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Towards a decision making model for city break travel

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to examine the city break travel decision, and in particular, to develop a decision making model that reflects the characteristics of this type of trip taking.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The research follows a sequential mixed methods approach consisting of two phases. Phase One involves a quantitative survey of 1,000 visitors to Dublin. The research distinguishes and compares city break and non-city break visitor cohorts. Phase Two entails a qualitative analysis (involving 40 in-depth interviews) that specifically examines the decision making behavior of city break visitors.*

Findings – *The research shows city break trips to be relatively inexpensive, uncomplicated, and discretionary in nature. The city break travel decision emerges from quite distinct motives where situational factors proved particularly influential. The decision process mostly entailed low involvement / limited problem solving behavior with strong internet usage evident throughout.*

Originality/value – *The findings show that many traditional decision making models have problems incorporating contemporary travel decisions such as city breaks. This is because such models generally fail to recognize a non-systematic approach to decision making, where travelers do not necessarily undertake the process in distinctive stages, and where emotional elements are as relevant as functional ones. This study supports the need for a range of models that are reflective of the differences that exist in travel decision making – models that can distinguish the specific nuances and characteristics of particular decision situations.*

Keywords *Decision making, Cities, Involvement, Ireland*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction

Consumer decision making has been the subject of tremendous research activity over the past 30 years. Yet, as Sirakaya and Woodside (2005, p.816) point out, “No single unifying theory has emerged across disciplines to describe, explain, or predict consumer decisions, and it seems unlikely that individual decision processes fit neatly into a single decision theory.” The travel decision in particular remains an exceptionally complex and intriguing phenomenon, due in part to the ever widening range of destinations on offer, the variation in vacation types, and increased discretionary time and income. Understanding travelers’ decision making behavior is essential to the success of tourist destinations and tourism businesses and therefore the travel decision has attracted significant attention from scholars and researchers in recent years.

Travel decision making research

According to Jeng and Fesenmaier (2002) much of the research effort in relation to travel decision making has followed two perspectives. The first perspective relates to the affective nature of decision making and choice behavior including attitudes, beliefs, involvement, risk perception, traits, and personality. The second concerns the development of models that

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can approximate and predict decision making and choice behavior and that assume individuals follow a utility maximisation strategy. Researchers have presented many such models in the literature in recent years. Decrop (2007) points out that most models of vacation decision making are presented either in the form of choice sets (e.g. Um and Crompton, 1990; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989) or in the form of cognitive processes (e.g. Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Moutinho, 1987). The choice set approach, with its emphasis on the destination choice process, has received particular attention in the literature in recent years. This is due to its relative simplicity and openness to empirical testing compared to other more complex approaches, and by extension its practical use for destination marketers.

Most of the early decision making models relating to travel purchases were adaptations of the grand models of consumer behavior (Nicosia, 1966; Howard and Sheth, 1969; Engel, Kollat and Belk, 1975z). However, as these grand models were originally developed for tangible products their application to tourism services is limited. Most still assume the decision maker to be rationalistic and logical. In reality, the travel decision can often be influenced by the emotional appeal of products or the advice of family and friends. Many traditional models also assume the decision process to be sequential in nature, following a funneling pattern where the decision maker goes through a variety of alternatives in a systematic way until they arrive at a final choice. Traditional models assume that people follow this logical sequence in a rational, functional manner. However, because of the subjective nature of decision making and the adaptability of the consumer it is important to recognize, as Decrop and Snelders (2004, p. 1011) put it, "that there is not just one but more possible types of vacation decision making processes." These authors give the example of the growing phenomenon of last-minute booking behavior as a factor that traditional models have not taken into account. Swarbrooke and Horner (2007, p. 77) make a similar point when they suggest most of the major models predate recent developments in tourist behavior such as "last-minute spontaneous purchases" and the "growing use of the Internet and multi-media systems that can be accessed from the tourists own home." Hudson (1999, p. 29) makes an important observation on the traditional models when he points out, "they are stereotypical and generalized whereas, in reality the decision process will vary significantly among different groups of tourists." This is a valid point, particularly as researchers increasingly recognize the significance of type of trip in understanding visitor behavior (Sung *et al.*, 2001). Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) describe type of trip as being a crucial element in people's travel decision process. In some situations the choosing of the destination can be of secondary importance in the decision making process. For certain types of vacations, particularly those of a discretionary, opportunistic, or last minute nature, factors such as travel party, duration, distance, and date flexibility may have a stronger influence on the decision making behavior undertaken. It is important that researchers take into account the type of trip that tourists are undertaking when examining the travel decision process. This paper examines one of the most popular types of trips that has emerged in recent years, the city break, and examines the decision making process involved in taking such vacations.

