and choices, as most decisions are joint in that they involve different members within a decision-making unit. Situational variables include physical surroundings (rainy weather in Britain might make the traveler want to go to a beach location), social surroundings (people living in crowded cities tend to travel to more serene places), temporal perspective (availability of time might influence travel plan), task definition (not the same criteria is used for a vacationer and his parents for example in choice of travel destination) and antecedent states (momentary mood decisions may cause someone to do something that he/she wouldn't do given normal circumstances) (Decrop 2006: p. 13-15).

Traditional Decision-Making Models

Tourism and hospitality experts have investigated the traveler's decision-making process substantially. The majority of the models are restricted in scope since they are limited to some specific aspect of vacation decision-making, such as motivation, information search or family and friends. However, some general conceptualizations have been proposed. Distinctions are made for traditional decision-making models between microeconomic, cognitive and interpretive models (Decrop 2006: p. 23-24).

Microeconomic models use traditional demand theory in order to explain tourism behavior. A rational traveler is depicted who tries to maximize the utility of his or her choices under the constraint of his or her allotted budget. Cognitive models do not pay attention to the price-demand relationship but to the mental processes involved in decision-making. Three types of cognitive models can be identified including input-output, sequential and process models. Most of these are inclined towards the classical buyer behavior theory and postulate a bounded rational and hierarchical tourist decision-making. In sequential models, the decision-making process is assumed to take place in compulsory sequential steps, which are typically problem identification, information search, evaluation

of alternatives, choices and post-choice processes. Finally, process models do not pay as much attention to the structural relationship between input and output as to the mental process that underlie decision-making. In contrast to both microeconomic and cognitive models, interpretive frameworks are not concerned with how travelers should, but on how they actually make decisions. The personal, social and cultural context of decision-making is taken under consideration to present a more naturalistic view of the consumer (Decrop 2006: p. 23-24).

Microeconomic approaches to the study of vacation decision-making are based on the concept of the economic person, spending money to gain satisfaction, maximizing the utility or benefits of his or her choices under the limitations of the allotted budget. Decisions are influenced by price: the lower the price, the higher the volume of demand and vice versa. This is a normative approach that explains on how consumers should behave rather than how they might behave in reality (Decrop 2006: p. 24).

There are many microeconomic models. In an effort to explain tourist demand, Seddighi and Theocharous came up with a model of tourist behavior and destination choice (Decrop 2006 p. 26). Destination choice is seen as a multistep process depicted in Figure 1.1.

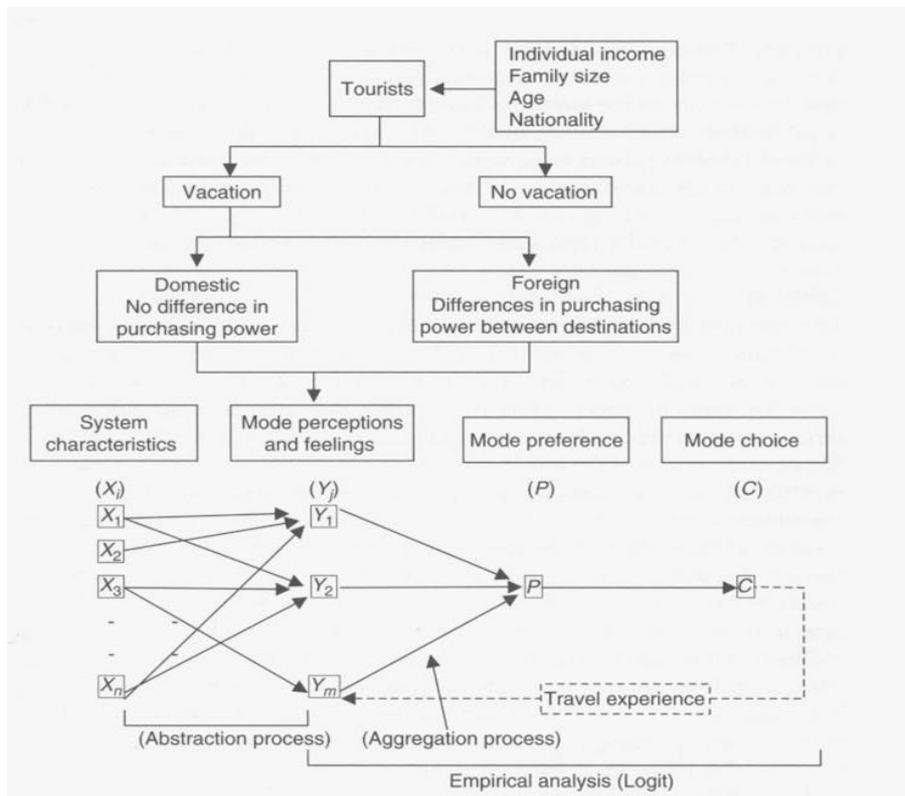


Figure 1.1: Seddighi and Theocharous's model of tourist behavior and destination choice

In the model, tourists are identified by a series of socio-economic and demographic indicators. Each is faced with the generic decision to go on vacation or not. Second, the prospective vacationer has to choose between a domestic and a foreign holiday, which is mainly determined by his or her purchasing power. The traveler then develops perceptions and feelings (attitude) towards alternative destinations on the basis of their characteristics. These perceptions and feelings are assumed to serve as decision criteria through an abstraction process from the system characteristics. Third, perceptions and feelings are aggregated into a preference ordering of destination alternatives that is expected to lead to choice. Fourth, the tourist's travel experience acts as a feedback loop to modify the perceptions and feelings towards the visited destinations. Although microeconomic models are useful for explaining and predicting tourist choices, they show severe limitations. They do not address the substantive issues of information asymmetry and the possible inversion of the demand-price curve. More importantly, the rationality paradigm raises serious questions for such an

emotional and experiential product as tourism. Moreover, microeconomic models do not incorporate a substantial number of variables (intrapersonal, interpersonal and contextual) that may be relevant in vacation decision-making. In the same way, they lack dynamism and focus on the individual consumer although vacation decision often evolve over time and are made in-group settings. In summary, microeconomic models are useful to measure and predict, but not to understand vacation decision-making in its full complexity (Decrop 2006: p. 26-28).

The focus of the cognitive paradigm to consumer research and behavior is on the socio-psychological variables and processes involved in decision-making. The consumer no longer remains passive and becomes an actor of his or her choices. Perception and information processing are the core processes for this model. Cognitive models vary by having either a structural or a process model. Structural models are concerned with the relation between input, defined in terms of the information provided about each alternative, and output, represented by judgments of, or choice between the alternatives. In contrast to this, process approaches pertain to how decisions are made in terms of the underlying cognitive processes (Decrop 2006: p. 28).

The most popular structural model and probably the most popular conceptualization to date is Woodside and Lysonski's general model of traveler destination choice depicted in Figure 1.2 (Decrop 2006: p. 31).

