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Information search behavior of European tourists visiting Mauritius

Abstract

Understanding the information search behavior of travelers is important for providing effective marketing strategies and appropriate communication campaigns. Indeed, investigating and understanding such behaviors of tourists have a long tradition in tourism research. Using data collected from 877 respondents, this study analyzes the information search behavior of European tourists visiting Mauritius. The impact of nationality and prior product knowledge on the external information search behavior of travelers has been investigated. Data was collected between September 2006 and January 2007 using structured questionnaires. The analysis was conducted using the Kruskal-Wallis test to analyze the influence of nationality on the use of external sources of information. A series of one-way ANOVA and t-test were also conducted to investigate the relationship between prior product knowledge and use of external sources of information. Results indicate that nationality and prior product knowledge influence travelers' information search behavior. Findings also indicate that for both first-time and repeat visitors, the Internet was an important source of information. However, travel agencies, friends and relatives, information leaflets and National Tourism Offices were found to be more important sources of information for first-time travelers than repeat visitors. The results also suggest that different marketing and communication strategies are necessary to effectively target consumers from the diverse European countries. In conclusion, recommendations for destination marketers in Mauritius are discussed. These include developing close contacts and good relationships with travel agencies, increasing online marketing techniques, encouraging positive word-of-mouth and increasing attention to tourists' satisfaction amongst others. Some limitations of the research are also discussed.

Keywords:

information search; nationality; previous visit; Europeans; Mauritius

Introduction

Tourism is considered to be an information intensive industry which relies on communication with tourists to be successful (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Poon, 1993). Understanding the information search behavior of travelers is therefore important for providing effective marketing strategies and designing appropriate communication campaigns (Gursoy & Chen, 2000). However, travelers from different national cultures behave differently in their search for information about a destination.

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Indeed, previous studies have revealed that nationality is a determinant of information search behavior of travelers (e.g. Chen & Gursoy, 2000; Gursoy & Chen, 2000; Uysal, McDonald & Reid, 1990). Hyde (2000) further argued that other determinants of travelers' search behavior are their demographic characteristics. Prior knowledge about the destination has also been found to influence travelers' behavior (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). These differences present many problems and challenges to destination managers and tourism authorities trying to market their products to diverse consumers with different socio-economic and socio-demographic backgrounds. Nevertheless, only a few studies in the tourism literature have focused on analyzing the information search behavior of travelers from different nationalities (e.g. Chen & Gursoy, 2000; Gursoy & Chen, 2000; Gursoy & Umbreit, 2004; Uysal *et al.*, 1990). Also, most of the research work on information search behavior has focused on US travelers (Gursoy & Chen, 2000).

This study therefore analyzes the information search behavior of travelers from five main European countries visiting Mauritius. These European countries constitute the main tourism generating markets for the island. It is expected that this research will contribute to the few studies available on cross-cultural information search behavior of travelers by investigating and comparing the information search behavior of tourists from France, UK, Germany, Italy and Switzerland. The findings from this study can also help tourism authorities in Mauritius to better cater for the needs of the tourists and market Mauritius more effectively by using the appropriate communication and marketing channels.

Dimensions of tourism in Mauritius

During the past 15 years, the island economy of Mauritius has proved to be a striking example of export-oriented development. The island diversified from a mono-crop economy to one based on sugar, textile and tourism. One of the reasons which accounts for the rapid economic development of the island is the preferential market access to the European Union under the Lomé Convention and to the US for sugar under a quota system and textile under a bilateral trade agreement. However, the phasing-out of these agreements has forced the government to rethink its priorities and strategies. Increased emphasis is now being placed on the tourism industry as the main engine for growth.

