

Cruise Passengers' Decision-Making Processes

INTRODUCTION

The process that individuals go through when deciding on where to travel has received much attention within the tourism literature (Crompton, 1992; Crompton and Ankomah, 1993; Fodness and Murray, 1999; Dellaert, Borgers and Timmermans, 1997; Vogt and Fesenmaier, 1998). The underlying purpose of the majority of this research is that by understanding how tourists make decisions, service providers can more effectively market to, and satisfy visitors. It has been argued that the decision-making process involves the narrowing down of initial alternatives (Nicosia, 1966) until one decides which goods/services to purchase. Past research has revealed that this process may be moderated by: a tourist's familiarity with destinations (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004, Sirakaya, Sonmez and Choi, 2001), marital roles (Ford, LaTour and Henthorne, 1995; Mottiar and Quinn, 2004), gender (Vogt and Fesenmaier, 1998), travel frequency (Morgan, 1991), children (Thornton, Shaw and Williams, 1997; Wang, Hsieh, Yeh and Tsai, 2004), spouse (Madrigal, 1993; Zalatan 1998), friends and relatives (Gitelson and Kerstetter, 1994), lifecycle (Decrop, 1999), culture (Caneen, 2003), cognitive distance (Ankomah, Crompton and Baker, 1996; Crompton and Kim, 2001), group processes (Decrop, 2005) local "experts" (Rompf, DiPietro and Ricci, 2005), and advertising (Johnson and Messmer, 1991).

While various models for understanding tourists' decision-making processes have been conceptualized (e.g., Crompton 1992; Gursoy and McCleary, 2004; Huan and Beaman, 2003; Sirakaya, McLellan and Uysal, 1996), few studies have attempted to empirically examine them. By examining the processes that tourists utilize to make

purchasing decisions, tourism practitioners should be better equipped to market their offerings to both current and future visitors.

One sector in need of a better understanding of their markets is the cruise industry. Since 1980, the North American cruise market has enjoyed an annual growth rate of 8.2% (CLIA, 2005). This surge in revenues was rejuvenated back into the industry by increasing fleet sizes and increasing cruise capacity by building new, larger ships (Lois, Wang, Wall, and Ruxton, 2004). CLIA (2006) reports that during the 1980's 40 new ships were built, while in the 1990's approximately 80 ships debuted, and at least 69 new ships have debuted since 2000. They argue that the industry's commitment to expanding guest capacity is because the industry has tremendous potential for growth, as only 16% of adults in the United States have ever taken a cruise. This growth in berths has made it imperative for the industry to not only attract a larger percentage of potential cruisers, but to also retain its current clientele in order to maintain current occupancy rates.

The cruise industry has also seen a change in the demographics of their cruise passengers over the past few decades. Data published by CLIA (2005) reveals that passengers are taking shorter cruises, as the overall percentage of growth since 1980 for short (2-5 day) cruises (724.5%) is much higher than that of 6-8 day (497.4%), 9-17 day (425.3%) and 18 or more day (82.4%) cruises. Additionally, cruise passengers are younger (average age is 50 years old) than they have been since they first started collecting data in 1975 (including corrections for inflation). This change in demographics suggests that "high-end" cruise lines may be losing a share of the

market, and value oriented (i.e., shorter cruises for younger persons) cruise lines may be gaining a competitive edge.

Combined, these changes in the market have made it integral for the cruise industry (in particular the “high-end” markets) to understand the decision-making processes of their current passengers. Moreover, the lack of empirical evidence related to tourism decision-making models, suggests that inductive (qualitative) methods might be more appropriate for examining these processes than deductive (quantitative). Thus, the current study will utilize qualitative methods (focus groups), guided by the choice sets model, as conceptualized by Crompton (1992) to better understand the decision-making processes of passengers on a “high-end” cruise line.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Decision Making