City break travel

City breaks represent a travel niche that has grown significantly in Europe in recent years. According to IPK International's European Travel Monitor, European city tourism grew by 20 percent in 2005, compared to an increase of just 3 percent in sun and beach vacations (Freitag, 2006). This growth has helped to popularize and regenerate several European cities and has assisted in offsetting the seasonality problems often encountered by urban destinations. The importance and economic value of the city break market is increasingly acknowledged by city managers and administrators.

So what is a city break? The most widely used definition of a city break is, "a short leisure trip to one city or town, with no overnight stay at any other destination during the trip" (Trew and Cockerell, 2002, p. 86). This definition recognizes that urban tourists can be divided into those who come to recreate solely in a city milieu and those who visit the city as part of a

larger trip. The growth in the former can be attributed to a number of factors, including the expansion of low cost airlines and the trend towards shorter and more frequent trip taking. However another equally important factor is the changing perception of cities as destinations. The city is increasingly viewed as, not just an entry, exit or transit point for travelers, but a desirable destination in its own right.

Method

A case study approach was used to explore the decision making process involved in taking a city break. Dublin, as one of the most successful city break destinations in Europe, was the principal focus of the investigation. The research follows a mixed methods design involving both quantitative and qualitative investigations. This approach has increasingly been used in tourism and leisure studies (Squire, 1994; Woodward *et al.*, 1988; Schott, 2002), allowing researchers to collect a variety of types of data that may otherwise be difficult to acquire.

Within the combined methods design, the researchers considered a sequential approach the most suitable. This consisted of conducting two phases to the research project, with the results of the first phase essential for the planning of the next (Miller and Crabtree, 1994). Phase One involved a quantitative study that provided particular data and knowledge necessary to carry out the second phase (Phase Two), a more in-depth qualitative enquiry. The researchers considered such a combined methods approach as the most appropriate to achieve the principal aim of the research – to explore the decision making behavior of city break travelers. In Phase One the need to build up a picture of city break visitors to Dublin in terms of their profile and the characteristics of their trips meant a broad quantitative enquiry was most suitable. A survey instrument involving 1,000 visitor questionnaires was utilized. This instrument provided a wealth of information concerning tourists to Dublin including visitor profile data, trip characteristics, booking behavior, and activities engaged in. A comparative analysis was carried out between city breakers and non-city break visitors (those visiting the city as part of a wider trip to Ireland). This proved very useful in identifying distinctive characteristics and features of the city break market. Chi-square tests were used to see if the difference between the two segments of travelers (city break and non city break visitors) was significant.

The results of Phase One provided a useful profile of the city break market and shed some initial light on the city break travel decision. However in order to get a fuller and more detailed perspective of the decision making process it was necessary to undertake a more qualitative investigation. This was achieved in Phase Two by conducting 40 in-depth interviews with city break travelers to Dublin. The intention here was to gain a thorough understanding of each visitor's travel decision story from beginning to end and to uncover what Geertz (1973) calls the "thick descriptions" of people's experiences. The data elicited from these personal interviews covered all the main aspects of the city break decision process including motives, information gathering, choice, purchase, and consumption experiences. In addition, in order to provide some useful comparative data, respondents were asked to compare their city break decision with that of their last main vacation. This provided some useful insights in relation to the distinctiveness of the city break travel decision and helped to show how type of trip could influence the nature of the decision making process.

Data analysis in Phase Two involved making sense of the text or narrative data collected from the in-depth interviews. For this study a three stage approach, as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), was followed. This consisted of: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction involved breaking the text into "chunks" and attaching a reference or code to each piece in order to identify key themes and patterns. Data display consisted of summarizing and presenting the structure and patterns emerging, while data verification involved checking for alternative explanations or seeking other means to verify the data.

Overall the combination of methods proved effective. Both phases complemented each other with Phase One setting the scene by presenting a picture of the city break travel market and providing details that subsequently helped in sample selection for Phase Two.

Consequently the quality and richness of the data from Phase Two allowed themes and concepts relating to city break motivation and decision making to emerge. This combination of methods was crucial in creating a synergic relationship (Schott, 2002) that contributed positively to the overall research effort.

Findings

The main focus of this paper relates to the results from the in-depth interviews (Phase Two). However, in order to give useful background information on the city break market, it is necessary to also present the main findings from the survey (Phase One). Therefore this section begins with some of the principal results from the visitor survey and is followed by findings relating specifically to the city break decision making process (Phase Two).

Phase One findings

The findings from Phase One primarily involve a comparative analysis between two visitor segments, city breakers and non-city break tourists. City breakers represent vacationers who were visiting the city only (and no other place) while non-city breakers consist of people visiting the city as part of a wider trip involving other destinations in Ireland. Chi-square tests were carried out to examine any statistically significant associations between types of visitors and a variety of variables relating to their trip. The main aim was to highlight areas where the city break market showed distinctive characteristics or features. Three main areas were focused on in the survey, visitor profile, trip characteristics, and visitor behavior.