In 2005, tourist arrivals to the island attained a figure of 761,063 (Central Statistical Office, 2006). European countries being the major tourism generating markets accounted for 66.1% of the total arrivals, an increase of 5.4% compared to the previous year. France is the leading tourism market generating around 220,421 visitors representing around 29% of total tourist arrivals and 43.8% of the European market (Central Statistical Office, 2006). Other major tourism generating European markets are the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and Switzerland as revealed in Table 1. The increased reliance of the Mauritian tourism industry on European countries as evident from the figures in Table 1, present many challenges to the tourism authorities especially in the present context where the government's objective is to achieve two million visitors by the year 2015. Indeed, the formation of the European Union, a supranational and inter-governmental union of 27 member states has led to the creation of one of the biggest tourism and leisure markets which the government could take advantage of. The constant annual increase in tourist arrivals to Mauritius from European countries indicates that there are potentials to exploit these markets. These potentials can be achieved by designing the right marketing and communication approach to attract travelers from the diverse European markets.

This requires an understanding of where potential travelers look for and acquire information as this search for information has significant implications for the purchases they make.

Table 1

TOURIST ARRIVALS TO MAURITIUS FROM EUROPEAN DESTINATIONS IN 2005

Country of residence	Tourist arrivals	% of European arrivals*
France	220,421	43.8
United Kingdom	95,407	19.0
Germany	55,983	11.1
Italy	43,458	8.6
Switzerland	15,773	3.1
Other European countries	71,673	14.3
Total arrivals from Europe	502,715	100.0

Source: Central Statistical Office (2006)

* Rounded to 1 decimal place

Literature review

INFORMATION SEARCH

An individual's awareness, choice and selection of destinations depends on the available information (Bieger & Laesser, 2001). The literature on information search behavior of travelers has revealed that the way in which tourists look for information has often been used as a segmentation criterion in tourism research (Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Fodness & Murray, 1997). Segmenting travelers is important to understand their individual behavior (Cohen, 1972; Wickens, 2002) and has been found useful for marketing purposes, designing appropriate tourism products and for establishing appropriate communication channels to meet the needs and expectations of tourists in different segments (Alvarez & Asugman, 2006). Segmenting the tourism market on the basis of information search behavior of travelers is especially appropriate for the industry as the latter rely to a large extent on information (Alvarez & Asugman, 2006; Bieger & Laesser, 2001) and communication with tourists (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). As such, many attempts have been made to segment travelers according to their information search behavior (Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1998; Schul & Crompton, 1983).

The concept of search dates back to Stigler's (1961) theory of economics of information which means that 'consumers will continue expending resources for search until the utility gained from the search exceeds the costs' (Money & Crofts, 2003, p. 191). In fact, information search behavior of consumers has been one of the most researched areas in consumer research (Beatty & Smith, 1987) and likewise, investigating and understanding the information search behavior of travelers have a long tradition in tourism research (Ettel & Wahlers, 1985; Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1998, 1999; Perdue, 1985; Raitz & Dakhil, 1989; Schul & Crompton, 1983; Snepenger & Snepenger, 1993; Woodside & Ronkainen, 1980). Information search behavior has been defined as the "motivated activity to search for information stored in memory or acquisition of decision-relevant information from the environment" (Engel, Blackwell &

Miniard, 1995, p. 41) and has been considered as one of the first steps of the vacation decision making process (Gursoy & Umbreit, 2004). The process of information search starts when an individual recognizes a need or a problem (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004) and is likely to take place when the consumer has to make a (travel) decision.

Studies on information search behavior have been guided by two models which have been used to investigate the search behavior of travelers: the strategic model and the contingency model (Fodness & Murray, 1997). The strategic model which was first proposed by Snepenger, Meged, Snelling and Worrall (1990) defines information search strategies as the combination of information sources. However, many studies which have used this source-based approach have considered only one type of information source used by tourists (Fodness & Murray, 1997) when in fact, Snepenger et al., (1990, p. 22) defines a search strategy as 'the combination of information sources used by a travel party to plan a trip.' Other studies have revealed that travelers tend to use different information sources such as travel consultants, family and friends, destination specific literature and the media when planning a vacation (Snepenger & Snepenger, 1993; Woodside & Ronkainen, 1980). For instance, the research by Fodness and Murray (1998) revealed that travelers did not use and depend only on one type of information. They noticed that travelers might use several types of information sources before making a decision. The strategic model also deals with the influence of socio-demographic characteristics on the use of external information sources (Snepenger et al., 1990). Alternatively, the contingency model which was first proposed by Schul and Crompton (1983) defines information search in terms of individual efforts such as previous trip experiences, the number of sources used, amount of time spent, product characteristics and situational influences (Fodness & Murray, 1997; Schul & Crompton, 1983). These researchers argued that travel specific lifestyles and differences in individuals were more appropriate predictors of external search behavior of travelers than socio-demographic characteristics.

