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DOI

[10.1108/17506181111139555](https://doi.org/10.1108/17506181111139555)

Publication date

2011

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bronner, F., & de Hoog, R. (2011). A new perspective on tourist information search: discussion in couples as the context. *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 5(2), 128-143. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17506181111139555>

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A new perspective on tourist information search: discussion in couples as the context

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Abstract

Purpose – Information-search for vacation decision-making can occur in two different contexts: an individual one, in which one forms one's preferences, and a social one in response to discussions with partners and family members. This paper focuses on the latter.

Design/methodology/approach – By means of a longitudinal study the research investigates the main topics of discussion in couples, and the information sources couples use in their discussion. Furthermore, the research investigates whether the information sources used depend on the nature of the sub-decision – search-determined or experience-determined – the couples discuss.

Findings – The research finds that there is considerable discussion between partners and that the amount of discussion varies in relation to the type of sub-decision. During these discussions, the use of different information sources is widespread. More generally, the study confirms the overall importance of the social context: information sources used in the social context are different from sources used in the individual context. The research does not confirm the expected relationship between the nature of a sub-decision and the type of information source used. As the decision process proceeds over time, the role of objective information sources increases in discussions.

Research limitation/implications – Compared with the classical individual approach to researching tourist information search, the social context of information-searching needs other market research data, to provide insight into the topics of discussion. Tourism marketing messages in a social decision context should be directed to significant others, as these messages are likely to be used as important information sources during the joint vacation decision process in couples. In this respect, the use of electronic word-of-mouth offers new opportunities for vacation marketing.

Originality/value – A new perspective on information search: the relevance of social contexts.

Keywords Decision making, Information searches, Information media, Tourism, The Netherlands

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Information search and vacation decision-making

Particularly in high-involvement decision situations, such as vacation choice, consumers acquire and process information and use this information in making purchasing decisions. Information acquisition is necessary for selecting a destination and for specific sub-decisions such as selecting accommodation, transportation and tours (Snepenger *et al.*, 1990). The information sources that tourists employ form the basis for vacation planning (McIntosh and Goeldner, 1986); these sources vary considerably. Consumers are likely to search as long as they believe that the benefits of acquiring information outweigh the costs (Stigler, 1961; Stigler and Becker, 1977; Ratchford, 2001). Information search is the motivated activation of knowledge stored in memory or acquisition of information from the environment (Engel *et al.*, 1995; Gursoy and McCleary, 2004). As this definition suggests, a search can be either internal or external. Internal search is the retrieval of knowledge from memory, while external searching consists of collecting information from the environment. For most tourist decisions, search is predominantly external (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004). In

Submitted: October 2007
Revised: May 2008
Accepted: September 2008

The authors thank Ad Schalekamp (TNS NIPO) and Kees van der Most (CVO) for their stimulating comments and for the funding of the fieldwork for this study.

the literature, researchers pay attention to the influence of the information sources used, situational variables and consumer characteristics affecting the choice process, and dependency on product characteristics. Further insight into tourist information-search behaviour is not only interesting from an academic viewpoint, but also relevant for marketing, because during information acquisition, marketers can influence tourists' buying decisions. Several factors can stimulate external pre-purchase information searching. In most tourist information-search studies, the starting-point is that the tourists acquire information because it enables them to reduce uncertainty when planning a vacation (McCleary and Whitney, 1994).

The purpose of this research is to study tourist information-search from a new perspective: the context of family vacation decision-making. Over the last 20 years, joint decision-making in families increased (Bronner, 2004, 2006). The vacation decision is more emphatically a joint decision than even buying equally large and important items such as cars and electronic and financial products (Mottiar and Quinn, 2004; Bronner and de Hoog, 2008). From this perspective, it is striking that "interpersonal influences in group decision-making and cultural environment are not taken into account when looking at tourist behavior" (Decrop and Snelders, 2005, p. 123). Also Jang, Lee, Lee, and Hong (2007, p. 1306) state, "Most tourists act in social situations and travel with family, relatives, friends and others. However, individual decision makers have been treated as if the tourism decision-making model exists in a vacuum". In this joint process, discussion and exchange of views within the family about several sub-decisions can occur, such as accommodation or number of places to visit. This increasingly shared decision process and relating discussions leads the researchers to study tourist information-search from a new perspective: not the traditional one in which an individual makes up his own mind almost independently of significant others, but one in which information-search is embedded in a joint decision process in couples (Fodness and Murray, 1999). An example of this new perspective is when the husband prefers Norway while the wife prefers Italy because she thinks the weather is awful in Norway. The husband then seeks information to persuade his wife that the weather in Norway is better than she expects. In the traditional individual decision-making approach, the focus would be on information that supports the husband's preference for Norway: for example, the beauty of the fjords. In this study, information search is seen as a tool in family discussions and the study investigates whether this new, social perspective leads to different information-search strategies than does the individual context.

To elaborate on this new perspective, the more classical information-search approach is compared with the approach in this research.