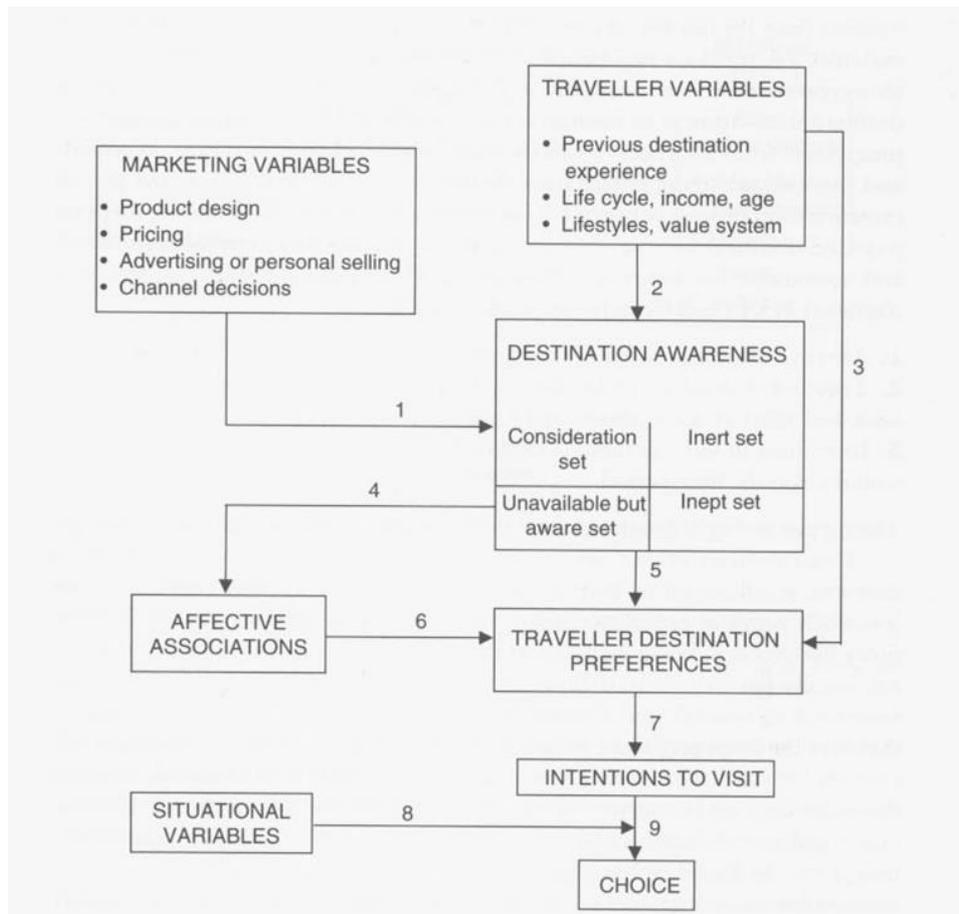


Figure 1.2: Woodside and Lysonski's general model of traveler leisure destination awareness and choice

Marketing variables (marketing mix's four P's) stand for the external inputs; traveler's variables (previous experience, socio-demographics, lifestyle) represent the internal inputs. Important variables are also added such as affective association (specific feelings related to a specific destination), traveler destination preferences (ranking of destinations) and intention to visit (perceived likelihood of visiting a particular destination within a specific time period). Structural models such as Woodside and Lysonski's model are popular in vacation behavior research because they describe major cognitive, affective and behavioral variables involved in the decision-making process and suggest sequences to connect them. They are simple to understand as they are limited to a few key variables and are easy to use for empirical studies and managerial decisions. However, structural models are reductive in nature because they only

deal with a small part of variables and relationships that may be involved in decision-making processes, therefore showing severe limitations for thorough understanding of tourist behavior (Decrop 2006: p. 31-32).

Process models differ from structural models by focusing not on the decision itself but rather on the psycho-behavioral variables that underlie decision-making. Many process models exist but Moutinho so far has proposed the most encompassing process model by making a comprehensive overview of all major variables that intervene in the tourist decision-making process (Decrop 2006: p. 33).

The model (shown in Figure 1.3) is divided into three parts based on the usual distinction between pre-decision, post-evaluation and future decision-making. The pre-decision stage involves the flow of events from the tourist stimuli to purchase decisions and is made up of three fields: preference structure, decision, and purchase. The preference structure for a particular destination is based on a set of factors, including internalized environmental influences (cultural norms and values, social class, etc.) and individual determinants (personality, lifestyle, motives) as well as attitude and family. The psychological analysis of the preference structure then follows. This preference structure then leads to a decision and purchase (Decrop 2006: p. 35).

The post-purchase evaluation is important as a reference for future purchase intentions. In the model, the field is labeled as 'satisfaction or dissatisfaction which could either be positive (acceptance), negative (rejection) or neutral (non-commitment). The last part of Moutinho's model is future decision making which can be seen as the practical interface with marketing decision planning concerning the study of the subsequent behavior of the tourist by analyzing repeat-buying probabilities of the tourist products and services (Decrop 2006: p. 36-37).

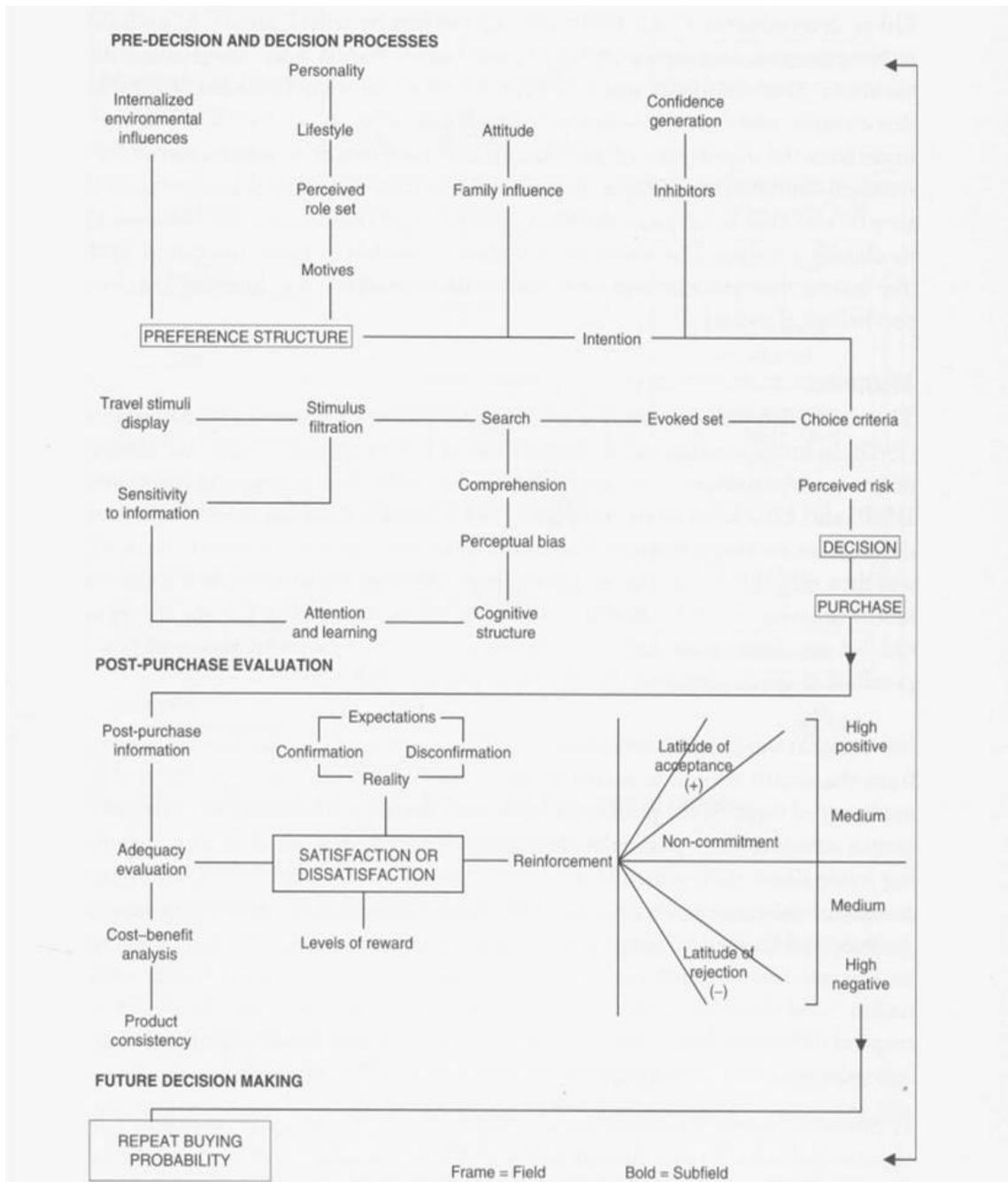


Figure 1.3: Moutinho's vacation tourist behavior model

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repeat-buying probabilities of the tourist products and services (Decrop 2006: p. 36-37).