The concept of “choice sets” was first proposed and elaborated in the consumer behavior literature in examining consumers’ purchase decisions by Howard (1963). The concept purports that consumers make a final choice from gradually reduced groups of alternatives among finite numbers of potential options. The concept has since been adopted and tested across several disciplines (Thill and Wheeler, 2000). Particularly, the concept has been applied to the tourists’ destination choice context (e.g., Um and Crompton, 1990; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). The literature suggests that decisions which are perceived to have higher levels of risk are more likely to include higher levels of information search and evaluation of alternatives (Crompton and Ankomah, 1993). To date, the line of research on choice sets has grown to be an important branch of travel decision-making studies (Jeng and Fesenmaier, 2002). Further, Sirakaya and

Woodside (2005, p. 828), in their review of tourism decision-making theories, purport that “the choice sets approach offers a rather simple and practical perspective to understanding the travelers’ decision-making process” and that the Crompton (1992) “choice sets approach provides practical advantages” to other types of models. Thus, the Crompton (1992) will be the model utilized to guide the present study.

The Model of Destination Choice Sets

Crompton (1992) integrated relevant research findings by consumer behavior scholars and extant yet sparse findings from tourism studies, and proposed a model (Figure 1) on the structure of tourists’ choice sets. According to this model, tourists’ decision-making process goes through three stages, whereby all destinations that they are aware of are funneled down to reach a final choice. The three stages are: initial consideration set, containing all destinations considered by tourists as “possible to visit within a period of time” (Crompton 1992, p. 423); late consideration (evoked) set (termed by Howard (1963)), containing destinations considered by tourists as “probable to visit within a period of time” (Crompton, 1992, p. 424); and final choice decision which is the final destination tourists choose to visit. Simply put, this model delineates the process used by potential tourists to reduce the number of destinations through three stages of alternative sets before reaching a final selection.

In a follow-up study, Crompton and Ankomah (1993) developed a total of nine propositions (two for the first stage; three for the second stage; and four for the final stage) based on this model. For example, for the first stage, it was proposed that the probability for a destination to be chosen as a final choice depends on the level of tourists’ awareness of the destination in the early consideration set. Moreover, the

number of destinations in the early consideration set within a given geographical area was postulated to be related to the tourists' prior visitation to that area, and the distance of their residence from that area. As for the late consideration set, fewer than four destinations were estimated to be included in this stage, and the ratio between the first consideration set and this set was hypothesized to range from .6 to .9. In the final stage, various decision strategies and criteria (decision rules) such as the relative merits of destinations, perceived constraints, the extent of reliance on information, and so forth were proposed for a final choice. The authors acknowledged that most of these propositions were "transplanted" from the consumer behavior field. Thus, it seems that the applicability and relevance of these propositions in the tourism context remained to be investigated.

When building the destination choice sets model, Crompton (1992) and Crompton and Ankomah (1993) cautioned that the notion of choice sets is applicable only when the task of purchasing requires non-routinized decision-making and high level of involvement. In other words, three main types of decision-making behaviors suggested by consumer behavior literature (i.e., brand loyalty: high involvement, routinized; limited decision-making: low involvement, non-routinized; and inertia: low involvement, routinized) (Assael, 2004) may not fit in this model. Yet, it has been argued that since the tourism product reflects the "unique characteristics of services" (i.e., intangible, inseparable, etc.) that decisions related to tourism purchase are all relatively highly involved (Sirakaya and Woodside 2005). Moreover, it was explicitly pointed out by Crompton (1992, p. 432) that the taxonomy of choice sets is "an analytical tool"

rather than “an explanatory model,” “because it does not explain the roles of internal and external forces that shape the choices”.

More recently, a series of studies reported by Crompton and his associates (Botha, Crompton, and Kim, 1999; Crompton, Botha, and Kim, 1998; Kim, Crompton, and Botha, 2000) have provided empirical support to the model as well as certain propositions. For instance, Crompton et al. (1998) verified the predicted results of the propositions for the late consideration set as stated above. Their findings supported the claim that the number of destinations in the decision maker’s late consideration set is typically under four, and this number is about 60% to 90% of its counterpart in their early consideration set. However, the authors failed to identify a consistent relationship between perceived importance and perceived risk with the late consideration set size. Nor did they confirm the proposed positive relationship between respondents’ preference rankings of destinations and the order of the destinations being mentioned in unaided recall questions. Interestingly, while their findings supported the proposition that destinations in which people invest more information-seeking effort are more likely to be included in the late consideration set, it was also reported that for a familiar destination (such as Sun/Lost City to most respondents in their study), there could be a different situation. Thus, their results revealed that a familiar destination could become the ultimate choice even though search effort on it is much less than on some alternatives.

