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Profiling the Gen Y tourist

Abstract

Although Generation Y (Gen Y) is seen as an important and influential travel market, it has not featured heavily within academic tourism literature. Therefore, this study seeks to assist with building a profile for the Gen Y tourist. It examines the preferences and behaviors of this cohort; specifically, the sources of information they use and the research they conduct prior to their travels. Data were collected from students studying at a large public university in the United States. Overall, the study found the participants had a preference for shorter vacations, and many had traveled internationally. There was also a direct relationship between a person's previous travel history and year of study with the amount that they traveled. Furthermore, participants placed a high level of importance on conducting research prior to their departure, namely listening or reading the news and looking at weather forecasts.

Key words: Generation Y; travel preferences; travel research; USA

Background

In tourism, generational theory is seen as a popular method to explain behavior, since age appears to be a strong determinant that affects travel preferences and activities (Huang & Petrick, 2010). While much research has been done to identify the travel behaviors and preferences of the Baby Boomer generation (Hawes, 1988; Horneman, Wei & Sherrie, 2002), other generations, such as Generation Y (Gen Y), still require a stronger cohort analysis (Opperman, 1995). Those who fall within this cohort are usually defined as people born between 1981 and 2000 (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). While Gen Y have been examined extensively in marketing (Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010), their general characteristics from a tourism perspective remains fairly limited (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2003; Harmon, Webster & Weyenburg, 1999; Kattiyapornpong, 2009; Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010). Most of the travel-related research has focused on their work patterns, or if they travel more or less than other generations (Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010). Furthermore, this research has been based predominantly in Australia, New Zealand, or the United Kingdom, with the US market still relatively unexplored.

Gen Y is an important generational cohort with a unique set of core characteristics. As some researchers have deemed Gen Y as representing the future visitor (Leask, Fyall & Barron, 2013), further research needs to be conducted on them as tourists (Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the preferences and behavior of this cohort; in particular, the sources of

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information they consult and the research they conduct prior to their travels. It is hoped the findings will contribute to the current tourism literature to better understand this "influential generational cohort" (Leask *et al.*, 2013, np).

Method

Based upon the existing literature on Gen Y, a survey was developed to contribute and build upon this research. Students from a large public university in the mid-western United States were invited to participate in an online survey about their vacation practices prior to an upcoming vacation break in the school calendar. Participants were contacted via email, through a list-serv, and posters were placed around the university campus, with a call for participation announcement also made in an online college newspaper.

The survey asked Gen Y participants about the types of vacations they typically go on, the types of destinations they travel to (including international or to developing regions), and whom they travel with. They were also asked about the number of vacations they take annually, their average length of stay, and the types of activities they like to participate in during their vacation. As technology is deemed influential to this cohort (Leask *et al.*, 2013, np), the study included questions that asked participants how they integrate technology into planning their vacation. In particular, participants were asked to rate on a Likert type scale how important they felt it was to conduct research on their destination with 1 = very important to 5 = not important. Respondents were also asked how they use broad research strategies, such as "asking those who visited before," "check the weather," and "read or listen to the news" on the destination. These were presented as a yes/no question and coded with 0 = no and 1 = yes. Lastly, participants were asked about specific strategies used to research a destination, such as use of travel guides like *Fodor's* and online sources such as TripAdvisor. These were presented on a Likert type scale with 1 = very often to 5 = never. In addition, survey participants were asked how often they purchased travel insurance on a Likert type scale with 1 = always to 5 = never. Lastly, all survey participants were asked for demographic information, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, relationship status and annual income.

To participate in the study, students had to be currently enrolled and planning a vacation before the end of the Spring semester, 2011. Prior to completing the study, the participants had to read through the informed consent form that relayed the voluntary nature of the study. After giving informed consent, respondents were taken to the online survey through a secure server.

Data analysis

The data set was first examined by age, with those born outside of the years 1981 to 2000 deleted (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak 2000). Frequencies were generated for the remaining cases for the demographic variables in order to provide an adequate description of the sample. Correlations were used to examine relationships between the types of planning the respondents use when traveling. Both general research (e.g., checking the weather) and more specific sources of planning (e.g., *Fodor's* travel guides) were compared as well as demographic variables of gender and year in studies. Finally, regression models

were computed to examine what might predict the number of vacation days taken per year and the average length of vacation days for the Gen Y traveler.

Before performing the correlation and regression analyses, the data were tested to ascertain whether they met a number of assumptions. Surveys with any missing values were omitted, leaving a sufficiently large sample size (N = 97) to meet the minimum number of cases recommended for a five indicator regression model, using the formula $N \geq 50 + 8m$, where m is the number of indicators (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Scatterplots revealed no instance of multivariate linearity, and no univariate or multivariate outliers were detected.