Classical approach to measuring information-search: the individual context

In the classical approach, the information-search question is posed in an identical way to all respondents participating in the survey. Some variants found in the literature are:

- Several information sources are included in the questionnaire and for each source the importance is measured using a seven-point rating scale, with 1 representing not important and 7 representing very important. For example: "When you purchase wine for personal use from a wine store, how important are the following information sources to your selection of a particular wine?" (Dodd *et al.*, 2005).
- Which of these information sources did you use in selecting this destination? Minimum is zero, maximum is all information sources used (Snepenger *et al.*, 1990).
- Can you pick from this list the three information sources you used most often (Cleaver, 2000).

The alternative approach to measuring information-search: the social context

In the alternative approach this study pursues, the researchers asked participants about relevant sub-decisions: "has there been discussion in your family about sub-decision x?". If yes: "pick from this list the two information sources you used most in the discussion about

sub-decision x". One of the answer categories is "no information sources played a role in the discussion about this subject". In this way, for each sub-decision, insight is obtained into:

- the percentage of couples who discuss this sub-decision;
- the use or non-use of information sources in relation to this discussion; and
- if information sources are used, which specific ones are primarily used.

The difference between the two approaches mentioned above has to do with the context of information-search. In the classical approach, information is used in the context of a person's own preferences. In the approach this study follows, information is used in the context of family discussions about vacations with another person (the partner) and preferences of this person. The basic question is whether these different contexts make a difference in the selection of information sources. For example, when considering the quietness of a destination, one may be personally satisfied with information provided in a travel agency brochure, in particular when it reinforces one's own preferences, but when one has to discuss and reach agreement with a partner about the same topic, information from friends and relatives is perhaps much more convincing. The marketing implications of this difference of context are also addressed in this paper.

Combining the focus of the research (information-search in response to a current problem and more specifically in response to discussion between partners within couples) and the choice of the vacation as the central topic, the study concentrates on three related themes, which are elaborated in the "Research questions" section.

This report investigates these themes with a longitudinal study that traces vacation choice processes among the same couples for nearly a year. This is necessary as "vacation choices involve a long process, which usually starts in January/February and spreads over many months" (Decrop and Snelders, 2004, p. 1013). The sample is drawn from the Dutch population of couples (married and unmarried).

Research questions

In this section, the themes and the research questions are elaborated.

Theme 1: discussion topics in the decision process of couples

As already stated, vacation choice is quite often a joint affair. Leisure travel is a product people frequently consume jointly and reflects the influence of all people travelling together (Fodness and Murray, 1999). This social setting that characterizes the consumption of a product also influences information-search. All people travelling together try to reach a final common vacation decision. In most couples, at least in The Netherlands, the "golden mean" strategy is in use most frequently in order to resolve disagreements (Bronner and de Hoog, 2008). This is a strategy of give-and-take and reaching a compromise. Here, everyone gives something up to reach a common decision. Reasoning takes place using logical arguments *vis-à-vis* one another. This reasoning process generates discussion about the sub-decisions that constitute an overall vacation decision, and this discussion will continue as long as the decision-makers make no final decision. The decision-making process leading to the purchase of the tourism product takes much longer than for many other products such as television sets (Gursoy, 2001). To deal with this longer period, tracking discussions about the vacation choice over a relatively long period is necessary. Furthermore, not all sub-decisions are equally important and involvement with an important one will probably lead to more discussion; in other words, more discussion about important sub-decisions and less discussion about unimportant sub-decisions is likely. More discussion can increase the satisfaction with the decision process afterwards due to reducing the risk of a taking a decision that turns out be disappointing. As Fodness and Murray (1999, p. 225) state, "for prepurchase search, better choice decisions, increased product and market expertise, and *heightened satisfaction* with purchasing have been suggested as outcomes". These considerations lead to the following research questions:

- RQ1a. Do couples engage in discussions about vacation sub-decisions?
- RQ1b. Which vacation sub-decisions do couples discuss more and which ones do they discuss less?
- RQ1c. Does more discussion takes place about sub-decisions which the partners deem more important than about sub-decisions they deem less important?
- RQ1d. Is more discussion between partners within couples related to greater satisfaction with the joint decision process?

Theme 2: information sources used in the discussion

In the discussions between partners within couples, several information sources are potentially useful as "weapons" for persuading others in the same family. Features of the product affect the choice of information sources. If the quality of a product is more difficult to evaluate before the purchase decision – as in vacation choice – consumers rely more heavily on personal sources of information (Murray, 1991). Bei *et al.* (2004), following the pioneering work by Nelson (1970), classify products into search and experience products. Experience products are dominated by choice attributes that cannot be known until use of the product, such as travel packages and dinners at new restaurants, and services more generally. Search products are defined as ones dominated by attributes for which full information can be acquired prior to purchase, like athletic shoes or mobile phones. For search and experience products, the role for consumers of different information sources varies. As Bei *et al.* (2004, p. 450) state: "For example, the information for selecting a travel package is more abstract and experience-oriented. Consequently, the recommendations of others would be used more for experience products than search products". For service products, personal information sources may be most important sources (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2006). In line with this assumption, recommendations of others are expected to be the most-used information source in the vacation discussion process, followed by the internet, because online informal sources from other consumers (like weblogs) become more and more important for experience products like vacations.