Both of the above mentioned models are similar in some aspects but differ in others. Both the strategic and the contingency models consider the influence of the composition of the travel party, prior visits to the destination and the degree of familiarity associated with the destination on the types of external information sources. One of the advantages of the strategic model is that it attempts to look into different sources of information likely to be utilized by tourists. Its weakness is that it does not help us to understand the reasons why travelers utilize certain types of external information sources and reject others. Also, it does not attempt to analyze factors, other than demographic characteristics of the consumer that may impact on the type of external information sources used. The contingency model can be considered superior to the strategic model as it examines several other factors that are likely to influence the search behavior of travelers. Yet, this model has been infrequently used in the tourism literature (Schul & Crompton, 1983).

INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL INFORMATION SEARCH

Consumer behavior research has identified two types of search that buyers go through before making purchase decisions: internal and external search (Engel et al., 1995; Hawkins, Best & Coney, 1998). Internal search is based on the retrieval of information from long term memory which may have been acquired from previous experiences and part information searches (Money & Crofts, 2003). When consumers need to make a travel decision, they initially rely on internal sources of information. This is particularly relevant when past experiences and knowledge are used as a basis for making travel decisions (Fodness & Murray, 1997; Gursoy & Chen, 2000; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

For instance, travelers may not require external information for a routine trip to family or friends, or for traveling to a previously visited destination as they may make use of previous experiences to plan their trip (Ettel & Wahlers, 1985; Snepenger & Snepenger, 1993).

When the internal search for information does not reveal enough information, the travelers may decide to collect information from external sources (Gursoy & Chen, 2000; Gursoy & Umbreit, 2004) or when an internal search for information does not provide up-to-date information, travelers search for information externally (Beatty & Smith, 1987). However, Perdue (1985) argued that even a traveler with adequate experience may need to rely on external sources of information before a routine trip or because of some side trips or change in route. External search is the retrieval of information from the market (Engel et al., 1995) and during the information search process, the memory is used to retrieve information and/or the consumer relies on various external sources of information (Wicks & Schuett, 1991). Schul and Crompton (1983) argued that in the case of vacation travel, the traveler relies on a variety of external sources of information and that the search involves considerable efforts.

Travelers have a wide choice of external sources of information (Raitz & Dakhil, 1989) and have actually been found to use different types of external sources of information namely: personal, marketer-dominated, neutral and experiential sources (Assael, 1987; Beatty & Smith, 1987). Fodness and Murray (1998) found that travelers tend to combine available information in a rational way and that they do not depend on one type of information source. They used spatial, temporal and operational dimensions to distinguish between the different types of information (Fodness & Murray, 1998). Snepenger and Snepenger (1993) further classified the external sources of information under the following headings: family and friends, destination specific literature, media and travel consultants. Other researchers and academics consider the Internet to be another source of external information (Money & Crofts, 2003). Indeed, many researchers have analyzed the Internet in relation to tourist information search (Gursoy & Umbreit, 2004) and it has been found to be a better choice since it is accessible worldwide and contains a large quantity of information (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2000).

Gursoy and Chen (2000) noted that travelers utilize external sources of information for pre-purchase information or for ongoing information search. Bloch, Sherrell and Ridway (1986) further argued that pre-purchase information search takes place before a purchase decision while ongoing information search is the search for external information regardless of sporadic purchase needs. A review of the existing literature on information search has revealed a number of sources of information. These have been classified as commercial or non-commercial and received from personal or impersonal communication (Fodness & Murray, 1997).