Visitor profile

In relation to visitor profile the findings show three characteristics in particular where city break visitors were distinctive; origin, educational achievement, and occupation (see Table I). The results corresponding to visitor origin showed the greatest difference between the two visitor groups. The vast majority (79 percent) of city breakers originated from Britain, with just 3 percent coming from North America. By contrast non-city break vacationers showed a significantly more even distribution with 31 percent from the UK and 30 percent from North America.

In relation to both occupation and education, the findings show city breakers exhibiting a more varied range of backgrounds compared to non-city break visitors. As a type of trip, city breaks appear to represent a more accessible vacation option for a larger section of the population, possibly reflecting what Richter (2003, p. 340) refers to as the “democratization of travel.”

Trip characteristics

The findings in relation to trip characteristics also highlight a number of distinctive aspects of the city break segment. For example, city breakers showed a clear preference for shorter vacations, particularly trips between one and three nights (56 percent). This concurs with Burtenshaw *et al.*'s (1991) belief that visitors can grasp the attractions of a city in just a few days. Another important characteristic was the distinctive arrival patterns shown by city

Table I Chi-square test on type of visitor and visitor profile variables

| Visitor profile characteristic | Significance level | Cramer's V | P value < 0.05 (λ) |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|------------|------------------------------|
| Origin | 0.000 | 0.518 | λ |
| Age | 0.569 | 0.078 | |
| Occupation | 0.023 | 0.120 | λ |
| Education | 0.000 | 0.206 | λ |
| Gender | 0.159 | 0.050 | |

Note: The symbol “ λ ” identifies statistically significant associations detected

breakers. Their tendency to come in considerable numbers during off peak periods was quite significant (see Table II).

City break trips also proved particularly popular for couples, with the majority of people travelling with a partner (59 percent). Interestingly, children hardly feature at all in these trips, indicating people's apparent preference for their city breaks to be adult focused.

Visitor behavior

The third main area of investigation in Phase One looked at issues in relation to visitor behavior. The findings show city break visitors to be considerable users of the Internet, both in terms of sourcing information and making bookings. They were significantly more likely to book their travel online (65 percent) compared to non-city break leisure visitors (40 percent). In addition, they tended to display a more impulsive decision making pattern of behavior (evident from both the late timing of their bookings and the considerable influence that cheap airfares had on their decision to travel).

In keeping with the sequential nature of the study, specific aspects of the data were also used to select an accurate group of city break visitors to participate in the in-depth interviews for Phase Two. Findings relating to visitor origin, age profile, timing of visit, and activities engaged in, were particularly useful in this regard. The following section presents the results from this interviewing process (Phase Two).

Phase Two

The second phase of the study involved carrying out in-depth interviews with 40 city break visitors to Dublin. Drawing on the findings from these interviews the city break decision is discussed under three main headings:

1. Pre-purchase behavior;
2. Choice and purchase; and
3. Post purchase evaluation.

Pre-purchase behavior

Pre-purchase behavior involves the early stages of the city break travel decision, including the motives that first stimulated the desire to take the trip, the search for information and the subsequent level of involvement observed.

In terms of motives the findings from Phase Two show a number of specific "push" and "pull" factors that featured prominently in the city break travel decision and when these were compared to respondent's main vacation motives some interesting distinctions emerged. These are illustrated in Tables III and IV where the principal push and pull factors for each type of trip are presented. Each table lists the motives in order of prevalence in the research findings, that is, how often people cited the motives as reasons for taking the trip.

| Table II Timing of visit by type of vacationer | | |
|---|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | <i>City break vacationer</i> | <i>Non-city break vacationer</i> |
| $X^2 = 51.68$ $p = 0.000$ Cramer's $V = 0.255$ | | |
| Winter (%) | 17.2 | 4.3 |
| Spring (%) | 23.2 | 14.9 |
| Summer (%) | 34.0 | 43.3 |
| Fall (%) | 25.6 | 37.5 |
| <i>Total</i> | | |
| Percent | 100 | 100 |
| <i>n</i> | 379 | 416 |

Table III Push factors – city break and main vacation

| <i>City break</i> | <i>Percent</i> | <i>Main vacation</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|---------------------------|----------------|----------------------|----------------|
| Escape | 38 | Relax | 35 |
| Socialize (internal) | 33 | Social | 25 |
| Self esteem (gift giving) | 15 | Escape | 20 |
| Fun/excitement | 13 | Fun/excitement | 10 |
| Socialize (external) | 10 | Prestige | 8 |
| Relax | 10 | Education | 8 |