Another issue has to do with the time dimension. Dodd *et al.* (2005) suggest that impersonal sources are generally useful in the early stages of product decisions. Personal sources of information tend to exert influence at later stages of the decision process. This difference is related to the nature of what is sought in different decision-making stages. In the early stages, the emphasis is on generating alternatives and evaluation attributes (sub-decisions), while in later stages the actual subjective evaluation of alternatives and development of preferences becomes more salient, so one can expect a shift from using impersonal sources to using personal ones during the longitudinal study. Based on these considerations, the following research questions are addressed:

- RQ2a. Are information sources used in the discussion about vacations?
- RQ2b. When discussing sub-decisions, for which sub-decisions do people search for information?
- RQ2c. When discussing sub-decisions, which information sources are used?
- RQ2d. In relation to the individual and the social contexts, are the information sources used different?

Theme 3: relation between type of sub-decision and information source used

Researchers have distinguished between search versus experience products. However, one can go a step further because a vacation can be seen as a mixture of experience and search aspects. The various sub-decisions in this study are characterized as either more search-determined (where sub-decisions are easy to assess, more concrete and objective; for example, the organisation offering the vacation) or more experience-determined (where sub-decisions are difficult to assess, unpredictable and subjective; for example, child-friendly environment or not).

In addition, travel information sources are in this study categorized into marketer-dominated sources (commercial travel information = subjective) and independent sources (family, friends, social contacts = objective). The internet may represent a mixed category, via which commercial information is accessible, but also consumer-generated content related to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with vacation experiences is accessible. A second way (already introduced above) of segmenting travel information sources is to divide them into personal (word-of-mouth) and formal (all other sources) ones. Utilization of information from these two types of information sources probably differs, depending on the search/experience property of vacations, because experience-determined sub-decisions are more risky in their outcomes and objective information sources are more trustworthy for risky decisions. These considerations lead to the research question below:

- RQ3. Are (a) objective and (b) personal information sources used more when discussing experience-determined sub-decisions than when discussing search-determined sub-decisions?

The next section describes the research design and method of data collection.

Design of the study

Sample

To gather longitudinal data, three waves of fieldwork are carried out:

- Wave 1: January 2005 (first ideas about the main summer vacation).
- Wave 2: April 2005 (decisions are taken about the main summer vacation).
- Wave 3: October 2005 (retrospective consideration of the vacation).

The sample for this study is a sub-sample drawn randomly from the Dutch Continu Vakantie Onderzoek panel (CVO, Continuous Vacation Panel; see also Bargeman and van der Poel, 2006). This large panel-based survey consists of respondents who report on their vacation behaviour four times a year. This panel is refreshed annually. The sample encompasses approximately 7,000 respondents. The panel is representative in relation to socio-demographics and vacation-related variables. All tour operators in The Netherlands use this data and the study is considered to be the standard for obtaining insight into vacation plans and decisions. This panel is the sampling frame for this study. Within this CVO panel, a sub-population is defined consisting of respondents who intend to go on summer vacation and constitute a couple (married or unmarried) living together at least four days a week. From this sub-population, a random sample of 240 couples is drawn by the research agency that conducts the CVO. Since collecting each partner's opinion independently is not easy, the sample sizes in comparable studies are often relatively small. Jang *et al.* (2007) list studies with sample sizes varying between 23 and 149 couples. From this perspective, 240 couples is a sizeable sample. TNS NIPO, a leading Dutch market research agency, is responsible for the fieldwork. For data collection, CASI (Computer Assisted Self Interviewing) is used. Respondents can answer the questions at home at a time that is convenient to them and can take the time they require to answer the questions. This customer-friendly approach towards respondents increases response rates and data quality (Bronner *et al.*, 2003; Bronner and Kuijlen, 2007). All respondents are asked to complete the interview individually. Partners are approached separately, with an interval of some days. The first respondent is furthermore instructed not to discuss his/her answers with the other family members. Since respondents stated their intention to participate in the surveys, the initial response rate is high: nearly 90 percent. Table I shows the response rates for each wave. Only data from couples participating in all three waves ($n = 137$) are included in the analysis.

Comparing respondents who drop out with the ones remaining, the panel mortality is not selective, according to the socio-demographics (tested by χ^2 , $p > 0.05$).