Ramifications of the Model

Since this “classic” model of tourist destination choice was proposed, tourism studies on decision-making process have extended to not only destination choice (e.g.,

Prentice, 2000; Sonmez and Graefe, 1998), but to the contexts of tourist behavior (e.g., Huang and Tsai, 2003; Kozak, 2001); tourist motivation (e.g., Heung, Qu, and Chu, 2001; Kozak, 2002); and travel agents' destination recommendation (Klenosky and Gitelson, 1998). There seems to be at least three trends in the application of the choice sets conceptualization: integration, extension, and amplification.

The first trend can be characterized as integration of the choice sets model. These studies integrated the model as part of their conceptual basis for explaining tourists' decision-making processes (e.g., Klenosky and Gitelson, 1998; Sonmez, 1998; Sonmez and Graefe, 1998; Zalatan, 1996). For example, factors like safety (Sonmez and Graefe, 1998) or destination characteristics (Zalatan, 1996) were included as part of tourists' decision-making processes.

The second trend is an extension of the choice set conceptualization to different situations from the high-involvement and non-routinized scenario specified by Crompton (1992). These studies examined the influence of previous experiences (Huang and Tsai, 2003; Kozak, 2001; Oppermann, 1998) and familiarity (Prentice and Andersen 2000) on destination choice, which could make the decision-making situation more routinized and less involved. For example, Oppermann (1998) contended that because of previous visits, some repeat visitors may experience a unique pattern of choice sets: their early, late, and final consideration sets could consistently contain only one option. Prentice and Andersen (2000) acknowledged that the choice sets model is limited in understanding choices made without much problem-solving processes. They argued that in alternative situations, specifically, when "familiarity is a driver for imagined affective associations about destinations, evoked opportunities, and preferences" (2000,

p. 493), familiarity could become the ultimate determinant of visiting propensity.

According to their conceptualization, familiarity, as opposed to extensive information processing postulated in the Crompton's model, becomes the mechanism of choice selection.

Research has also extended the classic choice sets model by examining tourists' decision-making characteristics in multipurpose trips (versus one single pleasure-seeking trip) (Oppermann, 2000), and by examining multi-facet travel decisions (choice of the combination of several travel components versus simply destination choice) (Dellaert, et al., 1997; Dellaert, Ettema, and Lindh, 1998). Dellaert et al. (1998) suggested that both the timing of travelers' choices on different components of one vacation and their constraints affect the overall process of travel decision-making. Further, the timing of those parts differed in varying degrees until the actual travel takes place, and constraints were found to be the determinant factor for travel decisions. Overall, this stream of research has attempted to extend the applicability of the concept of choice sets. Looking beyond the specific choice analysis context, these researchers associated the notion of choice sets with a broader picture of travel decision-making situations from various angles.

A third trend is the amplification of the choice sets model by adding additional factors to the model. Additional factors which have been added to the model include: cognitive distance (Ankomah et al., 1996), image (Heung, et al., 2001; Sonmez and Sirakaya, 2002), satisfaction (Kozak, 2001), motivational differences (Kozak, 2002), and the tourist's role (Jiang, Havitz, and O'Brien, 2000). For instance, Ankomah et al. (1996) investigated the relationship between cognitive distance and choice sets. They found

that cognitive distance estimates to destinations in the late consideration set were significantly more accurate than estimates to destinations in the reject set. Further, they found that respondents tended to underestimate cognitive distance for destinations in the late consideration set, but the level of underestimation varies in different subsets of the late set, with the action subset higher than inaction set. Kozak (2001) found that the determinant factors for intention to revisit were the level of overall satisfaction and the number of previous visits. In addition, tourist motivations have been found to be different based on two factors: nationality and destinations visited (Kozak, 2002). By identifying the antecedents and consequences of choice set formation, this stream of research has attempted to amplify the model, by making it more explanatory by including various factors influencing choice-decision.