Table IV Pull factors – city break and main vacation

| <i>City Break</i> | <i>Percent</i> | <i>Main Vacation</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|----------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Convenience/ease of access | 35 | Sun, sand, sea | 38 |
| Cost of travel | 33 | Positive/fun image | 20 |
| Fun destination image | 23 | Quality of facilities | 15 |
| Pre arranged event | 23 | Cost of trip | 10 |
| Friendly image | 13 | Previous visit | 10 |
| Previous visit | 10 | VFR | 8 |
| Tourist sites | 5 | | |

Push motives

The desire to escape from something in the home environment emerged as the strongest push motive for city break visitors. Iso-Ahola (1982) refers to this push phenomenon as “avoidance,” the notion of people taking a vacation in order to get away from something or someone. The things people were escaping varied quite considerably but for most they just wanted a break from routine or to get away from the humdrum of everyday life. In this regard the city break provided a quick, convenient and relatively cheap opportunity to do this. The escape was not always just a break from a mundane environment either – many people were using the city break as a respite from the pressures of parenting:

We have a young son – he’s one and a half and he’s into everything at the moment. Jane’s mother took him for these few days. It’s great to just get the break (Brian, Nottingham).

This is consistent with what Teare (1994) describes as people’s need for a break from family or domestic commitments.

The city break findings also revealed people’s need to escape was accompanied by a desire to do things at the destination. This included sightseeing, visiting pubs and clubs, attending events, and generally experiencing the city’s attractions. In this regard a significant distinction can be seen between respondent’s city break motives and their main vacation motives. For the latter, people placed a lot more emphasis on relaxation and “recharging the batteries”, whereas the city break was clearly seen as a doing and experiencing trip. This is similar to what Fodness (1994, p. 564) describes as the “utilitarian function of leisure travel”, where people are escaping on the one hand but are doing so with some clear leisure goal in mind, or as he puts it “an escape to recreational or fun activities.” The difference between the two types of vacations is apparent from the following response from a visitor when he compared his last main vacation to his city break to Dublin:

Portugal was probably more relaxing with us lazing about, whereas Dublin would be more a short break where there is so much to do, and you are walking a lot, you’re seeing a lot, you know, you are doing a lot – we seem to be doing a lot (Kieran, Northern Ireland).

The second most popular motive for taking a city break involved the desire to satisfy a social need. This again is a common push motive found in many motivational studies. Crompton (1979) divides the social motive into two main categories: enhancement of kinship relationships and facilitation of social interaction. The former refers to the desire to enhance or enrich family relationships, while the latter represents a need to “meet new people in different locations.” The

findings for Dublin indicate the presence of both of these motives and these are classified as internal for socializing within the travel party, and external for socializing outside the travel party (see Table III). For city break trips, the desire to enhance relationships was found to be primarily in the context of partners, spouses or other adults, and rarely involved families with children. The findings show the opposite for main vacations where the enhancement of relationships mostly involved a wider family unit including children. People used such vacations as a chance to come together and spend “quality time” as a family. Similarly, differences between the types of vacations were evident in relation to external socializing. For a number of people the city break offered a chance to meet and interact with locals. Such external socializing was clearly an important feature of the vacation for these visitors.

Listening to music in pubs and meeting and talking to people – this is important to me in Dublin.
(Maria, Italy).

By contrast this aspect hardly emerged at all in people’s main vacation motives where the emphasis was more on socializing within the travel party.

One of the most notable city break push motives to emerge was the gift-giving theme that featured in a number of trips ($n = 6$). The motivation behind such gift giving was interesting to observe. On one level, people purchased the trips for quite benevolent motives – “The reason we came this time was Kev had a 50th birthday, and this was my birthday present to him” (Paula, Birmingham) – but on another level, self esteem motives were also evident, that is, the giving of a city break as a present made people feel good about themselves.

Pull motives

The findings show pull factors were extremely important in the city break travel decision. These relate to the features or attributes of the destination that contribute to the desire to travel. Two pull factors, ease of access and cheap flights, proved to be particularly influential. Both these factors can be attributed to the growth of low cost air travel in recent years. The increased presence of budget carriers such as Ryanair in the European market has greatly facilitated the ease with which people can undertake point-to-point international travel:

We left home at 7 a.m. in the morning and arrived here at 7.52 a.m. I mean it’s incredible, I couldn’t believe it for 70p each way – I mean that’s much less than I pay going to work. Although I know the taxes bring it up but still it’s amazing. (Ruth, Glasgow).

Interestingly, two-thirds of interviewees lived in close proximity to an airport served by low cost carriers. This convenience was a crucial factor for many in the decision to come to Dublin. A number of people stated they purposely examined the low cost airline routes served by their nearest airport and made their destination choice on this basis:

It was basically anywhere where the low cost airfares travel companies flew to, from Newcastle airport. (Chris, Newcastle).