PREDICTORS OF INFORMATION SEARCH BEHAVIOR

The utilization of external information sources are determined by a number of factors such as prior product knowledge (Brucks, 1985; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998), composition of travel party (Snepenger et al., 1990), the environment (e.g. the number of alternatives, difficulty of the choice task), situational variables (e.g. previous satisfaction, perceived risks) and consumer characteristics (e.g. level of education, prior product knowledge) (Fodness & Murray, 1998, 1999). Information search behavior has also been analyzed in relation to the typology of the tourists (Snepenger, 1987). Gray (1970) identified two types of tourists: *wanderlusts* and *sunlusts*. The former are sensation-seeking individuals who look for new experience, culture and places, leaving

familiar things behind. Such travelers might still enjoy visiting a particular destination while being unaware of the destination's offer (Alvarez & Asugman, 2006). Hyde (2000) argued that for such travelers the meeting of the unknown and unexpected is part of the holiday experience. *Wanderlusts* therefore tend not to engage in deep search for information. *Sunlusts* on the contrary, have a desire for better amenities at a destination and look for the common (Gray, 1970) and tend to engage in thorough information search to gather information about a destination. The typology of the tourist is therefore a determinant of information search behavior (Alvarez & Asugman, 2006).

Previous studies have also revealed that the characteristics of the tourists are determinants of their information search behavior (e.g. Chen & Gursoy, 2000; Fodness & Murray, 1999; Gursoy & Umbreit, 2004; Hyde, 2000; Money & Crofts, 2003; Uysal et al., 1990). Hyde (2000) argued that demographic variables of travelers determine the amount of information searching. Indeed, in their research on information search behavior of German, French, British and Japanese tourists traveling to the United States, Uysal et al. (1990) found that tourists from different nationalities used different types of information. For French and German travelers, family and friends were the most important source of external information. Travel agents, brochures, airlines and articles in magazines were also found to be important sources of information for French tourists. British travelers were found to be using travel agents as the main source of information followed by family and friends, brochures and pamphlets, magazines and newspaper articles. Family and friends were the most important source of information for German travelers. This was followed by the use of travel agents, brochures and pamphlets, books and library materials. The research also revealed that travelers from these different nationalities used the different information sources with varying frequencies. Gursoy and Chen (2000) conducted a similar study on the information search behavior of British, French and German tourists. The research revealed that British and French travelers' information search behavior are alike and that German travelers are likely to use the Internet and travel offices more than British and French travelers. The above findings therefore suggest that the nationality of the traveler is an important factor affecting his or her search behavior.

CONCEPTUALIZING PRIOR PRODUCT KNOWLEDGE

Another determinant of information search behavior is prior knowledge about the destination (Alba & Marmorstein, 1987; Baker, Hutchinson, Moore & Nedungadi, 1986; Jacoby, Chestnut & Fisher, 1978). Travelers gain prior product knowledge from previous experiences and by means of virtual stimuli such as advertisement, newspapers and magazines (Milman & Pizam, 1978; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Bloch et al. (1986) further argued that consumers gain prior product knowledge through an ongoing information search process. Previous researchers who have analyzed the relationship between prior product knowledge and information search have concluded contradictory findings. While some studies have revealed a negative relationship between prior product knowledge and the amount of external information search (Anderson, Engledow & Becker, 1979; Etzel & Wahlers, 1985; Katona & Mueller, 1955; Snepenger & Snepenger, 1993), other researchers have found a positive relationship between prior knowledge and external information search, arguing that prior product knowledge encourages information search (Gursoy, 2003; Ozanne, Brucks & Grewal, 1992). In the former case, consumers who have prior product knowledge do not need to search for information externally (Brucks, 1985) hence, explaining the negative relationship. In the latter case, prior product knowledge encourages external information search as it makes information processing and acquisition easier (Gursoy, 2003; Ozanne et al., 1992).