Both structural and process models lie in a cognitive positivistic approach to decision-making. The new framework known as interpretative framework has challenged this view. Based on the premise of decision-making being more than a formalized multistage process, this approach includes variables and hypotheses that were not taken into account in the traditional models. One of the interpretative framework models is the model proposed by Woodside and Macdonald (refer to Figure 1.3).

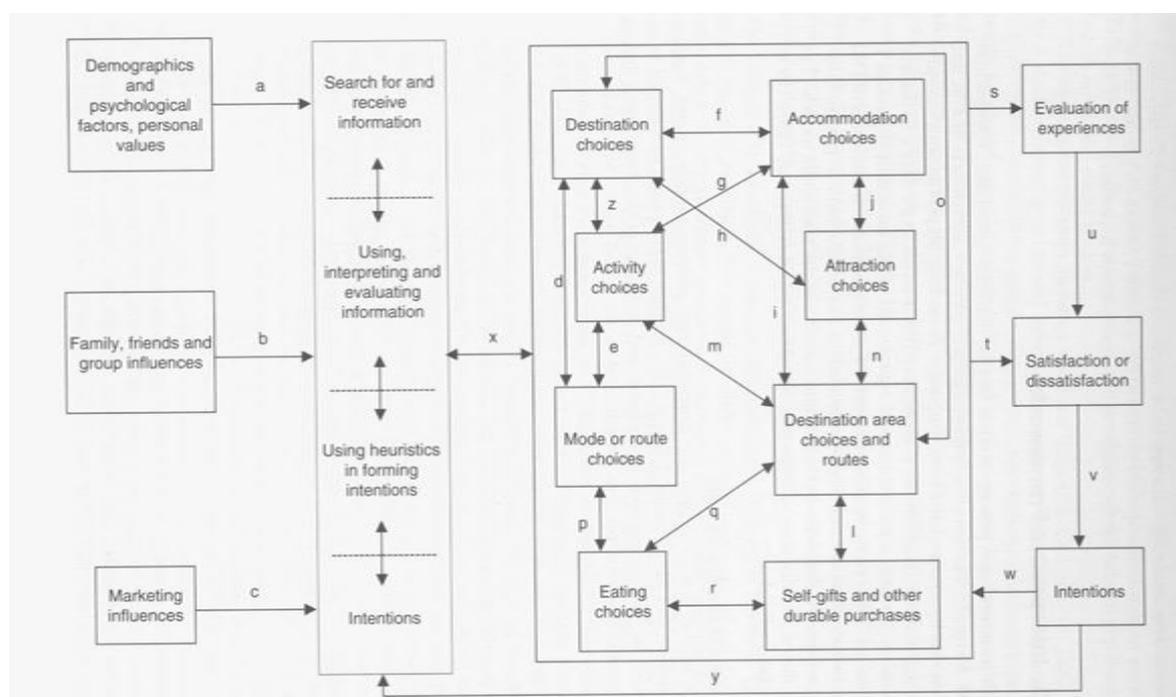


Figure 1.4: Woodside and MacDonald's general systems framework of customer choice decisions of tourism service

Qualitative data is used in the model to validate a general systems framework of how leisure visitors make their choices. Eight new subsets are identified in this model. The framework gives an insight into how decisions, interactions between members of a travel party and activities occurring during trips relate to each other and lead to other activities. The model assumes that the activation of initial travel choices spreads over time to other travel choices. Woodside and

MacDonald's model is criticized for not following an inductive approach with the argument that open-mindedness should prevail as one does not start with pre-conceived ideas (Decrop 2006: p. 39-42).

2.) Social Media in Travel, Tourism and Hospitality:

Theoretical Foundations

Faced with the explosive volume of social media and its increasing influence, hospitality and tourism enterprises are searching for ways to make sense of this media and manage it to their advantage. By placing the phenomenon into an appropriate theoretical context that better describes the complex and dynamic relationship inherent in social media is crucial to make sense of these media (Pan 2012: p. 74).

However, the question is whether theories really matter for the usage of social media since most of the social media came into existence by accident or by mistake (such as Facebook) or after a brainstorming session (such as Twitter). More importantly, in today's online world, a huge amount of behavioral data can be captured and analyzed instantaneously, and new ideas can be tested easily through various social media platforms. However, theories can still be crucial in enabling researchers and businesses to understand and take advantage of this media. Relevant theories can help interpret and make sense of data. It is easy to capture many types of behavioral data about customers, such as clicks, impressions, search volumes, comments, reviews, etc., but in order to find out what they represent, appropriate theoretical models help make sense of this data. Secondly, theoretical frameworks can help the discovery of new opportunities in this field. Potential opportunities may exist when relevant theories in communication, sociology, and information technology are surveyed. Understanding this complex and dynamic relationship is important for harnessing the power of online social networks for marketing purposes, for example, while discovering opinion leaders. Thirdly, theoretical frameworks could help avoid technological dominance over our lives and society. Fast developments of technologies could easily overwhelm users, both as business managers and consumers. Understanding their implications through a global perspective or abstract view could help them deal with the inundation of information technologies (Pan 2012: p. 75).

Various theories have been designed or are applicable to the study and understanding of social media. These can be separated into three school of thoughts: micro-theories dealing with studying the dynamics of the contribution of information online and communication of individual social actors; macro-theories looking at the structure and dynamics of social actors and social media content through global or abstract views and; pseudo-theories which include the recent conceptual framework in marketing and social media proposed mostly by non-academics. These schools of thoughts and framework are designed to contribute to our understanding of the nature of social media, why people contribute, how they form relationships, and how one can find opinion leaders and valuable social media content (Pan 2012: p. 76).

Micro-theories include the word-of-mouth theory, social exchange theory and social penetration theory. Historically, tourism researchers have found that advice from friends and relatives is the most frequently obtained and influential source of information used by consumers in their travel decision-making. The information communicated by friends and relatives is construed as more credible, honest, and trustworthy than that generated by marketers, since the communicators are not compensated for the referral. Advances in the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies now allow consumers to access personally meaningful critiques not only from friends and relatives but also from strangers (For Example: Travel blogs, which continue to grow in popularity). As an illustration, TripAdvisor currently offers 40 million reviews attracting 50 million unique users each month (Pan 2012: p. 76).

Asatryan and Oh's applied Psychological Ownership Theory to explain why former guests are motivated to offer word-of-mouth feedback. On one level, some customers develop feelings of connections with firms they are loyal to manifest into a sense of ownership. In such circumstances, one would assume that a loyal guest would provide positive feedback to others, directing their negative feedback to the management. However, where no such loyalty exists, the motive to write a positive or negative review may be a desire to control or influence the business indirectly by communicating with its future potential customers. Loyal customers' motives in posting positive reviews on travel blogs

and review sites are attempts to reward firms; the motives of non-loyal customers are based on the satisfaction of being helpful to other customers and having a sense of concern for them. These propositions point to strategies in which a firm can leverage customer feedback and social media for its own strategic benefit. On one hand, firms should enhance the perception of psychological ownership and control among their customer base through loyalty and guest feedback and service recovery programs; therefore, keep negative evaluations internal and positive feedback external. On the other hand, firms that do not emphasize customer loyalty or guest feedback should expect customers to both reward and punish their performance through social media (Pan 2012: p. 76-77).