Results

Descriptively, there were more females (78.4%) than males in the sample, and the majority was Caucasian in ethnicity (86.4%). There was an even split in the participants of their year of studies on the undergraduate level. Freshman, sophomores, juniors and seniors each comprised approximately 20% of the sample, while 9.7% were graduate students. Most participants (65.1%) reported taking one to two vacations a year, and the average length of their vacation was one week. However, there was a group (18.5%) taking extended vacations of anywhere from nine days to one month. Conversely, almost an equal group (20.4%) took a shorter vacation lasting three to six days. More survey participants had traveled internationally than those who had not (71.8 %), yet this travel did not typically involve developing countries. This was reflected in the choice not to purchase travel insurance as most reported never purchasing insurance (62.1%) and 15.5 % reported as rarely buying travel insurance. Most of the sample (80.6%) believed researching a destination was either very or somewhat important. A complete demographic breakdown of the sample can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive profile of survey participants

	N	%
Gender		
Female	80	78.4
Male	22	21.6
Year in studies		
Freshman	21	20.4
Sophomore	22	21.4
Junior	28	27.2
Senior	21	20.4
Graduate	10	9.7
Ethnicity		
Caucasian/White	89	86.4
African American	4	3.9
European	1	1.0
Mixed	3	2.9
Hispanic/Latino	2	1.9

Table 1 **Continued**

	N	%
Number of vacations per year		
Zero	1	1.0
One	28	27.2
Two	39	37.9
Three	18	17.5
Four	8	7.8
Five	5	1.9
Six	0	0.0
Seven	2	1.9
Eight	0	0.0
Nine	0	0.0
Ten	2	1.9
Average length of vacation (days)		
Three	5	4.9
Four	3	2.9
Five	11	10.7
Six	2	1.9
Seven	62	60.2
Nine	1	1.0
Ten	10	9.7
Fourteen	5	4.9
Thirty	3	2.9
International travel		
Yes	74	71.8
No	29	28.2
Visit developing countries		
Yes	33	32.0
No	70	68.0
How important to research destination		
Very important	42	40.8
Somewhat important	41	39.8
Neither	3	2.9
Somewhat unimportant	6	5.8
Very unimportant	8	7.8
How often purchase travel insurance		
Always	1	1.0
Rarely	16	15.5
Only for international travel	14	13.6
Only for travel to developing countries	1	1.0
Never	64	62.1

As the sample revealed that respondents overwhelmingly believed researching a destination was important to some degree, two different correlation tables were created to explore the strength of the relationships between different research strategies that were both broad and specific in nature. Table 2 shows mostly small or insubstantial correlations between general research methods. However, there were two moderate and one large correlation worth noting. The first finding between "how important to conduct research" and "listen or read news" resulted in a correlation coefficient of r = -0.483. Thus, the participants who felt that conducting research was important were somewhat likely to read or listen to the news about the destination. A similar finding was found with "look at weather forecast" albeit with a larger magnitude of r = 0.521. Here those participants who felt research was important were likely to look also at the weather forecast. Lastly, gender had a moderate relationship (r = -0.496) with "talk to previous visitors." Females in the study were more likely to talk to previous visitors than males.

Table 2
Correlations: Research in general

	How important conduct research	Listen/read news	Look weather forecast	Travel blogs of previous visitors	Talk to previous visitors	Travel books/websites	Travel agent/guide	Gender	Year of study
How important conduct research	1.00								
Listen/read news	**-0.483**	1.00							
Look weather forecast	**-0.521**	0.281	1.00						
Read travel blogs of previous visitors	-0.279	0.290	0.199	1.00					
Talk to people previous visitors	-0.366	0.222	0.285	0.313	1.00				
Read travel books/websites	-0.241	0.095	0.172	0.380	0.134	1.00			
Travel agent guide	-0.010	-0.144	0.060	-0.102	-0.116	0.040	1.00		
Gender	0.281	-0.066	-0.222	-0.093	**-0.496**	-0.132	-0.082	1.00	
Year of study	-0.057	0.137	0.012	-0.100	-0.120	0.163	-0.006	0.014	1.00

When examining specific research sources, both electronic and print, a larger number of large and moderate findings were revealed, which are illustrated in Table 3. Large correlations were found between the use of TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet (r =0 .682), the use of *Rough Guide* and *Dorling Kindersley* (DK) (r = 0.722) and *Frommer's* and *Fodor's* guides (r = 0.795). With each, those who were more likely to use one of the sources were just as likely to use the other. The direction of the relationships in the six other moderate relationships was found to support this idea. The results might suggest that participants in this study use multiple sources when researching a destination and do not rely on a single source.