In comparison to the numerous studies integrating, extending, or amplifying the choice sets model (which is arguably beyond the model's initial purpose), there has been little effort made in testing the original model. Furthermore, although Crompton and Ankomah (1993) estimated that the concept of choice sets could be generalizable to many facets of tourism, no studies have examined this model in other sectors of the tourism industry (outside of destinations). While this model has possibly been the most often cited and utilized in the field of tourism, few studies have empirically examined it. Recent research has generated a better understanding of the phenomena from different perspectives.

Recent Tourist Decision-Making Research

Most of the recent literature related to tourists' decision-making processes have examined how tourists' search for information when making travel decisions (Gursoy

and McCleary, 2004; Huan and Beaman, 2003; Maser and Weiermair, 1998; Vogt and Fesenmaier, 1998). Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998, p. 552) suggested that the underlying premise of this research is “that individuals are goal-directed; that is, they are attempting to answer a specific question as to which product to buy or how to spend time.” They examined information requesters, to a Midwest destination in the United States and were able to develop a reliable and valid scale for measuring multiple information needs of tourists. Results revealed that most information is collected for functional reasons, though information is also gathered to fulfill: innovative, hedonic (entertainment) and aesthetic/visual needs. They thus suggest that when developing communication materials, destination managers should incorporate these needs.

Gursoy and McCleary (2004) conceptualized a more holistic model of tourists' information search behavior, though the model has yet to be empirically examined. Their model postulated that familiarity and expertise are the key moderating variables between situational factors (previous visits, involvement, intentional learning and incidental learning) and both internal and external searching behavior. Their model further suggested that the relationships between familiarity and expertise, and internal and external search were mediated by the perceived costs of both the internal and external information search. These proposals suggested that travel decision-making was typically a highly involved and complex process.

Another model of decision-making was proposed by Huan and Beaman (2003). They suggested that not including tourist type or treating multiple step decisions as one compensatory choice invalidates decision-making research. They further suggested that examining decision-making at the individual level is flawed, as the process of

choosing a destination is also a social process (influenced by others). Thus, they argued that decision-making is a social-psychological construct.

Similarly, Decrop and Snelders (2005) proposed a decision-making typology based on social-psychological processes. They examined the decision-making processes of 25 Belgian households choosing a vacation and identified six different types of vacationers: habitual (repeaters), rational (risk avoiders), hedonic (pleasure seekers), opportunistic (non-planners), constrained (have contextual inhibitors) and adaptable (flexible). While these categories are not mutually exclusive, they do offer insight into the decision-making processes of vacationers from various social-psychological backgrounds. From this same data set, Decrop (2005) further found that decisions made with friends (in comparison to couples/families) are more likely to involve all members, take longer, and are more likely to be ineffective. Yet, decisions made with friends are less likely to be frustrating as friends are more willing to compromise (“sacrifice”), and group adhesion is a major goal.

Similar to the Crompton (1992) model, Woodside and Dubelaar (2002) and Woodside and King (2001) postulated a purchase consumption system (PCS) which sequences the steps in which consumers utilize to buy and use products. Their sequential model helps to explain how different variables (i.e., demographics, choices/alternatives, pre-planning issues, key selection drivers, etc.) in the decision-making process affect each other. Their behavioral model (as opposed to choice set models; see Sirakaya and Woodside 2005 for a full-review of both types of models) includes ten propositions related to the affects of one decision behavior on another (see Woodside, MacDonald and Burford 2004 for a full review of the propositions).

Also related to the current study is the work of Sirakaya, McLellan and Uysal (1996) who utilized a behavioral decision theory to model college students' decision-making processes. They revealed that for college students, decisions are individual specific and that destination attractiveness and the cost of the trip are the most important factors for predicting final choice. This finding suggests that decisions related to choosing a cruise may be related to the attractiveness and perceived value of the product.