The social-exchange theory mainly uses a cost-benefit framework and comparison of alternatives to explain how human beings communicate with each other, how they form relationships, and how communities are formed through communication exchanges. Given that all social media are dependent on user providing content, an understanding of their motives appears to be fundamental. The theory states that individuals engage in behaviors they find rewarding and avoid behaviors that have too high a cost. The rewards are often not monetary but social, such as opportunity, prestige, conformity and acceptance. Hence, the reason why people engage in social exchange have been posited as an expected gain in reputation and influence on others, an anticipated reciprocity on the part of others, altruism and direct reward. Travel blogs and social media sites have long recognized the discrepancy between people consuming information and people generating information, with the latter being far less than the former. However, consumers do have the option of sharing information, which is partially generating (replicating) the content on other sites having a similar effect to generating. Similar to social exchange theory, social penetration theory explains how human exchanges form relationships but social penetration theory focuses more on the individual levels while social exchange theory could explain behavior at aggregated and organizational level (Pan 2012: p. 77-78).

Social network analysis is a macro theory that views the community of individuals as connected actors, and uses mathematical models to study its

structure, development, and evolution. Social network analysis treats individual actors in a community as nodes; the communications between these actors are deemed to be ties, edges, link, or connections. Social networks can form at many levels, from individual users, to families, communities, and nation. Those ties could be communication frequency, friendship, kinship, sexual relationships, or common interests or beliefs. Together they form a complex graph structure. These measurements, as a result, determine the importance and structural positions of individual actors, and the characteristics of the partial or whole networks. The measurements could be used to study the social network, improve the network structure, and help increase the efficiency of information flows within the network. A theory on rumor transmission indicates that the accuracy and speed of rumor passing were affected by the structure of the network and the mental sets of individual actors in the network. By connecting this line of research with social network analysis of online social network sites could inform businesses of the best method for promoting themselves through electronic word-of-mouth (Pan 2012: p.79-80).

In order to try to make sense of the social media landscape, pseudo-theories can be applied. Social graphics is a theory that argues that instead of studying the demographics, geographic, and psychographic profiles of the customer database, businesses also need to develop a social strategy termed social graphics. Marketers and managers need to consider which websites are used by their customers, what are their social behaviors online, what is the social influence of the customer and what social information do the customers rely on. Basically, the theory asks to dig in deeper and go behind the scenes to find the source of the customer's information. The answer to the above questions could separate the customers into layers of engagement: from curating, producing, commenting, sharing, to watching. Businesses need to separate their customers into these layers and provide relevant tools and platforms to facilitate their particular social interactions (Pan 2012: p. 81).

Another line of framework, the Social Feedback Loop, links consumer purchase funnels with social media. The traditional purchase funnel has three stages (awareness, consideration and purchases) during which a marketer could

influence a customers' decision-making. However, the purchase funnel concept treats customers as though they are living in a vacuum and does not utilize the process. A customer, after purchase, will use the product, form opinions, and talk about it at a later stage. Some of the experience after purchase will be materialized and posted online; this will loop back to the customers' purchase decision-making processes. The social feedback cycle is driven mostly by word-of-mouth which is further driven by actual use, trial, or sampling experience. Harnessing this feedback loop might even be more important than marketing on the mass media through the first three stages of consumer decision-making. The pseudo-theory frameworks make sense in the way that marketers need to switch their focus from effects of mass-media on pre-purchase decision-making to post-purchase word-of-mouth; it is vital to study the different levels of engagement by customers in order to adopt different strategies for encouraging the spread of social media and influence the direction of consumer conversation (Pan 2012: p. 81).

Influence of the Internet and Social Media on the DMP

Throughout the last few years, the overall trend in travel businesses worldwide has been the adoption of new e-marketing strategies that utilize the ever-advancing Internet technology applications available today. One of the foremost technology applications used in travel business promotion has been the use of online social networking websites (Nusair, et al. 2012: p. 207).

Social networking sites are defined as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (Boyd & Ellison 2007: p. 210).

Boyd and Ellison (2007) further define online social networking as Internet applications that allow users to form connections with companies or other users that would not have been found otherwise.

Social networking focuses on building online communities of people who share interests and activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. It includes the ability to browse, search, and invite friends to interact, share reviews, comments, blog entries, discussions, events, videos, ratings, music and more. Online Social Networking sites typically allow users to create a “profile” and to exchange public or private messages and list other users or groups they are connected to in some way. Content of social media sites may include text, images, video or any other media. While consumers find emotional and practical benefits in participating in online discussions, these conversations tend to have profound commercial implications (Nusair, et al. 2012: p. 207).

Recently an expansion of Online Social Networks into travel has been witnessed. Thus, before and during vacation trips, travelers use the Online Social Networks to obtain information about the trips and to share their experiences related to the trip. Research has shown that 88 percent of leisure travelers report being influenced by online travel reviews. Travel review readers seek information from virtual travel communities, travel guidebook sites, and travel distribution sites. Some of the major concerns have turned out to be cleanliness, hotel location, hotel guest room size, staff, hotel facilities and breakfast among others. Overall, the role of Online Social Network websites such as Twitter remains an evolving and often elusive opportunity for travel marketers. As Online Social Networks are becoming more popular, researchers have begun to observe its usefulness as marketing tools. The growth and impact of Online Social Networks on travel cannot be underestimated. Users of social network sites share their travel experiences on MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, and blogs. It requires monitoring of customers’ reviews in order to defend their online reputation. Online Social Networks helps businesses to create, to learn about competitors, and to intercept potential prospects. Additionally, e-word-of-mouth through Social Networks will inevitably change the structure of travel information, the accessibility of travel information, and subsequently travelers’ knowledge and perception of various travel products (Nusair, et al. 2012: p. 207-208).

An increasing number of travelers are using the Online Social Networks for travel decisions. According to a recent survey, more than 74 percent of travelers

use the comments of other consumers when planning trips for pleasure. Contemporary travelers benefit from the Internet to acquire travel related information, share their personal experiences/opinions/reviews for hotels, resorts, inns, vacations, travel packages, vacation packages, travel guides, etc. to reduce risk before purchase. Travelers' reviews have a significant impact on business performance, with a 10 percent increase in traveler review ratings boosting online bookings by more than five percent. It is estimated that the online reviews influence more than US \$10 billion in online travel purchases every year (Nusair, et al. 2012: p. 209).

The top five Online Social Networks in travel include Tripadvisor, Virtualtourist, Iggogo, Mytravel and Yelp. Online Social Network websites about destinations, hotels and tourism have become important sources of information for travelers. The main reason for using Online Social Networks is the benefits (social, functional and psychological and hedonic) that the user can get. Social benefit is linked to the level of participation in the use of social media when planning vacation trips. In addition, the psychological and hedonic benefits are considered as important factors for users to involve in social networks (Nusair, et al. 2012: p. 209).

Even sites that do not primarily focus on travel such as Facebook have some sort of trip features or travel application. Facebook has a trip application which is a social travel application built on its platform that enables users to share their travel plans and to make new friends while travelling. Users have the ability to search for other users who share similar travel tastes and through this, may discover who has already been to the destination of the users interest or who is planning to travel there. Other sites that are gaining consumers' attention for travel related activities include Twitter and MySpace as well as Flickr, which has billions of pictures, allows travelers to document their travel experiences through pictures.

Word-of-mouth communication is perceived to be reliable, creditable, and trustworthy. According to a recent research, marketers spent more than \$1.5 billion in word-of-mouth initiatives in 2008 with the amount expected to rise to

\$3 billion in 2013. Firms are intentionally pushing for consumer-to-consumer communication through word-of-mouth communications. Users of Online Social Network sites interact for information related to travel and thus those applications are essential to spread positive word-of-mouth. A recent study denotes that people appear to trust unbiased views from users outside their immediate social network, such as online reviews. Web 2.0 presented new applications changing the users' communication on a social basis. As a result, electronic word-of-mouth became an uprising trend for consumers (Nusair, et al. 2012: p. 211).

Travellers are the new Employees

In 2006, TIME magazine assigned the title of Person of the Year to "You", the modern online users who create and control information. Since then, these online users have been increasingly empowered by the emergence of a plethora of social media applications that support the creation and use of social media. This impact can also be identified with relation to consumer behavior in travel and tourism (Yoo, Gretzel 2012: p. 189).