Table I Information about the samples used in the study

Date	Starting sample	Wave 1 January 2005	Wave 2 April 2005	Wave 3 October 2005
Number of partners in couples	480	428	340	274
Number of couples	240	214	170	137
Response %		89	79	81

Questionnaire

The questionnaire for the first two waves is identical. A vacation is usually described by means of a set of attributes or sub-decisions. The CVO panel uses a set of sub-decisions which is based on extensive qualitative and quantitative research with tour operators and consumers in The Netherlands in 2001. This set is validated as covering the most salient sub-decisions when people chose a vacation in 2002, 2003 and 2004. As a consequence, this set represents the most relevant sub-decisions concerning a vacation. The set consists of the following sub-decisions, which partly overlap with sub-decisions used in comparable research elsewhere (see for example Litvin *et al.*, 2004): number of places to visit; quiet surroundings versus lively ones; destination (country); sun-beach-water or not; means of transport; active (walking, cycling) or not; accommodation; culture or not; organisation (tour operator or self-arranged, group package tour); child-friendly or not.

For each sub-decision, consider the following questions, relevant to this paper, for each of the partners: importance of a sub-decision as seen by the respondents (seven-point rating scale, 7 = very important ... 1 = very unimportant); discussion about this sub-decision between partners within the couple (yes, no); when partners discuss a sub-decision, which information sources do they use most frequently in the discussion? Procedure: out of ten options, pick the two most frequently used sources in the discussion about sub-decision x.

These ten options follow from data from the CVO in 2002, 2003 and 2004, concerning the use of information sources in the vacation decision-making process: article in print; advertising in print; radio or TV programme; radio or TV commercials; internet sites; books; information from a tour operator, airline company, railway company, ferry company; tourist information office; relatives and friends; other information source.

The advantage for this study is clearly that use is made of experiences and data obtained by means of a panel study that spans several years, leading to firm grounding of questions and options used in the questionnaire.

In the third wave, a question about overall satisfaction with the decision process and the summer vacation is asked, with both aspects rated on a seven-point rating scale (7 = very satisfied to 1 = very dissatisfied).

Results

This section pursues the research themes outlined in the "Research questions" section. First, discussion about sub-decisions is investigated. Next, the information sources used in the discussions are analyzed. Finally, the study addresses the question about the relation between sub-decisions and the use of different information sources.

Theme 1: discussion about sub-decisions

RQ1a. Do couples engage in discussions about vacation sub-decisions?

Table II presents the percentage of people who discuss at least one sub-decision (not necessarily the same one) in Wave 1 and Wave 2.

Table II shows that discussing sub-decisions is quite widespread. In two-thirds of the couples interviewed (12% + 16% + 38% = 66%), discussion takes place during the vacation decision process. In addition, a substantial number of respondents continue

Table II Number of persons discussing at least one sub-decision per wave

% discussion in Wave 1	% Discussion in Wave 2					
	No discussion		Discussion		Total %	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
No discussion	34	94	12	32	46	
Discussion	16	44	38	104	54	
Total %	50		50		100	274

discussing during Wave 1 and Wave 2 (38 percent), while 34 percent do not discuss at all in Wave 1 and Wave 2. Apparently a core of people continue discussions over two waves and another core of people do not (Table II, $\chi^2 = 54$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$).

RQ1b. Which vacation sub-decisions do couples discuss more and which ones do they discuss less?

Shown in Table III are the discussion percentages for each sub-decision.

Between 10 and 27 percent of the respondents discuss at least one sub-decision. The most frequently discussed sub-decisions are destination and number of places to visit. The least discussed sub-decision is the means of transport. In Table III no significant differences between Wave 1 and Wave 2 are found. The rank order correlation between the two waves is significant (Spearman's $r_s = 0.79$, $p < 0.05$). This significant correlation means that at a general level stability over waves and sub-decisions is present.

RQ1c. Does more discussion take place about sub-decisions which the partners deem more important than about sub-decisions they deem less important?

The researchers investigated this research question by computing the Spearman rank correlation between the ranked amount of discussion about each sub-decision, and the ranked importance of these sub-decisions. This correlation is 0.02 (NS) in Wave 1 and 0.10 (NS) in Wave 2, so there is no relationship between the importance of sub-decisions and the amount of discussion.

RQ1d. Is more discussion between partners within couples related to greater satisfaction with the joint decision process?

To investigate this research question, the researchers calculated an additive index of the amount of discussion over all sub-decisions by simply adding up each time a respondent states that s/he discusses a sub-decision. Amount of discussion over ten sub-decisions

Table III Percentage of respondents discussing each of the sub-decisions in Wave 1 and Wave 2

	% Wave 1	% Wave 2
Destination (country)	27 ^a	24
Number of places to visit	24	21
Culture or not	18	14
Accommodation	17	16
Quiet versus lively surroundings	16	14
Child friendly ($n = 156$) ^b	16	17
Active (walking, cycling)	15	14
Sun-beach-water or not	15	16
Organisation	12	11
Means of transport	10	10

Notes: ^a Reading example: 27 percent of the respondents in Wave 1 had a discussion with their partner about the destination (country); ^b Questions about this sub-decision are only posed to couples with children. $n = 274$.

correlates significantly with more satisfaction with the choice process (Wave 1 Pearson's $r = 0.15$, $p < 0.05$; Wave 2 Pearson's $r = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$). Satisfaction with the choice process correlates significantly with overall satisfaction with the vacation (Pearson's $r = 0.74$, $p < 0.05$). As discussion and satisfaction are measured at different moments in time (Wave 2 and Wave 3 respectively), it is plausible that the amount of discussion has a positive relation with the satisfaction with the choice process and, through this relation, with overall satisfaction with the vacation.

