

The Vacation Plan: A Conceptual Model

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Abstract

As an alternative direction in researching vacation decision-making it is proposed that research examines the vacation plan as a unit of enquiry. The vacation plan is conceptualized as being the accumulated result of all pre-trip decision-making. A structural equation model of antecedents and consequences of the vacation plan is developed, and tested using data on the vacation plans of 451 consumers undertaking a first-ever touring vacation of New Zealand. Results suggest that the breadth of content of a vacation plan is determined by the length of the vacation to be undertaken, the tourist's choice of travel style, novelty-seeking motives and information search behaviours. The findings also show that the breadth of content of a vacation plan can influence amount of pre-vacation purchase of tourism services.

Introduction

A vacation plan can be conceptualised as being the accumulated result of all pre-vacation decision-making by a tourist. The aim of this paper is to explore the antecedent factors which lead to more or less extensive vacation plans. The paper also explores the consequences of tourist vacation planning for the purchase of tourism services. A conceptual model of the vacation plan is built and tested using data on the vacation plans of tourists exploring an international destination for the first time.

Vacation decision-making involves multiple decisions made over an extended period of time, including choices in destinations, composition of the travel party, dates of departure, budgets, choice in accommodation and transport, travel routes, activities, dining and retail shopping (Dellaert, Ettema, and Lindh, 1998; Woodside and MacDonald, 1993). Recent models recognize this multi-faceted nature of vacation decision-making (Decrop and Snelders, 2005; Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002; Woodside and MacDonald, 1993; Woodside and Dubelaar, 2002; Woodside, Caldwell, and Spurr, 2006). In any of these models it is important to specify the sequence in which vacation decisions are made regarding choice of destination, composition of the travel party, and the like (Dellaert *et al.*, 1998). Empirical research in this area suggests that there is not a consistent sequence in which all tourists make such decisions, but rather that the sequence of decision making varies between tourists and between contexts (Bansal and Eiselt, 2004; Dellaert *et al.*, 1998; Fesenmaier and Jeng, 2000; Hyde, 2004; Hyde and Lawson, 2003; Woodside and King, 2001).

As an alternative to seeking to map all the possible permutations in which vacation decisions are made, the researcher could adopt the parsimonious approach of examining the vacation plan. The vacation plan can be conceptualised as being the accumulated result of all pre-trip vacation decision-making. The vacation plan is an integrated and logically-consistent set of decisions which will guide and predict tourist behaviour.

Seldom have attempts been made to record and measure the content of tourist's vacation plans (Hyde and Lawson, 2003; Johns and Gyimothy, 2002; March and Woodside, 2005; Stewart and Vogt, 1999). In a number of studies of vacation decision-making, the concepts of tourist information search and vacation planning have often been used

interchangeably (Meis, Joyal, and Trites, 1995). In other studies the length of time spent planning the vacation has been employed as a surrogate measure of vacation planning (Gitelson and Crompton, 1983; Lo, Cheung, and Law, 2002; Rao, Thomas, and Javalgi, 1992; Zalatan, 1996).

A conceptual model of the vacation plan is proposed which relates the breadth of content of a tourist's vacation plan to the tourist's choice of travel style, length of the vacation, size of the travel party, age of the tourist, novelty-seeking motives and information search activities (see Figure 1). The model proposes that as a consequence of the vacation plan, pre-vacation bookings for tourism services will be undertaken.