Given the experiential nature of tourism, the information created by other travelers is even more important and influential in travelers' information search and decision-making process. Growing numbers of travelers search and consume travel information created by other travelers for their travel planning and share their experience after returning from trips. According to a recent report, more than 89 percent of leisure travelers buyers were influenced by various types of user-generated contents including videos, reviews and blogs in context of travel purchase decisions. In addition, more than one-quarter of US Internet users who followed brands on social networks followed a travel brand. Further, more than half of travel marketers indicated that they continue to invest heavily in social media despite economic downturn. Clearly, social media have taken on an important role in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of travel consumers as well as travel and tourism marketers (Yoo, Gretzel 2012: p. 189).

Online individuals deal with social media in three different ways: consuming, participating and producing contents online. Travelers engage in online travel communities for functional, social, psychological and hedonic benefits. Travel review writers are mostly motivated by intrinsic motives of enjoyment, concerns for other travelers or the desire to help the company while only some are motivated by the opportunity for venting. Travelers more likely intend to use social media when they perceive greater benefits and greater altruism, availability, individual predisposition or trust. However, it was also found that costs related to the use of social media like effort, privacy concerns or difficulty to use do not significantly affect intentions to use social media. Looking specifically at travel social media creation, travel social media creators tend to be young, men, and have higher incomes and greater internet skills. They are also more likely frequent travelers as well as highly involved in trip planning (Yoo, Gretzel 2012: p. 191-194).

Travelers are likely to find social media related sites during their online information search queries. About half of the travelers used contents/media created by other travelers. In terms of types of social media used, travel reviews are the most prominent form. Of those online users who use social media for travel, many only use one or two types, while some use three. However, there is also a small proportion of online travelers who use social media very broadly. The number of social media types used, however, is increasing, as many travel related websites are cross-linked with other social media types (Yoo, Gretzel 2012: p. 195-196).

One of the most important question that needs to be addressed is whether social media actually influence travelers' decisions. A considerable percentage of online travelers who use social media believe that their decisions have been influenced by the social media on their decision-making. The greatest impact is felt with respect to where to stay, which is not surprising given the dominance of travel reviews, which most often are written regarding hotels. However, activities and restaurant choices are also very much influenced (Yoo, Gretzel 2012: p. 197-198).

The following Figure 2.1 gives a broader view of what factors get influenced the most while planning a vacation.

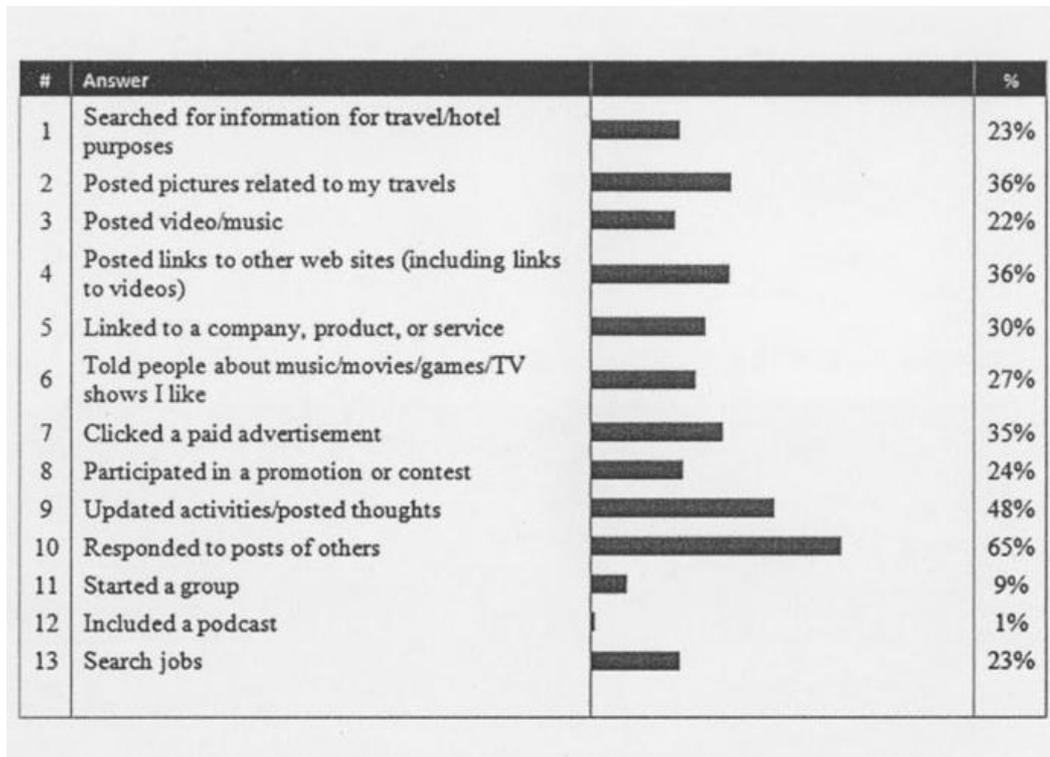


Figure 2.1: Activities engaged in when using Online Social Network Sites

While more than half of online travelers are social media users, only about 20 percent of online travelers have ever posted travel-related contents online. When looking at social media users, the percentage increases but is still rather low indicating that a majority of social media users solely consume contents. The percentage of content producers has increased from 17 percent in 2008 to 37 percent in 2010. Thus, it is important to not only understand who uses social media but also to analyze who the content creators are. Younger online travelers are more likely social media creators and are more likely to be single and employed full time. Regarding ethnic origin, a higher percentage of social media creators are Asian (Yoo, Gretzel 2012: p. 198-199).

An interesting finding is that social media use also changes information search behaviors in that it leads to more time spent planning, more information sources used and more print-outs taken on the trip for at least half of the social media users. Thus, interestingly, social media use expands information search and use instead of providing efficiencies (Yoo, Gretzel 2012: p. 199-200).

Another specific consequence of this technological change and use of different tools is that tourists not only seek information to help with travel decisions but also derive enjoyment from interaction with others. They engage in online social relationships, enjoy materials posted by other people or create their own materials. Important in this respect are travel reviews or stories, which are not merely a source of idea for the tourists who read them but bring an element of fun to the travel planning process and provide enjoyment prior to the travel experience. The tourist can have fun while at the same time forming more realistic and reliable expectations of the destination or location to be visited (Parra-Lopez, et al. 2012: p. 176).

Information is essential to travellers and the Internet allows them to find travel-related information without the need for intermediaries. Thanks to this growth, travellers are increasingly becoming co-producers and distributors, who should work in cooperation with tourism services and products. They generate content in blogs, podcasts, vlogs, wikis, mash-ups and maps to share their travel experiences with other people, they comment on aspects that have surpassed or fallen short of their expectations, on the advantages and disadvantages of tourism products and services, all of which should be taken up and managed by tourism organizations. In this way, the Internet user-generated content brings security to online travellers in travel planning and purchase processes (Parra-Lopez, et al. 2012: p. 176).

This brings in two benefits to travel organizations or tourism marketers. First, tourists become the transmitters of “consumer generated media” (CGM) and in a way their employees by sharing their experience and reaching out to potential travellers. And secondly and more or less surprisingly, more trust is built as the reviews are considered as unbiased and more trust is generated. This is

surprising as the recommending party may be an unknown individual the potential tourist will never meet or interact with and has no or only partial benefit by giving the recommendation. Therefore, it is very important for tourist organizations and marketers to build a community of post-consumption travellers to achieve electronic word-of-mouth and generate reviews and save on employee and marketing costs.

Social Media Marketing

The emergence of online social media challenges the existing marketing paradigms. It requires innovative approaches to take advantage of marketing opportunities provided through technological capabilities and to address changes in consumer behavior and expectations due to the technological shift. It also requires holistic and strategic thinking rather than short-term fixes and piecemeal approaches. For marketers, transitions have never been easy (Shao et. al. 2012: p. 87).