Theme 2: information sources used in the discussion

RQ2a. Are information sources used in the discussion about vacations?

The analysis for Theme 1 shows that discussion occurs quite frequently during the vacation decision-making process. If a respondent answered that s/he discussed a sub-decision, they are asked whether information sources are used in the discussion, and if so, what the two most-often used sources are. In the analyses concerning this theme, respondents are included who at least once discussed a sub-decision in either wave, because these are the people who can report on the use of an information source in the discussion ($n = 180(32 + 44 + 104)$, see Table II). Table IV presents the percentage of people who consult at least one information source when discussing sub-decisions in Wave 1 and/or Wave 2.

The large majority of the people in Table IV who discuss sub-decisions at least once, use an information source during the discussion ($21\% + 23\% + 43\% = 87\%$). Of these people, 43 percent use information sources in both waves.

RQ2b. When discussing sub-decisions, for which sub-decisions do people search for information?

The question is how information-search is distributed across the sub-decisions. Table V shows the percentage of people using an information source for a sub-decision, given that the sub-decision is the subject of discussion.

Considering Table V, for almost all sub-decisions 50 percent or more of the respondents use information sources during the discussion. In particular, discussions about the way to organize the vacation and the nature of the vacation environment (quiet versus lively) elicit the use of information sources. This confirms the notion that in the joint decision process information plays a substantial role in discussions concerning sub-decisions.

In Table V, at the overall level, stability can be seen between Wave 1 and Wave 2 concerning the use of information sources in the discussion (Spearman's $r_s = 0.77$, $p < 0.05$), and at the level of the sub-decisions there is only one indicative difference: as regards accommodation, more information is used in the discussion in Wave 2 than in Wave 1 ($T = 1.88$). The rank order correlation between frequency of discussing sub-decisions

Table IV Percentage of people who consult at least one information source while discussing sub-decisions in Wave 1 and/or Wave 2

Information search in Wave 1	Information search in Wave 2					
	No source used		Yes, at least one source used		Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
No source used	13	24 ^a	21	37	34	61
Yes, at least one used	23	41	43	78	66	119
Total	36	65	64	115	100	180 ^b

Notes: ^a Reading example: 13 percent of the partners discussing at least one sub-decision do not use an information source in the discussion in Wave 1 and Wave 2; ^b 100 percent is all discussions between partners (see Table II)

Table V Information search and discussion about sub-decisions

Sub-decision	Wave 1		Wave 2	
	%	n	%	n
Organisation	97 ^a	34	93	30
Quiet versus lively surroundings	86	44	79	39
Number of places to visit	79	67	79	57
Destination (country)	76	74	74	66
Accommodation	72	46	88	43
Sun-beach-water or not	69	42	66	44
Active (walking, cycling)	68	41	69	39
Culture or not	65	48	66	38
Child friendly ($n = 156$)	60	25	77	26
Means of transport	48	27	61	28

Note: ^a Reading example: 97 percent of the partners discussing the organisation of the vacation ($n = 34$) search for information in connection with this discussion

(Table III) and information source use (Table V) is not significant for Wave 1 and Wave 2. This implies that discussion in itself does not lead to more information use.

RQ2c.

When discussing sub-decisions, which information sources are used?

Next was to investigate the types of information sources that are used when discussing sub-decisions. Table VI shows the percentages of most frequently-used information sources across all sub-decisions. Table VI is based on the number of information sources used by all discussing respondents across all sub-decisions. In Wave 1, 477 information sources are mentioned by the respondents and in Wave 2, 453.

Table VI makes clear that relatives and friends, followed by internet sites, are the most-consulted sources of information in both waves.

Dodd *et al.* (2005) report that early in the choice process, formal information sources are more used than personal ones and that later in the choice process personal information sources become more used. This study seeks to confirm this finding. For purposes of classifying personal versus formal information sources, following Dodd *et al.* (2005), the relatives and friends are personal sources of information, and all other information sources as formal ones. Study findings fail to confirm Dodd *et al.*'s (2005) findings, as in Table VI the percentages for relatives and friends and the other information sources combined (formal) for the two waves are almost the same.

The role of tour operators/transport companies as a specific source of information decreases across the waves ($t = 4.13$, $p < 0.05$) and the role of books increases ($t = 4.53$, $p < 0.05$). The role of advertising in the discussion seems to be negligible. For the limited role played by radio and TV programmes and commercials, the explanation is probably that, mostly, this

Table VI Percentage of information sources used in the discussion about the sub-decisions

Information source used	Wave 1 (100% = 477)	Wave 2 (100% = 453)
Relatives and friends	29	28
Internet sites	17	21
Tour operators, transport companies	17	8
Books	11	22
Article in print	9	6
Tourist information office	8	6
Advertising in print	5	5
Radio and TV commercials	2	1
Radio and TV programmes	1	2

information cannot be consulted later in the discussion (after the transmission), unless people take the trouble to record the transmission, which seems quite unlikely for commercials.

