

Perceptions as Influencer of Consumer Choice Behavior: The Case of Tourism in Nigeria

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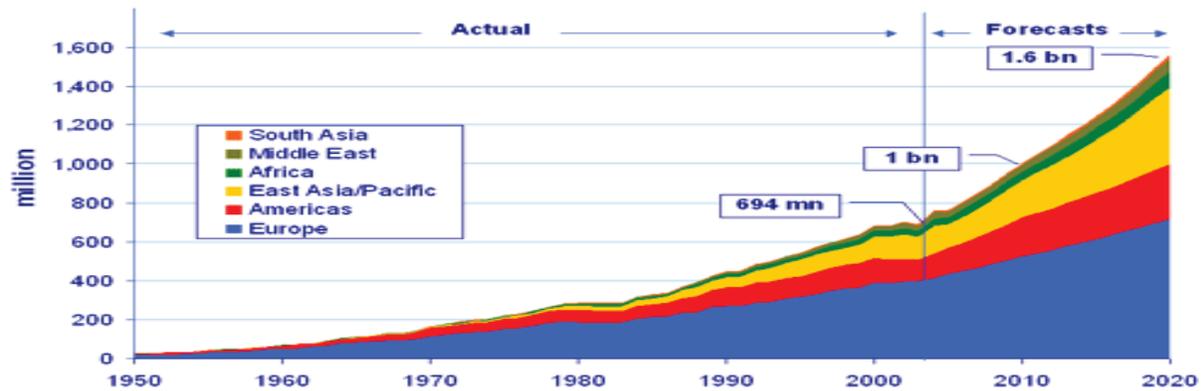
Consumers will form opinion(s) on a particular product based on information at their disposal, which will determine whether such product is selected. Destination images influence a tourist's travel decision-making, cognition and behavior at a destination as well as satisfaction levels and recollection of the experience (Jenkins, 1999). A survey was conducted in the United States, of potential tourists aimed at understanding the role perceptions of potential American outbound tourists to Nigeria and how consumers choose their destinations; based on information at their disposal. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the distribution of variables. All statistics were two-tailed at 0.05 significance level.

INTRODUCTION

For the past three years, international tourism has been booming. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2009), International tourist arrivals reached 922 million in 2008, up 18 million over 2007, representing a growth of 2%. International tourism receipts rose by 1.7% in real terms to US\$ 944 billion (642 billion euros). Following four years of consecutive strong growth, an abrupt shift in trend occurred in the middle of the year, with tourism demand falling significantly under the influence of an extremely volatile world economy (financial crisis, commodity and oil price rises and sharp exchange rate fluctuations), the evolution of the influenza A (H1N1) outbreak, and above all the fear of terrorism.

International tourist arrivals have continued to grow – from 25 million in 1950, to 277 million in 1980, to 438 million in 1990, to 684 million in 2000, and reaching 922 million in 2008 (WTO, 2009). Africa has been one of the strongest growth markets, with most destinations showing consistently above average increases in arrivals and receipts. Between 2000 and 2005, international tourist arrivals to Africa increased from 28 million to 40 million - an average growth of 5.6 % a year, compared to a worldwide 3.1 % a year. In the same period Africa's International tourism receipts doubled from US\$ 10.5 billion to US\$ 21.3 billion (WTO, 2008). Figure 1 below shows the growth trend.

FIGURE 1



Source: <http://www.world-tourism.org/facts/menu.html>.

THE STATE OF TOURISM IN NIGERIA

While tourism industry in Nigeria has never been fully developed in a large scale capacity, it has suffered a great deal during the past military and civilian rule. According to (Gray, 1989, p.121), “Nigeria is still not a popular tourist destination. Unlike Kenya, with its vast game preserves, or the Ivory Coast, services in Nigeria are not geared in as large degree to tourists”. Many countries have invested heavily in tourism and have acquired a high level of economic dependence on inbound tourism, but the opposite is true in case of Nigeria. Tourism, although beginning to perform well in other African countries such as Ghana, South Africa, Kenya, and even Tanzania; is almost non-existent in Nigeria. Owing to the country's poor international image, combined with the obstacles placed in the way of visitors, for example difficulties in obtaining visas and the lack of suitable accommodation, few people visit Nigeria solely as tourists.

In late 2002, the government declared tourism as one of its six key areas for economic development in 2003-07. It is therefore, the intention of this study to see how tourism could be well developed and promoted in order to attract tourists to the country. Tourism as an industry has been considered to be a vital part of the world economy. Everyday people move from one location to the other. Tourism is therefore, considered as the world's largest industry. There has been steady increase of tourist throughout the world. Despite the depressed nature of international economy, over US\$464 billion (excluding international airfare payments) were generated in the international tourist receipts in 2001 (Dieke, 2003). However, Africa recorded only 2.5% of the market; out of which, Nigeria received only 3%.