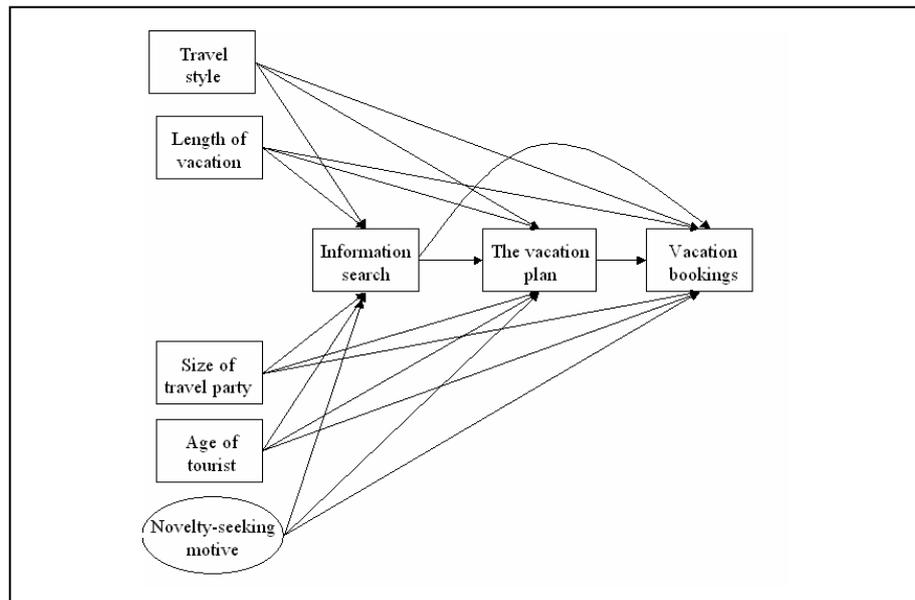


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Vacation Plan

Travel Style

Travel style refers to identifiable patterns of consumption behaviour amongst travel groups (Becken and Gnoth, 2004; Woodside and King, 2001; Woodside and Dubelaar, 2002). Previous studies have suggested that individual mass tourists tend to have more extensive vacation plans and that backpackers have less extensive vacation plans (Hyde and Lawson, 2003; Snepenger, 1987).

Length of the Vacation

How extensive the vacation plan is may vary with the length of the vacation. For example, the number of planned locations and planned activities is likely to increase in a linear fashion with an increase in the length of the vacation (Hyde, 2005).

Size of the Travel Party

Initial research has suggested an association between size of the vacation travel party and content of the vacation plan (Basala and Klenosky, 2001; Philipp, 1994). The single tourist has considerable freedom to choose where to travel and what to do, while the larger party such as a family group, is more constrained in its vacation choices and vacation behaviours.

Age of the Tourist

One might also expect an association between the age of the tourist and content of the vacation plan. Observation of tourist behaviour suggests that vacation plans might be less extensive amongst younger tourists, and more extensive amongst older tourists (Gibson and Yiannakis, 2002).

Novelty-Seeking Motive

Novelty seeking has been identified by a number of theorists as a key determinant of tourist behaviour (Cohen, 1972; Crompton, 1979; Plog, 1974). Novelty seeking refers to the human need for varied and novel sensations and experiences (Zuckerman, 1979). The novelty-seeking motive may provide some explanation for variation in content of the vacation plan. For some vacationers with a high need for novelty, an integral element of the vacation may be the enjoyment derived from experiencing a vacation which is not planned in detail (Elsrud, 2001; Hyde and Lawson, 2003).

A field study was undertaken to test the influence of each of these factors on the breadth of content of tourists' vacation plans. A series of hypotheses was prepared as follows:

H1abcde: Amount of information search undertaken by the tourist is determined by (a) choice of travel style, (b) length of the vacation, (c) size of the travel party, (d) age of the vacationer, and (e) novelty-seeking motives

H2abcdef: Breadth of content of the vacation plan is determined by (a) choice of travel style, (b) length of the vacation, (c) size of the travel party, (d) age of the vacationer, (e) novelty-seeking motives, and (f) amount of information search

H3abcdefg: Extent of vacation bookings is determined by (a) choice of travel style, (b) length of the vacation, (c) size of the travel party, (d) age of the vacationer, (e) novelty-seeking motives, (f) amount of information search, and (g) breadth of content of the vacation plan

A test of these hypotheses was undertaken using data on the vacation plans of first-time visitors to an international destination.

Research Method

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a sample of 451 first-time vacation tourists to New Zealand, during their initial 24 hours in the country. Respondents were intercepted at downtown Auckland's two visitor information centres during the months of January to March 2004. All respondents lacked prior experience of the destination on which to base their vacation plans. The attractions and activities of New Zealand are geographically dispersed amongst two main islands, such that the typical vacation involves a tour by car or coach around these two islands (Oppermann, 1994). The sole or primary purpose of visit for the 451 tourists was a first-time touring vacation.