A technology-driven shift is again occurring now with the broad adoption of Web 2.0 technologies by both consumers and organizations. Such changes in technologies and the resulting challenges for marketers have a great impact especially on destination marketing organizations. Existing studies on technology use in Destination Marketing Organizations show that innovation, especially continuous innovation, is not very common and that the capacity to innovate and successfully adopt new information technologies differs greatly among organizations. While some decision-making organizations are struggling with fully taking advantage of Web 1.0 applications, others have already embraced the new Web 2.0 paradigm and are active users of social media based strategies in their marketing efforts (Shao et. al. 2012: p.87-88).

The use of Facebook among national decision-making organizations suggests that not only do many of the organizations have a Facebook presence, even more importantly, those who had a Facebook presence were not utilizing the ways that would allow them to really seize a competitive edge on the social medium. The trend of engaging in social media marketing shows that only a few decision-

making organizations in Europe are really engaged in social media marketing and that the majority of the organizations have yet to develop a sophisticated and a comprehensive social media strategy (Shao et. al 2012: p. 88).

Web 2.0 technologies have created a conversation space in which messages about brands are not only designed and promoted by marketers but increasingly also initiated and published by consumers. In such an environment, marketers are conversation managers in a bigger social network that communicates continuously through various media avenues as well as directly with one another. Social media marketing, then, involves developing methods for strategically shaping conversations. This requires letting go of traditional beliefs of what marketing is. Social Media marketing is essentially about participation, sharing, and collaborating rather than straightforward advertising and selling. It also needs to be emphasized that marketing in this new paradigm should consider consumers as partners who collaborate and co-create value together with marketers by exchanging resources and information (Shao et. al. 2012: p. 88).

Yoo and Gretzel (Yoo, Gretzel 2010) have highlighted the new approaches needed for social media marketers to adopt which encourages active participation. The new approaches are an almost complete overhaul over traditional marketing approaches. Customer relations have changed in social media marketing from a one-way communication channel to feedback from customers. The customer service is now operated in real-time and is online rather than the traditional offline and delayed response solution. Regarding products, more value added information can now be provided like pictures videos, consumer reviews etc. and the product is now co-created with consumers and is more or less customized. The marketing function of price has also changed from limited payment options to online payments and instead of one-price pricing, flexible pricing strategies need to be adopted. Promotions are now online and customized with customer-participation. Market research does not see any more delayed results like in traditional marketing approaches but has multiple formats and is less costly and unmediated, with an immediate reaction.

Performance in the social media marketing is measure through conversations and consumer sentiment and is continuous.

Success in social media marketing is not about return of investment anymore but rather about return on engagement. Instead of the 4 P's that centered traditional marketing, social media marketing essentially focuses on relevance, revenue, reach and reputation. Mere presence is not enough for achieving social media marketing success. Social media marketing is a conversation that needs to be held with the right audience, needs interesting input, and requires trust to be established (Shao et. al 2012: p. 90).

Social media marketing is important to be adopted by decision-making organizations, as future developments will be dependent on social media. If a new paradigm appears, it will be more related to the social media-marketing paradigm than the traditional marketing approach.

Destination Image and Satisfaction

Brand image helps consumers identify the right product to fulfill their utilitarian and hedonic needs. Strong branding image encourages brand loyalty. The associated brand image allows consumers to create, transform, and express self-identity. Functional and symbolic brand attributes influence a tourist's destination loyalty. Symbolic characteristics and high self-congruity affect tourists' intentions to revisit a destination (D. Martin et. al.2011: p .2).

Many factors influence a tourist's destination choice. Self-congruence and functional congruence influence destination choices. Strong self-congruence exists when a destination's image matches the tourist's ideal self-image. Functional congruence occurs when a destination's performance-related attributes meets the tourist's essential holiday needs (e.g., relaxation, comfort, or convenience). Surprisingly, tourism research examining self-congruence and functional congruence remains limited. Functional congruence affects destination choice suggesting destination decision making relies more heavily on tangible attributes to fulfill basic utilitarian needs (D. Martin et. al.2011: p. 2).

Recent studies have considered tourism destination as a combination of push and pull factors. It has been stated that motivational mechanisms generate a sense of attachment to place in the tourist's mind, suggesting that destination image is a combination of both subjective and social construction. In this perspective, the core element of destination is the image, which represents simplified messages of tourism attraction. Images are used to promote tourist destinations, and tourism managers should know which visual attributes visitors perceive as interesting in preference to others. Due to increasing global competition and changing tourist motivations and needs, communicating a positive destination image has become a top priority in successful tourism management and destination marketing (Nicoletta, Servidio 2012: p. 19).

Most of the images selected to promote tourism destinations are often based on stereotypical symbols. Stereotypical images are an extreme simplification of reality. They are not accurate and often provide little information about destinations. Most images are also out-of-date. (Nicoletta, Servidio 2012: p. 19-20)

Changes in the tourism sector, competition among products and tourist destinations and changes in tourists' expectations and habits, all means tourist destinations must be conceived as brands that have to be managed from a strategic point of view. From that perspective, brand image plays a fundamental role in the success of tourist destinations, since image, seen as a mental picture formed by a set of attributes that define the destination in its various dimensions, exercises a strong influence on consumer behavior in the tourism sector. First, and based on the fact that tourists usually have a limited knowledge of tourists destinations they have not previously visited, images fulfill an important function insofar as destinations with strong, positive and recognizable images have more probability of being chosen by the tourists (Beerli, Martin 2003: p. 624).

Second, the destination image perceived post-visit also influences tourist satisfaction and intention to repeat the visit in the future, depending on the

destination's capacity to provide experiences that correspond with their needs and fits the image they had of the destination (Beerli, Martin 2003: p. 624).

Furthermore, and insofar as tourist destinations, as settings comprising economic, cultural and social activities, have come to be understood as a product on offer, the public institutions responsible for those destinations see themselves obliged to develop a set of marketing actions that ensure the best possible positioning in a highly competitive market when it comes to attracting tourists. In that context, the definition of a brand image that is strong, coherent, differentiating and recognizable that creates a favorable opinion of the destination is one of the foundations on which to base marketing actions included in any strategic plan (Beerli, Martin 2003: p. 624).

In the tourism marketing literature, various authors point out that tourist destination image is a concept widely used in the empirical context, but is loosely defined and lacking a solid conceptual structure. Some tend to consider image being formed by the reasoned and the emotional interpretation of the consumer and as the consequence of two closely interrelated components: the perceptive/cognitive evaluations, which refer to the individual's own knowledge and beliefs about the object and the affective appraisals, which refer to the individual's feelings towards the object (Beerli, Martin 2003: p. 624).

From a cognitive point of view, tourist destination image is assessed on a set of attributes that correspond to the resources or attractions that a tourist destination has at its disposal. In the tourism context, those attractions are the elements of a destination that attract tourists, such as scenery to be seen, activities to take part in, and experiences to remember. To be precise, the attractions provide the motivations and the magnetism necessary to persuade an individual to visit a determined place (Beerli, Martin 2003: p. 624).

Tourists form an image of a tourist destination after undergoing a process which, consists of the following stages: (1) accumulating mental images of the destination, thus forming an organic image; (2) modifying the initial image after more information, thus forming an induced image; (3) deciding to visit the destination; (4) visiting the destination; (5) sharing the destination; (6)

returning home, and (7) modifying the image on the experience in the destination. Based on that two types of image, organic and induced can be distinguished. The organic image is based on non-commercial sources of information, such as news about the destination in the mass media, information received and opinions of friends and relatives. The induced image is based on commercial sources of information, such as different forms of advertising and information from travel agents and tour operators (Beerli, Martin 2003: p. 625).