Not much work has been done extensively in the area of marketing tourism in Nigeria; therefore, few literatures are available for review; however, extensive body of literature in the field of tourism is incorporated, especially in the area of tourism information. Many destinations with a variety of attractions have failed to attain their tourism potentials because their promotion is not themed or effectively targeted. Promotion is particularly invaluable in tourism because of its intangible and immobile nature and, quite importantly, tourism is an experience that cannot be inspected or tested before purchase. Thus, unlike manufacturing, which distributes products to market, tourism moves market to products (Fakeye, 1991). These peculiarities in tourism pose challenges that require articulated promotional strategies, planning and management practices (Awaritefe, 2003).

With an estimated 2.6 million international tourist's arrival in 1999, West Africa accounted for just 10% of the regional total. Six countries out of the 14 in the sub-region recorded more than 100,000 international tourists in 1999. Nigeria attracted the major share - with close on 770,000 arrivals it captured a sub-regional market share of 30%. Of all international arrivals in West Africa, 45% originate from within the region itself, followed by the Americas with 5%, and East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific together with 4.7% (Nevin, 2003). In order to increase her share of the market for tourism, Nigeria must

understand that “a whole range of changes in society and the global economy will need to be taken into consideration in planning and managing tourism destinations and enterprises in the era of globalization” (Wahab & Cooper, 2001, p. 69). Tourism is still being developed in Nigeria; as a result, there is a new federal policy in preparation which recognizes the vast potential of the sub-sector. With the government's renewed interest and new private sector initiative, there are indications that there are more exciting days ahead for every tourist (Craig, Olumhense, Oyo, Tanolaju, & Utomi, 1990).

According to UNWTO (2010), “the long-haul travel worldwide will grow faster, at 5.4 per cent over the period 1995-2020, than the interregional travel, at 3.8 per cent. Consequently, the ratio between interregional and long-haul travel will shift from around 82:18 in 1995 to close to 76:24 in 2020.”

“Tourism is not a clear-cut sector but an all-embracing and pervasive domain of service and industrial activities. It touches upon almost all spheres of national life within the country and that is particularly the reason why a sound state policy of tourism should be essentially formulated before any significant tourism investment projects are launched” (Wahab & Cooper, 2001, p. 5). As rightly put by MacCannell, tourism is an ideological framing of history, nature and tradition; a framing that has the power to reshape culture and nature to its own needs (MacCannell, 1992). Some writings already maintain that globalization, as a mega trend, is changing the nature of international tourism (Keller, 1996).

Tourism has become a landmark in human activities reaching 800 million international tourist visits in 2005 and registering receipts totaling \$444 billion without the cost of international transport which may reach US\$180 billion. The continued expansion of tourism in the world due to world population growth, increasing affluence of many nations, the expansion and diversification of travel motivations and expectations, great technological achievements in information and communication, the fierce competition between an increasing number of tourist destinations, and deregulation movements, is an important playground for global forces. The new technologically advanced distribution channels permit anyone to receive the most up-to-date multimedia information on the best connections, and at the best prices, for most attractive destinations in the world (Keller, 1996).

Populations of various countries respond to this globalization of economies, markets, systems and cultures by looking at their own identities, as in contrast to globalization lies localization which is an opposing force. These two adverse forces cannot be averted by the state, the market or communities by acting alone (Cleverdon, 1998). Moreover, increased awareness of physical and cultural heritage safeguards have induced various tourist destinations to engage in the complex planning process for sustainable development in tourism. In addition, the Free Trade in Services Agreement is another difficult tunnel for globalization to go through (Wahab and Pigram, 1997). Cultural differences between individual tourist destinations will continue to play an important role, among other factors, in the choice of a holiday destination. However, a transcending global cultural understanding might eventually emerge cutting across various cultural diversities with each having its local flavor.

The marketability of individual destinations and global tourism is vulnerable to sudden changes in market perceptions. Acts of man or nature can transform the reputation, desirability and marketability of the most popular tourism destinations overnight (Beirman, 2003, p. 3). The attacks of September 11, 2001, in which hijacked Boeing 767 and 757 commercial aircraft were used as flying missiles which blew up the Twin Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City and part of the Pentagon in Washington DC, massively disrupted global tourism. This 2001 attacks generated panic, thereby, compromising the security of commercial aircraft and global tourism safety worldwide.