Purpose of the Study

Since it has been suggested that understanding tourists' decision-making is one of the keys to marketing success (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004; Johnson and Messmer, 1991) and the cruise industry is becoming increasingly competitive (CLIA 2005, 2006), it would seem important for cruise management to better understand their visitors' decision-making processes in a practical manner. Since the Crompton (1992) model has been suggested to offer a "rather simple and practical perspective to understanding the travelers' decision process" and has been argued to have "practical advantages" over other models (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005), it was believed that the Crompton (1992) would offer the best fit to the research needed.

Yet, as argued by Crompton (1992), the choice sets model does not necessarily delineate the shaping forces of a choice. As stated by Sirakaya and Woodside (2005, p. 829), choice set models often "accept that other individuals affect the decision-maker, but do not address active interaction with other individuals or sources along the decision-making process. Thus it would further seem important to focusing on the social influences on these decisions (as per Huan and Beaman, 2003), and to examine

the underlying reasons why passengers chose the cruise they did, over all other vacations.

Crompton's (1992) choice set model was developed to examine the decision-making processes related to choosing a vacation destination, and he argued that the process might be quite different for different types of vacations. It was thus postulated that the decision-making processes of persons purchasing a cruise vacation would be more complex than decisions related to choosing a destination, since it was believed the process would involve more steps. Similar to choosing a destination, cruise vacationers must decide: a) whether or not to take a vacation, and b) where to go. Yet, cruise vacationers must also decide: c) which cruise line to travel on, and d) which ship from that line to choose.

It has been suggested that for topics that have a theoretical foundation which is not yet robust, qualitative approaches are preferred (Dann and Phillips, 2001). Thus, since the Crompton (1992) choice sets model lacks empirical support, it was determined that the most feasible means for examining the purposes of the study was via focus groups of cruise passengers. Therefore, the current study utilized inductive reasoning (instead of hypotheses) as a guiding framework to investigate the role of choice sets while examining social influences and the underlying reasons for final choice.

METHODS

Data for the current study was collected during a one week cruise on board the newest ship for a predominant cruise line (called ABC line from here forward), utilizing focus groups. The ship utilized has been defined as a "premier ship" (Choosing Cruising, 2004) on a "premier line" (Cartwright and Baird, 1999). The ship has 720

passenger staterooms which have been called “among the largest in the industry” with 80% of all cabins having deluxe verandas (Cruise & Vacation Views, 2001). The ship’s itinerary included stops in St. Thomas, USVI; Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands; Ocho Rios, Jamaica and ABC’s private island.

Potential participants were selected from the cruise manifest (listing of all passengers, including relevant information) by the Ship’s Hotel Manager, and were stratified to ensure representation of different cruiser types (Alumni, suite, outside, and inside cabin) were solicited. This was done by sorting passengers by cabin type and by number of cruises, prior to systematically selecting them. Passengers selected (n = 152) were then randomly placed into one of 23 pre-planned focus groups. These passengers were then invited to participate by having a note explaining the study sent to their cabins, with an R.S.V.P. card enclosed. The note informed the guests where and when their focus group would take place. The note also asked them to indicate whether they would like to participate by returning their R.S.V.P. card to the Purser’s Desk.

A total of 82 passengers agreed to participate via contacting the Purser’s Desk. Guests who showed up for their focus groups (n = 72) were interviewed in small groups (2 to 5 people) in order to better hear individual opinions, comments and observances, while allowing for group interaction. The interviews were all conducted in the same conference room, and were recorded in order to better preserve the data. The interviews were led by one the primary investigator of the current study, with one assistant in attendance to take additional notes to better assist with the reliability of

responses. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 35 minutes. As a gift for participating, guests were given a small gift, compliments of the Hotel Manager.

The questions asked were scripted in order to be consistent, and multiple follow-up questions were utilized as discussion warranted. The script was developed, following the Crompton (1992) choice sets model, and included additional inquiry into the role of others within the decision-making process (as per Huan and Beaman, 2003). Also, with the use of the interviewing process, follow-up questions were included to assist in understanding the underlying causes of the decisions made.