Next, the relation between the use of information sources and the types of sub-decisions is investigated. Table VII lists the two most frequently used information sources for each wave and sub-decision.

In Table VII, relatives and friends are present as a source of information in every sub-decision, as expected for an experience product like vacations. Table VII shows that in both waves, relatives and friends are quite important information sources. Books and internet sites increase in importance in Wave 2, while tour operators/transport companies almost disappear in Wave 2. From all sources Table VII mentions, advertising in print and commercials and programmes on radio and TV never make it to the first or second place, showing that they are not frequently used as sources of information when partners discuss sub-decisions.

RQ2d. In relation to the individual and the social contexts, are the information sources used different?

In the "Introduction" section, a new perspective on information-search – taking the role of context into account – is presented. The question is whether indeed a difference exists in the use of types of information sources when the context changes from the perspective of individual preferences to the perspective of discussion with a partner and the partner's preferences. This question is investigated by comparing data from the CVO panel (the complete panel, $n = 7000$) with data from the subsample of this panel as used in this study. In the CVO panel, the classical question (individual context) is asked: "Which sources did you consult when preparing/planning your vacation?". In this sample, 36 percent of the vacationers do not search for information in advance. Of the vacationers searching for information (64 percent), only 3 percent use information from personal (= relatives/friends) sources. In this study's sample, 29 percent (Wave 1) and 28 percent (Wave 2) of the vacationers use relatives and friends as information sources. In Table VIII the averages of the percentages for Wave 1 and Wave 2 are used.

Table VII Most-used information sources in the discussion about sub-decisions for the two waves

	Wave 1		Wave 2	
Sub-decision	1st source	2nd source	1st source	2nd source
Organisation	Relatives and friends	Internet	Relatives and friends	Internet
Quiet versus lively surroundings	Relatives and friends	Tour operators	Relatives and friend	Books and Internet
Number of places to visit	Relatives and friends	Internet and Tour operators	Books	Relatives and friends
Destination (country)	Relatives and friends	Internet	Relatives and friends	Internet
Accommodation	Internet	Relatives and friends	Internet	Relatives and friends
Sun-beach-water or not	Tour operators	Relatives and friends	Relatives and friends	Books
Active (walking, cycling)	Relatives and friends	Books	Relatives and friends	Books
Culture or not	Books	Relatives and friends	Books	Internet, Relatives and friends, Tourist information
Child friendly ($n = 156$)	Internet	Tour operators, Tourist information, relatives and friends	Books, Relatives and friends	Internet
Means of transport	Relatives and friends	Tour operators	Relatives and friends	Internet

Table VIII Comparison between the percentage of used information sources types in the CVO and data in this study

Type of information source used	Individual context (CVO) (%)	Social context (this study) (%)
Personal	3	29
Formal	97	71

Table VIII shows that the sources people use in a social context are more personal than the sources they use in an individual context. This underlines the perspective of this paper, that context makes a difference as regards selecting different information sources in the vacation decision-making process. Another explanation is that information used initially (planning phase) cannot play a role in the discussion because the information is by then already known to both partners. So a partner needs new additional information sources in the discussion, and that's where relatives and friends become important, perhaps because one has already exhausted all formal information sources in the preparation phase. More generally, this finding supports the overall importance of the social context: more joint decision making (golden mean strategy) generates more discussion, which in turn influences the selection of information sources over time.

Theme 3: relation between sub-decision and information source used

RQ3.

Are (a) objective and (b) personal information sources used more when discussing experience-determined sub-decisions than when discussing search-determined sub-decisions?

This research question requires a classification of information sources into personal versus formal and into objective versus subjective sources. Also, a classification of sub-decisions into more experience-determined sub-decisions and more search-determined sub-decisions is needed.

The objective versus subjective dimension fall into three categories, defined as follows:

1. *Objective.* The source has no stake in the decision (e.g. articles in newspapers, radio and TV programmes, books, relatives and friends).
2. *In between.* The source can have a stake in the decision (e.g. internet sites, tourist information office).
3. *Subjective.* The source does have a stake in the decision (e.g. tour operators/transport companies, radio and TV commercials, advertising in print).

By "having a stake in a decision", is meant that if the information source influences your decision, the information source may gain financially by its outcome.

The classification of sub-decisions using a search versus experience product dimension is not easy. As literature for guiding a classification is lacking, a pragmatic approach is chosen by creating three categories:

1. *Experience* (only by experiencing the product one knows the precise outcome of the sub-decision). Child-friendly, quiet versus lively.
2. *In between* (in part, one can obtain knowledge about the precise outcome in advance, but some on-the-spot experience remains). Active, culture, sun-beach-water.
3. *Search* (knowledge about the precise outcome of a sub-decision can be obtained largely in advance). Accommodation, country, means of transport, number of places to visit, organisation.