Measures were taken of each of the variables in the model:

1. *Travel Style* - Information on each respondent's main choice in type of transportation and main choice in type of accommodation was sought. Percentage of total vacation days to be

spent with a rental car, spent on a coach, spent with a camper van, spent in backpacker accommodation, or spent with New Zealand friends and relatives, respectively formed measures of the extent of adoption of an auto, coach, camper, backpacker or VFR (visiting friends and relatives) travel style (Becken and Gnoth, 2004).

2. *Length of Vacation* – in nights.
3. *Size of Travel Party* - coded into three categories, single travelers, couples, and groups of three or more.
4. *Age* - age of the eldest respondent in each travel party coded into three categories, under 30 years, 30-49 years, and 50 years plus.
5. *Novelty Seeking* - Respondents completed the Lee and Crompton (1992) Novelty Seeking in Tourism Scale. The scale consists of 21 likert items.
6. *Information Search* - Respondents were asked how many hours they had spent consulting each of six information sources – friends and relatives, travel guidebooks, travel agents, travel brochures, television and movies, and the Internet - to help plan their New Zealand vacation.
7. *Vacation Plans* - Respondents were asked “Where do you intend to travel to in New Zealand?” A measure of the breadth of content of the vacation plan was determined by the number of unique destinations the vacationer planned to visit relative to the length of the vacation.
8. *Vacation Bookings* - Respondents were asked how many nights of accommodation they had booked for their New Zealand vacation. The percentage of vacation nights for which accommodation had been booked was utilized as a measure of vacation bookings.

Confirmatory factor analysis of the Novelty Seeking in Tourism Scale was undertaken using Amos 5.0 (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Gerbing and Anderson, 1988). Of the 451 respondents, a subsample of 316 had completed all items in the Novelty Seeking in Tourism Scale. The CFA confirmed that the Lee and Crompton scale measures a multidimensional construct consisting of four factors – thrill, escape from routine, boredom alleviation and desire for surprise. All model fit indices met acceptable levels (GFI=.94; TLI=.92; CFI=.94; $X^2/DF=2.39$; RMSEA=.066) (Arbuckle and Wothke, 1995; Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black, 1998; Hu and Bentler, 1995).

A regression path model was then formulated employing the data collected and the measurement model resulting from the CFA, using AMOS 5.0. An initial model formulation phase was undertaken using a random split-half of the total sample (N=230). A series of phases of model modification followed where significant regression paths were identified, standardised residual covariances examined, and non-significant regression paths deleted. A robust regression path model was thus built ($X^2=54.479$, d.f.=53, $p=.418$). A model confirmation phase followed with the remaining split-half sample (N=221). The final model was then bootstrapped using the total sample (N=451); 1000 bootstrap samples were generated (Hair *et al.*, 1998).

Nine observed exogenous variables were retained in the final model: the five metric measures of travel style (auto, coach, camper, backpacker and VFR measures), length of the vacation, size of the travel party, age of the vacationer and “desire for surprise” (one of the four dimensions of novelty seeking). Eight endogenous variables were retained in the final model: the three scale items contributing to “desire for surprise” (#10, #18 and #21), three distinct measures of information search (hours spent consulting friends and relatives, hours spent reading travel guidebooks, and hours spent consulting travel agents), vacation plans, and vacation bookings.

Results

A robust regression path model was formulated (see Table 1). All model fit indices met acceptable levels ($X^2=69.86$, $df=53$, $p=.060$; $GFI=.98$; $AGFI=.95$; $TLI=.97$; $CFI=.99$; $X^2/DF=.988$; $RMSEA=.027$).