Participants were initially informed that the purpose of their focus group was: “to assist “the cruise line” in better serving them in the future, and to determine why you chose this particular cruise and ship.” The initial set of questions asked for feedback regarding participants’ cruising history (i.e., number of cruises they had taken, number with ABC, who else they had cruised). The second group of questions asked respondents about their initial consideration sets. Participants were asked: what types of vacation they considered, who was involved in this process, when did this process start, were there multiple rounds of reducing choices (i.e., was there a late consideration set), why/how did they decide to take a cruise versus another type of vacation.

The third group of questions asked participants the main reasons why they chose ABC over other cruise lines and or vacations (late and final decision). Questions in this group included: what other cruise lines/vacations were considered, who made the final decision, who/what influenced the final decision, what were the other possible choices, when was the final decision made, and why did they ultimately choose the “ship.” Additional streams of questions (not included in this study) include: a competitor

analysis, the effect on the current cruise of participating in a focus group, and future behavioral intentions.

RESULTS

Profile of Respondents

Respondents included 55 visitors who had sailed ABC before and 17 first time ABC guests. Participants on average had taken a total of 13.7 cruises, with 8.3 (60.3%) of those cruises being taken on ABC (ranged from first time cruisers to 61 total cruises). Additionally, the sample included 37 males, and 35 females, and consisted of 18 guests who were staying in suites and 14 guests who stayed in inside cabins.

Initial Choice Set

On average, guests started their decision-making process regarding which type of vacation to take 5.7 months prior to sailing. The vast majority of initial decisions were made only by those who would be going on the vacation (i.e., couples discussed it together, or one member of a couple informed the other, or, if an individual, nobody influenced initial decisions). Of the 72 participants, only four made initial decisions based on information received from ABC, and only one was influenced by a travel agent. The four persons who were influenced by ABC were all Alumni, and contact made from their participation in the Alumni program is what started their decision-making processes. The majority of responses mirrored the following:

“Nobody, or no information influenced our decision to go on vacation. We go every year, and as always, we just sat down and started to decide where we would go this year. We make these decisions by ourself (Male, Alumni visitor).”

During this initial phase, only five interviewed guests considered a vacation other than a cruise. These guests were either considering flying to a single destination (n = 4)

or driving to see family (n = 1). While there were multiple reasons that participants gave for deciding to take a cruise instead of another type of vacation, most were because cruising is perceived to be more carefree than other vacations. Examples include:

"We think (cruising) is the best part of everything. You've got everything from food, live entertainment, & different ports to go to. It's a break away from doing nothing."

"You can unpack only once, and see different places...it is convenient."

"We've done other vacations, been there, done that."

"You don't have to be anywhere, at any specific time."

"You don't have to deal with buses or hotels. You have everything you need right here."

While it was anticipated that there would be a progressive funneling of multiple choices, down to a single choice, the vast majority of participants (n = 56) knew that they were taking an ABC cruise the second that they decided to go on vacation. Of these, all but three were repeat ABC cruisers. Responses from the repeaters included:

"The only decision we make every year is which ship we are going to go on."

"We've tried other lines, but ABC is where we belong...I don't think we'll take a regular vacation again."

"Why would we go through the hassle to try anything else? They (ABC) make us happy and treat us like royalty...we only sail ABC."

Responses from first time ABC (n = 3) cruisers who knew they would be taking a cruise on ABC immediately included:

"Our parents always swear by ABC and we just figured it was time for us to see what it was all about...it was the only vacation we considered."

"The last cruise we went on, people told us that ABC America was better...we knew our next cruise would be with them, just didn't know when."