For people’s main vacations however, the importance of ease of access was less evident. Of much more relevance in that decision was the allure of sun, sand and sea. Such heliotropic motives reflected the family nature of most of these trips and the keen desire to relax while on vacation.

Another noteworthy pull motive to emerge for city break visits was the attractiveness of pre-arranged events in the city. A number of trips centered on a range of events including concerts, sports games, exhibitions and parties. All admitted they would not have been in Dublin (at that time) if it were not for the event. Again this motive was very specific to city breaks and did not figure in the results for the main vacation decision.

A final point in relation to city break motivation concerns the situational factors that were present during the travel decision. These relate to circumstances that are “particular to a time and place of observation [. . .] and which have a demonstrable and systematic effect on current behavior” (Belk, 1975, p. 158). The findings reveal many such situational variables, most of which had a strong bearing on the decision to travel to Dublin. For example, one

respondent found himself in circumstances which conveniently facilitated him taking a discretionary trip:

Well I'm between jobs at the moment, I haven't been doing anything. So I decided to come here for a few days. (Frank, Scotland).

Another respondent faced losing vacation entitlements if he did not use them up before the end of the year. A city break to Dublin was promptly undertaken. Such findings show how influential situational factors can be in the decision making process. It also highlights the unpredictable nature of the travel decision, particularly as situational factors can emanate from any aspect of a person's life.

Overall the results underline the multi-motivational nature of vacation decision-making and confirm Bloy's (2000) assertion that people's travel motives change according to the nature of the vacation they take.

Information search

A number of significant findings emerged in relation to the city break information search. First, the range of information sources that people consulted was quite narrow. The interviews show city breakers on average considered 2.5 sources of information prior to purchase (including memory of previous visits). This is a relatively small number for an international vacation. The findings indicate a search pattern that focused mostly on sources that were both immediate and close at hand, namely, the Internet and family and friends. The internet in particular was heavily used by city break travelers. People appreciated its convenience, especially in situations where the decision making timeframe was short.

Well it's handy isn't it, you have it all there, and you don't have to leave the house. We certainly didn't have time to start collecting brochures and stuff (Lorna, London).

It is interesting to note the crucial role the internet plays in what seems to be a general trend towards last minute information search behavior. Previous decision models, particularly those older than ten years, fail to reflect adequately the importance and significance of this medium in contemporary travel decision making. The scope and scale of information which is currently available online to potential travelers has, in many cases, made the internet a one-stop shop for information seekers, eliminating the need to consult other more traditional information sources. In this study it proved to be the most consulted information source with over 60 percent of city break interviewees claiming to have used it during their decision making process.

Level of involvement

The research highlighted some significant points in relation to the amount of time and effort put into the city break purchase decision. The literature suggests travel service products possess certain functional, financial, physical, psychological, and social risks for consumers (Lovelock and Wright, 1999; Teare, 1992). It is the desire to reduce these risks that causes people to engage in much pre-purchase planning and information search effort. The results show that city breaks were seen by most respondents to possess few of these risk factors and as a result were characterized by low involvement search behavior, particularly when compared to main family vacations. One of the principal reasons for this was the absence of children from most city break trips. This is reflected in the following reply in which a respondent compares his city break to his last main vacation in terms of planning:

I would say this vacation was more . . .spontaneous. We did not plan so much – my wife found a cheap flight on the Internet and we decided to go together, just us. Our main vacation last year was different – we took our son. Obviously we need to plan more because it is focused on him (Phillipe, France).

This response shows how the city break trip was seen as an adult focused vacation and therefore could be decided on spontaneously without too much planning or effort. The main vacation however was perceived differently, as the participation of a child meant the

respondent had to think more about his requirements and ensure a suitable destination was chosen.

Another reason to explain city break visitors' low involvement behavior relates to the size and expense of the trips. According to Bieger and Laesser (2004) fear of economic risk often leads to high investments of time, effort and resources in customer decision making. The findings show most city breaks were shorter and less expensive compared to main vacations and therefore perceived as less risky. In addition, the uncomplicated nature of most city breaks also contributed to less planning and search effort compared to main vacations. This point is highlighted in the following comment where a respondent compared a recent main vacation in Estonia to the city break:

I went to Estonia recently, and Estonia is very different from a city break – it's a very complex trip [...] a city break has less parts and so they are easier to manage, but long breaks have more parts and activities so they require more time in the planning (Michael, London).

It is important to point out that low involvement behavior was also evident in main vacation situations, particularly where the main vacation consisted of a repurchase, or what Hawkins *et al.* (1995) refer to as a destination-loyal decision. In general, factors such as travel party, nature of destination, duration, and organization of trip (i.e. package or independent) tended to have a strong influence on the level of involvement in all vacation decisions.