Components and dimensions of the construct prior product knowledge are still debatable (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). Alba and Hutchinson (1987) argued that prior product knowledge is a multidimensional construct comprising of familiarity and expertise. Other researchers suggest that it is one-dimensional and is measured through familiarity (Johnson & Russo, 1984; Rao & Monroe, 1988), expertise (Bettman & Sujan, 1987; Mitchell & Dacin, 1996) and product experience (Brucks, 1985; Wright & Lynch, 1995). Indeed, past experience as a dimension of prior product knowledge is one of the most important factors affecting the decision making process (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Gursoy, 2003; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Previous studies have revealed that the amount of past experiences determines the extent of external search for information (Bitner & Booms, 1982; Etzel & Wahlers, 1985; Perdue, 1985; Woodside, 1980). The types of external sources of information have also been found to differ between first-time visitors and repeat visitors (Gursoy, 2003; Vogt, Stewart & Fesenmaier, 1998). For instance, Baloglu (2001) found that first-time visitors tend to use commercial information sources such as advertisements and brochures while repeat visitors use both commercial and non-commercial sources of information. Gursoy and MacCleary (2004) argued that the cognitive theory can be used to explain the influence of previous visits on information search. The theory postulates that when experiences are gained through previous visits, consumers also gain knowledge about a given destination or activities and their internal cognitive image of the destination becomes more complex (Spence & Brucks, 1997; Williams, Schreyer & Knopf, 1990).

Gursoy (2003) noted that in the contingency model, prior visit is one construct which measures product knowledge. This study therefore, uses previous visits to Mauritius as a determinant of prior product knowledge and analyzes its influence on the external information search of European tourists visiting Mauritius. Previous studies have also linked the characteristics of the tourists and information search behavior (Gursoy & Umbreit, 2004; Hyde, 2000; Money & Crotts, 2003; Uysal et al., 1990). This relationship was further investigated in this research and the influence of nationality on information search behavior has been analyzed. This study therefore combines variables from the strategic and the contingency models to analyze the information search behavior of tourists from the five main European markets for Mauritius. It is expected that this study will contribute to the few cross-cultural studies on travelers' use of information sources.

Research design

DATA COLLECTION AND STUDY SAMPLE

This research has used a structured questionnaire to collect data from European tourists who were actually visiting Mauritius. Data was collected by interviewing tourists at the following major tourist attractions in Mauritius: Le Gorges National Park, Le Chamarel, Aventure du Sucre, the Pamplemousses Botanical Garden and Flic-en-Flac public beach. The survey was conducted between September 2006 and January 2007. This method has indeed resulted in a good response rate. The total sample size was 877 European tourists: 225 French travelers, 204 British travelers, 187 German travelers, 189 Italian travelers and 122 Swiss travelers (Table 2). The survey sample consisted of tourists from those European countries representing the major tourist generating markets for Mauritius.

SURVEY VARIABLES

The questionnaire has been designed out of a review of existing literature on information search behavior of travelers (e.g. Chen & Gursoy, 2000; Fodness & Murray, 1997; Gursoy & Chen, 2000; Uysal et al., 1990). Questions in the first part of the question-

naire asked respondents about their demographic profile such as nationality and whether they had previously visited Mauritius. To determine their nationality, respondents were asked about their country of permanent residence and country of birth. Based on their responses, they were classified as French, British, German, Italian and Swiss. If they were of nationalities other than those which are the focus of the study, they were eliminated from the survey. If a respondent's country of permanent residence was different from his/her country of birth, he/she was also eliminated from the survey. To determine whether the respondents had prior knowledge about the destination, they were asked to indicate whether they had been to Mauritius on previous occasions or whether this was their first visit. The second part of the questionnaire asked the respondents about the different sources of information they have used to plan their trip and they had to pick all the sources of information from a list namely: (1) travel agency, (2) friends and relatives, (3) Internet, (4) information leaflets, (5) National Tourist Office (NTO), (6) airlines and (7) others. Respondents were also asked to rate the importance of the different external sources of information in planning their visit to the destination on a 1-5 scale, where 1 = not important and 5 = very important.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was conducted using the Kruskal-Wallis test to analyze the impact of nationality of the respondents on the use of information sources. The Kruskal-Wallis test is most commonly used when there is one attribute variable and one measurement variable, and the measurement variable does not meet the assumptions of an ANOVA: normality and homoscedasticity. The Kruskal Wallis test which can be applied in a one factor ANOVA case is a non-parametric test for a situation where the ANOVA normality assumptions may not apply, that is where the crucial assumption of the *F*-test cannot be validated (Kohler, 1994). To investigate the relationship between prior product knowledge and use of external sources of information, a series of one-way ANOVA and *t*-test were conducted.