Length of the vacation, auto and VFR travel styles were positively related to number of hours of consultation with friends and relatives ($r^2=.153$). Length of the vacation, auto and camper travel styles were positively related to number of hours of reading travel guidebooks; desire for surprise and a VFR travel style were negatively related to number of hours of reading travel guidebooks ($r^2=.131$). Age of the tourist, auto and coach travel styles were positively related to number of hours of consultation with travel agents; desire for surprise was negatively related to number of hours of consultation with travel agents ($r^2=.135$). Hypotheses *H1abde* are supported.

Coach, auto and camper travel styles were positively related to content of the vacation plan; length of the vacation and desire for surprise were negatively related to content of the vacation plan. Number of hours of consultation with travel agents and number of hours of reading travel guidebooks were positively related to content of the vacation plan ($r^2=.411$). Hypotheses *H2abef* are supported.

A coach travel style was positively related to vacation bookings; backpacker, VFR and camper travel styles and desire for surprise were negatively related to vacation bookings. Hours of consultation with travel agents was positively related to vacation bookings; hours of consultation with friends and relatives and hours of reading of travel guidebooks were negatively related to vacation bookings. Content of the vacation plan was positively related to vacation bookings ($r^2=.445$). Hypotheses *H3aefg* are supported.

Discussion

An examination of the vacation plan offers an alternative framework from which to understand vacation decision-making. The vacation plan has been conceptualised as being the culmination of all pre-trip vacation decision-making, a logical and consistent set of decisions likely to influence vacation behaviours. This study has shown that the breadth of content of a vacation plan is determined by a tourist's choice of travel style, length of the vacation to be undertaken, novelty-seeking motives, and information search behaviours of the tourist. The study has also shown that the breadth of content of a vacation plan influences amount of pre-vacation purchase of tourism services.

An understanding of tourists' vacation plans can provide a useful guide in the formulation of marketing plans for tourism businesses. To the extent that elements of the vacation have been pre-determined as part of a vacation plan, and are not susceptible to change, tourism businesses might concentrate their marketing communications in the media consulted by the tourist at their home base (Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002). To the extent that the tourist has not formulated a vacation plan prior to commencement of the vacation, tourism businesses might target their marketing communications in the destination area or enroute to the destination area.

Future research should continue into planned versus realized vacation behaviours (March and Woodside, 2005). An analysis might be undertaken of which vacation elements are most often realized, which vacation elements are most susceptible to change, and what are the facilitators and inhibitors which may influence changes to vacation plans. This paper has only touched upon the possibilities for investigating tourists' vacation plans. Greater insight into tourists' pre-vacation intentions and their influence on vacation behaviours must await further enquiry.

Table 1: Bootstrapped Standardized Regression Weights:

Parameter		Estimate	S.E.	p
novel18	<--- surprise	.645	.044	.000
novel21	<--- surprise	.642	.045	.000
novel10	<--- surprise	.743	.036	.000
friend	<--- length	.278	.044	.000
friend	<--- auto	.125	.044	.005
friend	<--- VFR	.268	.044	.000
guidebook	<--- length	.296	.048	.000
guidebook	<--- auto	.190	.046	.000
guidebook	<--- surprise	-.154	.055	.007
guidebook	<--- camper	.141	.045	.002
guidebook	<--- VFR	-.085	.044	.057
travel agent	<--- coach	.119	.050	.014
travel agent	<--- age	.164	.053	.000
travel agent	<--- surprise	-.185	.061	.002
travel agent	<--- auto	.101	.050	.036
plan	<--- length	-.334	.042	.000
plan	<--- surprise	-.128	.053	.011
plan	<--- travel agent	.080	.041	.038
plan	<--- guidebook	.166	.039	.000
plan	<--- coach	.238	.047	.000
plan	<--- auto	.325	.045	.000
plan	<--- camper	.125	.039	.001
booking	<--- travel agent	.071	.043	.074
booking	<--- surprise	-.348	.053	.000
booking	<--- backpacker	-.203	.041	.000
booking	<--- VFR	-.171	.036	.000
booking	<--- plan	.197	.041	.000
booking	<--- camper	-.146	.032	.000
booking	<--- coach	.114	.045	.004
booking	<--- friend	-.115	.038	.003
booking	<--- guidebook	-.078	.039	.044

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