In the consumer behavior literature, satisfaction is defined as consumer fulfillment responses to attitudes that include such things as judgments following a purchase or a series of consumer product interactions. Satisfaction is one of the objectives of marketing activity, linking the processes of purchasing and consumption with post-purchase phenomena. In the tourism literature, destination satisfaction refers to the emotional state reflected in a tourist's post-exposure assessment of a destination. Recently, some researchers have suggested that an individual customer who is satisfied with a brand might have an emotional attachment to that brand. By borrowing these concepts, it is expected that the destination source credibility will result in destination satisfaction as long as tourists have a strong emotional attachment to the destination. Similarly, credible destination sources will be formed when the evaluations of destination and levels of satisfaction are positive, which includes a strong emotional attachment to the destination. That is, a credible destination source can result in positive destination satisfaction if the development of destination attachment is successful (Veasna, et. al. 2012: p. 3)

Post experience processes

The decision-making process does not conclude with the purchase. Many researchers in consumer behavior have stressed the importance of considering post-purchase assessment and the evaluation of the level of customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Product evaluation takes place during and after the consumption experience, and this reinforces further behavior (Decrop 2006: p. 130).

Post-experience plays an even more important role in the era of social-media marketing where one person's satisfaction and positive review can lead to another potential customer's purchase decision. Where it was believed that the cycle ends for a customer, a new cycle is starting for the future traveler.

The implication is that dissatisfaction should arise only if negative feelings about the vacation are attributed to factors external to the vacationer (supply variables such as accommodation, transport, and food), not if they are seen as the result of internal factors (such as attitudes, expectations and intrinsic rewards). Other authors refer to tourist satisfaction as the result of the interaction between a tourist's experience at a destination area and his or her prior expectations. Expectation is made of the travelers' previous images of the destination. These images are compared against what he or she actually sees, feels and achieves during his or her stay at the destination (Decrop 2006: p. 132).

When identifying the antecedents of informants' satisfaction or dissatisfaction judgments, three major explanations emerge from the data. First, there is a comparison process between the just-lived vacation or destination and previous vacation or destination experiences. Relative performances are compared with norms resulting from previous experiences. Other standards of comparison include brand attitudes and expectations. Satisfaction may result from a direct comparison process between expectation based on previous experience, and performance on special attributes. The level of expectation, and the matching probability that post-experience assessment results in satisfaction or dissatisfaction, is very dependent on the destination itself. Based on the comparison process, there are three possible resulting moods that include disappointment (expectations of vacationers are not met), surprise (destination performance goes beyond vacationers' expectations, unexpected things have occurred) and indifference (vacationers are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied). This comparison process results in either confirmation (performance equals expectation) or disconfirmation (positive if performance is better than expected; negative if performance worse than expected). Positive disconfirmation leads to satisfaction while negative disconfirmation results in dissatisfaction. Simple confirmation implies a more neutral response; however, there are indicators in

the data that vacationers are more likely inclined towards satisfaction in this case (Decrop 2006: p. 132-133).

Finally, it is worth noting that informants often simply mention the differences between vacation expectations and performances, without any evaluation. This mind-set is also relevant especially since keeping expectations too high may almost always result in slight dissatisfaction. By this method, informants locate the origin of their satisfaction or dissatisfaction in other factors than the product and the experience itself. The dissatisfaction may arise because of personal attribution by blaming oneself for not utilizing opportunities or it could be an external attribution such as a traffic jam en-route vacation destination. Another aspect worth mentioning is that vacation satisfaction or dissatisfaction is seldom equally distributed among different members of a decision-making unit. This case is often seen in family vacation where parents were dissatisfied but their children satisfied with their vacation decision, or vice versa (Decrop 2006: p. 134).

As a result of dissatisfaction, most vacationers are willing to change destinations by excluding the just visited destination from future consideration sets. Repeated dissatisfaction resulting from several missed vacation experiences reinforces the willingness to change radically (for example: summer vacation is left out for winter ski vacation). While dissatisfaction leads to attitudinal and behavioral change most of the time, satisfaction results in brand loyalty and repeat purchase. Another important consequence of vacationers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction is information giving, more particularly, word of mouth, or better known as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) when information is passed electronically. A feeling of satisfaction results in advising relatives and friends to visit the destination. It may also result in generating a positive review on a travel blog or website. In contrast, dissatisfaction leads to negative word-of-mouth to relatives and friends. This is rather holistic (less detailed information is provided) or focuses on only one attribute. An even more severe response to dissatisfaction is complaint behavior. However, data show that only small minorities of unsatisfied vacationer start active complaining behavior after their vacation experience (Decrop 2006: p. 137-138).

3.) Decision-Making Model in the era of the Social Network

As mentioned above, many processes and variables have changed with the ongoing Internet and Social Network boom. This has implications and consequences on the existing Decision-Making processes and as a result a direct effect on the Decision Making Models.

The increased usage of Online Social Networks in travel makes it important to develop an understanding of users and attitudes towards these sites. Users' perception about Online Social Networks sites usage may be developed while they participate. The intrinsic motivation such as enjoyment is a significant antecedent of attitude towards using Online Social Networks. Reports show that the Internet self-efficacy, need to belong, and collective self-esteem have positive effect on attitudes towards Online Social Networks. Tourism is an information-intensive industry; therefore, it is critical to understand changes in technologies and consumer behavior that impact the distribution and accessibility of travel-related information. In technology usage context, the users' pre-usage cognition (for example: attitude) are typically based on second-hand information, such as vendor claims, communicated via interpersonal or mass media channels. Over time, as users gain first-hand experience with technology usage, they evaluate the extent to which their initial cognition is consonant or dissonant with their actual experience, and revise their cognition and/or behavior to achieve greater consonance. (Nusair, et al. 2012: p. 211)

Considering all factors, variables and models mentioned, an attempt at making a decision-making model that increasingly relies on online social networking sites is depicted in Figure 3.1. From the grass root-level, we can derive that after the basic recognition of need, the user will access the Internet to access Online Social Networking Sites and get more information about the destination in mind through search engines. If the user is not aware of Online Social Networking Sites, he/she might get directed to its use through mass media advertising or word-of-mouth through friends and peers.