Analysis and discussion of findings

The findings from this study (Table 2) have revealed that French tourists use travel agencies as their main source of information followed by the Internet, friends and relatives, airlines, National Tourist Offices (NTO), information leaflets and others. For British travelers, travel agencies were the most important source of information. This was followed by the Internet, information leaflets, NTO, friends and relatives, airlines and others. The study further revealed that travel agencies were the most important source of information for German travelers. This was followed by the Internet, airlines, information leaflets, friends and relatives, NTO and others. Italian tourists were however, found to be using the Internet as their main source of information, followed by travel agents, friends and relatives, NTO, information leaflets and others. For Swiss travelers, travel agencies were the most important source of information followed by the Internet, friends and relatives, NTO, airlines, information leaflets and others. In all cases, the Internet was found to be an important source of information for all travelers. This finding is in line with the study by NFO Plog Research which found that the Internet has become one of the most important sources of external information for travelers (Lake, 2001).

Table 2

EXTERNAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION USED BY EUROPEAN TRAVELERS (N = 877)

Nationality	No	Travel agency (%)	Friends/relative (%)	Internet (%)	Information leaflets (%)	NTO (%)	Airlines (%)	Others (%)
French	225	70.45	28.40	69.3	18.5	23.33	27.2	7.94
Rank		(1)	(3)	(2)	(6)	(5)	(4)	(7)
British	204	75.28	31.48	68.67	45.7	34.89	18.41	10.53
Rank		(1)	(5)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(6)	(7)
German	187	65.42	22.55	58.45	34.62	12.65	45.71	8.91
Rank		(1)	(5)	(2)	(4)	(6)	(3)	(7)
Italian	139	56.31	37.85	77.74	22.65	24.81	19.74	12.56
Rank		(2)	(3)	(1)	(5)	(4)	(6)	(7)
Swiss	122	75.47	35.78	56.67	18.44	32.61	23.80	11.41
Rank		(1)	(3)	(2)	(6)	(4)	(5)	(7)

Note: Respondents were allowed to choose multiple sources

With the exception of Italian tourists, travel agencies are the most frequently utilized source of information by almost all travelers from the different nationalities (Table 2). This finding is in line with previous research which has examined the utilization of external information sources by European nationalities. For instance, Gursoy and Umbreit (2004) reported that the most important source of information for European travelers was travel agencies. Similar findings have been revealed by the study of Chen and Gursoy (2000) and Gursoy and Chen (2000). Both studies reported that travel agents were the most frequently used external source of information of British, French and German travelers.

To analyze the impact of nationality on the external information source utilization, a series of Kruskal Wallis tests were conducted and Table 3 presents the results. As shown in Table 3, at $p \leq 0.05$ significance level, the impact of nationality on the use of external sources of information is significant, implying that the nationality of the travelers is a determinant of the respondents' search behavior in relation to the different external sources of information. This finding confirms the findings of other research. The studies by Gursoy and Umbreit (2004), Chen and Gursoy (2000) and Uysal et al. (1990) reported that the national cultures of travelers were likely to influence their external search behavior.

In an attempt to test whether the prior product knowledge construct, conceptualized as previous visits to Mauritius in this study is a determinant of travelers' utilization of external sources of information, a series of *t*-test was conducted to assess the difference between those respondents who visited Mauritius previously and first-timers (Table 4). In general, the results indicate that those respondents who have visited Mauritius for the first time considered the external information sources as being more important than those who had visited the island previously. The results suggest that prior product knowledge, conceptualized as previous visits, is in fact a determinant of utilization of external sources of information.