For most international travelers, tourism is a discretionary act. Events which compromise the viability of a destination may result in considerable economic disruption to the country, state or region. For individuals, this situation could result in loss of income, unemployment and poverty. However, few tourists will consider these implications in determining their choice of destination. Their prime concern is to travel to a destination satisfying their own desires with a minimum of complications or threats to their safety and well-being. Global tourism crises, including those mentioned above, are evidence that destination crisis marketing can no longer be treated as a problem confined to a few specific destinations; it is now a global issue. Since September 11, destination crisis marketing has been moved beyond the

cloisters of academia to become a critical economic, political and social priority for many nations to which tourism is a significant industry (Beirman, 2003).

While Nigerians look for ways to alleviate their problems, they are becoming increasingly confident that some newly implemented measures to boost tourism and foreign participation in business will not only strengthen their prospects for the future but also attract the attention of African-Americans. In January 1989 a new industrial policy was introduced to simplify the process of investing in Nigeria, and it also opens up more areas of the economy to foreign investors. (Leavy, 1990). Usually, the travel market is often divided into four segments: personal business travel, government or corporate business travel, visiting friends and relatives, and pleasure vacation travel (Nesbit, 1973). This study focuses on the pleasure vacation travel segment. The objectives of the research were to identify motives which directed respondents' selection of destination, and to develop a conceptual framework that would integrate such motives. It was anticipated that the motives might provide a basis for subdividing or segmenting those traveling for pleasure.

In the study reported here, the concern was to identify states of tension or causes of disequilibrium which provoked respondents' decisions to select particular vacation destinations. It is recognized that perception is only one of many variables which may contribute to explaining tourist behavior. To expect perception to account for a large portion of the variance in tourist behavior is probably asking too much since there may be many other interrelated influences operating. Nevertheless, perception is considered a critical variable because it is the impelling and compelling force behind it all.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism as an industry requires a diverse range of information and lends itself well to the support offered by developing multimedia, communication technologies and information systems (Sheldon, 1993; Poon, 1993; & Cho, 1998). Therefore, information communication technologies (ICTs) have been changing the global tourism industry rapidly. The implications of the internet and other growing interactive multimedia platforms for tourism promotion are far reaching and alter the structure of the industry. Information communication technologies (ICTs) have revolutionized the travel industry in the last decade. E-tourism reflects the digitalization of all processes and value chains in the tourism, travel, hospitality and catering industries. It emerges as a term describing the entire range of applications of ICTs on tourism and the implications for the tourism value chain. Major opportunities and challenges have emerged and need to be addressed by all industry players. The level of e-tourism developments, however, varies between regions, countries and continents e-tourism, therefore, is emerging as a way forward for many destinations and organizations around the world (Buhalis & Deimezi, 2004).

In the dynamic global environment of today, understanding how travelers acquire information is important for marketing management decisions (Srinivasan 1990; Wilkie & Dickson 1985). For destination marketing managers, understanding information search behavior of travelers is crucial for designing effective marketing communication campaigns because information search represents the primary stage at which marketing can provide information and influence travelers' vacation decisions. Since, consumers will use that information to form a perception of a particular destination on which such information is gathered. Perception is defined as the psychological processing of information received by the senses. Often, perception is used to refer to the content of the consumer's beliefs about a product; for example, it is sometimes said that an advertisement led the consumer to develop a favorable perception of the product (Mullen & Johnson, 1990, p. 12). A number of fundamental principles characterizing the perceptual process were developed by German psychologists near the turn of the century. These researchers emphasized the innate organizing processes that seem to direct perception (Mullen & Johnson, 1990). The term *gestalt* refers to form, pattern, or configuration. These early experimental psychologists studied the processes by which separate, distinct stimulus elements were perceptually merged into forms or configurations (Koffka, 1935). Perception attributes included: information, preferences, hearsay, and experience.

Therefore, conceptual and empirical examinations of tourist information search behavior have a long tradition in tourism marketing literature (Etzel & Wahlers, 1985; Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1998, 1999; Perdue, 1985; Schul & Crompton, 1983; Snepenger & Snepenger 1993; Woodside & Ronkainen, 1980). Even though several studies examined travelers information search behavior and the factors that are likely to affect it, they all examined travelers' prior product knowledge as a one-dimensional construct, most often referred to as destination familiarity or previous trip experiences (Woodside & Ronkainen, 1980). However, consumer behavior literature suggests that the prior product knowledge is not a uni-dimensional construct (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). Alba and Hutchinson (1987), therefore propose that prior product knowledge has two major components, familiarity and expertise, and cannot be measured by a single indicator. In addition, in tourism, little research has been done on the factors that are likely to influence travelers' prior product knowledge and, therefore, their information search behavior.