Choice and purchase

One of the most interesting factors to emerge from the interviews was the small number of alternatives considered by the majority of city break tourists. Over half of all interviewees ($n = 23$) chose Dublin without considering any alternative. Many city breaks involved travel opportunities that presented themselves such as sports games, concerts, and stag/hen parties. Such scenarios did not generally involve alternatives and if the event were not happening in Dublin they probably would not have taken the city break at that time. The following comment by a rugby supporter highlights this:

No, we didn't look at anywhere else. I mean we came primarily for the game, so if that wasn't on we probably wouldn't be here now (Ali, England).

The outcome of such decisions was often heavily influenced by personal circumstances that people faced at the time (e.g. money issues, work commitments, domestic responsibilities, etc.).

Evaluating alternatives

For those who did contemplate alternatives, the range of options considered was quite small. The findings show interviewees considered just 13 destinations in total, with Prague, Amsterdam, and Glasgow being the most commonly mentioned. All but two were urban locations, indicating people's specific desire to visit a city, as opposed to some other kind of destination. It is likely that cities fitted in better with the length and nature of the trip being taken. Respondents commonly referred to the convenience of cities as destinations, where direct access without the need for further onward travel was a big advantage, particularly when the duration of the trip was relatively short.

The results also show people's individual evoked sets to be quite small, particularly when compared to other studies (Woodside and Sherrell, 1977; Ryan, 2002; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). With an average set size of just 1.67, the city break decision was noticeable by how little evaluating activity people engaged in during the choice process. Moreover, there was very little sign of the funneling process which most of the traditional choice set models suggest. For example, no evidence emerged of a multi-stage choice process made up of early and late consideration sets, as suggested by Um and Crompton (1992). Instead, the city break choice process generally consisted of limited, low involvement decision making that in many cases was spontaneous and opportunistic.

Where alternatives were considered, the findings show respondents employed both compensatory and non-compensatory heuristics. The choice of Dublin was most frequently influenced by the cost of flying and the ease of access to the city. These two attributes, which featured prominently as pull motives, were central to most people's decision in selecting Dublin. The cost of the flight was particularly persuasive, with people commonly using compensatory rules based on this point. For example, in a number of cases respondents first considered other cities but ended up choosing Dublin following a trade-off strategy in which the cheap flight compensated for other comparative weaknesses.

Originally we were considering Amsterdam, but the flights had gone up quite a bit and so we thought about Dublin. We were able to get here for half the price of Amsterdam (Dave, Scotland).

The "ease of access" attribute, also emerged as being highly influential in the decision to travel to Dublin. The relative simplicity with which people could access the city was a very important factor for many city breakers. A number of these used the "elimination by aspects" rule, in which they applied a cut-off point that involved the decision to only consider destinations served from their local airport. Any city destination that did not meet this criterion was essentially disregarded. Such behavior shows the importance city break visitors place on convenience, mainly due to time constraints. It also highlights the market potential of geographical areas within an hour or two of airports that serve city break destinations.

In addition to these two important attributes the decision to come to Dublin was also influenced by the prospect of fun. Much of this fun centered around visiting pubs and clubs. Dublin's lively ambience was seen as an attractive feature with people regularly referring to the buzz and the "craic" (fun) aspect of the city.

Booking behavior

A number of important findings emerged in terms of how people purchased their city break trips. First, it was interesting to note how uncomplicated most city break products were – 83 percent consisted of transport and accommodation elements only. This is a significant point, as the simplicity of city breaks is central to their popularity. Having to research other elements of a vacation such as transfers, kids clubs and car hire can be time consuming and unappealing, particularly for someone contemplating an unplanned, discretionary trip. As one city breaker succinctly put it – "it is very easy, there is only a hotel and airplane to think about, and then you go" (Celine, France).

The uncomplicated nature of city break trips was also an influence on the timing of purchase. The findings indicate a last minute booking behavior pattern, showing the majority of people purchasing their city breaks less than a month before departure. This highlights the spontaneous and in some cases impulsive aspect of these trips. Unlike main vacations which frequently follow an extensive decision making pattern, city breaks can be conceived, researched and booked in a matter of days or even hours.

The internet usually played a significant part in these relatively quick travel decisions. The results show, for example, interviewees were three times more likely to book their city break online compared to their main vacation. The internet featured significantly throughout the whole city break decision process. People relied greatly on it for searching, evaluating, and booking their vacations, and although some expressed frustration at times, there was nonetheless a certain degree of accomplishment when the trip came together.

You don't have to go in somewhere and talk to people – you choose what hotel you want, what area it's in, and then if you can make it all match up it feels great (Diane, London).