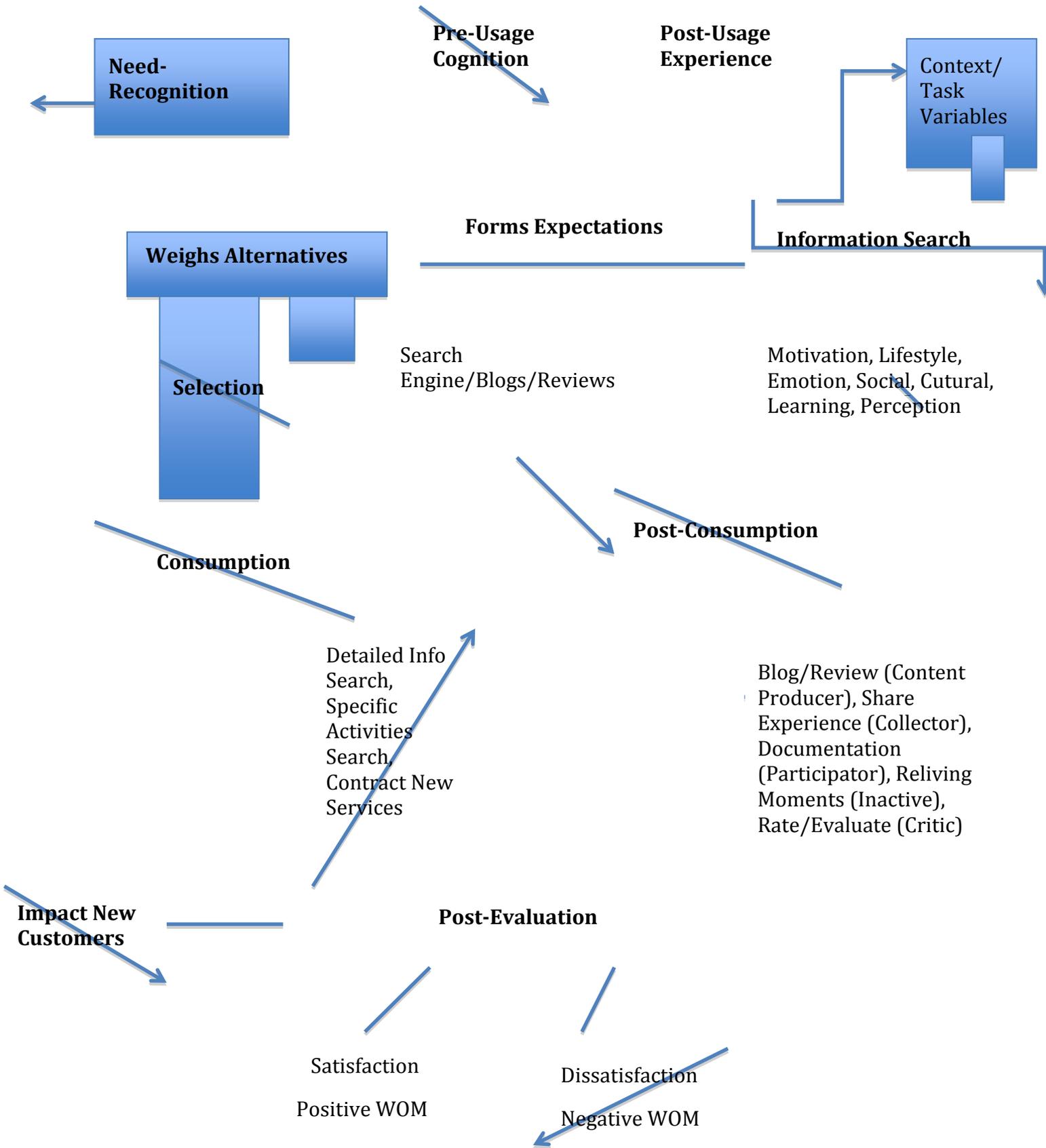


Figure 3.1: The Meric Social Media Model of Tourist Decision-Making

This stage is known as pre-usage cognition. Once the user has familiarized him or herself to the Online Social Networks, the phenomenon is known as post-usage cognition. So in the process, the user turns second hand information into first hand using. Once acquainted and familiar with the use of Online Social Networks, the user will go through an information search and using the variables of motivation, lifestyle emotions and perception as well as social and cultural variables, the user decides on a destination that suits his/her needs and characteristics. Context and task variables (time-pressure) are also accounted for in the process.

After the information search, the user forms expectations of his/her desired trip and undergoes the process of weighing alternatives. This is done through Social Media Sites such as Facebook, Twitter etc., travel-related sites like TripAdvisor and by reading travel blogs and reviews. In this process, the user decides the specific accommodation, mode of transport and takes into account recommendations regarding the vacation.

In the consumption stage, the user is about to start or has started the vacation and because of the portability of social media, is capable of making detailed information search regarding location-specific criteria such as deciding which restaurants to go to. The user can also cater to impulse desires and contract new services or decide to undertake an activity.

In the post-consumption stage, the user has completed his vacation and depending upon his characteristics, responds to his/her experience. An inactive user relives the moments; a critic will rate and evaluate already existing blogs and reviews. Some users are content producers and blog about their trip or write their own reviews and many document their trips making an album for example and may or may not share it online on sites like Flickr.

In the Post-Evaluation phase, the user has documented about his trip and is either satisfied with the entire process or dissatisfied. A satisfied user will forward positive word-of-mouth whereas a dissatisfied user will pass on

negative word-of-mouth electronically. This impacts new users and potential customers, starting the cycle all over again.

Future Trends

The rapid development in the technology sector is one of the leading causes for a change in decision-making in tourism. Many new technologies are in the making or are already in the market but not in widespread use. For travel marketers, it is important to be one step ahead and consider future trends before they hit the market.

Geolocation is a trend that already exists with many services utilizing this technology, but the trend can be expected to grow in the years to come as Smartphone use becomes more widespread. The future also promises better connectivity possibilities. Recent years have seen an increase in the number of free Wireless Networks. Indeed, the availability of wireless connectivity is currently the amenity most appreciated by tourists. This trend will become more pronounced with the generalization of technologies such as WiMAX, LTE, broadband mobile networks, etc. Some operators already offer data roaming as part of their data tariffs. With more wireless Internet availability, more travelers with smart phones and tables will have access to the Internet and social media website and can contribute about their travel in real-time. This would radically increase the participation of travelers as content creators in the years to come. Personalization is a trend that makes use of Web 3.0 (also known as semantic web), which tailors provision to specific users' need (Parra-Lopez, et al. 2012: p. 174).

Another emerging trend is the frame-of-mind recommendation. Technological systems initially provided general recommendations based on the products and services earning the highest ratings (For Example, in the travel context: Trip Advisor). These systems are being gradually refined and are now capable of tailoring the recommendation to the user given that they know some of the users' tastes. Systems are now being developed that can not only adapt to the users' general characteristics but can detect the frame of mind depending on various circumstances (search history, day of the week, latest status updates on

social networks, latest purchase, etc.). Based on these, a recommendation tailored specifically to the particular moment can be made (Parra-Lopez, et al. 2012: p. 174). This is currently executed by Google and Facebook to give users targeted advertising through the sites users have visited and recent purchases users have made.

An up and coming technological break-through is augmented reality. Augmented Reality is a direct or indirect vision of the real, physical world in which the elements are enriched by ICT-generated information (for example: estimated distance to a given location, information about a museum you are standing in front of such as entrance price and what it is about, etc.) As a result, augmented reality technology is viewed as offering extensive possibilities for the tourism sector. It is estimated that the augmented reality market will generate revenue in excess of 500 million Euros in 2014, primarily from payment application downloads and, in particular, from advertising (Parra-Lopez, et al. 2012: p. 174-175). Augmented reality is being developed by many big companies and is being merged with wearable technology. Google, being a pioneer in this field, has come up with a prototype of Google Glass which are wearable glasses that have a screen on the right side and a camera embedded so you can get information, take pictures and videos and send them without using smart phones, laptops or tablets. Augmented reality will open endless possibilities for the tourism industry in future.

The trends yet to emerge may be different in their characteristics but have one thing in common that matters to the travel industry. All of these technological advances promote social interaction and are connected in one way or the other to online social networking sites.

Conclusion:

It is inevitable that Online Social Networks will play a growing role in travel related behavior and decisions (Nusair, et al. 2012: p. 219). As seen in the aforementioned studies and the general trend of increased social media usage, the growth in online travelers' use of social networks to aid in their decision making processes and share their experiences is on the rise. With the exponential increase in Smartphones, access to Online Social Networks will become easier to access locally and even while travelling.

Consequently, tourism destinations should consider promoting their products via these social media sites. For instance, destinations should create a Facebook page and encourage user-generated content. Furthermore, distributing destination news via Twitter can increase users' awareness. One must consider that high volume posting may change a users' attitude towards the destination and may encourage the user to terminate the social network relationship. On the other hand, a shy presence on a social networking site will not benefit the destination, nor will it increase awareness (or users). Furthermore, unrelated postings may confuse tourists and defeat the purpose of the destinations' Online Social Network. User-generated content is the key. Cross link and integration makes you more visible. Travelers will act as your employees which means more trust needs to be established with customers and loyalty rewarded.

Therefore, to maintain its competitive edge, social networking websites must develop appropriate marketing strategies that help build customer relationships, customer satisfaction, trust, and perhaps most importantly, loyalty (Nusair, et al. 2012: p.220). The high percentage of people that use social media but lower percentages of users refer to pure social media sites suggest that social media embedded in travel websites such as online travel agency and destination sites are important.(Yoo, Gretzel 2012: p.195).

The rise of the social media and widespread presence of the Internet have made travelling easier and quicker, but also more competitive. Traditional models of

decision-making will become obsolete eventually and new models will have to be adopted that factor in the use of social media.

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