Table IX shows the relation between type of sub-decision and type of information source (objective versus subjective) people use.

From reading the columns in Table IX, it is clear that no significant differences in information source types used in the various sub-decisions are found. At the overall level, the role of objective sources increases over time ($T = 2.14$, $p < 0.05$) and the role of subjective sources decreases over time ($T = 3.88$, $p < 0.05$). Apparently, the closer in time the actual vacation is, the more people try to reduce the risk of a disappointing vacation by consulting objective sources. Considering the type of sub-decision, Table IX makes clear that this holds true especially for search-determined sub-decisions (Objective Wave 1-Wave 2 $T = 1.83$, indicative; Subjective Wave 1-Wave 2 $T = 3.41$, $p < 0.05$).

Table IX Relation between sub-decision and information source (Objective – Subjective) used in the discussion

Type of sub-decision	Percentage of information source type used in the discussion						Number of observations	
	Objective		In between		Subjective		Wave 1	Wave 2
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2		
Experience	51 ^a	58	26	26	23	16	80	77
In between	53	59	22	26	25	15	132	121
Search	49	57	27	29	26	14	265	255
Total	51	58	25	28	24	14	477 ^b	453

Notes: ^a Reading example: in the discussion about experience-determined type sub-decisions, 51 percent of the information sources used in the discussion belong to the class of objective sources (in Wave 1); ^b The total number of information sources used in Wave 1

Table X shows the relation between type of sub-decision and personal and formal information sources used in the discussion.

In Table X significant differences in information source types used (*T*-test) between the sub-decisions for Wave 1 and Wave 2, are absent.

Conclusions and implications

Summary of findings

The research in this paper investigates the relationship between the discussion of vacation decisions in couples and the use of information sources used in this discussion. By means of a longitudinal study of Dutch couples, in which both partners are interviewed over a time span of almost a year, several research questions are answered.

Concerning the frequency of discussing sub-decisions in vacation decision-making, discussion occurs among 66 percent of the couples during the decision-making process, and the amount of discussion varies across sub-decisions. All ten sub-decisions that are part of the questionnaire receive attention, ranging from 27 percent for the vacation destination to 10 percent for the means of transport. No relation occurs between the importance of a sub-decision as assigned by a partner in a couple and the amount of discussion about a sub-decision. A greater amount of discussion about sub-decisions relates positively to satisfaction with the decision process afterwards.

During these discussions, the use of information sources is widespread: in 87 percent of the cases, sub-decision discussions involve one or more sources of information. In particular, discussions about how to organize the vacation and the nature of the vacation environment (quiet versus lively) elicit the use of information sources. Overall, for each sub-decision, 50 percent or more of the partners use information sources during the discussion. No relation is found between the amount of discussion and the use of information sources: sub-decisions generating more discussions are not the ones that lead to the use of many information sources.

Table X Relation between sub-decision and information source (Personal-Formal) used in the discussion

Type of sub-decision	Percentage of information source type used in the discussion				Number of observations	
	Personal		Formal		Wave 1	Wave 2
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 1	Wave 2		
Experience	30 ^a	27	70	73	80	77
In between	24	28	76	72	132	121
Search	31	29	69	71	265	255
Total	29	28	71	72	477 ^b	453

Notes: ^a Reading example: in the discussion about experience-determined type sub-decisions, 30 percent of the information sources used in the discussion belong to the class of personal sources (in Wave 1); ^b The total number of information sources used in Wave 1

As a vacation is mainly an experience product, the expectation is, based on the literature, that personal recommendations are the information source that is mostly used in discussions between partners. The findings confirm this expectation: in both waves, relatives and friends outrank all other information sources like tour operators/transport companies and internet sites. This also holds true for every sub-decision: in both Wave 1 and Wave 2, relatives and friends are always first or second in the ranking order of information sources used. The very limited use of radio and televisions commercials in discussions is striking. In addition, advertising in print plays a minor role. Furthermore, later in the choice process the role of tour operators/transport companies as information sources decreases, while the role of books increases.

Finally, the relation between the nature of a sub-decision and types of information sources used is investigated. Though overall a vacation can be seen as an experience product, some differentiation between sub-decisions is made, since for some sub-decisions all information can in principle be found before the actual vacation (search-determined sub-decisions), while for others, only the vacation itself can reveal the correct information (experience-determined sub-decisions). In line with the distinction between personal and formal sources of information, the expectation is that for more experience-determined sub-decisions, people will use personal sources of information in the discussion and formal sources for search-determined sub-decisions. However, this is not to be the case. As regards the idea that for experience-determined sub-decisions, people will rather turn to objective information sources (those having no financial stake in the outcome of the decision) than to subjective ones (those having a financial stake in the outcome of the decision), the finding is that the role of objective sources in discussions increases over time while the role of subjective sources decreases over time. This holds true especially for search-determined sub-decisions. Apparently, the closer in time the actual vacation is, the more people try to reduce the risk of a disappointing vacation by consulting objective sources.