In evaluating the initial parts of the city break travel decision it is interesting to note how fluidly and seamlessly people seemed to move between the different stages. In many cases no clear differentiation was evident between the information search, choice, and purchase elements. For a number of people these three stages were carried out almost simultaneously.

Once we had decided to get away we just went online, searched around a bit, came across some cheap flights to Dublin and that was it – booked it then and there, all very quick (Howard, Surrey).

In some cases certain stages were bypassed altogether. This often happened when people were invited to join a prearranged trip where the evaluation between alternatives was not an issue. In such situations the alternative for decision makers was not to go. In one case an interviewee decided to come to Dublin following a chance conversation with a work colleague:

Well how it came about was, my friend at work was talking one day, and he said he was going to Dublin with a mate and just asked would I be interested. I decided why not? And here I am (Joe, London).

Such overlapping or bypassing of stages was a common theme among the city break respondents and reflects the spontaneous nature of much of the decision making.

Post purchase evaluation

The final stage in the travel decision process usually consists of some form of post purchase evaluation, in which visitors measure their experience of the travel product against their pre-consumption expectations. The result of this process is generally expressed in terms of satisfaction or dissatisfaction and usually has a bearing on future purchasing behavior. In order to understand city break visitors' evaluation of their trip to Dublin, interviewees were asked to describe their overall experience of the trip in terms of whether it matched their prior expectations. The vast majority of people ($n = 36$) stated the experience had matched or exceeded their expectations, which according to Oliver's (1987) expectancy disconfirmation model, means they were satisfied overall.

As well as confirming whether or not the city break had lived up to their pre trip expectations, respondents also gave an assessment of their experience of the trip. "Friendliness" and "good fun" were the most common themes expressed, suggesting an overall positive evaluation of the city and the trip as a whole. Friendliness, in particular, was interesting as it did not register significantly as an initial factor in people's prior expectations of Dublin:

I just found people very pleasant – everyone seemed to be friendly and willing to talk. There just seems to be a kind of openness there that you don't seem to get in other cities (Brian, Nottingham).

The negative comments which people expressed related mainly to high prices, litter, and congestion. The cost of drink and food in particular was an issue for many while the lack of child friendly facilities in the city was also commented on.

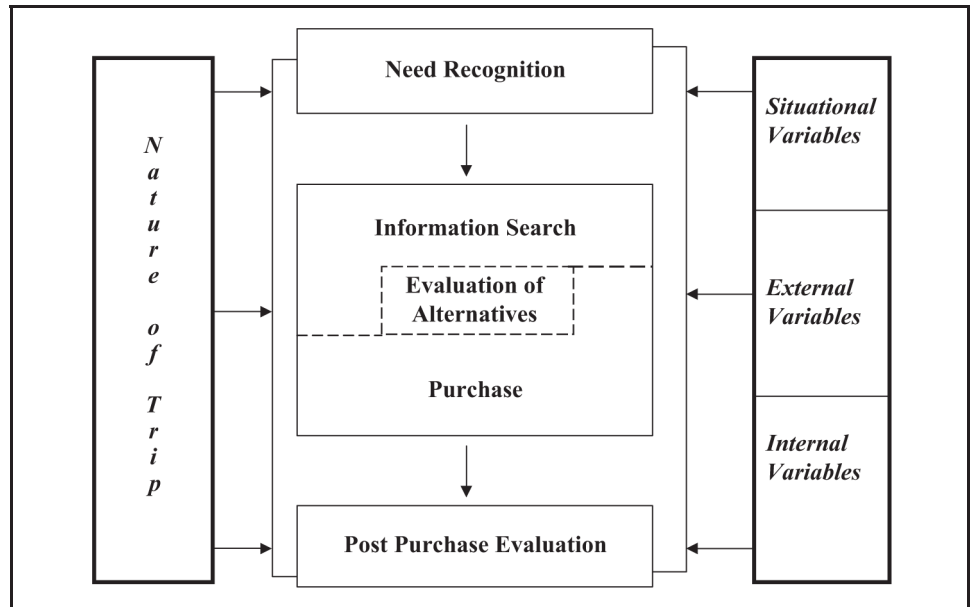
Towards a new model for the city break decision

This study has shown that city break travelers exhibit a number of distinct characteristics in their decision-making behavior. These characteristics are reflective of many contemporary trip-taking trends such as heavy Internet usage, discretionary vacation taking and the growing popularity of short breaks. The findings show a decision making process that does not fit easily with many of the traditional models. Therefore, based on the findings from this study, the researchers propose a new model that reflects the distinct features and characteristics of the city break travel decision. Figure 1 presents this model and the following section will explain the rationale behind its design.

One of the first things to note in relation to the model is the fewer number of stages in the decision process. It consists of just three distinct horizontal boxes reflecting a much flatter appearance compared to other models. The first of these boxes represents the need recognition stage.