Table 3
Correlations: Specific research sources

	How important conduct research	Lonely Planet	Trip Advisor	Rough Guide	DK	From- mer's	Fodor's	Wiki Travel
How important conduct research	1.00							
Lonely Planet	0.164	1.00						
TripAdvisor	0.187	**0.682**	1.00					
Rough Guide	0.072	**0.491**	**0.400**	1.00				
DK	-0.045	0.287	**0.424**	**0.722**	1.00			
Frommer's	0.115	**0.522**	**0.499**	0.282	0.302	1.00		
Fodor's	0.077	**0.537**	**0.560**	**0.430**	**0.554**	**0.795**	1.00	
Wiki Travel	0.111	0.360	**0.454**	0.336	0.350	0.302	0.334	1.00

Finally, two regression models were created to explore relationships between the number of vacation days and average length of vacation days and the variables of year in studies, prior international travel, whether they visit developing countries, how important it is to research the destination, and how often they purchase travel insurance. The first model, shown in Table 4, using the number of vacations as the dependent variable was significant with p = 0.013. The variables within the model with the greatest predictive ability were year in studies and prior international travel. In other words, those who were more advanced in their studies were more likely to take multiple trips per year. Likewise, those who travel internationally were most likely to take more vacations annually. The second regression model was not significant, at p = 0.067, as shown in Table 5. This model utilized average length of vacation days as a dependent variable and the same independent variables as the first model.

Table 4
Regression model number of vacation days

Variables	N	F ratio	R^2	B	β	t-value
The model	97	3.076	0.378			
Constant				0.754		1.236
Year in studies				0.210	0.209	2.117*
Prior international travel				0.738	0.250	2.291*
Visit developing countries				-0.013	-0.005	-0.045
How important research destination				-0.157	-0.144	-1.435
How often buy travel insurance				0.173	0.166	1.612

*Significant at < .05

Table 5
Regression model for average length of vacation (days)

Variables	N	F ratio	R^2	B	β	t-value
The model	97	2.148	0.323			
Constant				6.760		6.235
Year in studies				0.069	0.039	0.383

Table 5 **Continued**

Variables	N	F ratio	R^2	B	β	t-value
Prior international travel				-0.678	-0.130	-1.178
Visit developing countries				1.700	0.342	3.069
How important research destination				0.162	0.083	0.817
How often buy travel insurance				-0.056	-0.030	-0.294

Discussion and conclusion

Findings from this study support previous observations in the literature. Like Hudson (2010) and Kattiyapornpong (2009), participants in this study also took shorter vacations of once or twice a year. Similar to the Australian Gen Y travelers examined by Glover (2010), the majority of the participants had traveled internationally; however, many of them did not travel to new and alternative destinations, with the majority of the participants (71.8%) having never visited a developing country. This supports the idea that preferences within this cohort may differ across cultures (Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2010).

The study also found that the number of vacations Gen Y participants took was directly impacted by their year of study, whereby those at a more senior level traveled more frequently. This also supports Moscardo and Benckendorff's (2010) comments on the dynamics in this cohort, in terms of their stage of life, which causes different behaviors and abilities. This study also found a person's previous travel history impacted their travel patterns, whereby the more someone had traveled, the higher the likelihood they traveled more frequently.

Overall, while the participants believed it is important to research a destination prior to departure, they didn't favor one source of information. Interestingly, the participants chose to look at one of three 'couples' of resources: TripAdvisor and Lonely Planet, *Rough Guide* and DK, and *Frommer's* and *Fodor's*. These groupings may suggest different types of travel preferences and traveler types within this group. For example, Lonely Planet is sometimes referred to as the 'backpacker bible' (Welk, 2008), and is used more by an allocentric traveler (Plog, 2001). Future research could be conducted to assess specific niches and traveler types within this cohort.

 Those who considered research as important prior to their vacation were interested in listening or reading the news, and looking at the weather forecast. While previous research reports Gen Y as being highly influenced by their friends, this study found that female participants were more likely to talk to people who had previously visited their chosen destination.

While the findings from this study highlight some interesting characteristics about this generation, it is apparent that a great amount of research still needs to be done. Clearly, Gen Y are dynamic, and their preferences may vary according to their culture, stage of life, gender, and personality types. The authors encourage further research to be conducted on Gen Y in relation to tourism, to further assist tourism professionals' capture and satisfy this important cohort.

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