The sources used when discussing vacation sub-decisions with a partner are definitely more personal than the ones used for preparing a vacation from a purely individual perspective. This underlines the chosen research perspective that context makes a difference as regards the selection of different information sources in the vacation decision-making process.

Limitations of the study

A relation between the nature of a sub-decision (experience-determined or search-determined), and types of information source used is not found. The absence of this relation may be due to the very tentative nature of the classification of the sub-decisions into experience- or search-determined ones. An obvious improvement in the future testing of this relation is to ask the respondents how they personally perceive each sub-decision (experience-determined or search-determined), as their behaviour is more influenced by their own interpretation of these sub-decisions than a post hoc classification by researchers. Only if the same results are found as in this study, can it be assumed that information-search behaviour during discussions between partners can be generalized across the entire vacation, and does not depend on the sub-decision of a vacation that is the topic of the discussion.

Another limitation is that this study focuses only on the discussion between partners. As the influence of children is growing, in future studies data about the role of children in vacation decision-making by couples need collection.

Implications for future research and tourism marketing

Information-search is different in two different contexts:

1. forming and creating own preferences in the pre-purchase phase; and
2. in response to discussion between partners within couples, in order to reach agreement and arrive at a common decision.

In the first (individual) context, there is no discussion: consumers acquire and process information and use this information in making up their own minds. In the second (social) context, information can be a "weapon" to be used in discussions with a partner. If partners in a couple travelling together disagree about the final choice, arriving at a final decision involves one or more of several strategies. In vacation choice, the golden mean strategy is mostly used. This is a strategy of give-and-take and reaching a compromise. Everyone gives up something and the decision-makers achieve a golden mean. In this process, the decision-makers use arguments *vis-à-vis* one another. These arguments likely are stronger and more persuasive if they are solidly based on specific types of information sources, in particular personal ones. This distinction between information sources used in these two different contexts has several implications for targeting marketing messages.

Marketing managers try to influence the final consumer choice by making use of several marketing instruments. Providing information that fits into the consumer search process is one of the tools. Core elements are brochures, web site information and advertising material (print, TV, radio, Internet, outdoor). Research provides data about which segments of consumers use which information (Decrop and Snelders, 2005). With the aid of marketing research, the tourism industry studies how travellers select, acquire and use information. As Fodness and Murray (1999, p. 229) state in reference to these studies: "the belief that systematic patterns of tourist behaviour are attributable to the information available to them compels its study". The central idea is that, during information acquisition, marketers can influence consumers' buying decisions (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004). However, currently they seem to focus on the individualistic context of information-search. Marketing research is carried out in which individual perceptions and preferences for countries, tour operators, travel agents and specific package vacations are measured. Results are used to improve weak points and reinforce strong points in brand image and/or country image. But the social context of information-search requires other data and different studies. By means of marketing research, the tourism industry needs to collect additional information about points of discussion within couples. If a male partner thinks the weather is beautiful in country x and the female partner thinks the weather in this country is bad – and it is a topic of discussion – the tourism industry has to provide him with information about the weather, using the appropriate information sources. These sources should fit this social context: for example, more personal information sources in the beginning of the decision process and more objective ones later in the decision process. With the help of this tailored information, he can persuade his partner and reach a common decision. More generally, the results of the study do have marketing and marketing research implications for product types and decision processes that have important features in common with vacations, such as "intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability" (Westwood *et al.*, 1999, p.239). One needs to collect data about individual perceptions and preferences, in the first pre-purchase phase, and during a later phase, about topics of discussion between partners. When selecting communication channels to convey information, the context in which the information is received should be taken into account: individual or social.

For tourism marketing, taking into consideration that personal sources are more significant in the social context as compared with the individual context, is important. This implies not only trying to influence the consumer who has to take a decision but also trying to influence the "significant others". This study shows that as time progresses, objective information sources become more important in the joint decision process. The role of review and rating sites with consumer-generated content (electronic word-of-mouth as a combination of personal and objective information sources) is growing. As de Valck (2005, p. 234) states: "We have found that community influence manifests itself most profoundly in the information search and pre-purchase evaluation phases." Networks of consumers in communities of interest arise (Brown *et al.*, 2007). It seems very important to follow closely the interaction and discussion between consumers on these types of sites. According to de Valck (2005, p. 239), "the highly relevant traditional reference groups formed by family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues [...] function out of sight of marketers". In the near future, consumers will rely more on online information sources providing content from fellow consumers and fellow travellers. The internet might in this way potentially change a vacation from an

experience-determined product into a search-determined product, because information on experiencing the product is available online (Bei *et al.*, 2004). However, Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan (2008, pp. 459) conclude that the tourism industry "lags behind others in the development and discussion of strategies for managing interpersonal influence in an electronic environment". Catching up will become even more important as family democracy increases in the coming years, and more vacation decisions are taken together in joint decision processes. More knowledge about how to align information and information channels in this changed decision and information landscape is necessary for effective marketing.

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