One of the most commonly examined factors that are likely to influence travelers' information search behavior and decision-making process is their prior product knowledge (familiarity and expertise) about the destination. Despite the recognized importance of prior product knowledge (familiarity and expertise) on travelers' decision-making and information search process, tourism researchers have been treating prior product knowledge as a uni-dimensional construct, most often referred to as destination familiarity or previous trip experiences (Woodside & Ronkainen, 1980). This construct is mostly operationalized by measuring the number of previous trips taken to a particular destination. Although, the number of previous trips taken to a certain destination is an important indicator of familiarity with the destination, it fails to capture travelers' total prior product knowledge about the destination. This single indicator does not account for the prior product knowledge gained about the destination through different sources other than previous trips taken to the destination such as reading guidebooks, talking to friends and relatives, etc. Indeed, prior trip experience is only one of the indicators of the traveler's familiarity with the destination and that familiarity itself is only one of the dimensions of prior product knowledge. In order to expand the concept of tourist information search behavior, in this study, prior product knowledge is treated as a multidimensional construct having two components, familiarity and expertise. Familiarity comes before expertise due to the fact that you have to be familiar before you can be expert (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987).

It is important to identify the factors that are likely to influence travelers' familiarity and expertise and, therefore, travelers' information search behavior prior to making a purchase. Identification of those factors may enable destination marketers to develop better communication and targeting strategies. Review of the consumer behavior and tourism literature revealed that previous visits, travelers' involvement, learning, word of mouth, and cost of information search are likely to influence travelers' prior product knowledge (familiarity and expertise) of destinations and the way they search for information, internally and/or externally (Alba & Hutchinson 1987; Brucks 1985; Celsi & Olson 1988; Etzel & Wahlers, 1985, Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1998; Perdue, 1985; Schul & Crompton, 1983; Snepenger & Snepenger 1993; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998; Woodside & Ronkainen, 1980).

Consumer information search has been one of the most enduring literature streams in consumer research (Beatty & Smith 1987). Marketing and consumer behavior researchers have been examining consumer's pre-purchase information seeking behavior since at least 1917 (e.g., Copeland, 1917), and even today most consumer information processing and decision making models include pre-purchase information search as one of the key components (e.g. Bettman 1979a; Bettman, Johnson, & Payne 1991; Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard 1993; Howard & Sheth 1969; Olshavsky 1985). Like the consumer behavior and marketing fields, conceptual and empirical examination of the information search behavior has a long tradition in tourism literature (Etzel & Wahlers, 1985; Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1998, 1999; Perdue, 1985; Raitz & Dakhil, 1989; Schul & Crompton, 1983; Snepenger & Snepenger 1993; Woodside & Ronkainen, 1980).

Past research in the area of information search has focused on developing typologies of consumer information search strategies using nearly 60 variables that are likely to influence external information search (Srinivasan & Ratchford 1991). These typologies often include aspects of the environment (e.g., difficulty of the choice task, number of alternatives, complexity of the alternatives), situational variables

(e.g., previous satisfaction, time constraints, perceived risk, composition of traveling party), consumer characteristics (education, prior product knowledge, involvement, family life cycle, socio-economic status) (Schmidt & Spreng 1996) and product characteristics (e.g., purpose of the trip, mode of travel) (Fodness & Murray 1998, 1999). Even though several researchers concluded that information search behavior can be conceptualized as a series of interrelated behaviors, there have been only a few attempts to model the interrelationships among these factors. Notable exceptions are Maute & Foresster (1991); Moorthy, Ratchford, & Talukdar (1997); Punj & Staelin (1983); and Srinivasan & Ratchford (1991) in the field of consumer behavior and marketing and Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) and Fodness & Murray (1999) in the field of tourism.

There are three major theoretical streams of consumer information search literature (Schmidt & Spreng 1996; Srinivasan 1990) in the consumer behavior and marketing fields. The first is the psychological/motivational approach, which incorporates the individual, the product class, and the task related variables such as beliefs and attitudes (Beatty and Smith 1987; Duncan and Olshavsky 1982) and involvement (Beatty and Smith 1987). The second is the economics approach, which uses the cost-benefit framework to study information search. The economic theory of search states that consumers weight the cost and benefits of search when making search decisions, and thirdly, one is the consumer information processing approach which focuses on memory and cognitive information processing theory.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research questions were specifically asked to determine how potential tourists get their information about Nigeria. It is believed that the information will lead to how potential tourist will form their perception on destination selection. Participants were eligible to participate if they (1) were 18 years and older; (2) were students or workers in the university; (3) had a history of visiting other places; (4) could read, speak, and understand English. Participants were excluded if their family members were victims of terrorist acts and were emotionally challenged or diagnosed with any emotional disorder that may interfere with sessions. After appropriate approval from the relevant Institutional Review Board, we conducted a cross-sectional study based on a prospective cohort from the intervention designed to reduce bias based on the information at respondents' disposal, we used a cross-sectional design to examine the baseline data in a prospective cohort of two Universities.