This is the starting point for most models but in this case it is necessary to make a few important observations. First, the recognition of the need to take a city break often stems from specific situational factors in people's lives. The findings show how important these points prove in stimulating the initial need to take a trip. Such situational factors are seldom acknowledged or, have been marginalized in the traditional models (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). Second, as the findings have shown, the desire to get away and experience a change of scene (escape) seems particularly significant in the need to take a

Figure 1 City break decision making model



city break. People see such trips as ideal vehicles to bring some novelty and diversion to the routine of daily life, a kind of antidote to the stresses of modern living. Third, the initial generic decision of whether or not to take the trip is of particular importance. As noted previously, the city break vacation is usually a discretionary one and therefore dissimilar to many main vacation decisions. The latter often consist of an annual ritual with the decision to go already decided. By contrast, city break opportunities often occur out of the blue without much warning. Therefore, the initial generic decision (to take a vacation) is often the most crucial aspect of the decision process. Indeed, as Decrop and Snelders (2004) point out, the generic decision does not always follow a rational decision making sequence. For example, people sometimes have an idea to take a trip, check out alternatives, select the one they want, but may still not have made the generic decision to go. This is often the case with discretionary trips such as short breaks where there is a lot of fantasizing. A distinction therefore needs to be made between generic intention and the actual generic decision.

The second box in the city break model is slightly unusual in that the information search, evaluation of alternatives, and purchase phases are grouped together. Although the information search does come first, it intentionally runs into the evaluation and purchase phases. This reflects the findings, which show a number of city breakers engaging in all three of these activities together in quite an unsystematic and at times haphazard manner. In some cases, the evaluation of alternatives was bypassed and people went straight to the purchase stage, as represented by the right side of the box. In other situations, people searched for information and evaluated alternatives simultaneously before purchasing (left side of the box). Undoubtedly, the presence of the Internet is one of the main reasons for this decision making pattern. People can search out deals, evaluate them, and make bookings, with just a few clicks of a mouse. In many ways the internet cuts through the multistage decision models of old, and reflects the modern reality of people taking discretionary trips in situations where they increasingly lack consumer resources such as time, attention, and cognitive processing ability. The Internet represents the ultimate decision-making tool for the cash rich, time poor, modern traveler.

The final box represents the post purchase evaluation stage and is similar to most other models. The service is evaluated from the moment the consumer has made the purchase commitment. The city breaker will make judgments on the service providers they encounter as well as the destination itself. Interestingly, because city breaks are mostly put together by individuals themselves, there is no third party to blame if things go wrong such as a travel agent or tour operator.

In addition to the three main boxes of the decision model, a number of factors appear on either side of the horizontal dimension. These factors represent the main influencers in the city break decision and fall into four groups:

1. internal variables;
2. external variables;
3. nature of trip; and
4. situational factors.

Some of these are similar to those suggested by other authors but have been adapted to reflect the specifics of the city break travel decision.

1. The internal variables refer to the personal aspects of the consumer such as, motivation, image, personality, lifestyle, attitudes, beliefs, and lifecycle stage.
2. External variables include, constraints, pull factors of a destination, marketing mix, influences of family and reference groups, culture and subcultures, social class and household-related variables.
3. The third factor is the nature of the intended trip. This is very significant in the context of city breaks as it refers to features such as travel party size, distance, time, and duration of trip.
4. The final group refers to situational factors and although these could technically come under external variables, their importance to the city break travel decision merited their own distinct grouping.

All four of these factors represent the principal influences on the overall decision process. The extent of each one's influence varies from case to case but can be felt at any time or stage in the process.

Conclusion

This research has shown the importance of type of trip as a determinant of decision-making behavior and highlights the significance of what Ritchie (1994) refers to as the context in which choices are made. The traditional models of consumer behavior have problems accommodating the characteristics of some contemporary travel products such as city breaks. This is primarily because they fail to recognize a non-systematic approach to decision making, where the process is not necessarily undertaken by a sole individual in distinctive stages, and where emotional elements are just as relevant as functional ones. In addition, many conventional models fail to acknowledge the importance of the nature of the trip being undertaken. The idea of one, all encompassing travel decision making model that represents every type of trip is unrealistic. Along with Sirakaya and Woodside (2005), who claim unique approaches for modeling tourist decisions is long overdue, most scholars see the need today for a range of models that are reflective of the differences that exist in travel decision making. This study shows the city break decision to be distinctive in a number of ways. The findings reveal a decision process characterized by low involvement behavior and limited problem solving, with little evidence of the funneling activity that is so often a feature in other models.

Examining the particular nuances and characteristics of specific travel decisions such as city breaks provides a useful contribution to our understanding of this complex area of tourism marketing, and further underlines the importance of investigating decision behavior across all types of trips.

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