Table 3

NATIONALITY'S IMPACT ON UTILIZATION OF EXTERNAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION: KRUSKAL WALLIS TEST RESULTS

Information sources	Chi-square	Significance (<i>P</i>)
Travel agents	132.54	0.000
Friends and relatives	99.91	0.000
Internet	127.37	0.000
Information leaflets	82.64	0.015
NTO	78.72	0.015
Airlines	57.82	0.000
Others	34.53	0.015

As product knowledge increases, the external sources of information become less important when planning the trip, supporting the assumption of the contingency model that those travelers who are familiar with a destination will approach a product decision with limited problem solving process and that they are less likely to look for more information about the destination. Their decisions about a trip are based on internal information sources (Fodness & Murray, 1999). The findings of this research also support that of other research in the area which has revealed a negative relationship between prior product knowledge and amount of external information search (Anderson et al., 1979; Etzel & Wahlers, 1985; Katona & Mueller, 1955; Snepenger & Snepenger, 1993) but however, contradict the observations of other research in the field (Gursoy, 2003; Ozanne et al., 1992).

Table 4

DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF EXTERNAL INFORMATION SOURCES BETWEEN RESPONDENTS WHO HAD VISITED MAURITIUS PREVIOUSLY AND FIRST-TIMERS

Information sources	Mean value**		<i>t</i> -value
	1 st time (N= 734)	2 nd time or more (N= 143)	
Travel agents	4.5	3.7	-6.5 *
Friends and relatives	4.7	2.5	-6.3 *
Internet	4.8	4.6	-1.1
Information leaflets	3.7	2.4	-3.5 *
NTO	3.4	1.7	-2.7 *
Airlines	1.6	2.2	5.2 *
Others	3.9	3.1	-4.8 *

* Statistically significant at 0.05 or less ($p \leq 0.05$)

** 1 = not important; 5 = very important

The most significant difference between the two groups of travelers was found in the utilization of travel agents and friends and relatives as external sources of information. First-time visitors were found to consider friends and relatives and travel agents as being more important sources of information compared to those who had previously visited the destination. First-timers considered information leaflets, NTO and other

Conclusion, recommendations and limitations

sources of information as being more important in planning their trip than those travelers who have visited the destination previously, supporting the study of Woodside (1980) on the information search behavior of travelers to South California. He observed that first-time visitors relied more on professional sources of information than repeat visitors. Another important observation is that travelers with previous experience considered airlines as an important source of information compared to first-time visitors. Both groups in this study however, rated the Internet as being an important source of information for planning their trip.

The purpose of the study was to use variables from the contingency and strategic models to analyze the information search behavior of European tourists visiting Mauritius. The study has revealed that prior product knowledge acquired through previous visits to Mauritius and the nationalities of the travelers were determinants of their utilization of external information sources. Those travelers who had previously visited the destination considered external sources of information as being less important than first-timers. Significant differences were found between first-time visitors and those who had visited the destination on previous occasions in the use of travel agents and friends and relatives as sources of information. Other differences in the utilization of information sources were for information leaflets and NTO. First-time visitors were found to rely more on these sources than those who had previous experiences with the island. Travelers from both groups however, reported that the Internet was an important source of information while planning their trip.

Theoretical implications derived from the findings of this study include the notion that prior product knowledge does affect the information search behavior of travelers. The findings have revealed that those tourists who have visited Mauritius previously made less use of external sources of information compared to first-time visitors to the island who relied more on external sources of information. In other words, for travelers who are visiting Mauritius for the first time, external search for information is more relevant than for those who are familiar with the destination, implying that familiarity with a destination may result in little need for information and more reliance on prior knowledge of the destination.

The findings from this study can be used to draw some practical implications for marketing the Mauritian tourism product. The research can help tourism authorities of the island by improving their understanding on how to reach the different markets through appropriate marketing channels. It is clear from the findings that travelers use more than one type of information source when planning their trips. Segmenting travelers by information search strategies can therefore prove useful in targeting markets and employing appropriate promotional and marketing mixes.