In order to empirically test the applicability of information gathered on Nigeria as a destination and how potential tourists form their perceptions based on such information will help the self-theory to an understanding of tourist behavior. Students, faculty and staff of University of Houston and Texas Southern University (both in Houston, TX), were surveyed. Specific questions were asked to determine how respondents will react in certain situation especially when it comes to selecting a destination, based on the information at their disposal. Thus, respondents were required to indicate on a five-point scale their perception of how they will react based on the information they received about the destination. Questions were also included in the self-completion questionnaire regarding respondents' travel behavior, together with some demographic characteristics. Specifically, subjects were asked to indicate how they get information about this destination and from what source. Demographic variables included age, gender, education, income and occupation. Potential respondents were then randomly presented the survey and told that information obtained through the questionnaire would be used to help in the development of better travel products and services. From the 100 questionnaires given to two assistants, a usable sample of 92 responses were returned out of which 3 questionnaires were unusable, due to non-completion, and thus were not used to be part of this research. This gave a total of 89% useable returns. Given the length of the questionnaire, the complexity of some questions (particularly the self-concept scale) and the lack of an incentive or prize draw for completed survey forms; this was considered a good response.

FINDINGS

According to the data collected 33 men and 56 women responded to the questionnaire. Eighteen per cent are married, sixty-five per cent are single, five per cent are divorced and one percent widow. The average age of people surveyed is 27 years. Most of the respondents are students which explained the mean income of \$25,000 to \$30,000. The data collected was analyzed on SPSS using regression analysis. Travel intentions, attitude, and barriers were used to assess travel intentions, we selected an item measuring intent to travel (past and current), was used to score the item for actual intention to travel: *I like to travel to new places*. Participants were required to respond to a four-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). A positive attitude towards travel was determined by the lowest score. The travel attitude and barriers scale was internally consistent in the present study sample at Cronbach $\alpha = 0.88$.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the distribution of variables that may be associated with intention to travel. To test for independence or association of the independent variable with the outcome variable, we used Pearson chi square statistic and Fisher's exact to compensate for small cell counts. A univariable logistic regression model was then used to examine the potential predictors of intention to travel as well as the possible confounders. To simultaneously adjust for potential confounders, we used the multivariable logistic regression modeling. To enter into this model, we determined a priori that only independent variables that were statistically significant at $p < 0.25$ and were biologically relevant such as age or gender would qualify (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000). Next, we tested for interactions at $p < 0.10$ for entry into the model (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000). Finally, to test for the fitness of the model with or without interaction, we performed the goodness-of-fit test following Hosmer and Lemeshow's criteria. All statistics were two-tailed at 0.05 significance level and were performed using SPSS statistical package, version 16.0.

R Square is .985 and adjusted R is .981. External validation was conducted by comparing the results of the remove method with the enter method of the data. The regression variance of mean is significant at sig. level of .000 was obtained. Test of homogeneity of variances is significant, while Levene's Test of Equality of Error variance is also significant and the calculated F score of 256.000.

CONCLUSION

In examining consumer information process and destination perceptions, Bolfmg (1988); recommended segmentation implication for individuals at different involvement levels in the context of general consumer behavior. Dimanche, Havitz, & Howard (1993), applied consumer involvement profiles as a tourism segmentation tool to classify individuals and predict attitudes and behaviors. There is strong support for the relationship between involvement and search behavior. Literature suggests that, when making decisions, highly involved individuals will go through an extended problem solving process: recognizing the problem, actively searching for information, evaluating the alternatives, and then making the purchase decision (Clarke and Russell, 1978). About 90% of the respondents indicated that they will make plans to travel as tourists to Nigeria based on the information they received. The findings of this study lend further support disposable income will lead to whether a destination is selected specifically during the pre-trip stage of the tourist decision-making process. Types of information contents can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of destination selection.

Practical implications of these results are further enhanced by the study's finding that there were significant relationships between different levels of tourist purchase decision involvement and the use of information collected. People at the high level income will make decision to likely visit a destination based on the information.

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