Regardless of the impact of nationality and previous visits to the destination, travel agents and the Internet were found to be important sources of information for most of the respondents. It is therefore recommended that marketers develop close contact and good relationships with travel agencies located in the different European markets. Tourism marketing managers can also send representatives of Mauritius to talk about new development at the destination to travel agents. Travel agencies can further be motivated to persuade potential tourists to visit Mauritius by providing the former with free trips to the destination. Personalized mail shots targeted at the travel agents can also be used to encourage them to recommend the destination to potential travelers.

Increasing online marketing techniques will also prove useful in increasing the island's market share from European countries. It is important for the tourism authorities to design web pages which provide extensive information about the destination. Destination managers can provide additional services through the web pages such as purchase of accommodation, car rental and online booking facilities. Such web pages can also be advertised at other sites and promoted free of charge. This would ensure that the sites would reach a critical mass of potential visitors to Mauritius. To facilitate the search process, it is also recommended to provide information hubs containing links to authoritative websites regarding the destination. These could include links to the embassy or consulate, convention and visitors' bureau websites. Providing such types of information through the Internet will increase the level of contact with potential customers and will also provide them with prompt service and up-to-date information.

The findings also have definite implications for future communication and marketing strategies to reach the diverse consumers in the different European countries. In general, friends and relatives were found to be an important source of information for French, Italian and Swiss travelers. Increased attention therefore needs to be given to customer satisfaction to encourage positive word-of-mouth of the destination. Customer satisfaction can be assessed by survey feedback from departing tourists and areas requiring improvements should be worked upon. Complaint handling procedures should also be improved to increase satisfaction levels with the destination and its services. British travelers were also found to rely on information leaflets for information. Tourism marketers should focus on information leaflets if they want to reach British consumers and should provide such leaflets in large numbers in different regions of UK. Information leaflets should provide as much information as possible on the destination and should be attractive. For German travelers, airlines were another important source of information. Mauritian tourism authorities should therefore develop close links with airlines. They can arrange to set up tourism offices within the airline companies in order to provide better information about the destination to potential travelers. Promotional and marketing efforts can be directed at the airline companies.

While it is important for destination managers to understand the most appropriate ways of providing information about the destination to potential tourists, it is also of utmost importance to ensure that these information sources contain effective messages. For instance, all the communication and marketing strategies used could be based on the AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire and Actions) framework, first introduced by Strong (1925) and which suggests desirable qualities of any communication (Kotler, 2002). Ideally such promotional and communication strategies should gain Attention, hold Interest, arouse Desire and eventually elicit Actions (AIDA), thus encouraging purchase of the destination's product. Information strategies based on this model would therefore take the consumers from awareness about the destination through purchasing its tourism products (Kotler, 2002).

Despite the managerial and marketing implications of this study, it is however important to consider its limitations. The findings from this study suggest that prior product knowledge is a determinant of search behavior. Prior product knowledge was conceptualized as a one dimensional construct in terms of previous visits to the destination when in fact other researchers have argued that prior product knowledge is a multidimensional construct comprising of familiarity and expertise (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987) and familiarity, expertise and past experience (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004).

The study also did not attempt to analyze why travelers consider a certain type of information as being more important than others.

The study has also focused on only 7 types of information sources used by European travelers in planning for their trips. There is a need therefore to study other sources of information which might be more culture specific since nationality might not be a determinant of the culture of a traveler. Subcultures may exist within a national group and their relationship between information search behaviors deserves further investigation. Therefore, equating nationality with culture might produce limited findings.

Overall, this study provides some useful insights on how European tourists acquire information about Mauritius. Findings suggest that destination managers and marketers of the island should understand that tourist information search behavior is not a homogeneous process, but is rather heterogeneous in nature, where different travelers have different information needs. With this understanding, tourism marketers should design different communication strategies and make use of different types of information sources to achieve more success in attracting tourists to Mauritius.

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