The sixteen passengers who did not know that they would be sailing with ABC immediately included two repeat ABC cruisers, and 14 first timers. This group of respondents appeared to weigh the strengths of the different lines first, and then chose based on itinerary and/or ship. A single, consistent theme for why they ended up cruising ABC seemed to be that it offered better value. Quotes from this group include:

“We did research on all of the big cruise lines and narrowed it to Princess, Royal (Caribbean) and ABC. Princess and Royal (Caribbean) are less expensive, but you don’t get as much as you do here. We decided that since it was our anniversary that it was worth the extra money... Once we knew we were going on ABC, the ‘ship’ was our choice because we wanted to go to the Caribbean.” – First Timer

“Our last few cruises were all on Princess, but we wanted to sail somebody new. We are able to cruise (Princess) for a little less (money), but they aren’t worth it unless they are running a special promotion. We checked out a lot of lines, and even thought about Princess again...We couldn’t find a super deal, so we chose ABC because (the others) don’t offer as high of quality overall...I really wanted a newer ship (in response to why he chose the ‘ship’).” – First Timer

“We knew it was going to be either Celebrity or ABC, and tried to see who would offer us the best deal. Of all the lines these are our two favorites, and this time the decision seemed to be tougher than normal. Both lines offered us wonderful deals. We got a 45% discount for being Alumni members which made our decision much easier...we chose the ‘ship’ because we wanted to be in a warm itinerary.” -- Repeater

Late and Final Choice Set

On average, respondents had decided to take their vacation on board the “ship” (final decision) 5.5 months prior to sailing. Thus, the time from initially thinking about taking a vacation (5.7 months prior), to making a final decision took on average less than one week. For participants who knew immediately that they were going to take an ABC cruise (n = 56), they reduced their choices down to the “ship” based on either the

destinations visited, or the ship itself. Examples of quotations made by respondents who based their final decision on destinations visited include:

“Their itinerary and dates matched best with when and where we wanted to go.”

“This was the only ship ‘ABC’ has in the Caribbean which made our choice very easy.”

Responses from those who made their decision based solely on the ship include:

“We have come to eliminate some of (ABC’s) ships, the older ones, and wanted to cruise the newest one.”

“We heard that this ship had the best modern art.”

As mentioned previously, the final decision for respondents who did not know that they would be going on ABC immediately was generally made, based on value.

During the final decision-making phase, respondents were also more likely to seek information from others. Participants who knew immediately that they were going to cruise with ABC (n = 56), were most likely to seek information from the Web (n = 33), though they also contacted ABC directly for information (n = 11) and also contacted travel agents for information (n = 8). Participants (n = 16) who did not know that they were going to cruise ABC immediately were most likely to: go to the ABC Web site (n = 13), contact a travel agent (n = 9), ask friends/family for assistance (n = 6), or talk with a group leader for advice (n = 5). These respondents as a whole were much more likely to use multiple sources of information to make a final decision, while the former group tended to utilize only one source of information.

Participants were also asked the main reason why they chose ABC over all other cruise lines. These responses were systematically grouped into themes by two researchers independently. Once completed, the themes were compared and

negotiated. The resultant themes which included three or more responses included: Superior Product/Service (n = 19), Familiarity/Loyalty (n = 11), Other Guests (n = 9), The Ship (n = 8), Superior Crew (n = 6), Convenience (n = 6) and Price (n = 4).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

With the cruise industry becoming increasingly competitive (CLIA, 2006), it is more important than ever for cruise management to understand their markets. Further, the understanding of tourists' decision-making processes (Crompton, 1992), the various social influences (Huan and Beaman, 2003) and the underlying processes (Gursoy and McCleary, 2004; Johnson and Messmer, 1991) have been proposed as keys to marketing success. Thus, it was the purpose of the current study to examine cruise passengers' choice sets (as per Crompton, 1992), while focusing on the social influences on these decisions (as per Huan and Beaman, 2003), and examining the underlying reasons why passengers chose the cruise they did.

Results of the current study have both managerial and theoretical implications. The Crompton (1992) choice sets model suggested that decisions related to choosing a vacation destination go through three distinct stages, yet suggested that this process could be very different for different sectors of the tourism industry. It was thus believed by the current researchers that the decision-making processes of persons purchasing a cruise vacation would be more complex than decisions related to choosing a destination. Similar to choosing a destination, cruise vacationers must decide: a) whether or not to take a vacation, and b) where to go. Yet, cruise vacationers must also decide: c) which cruise line to travel on, and d) which ship from that line to choose.

Findings of the current study suggest the existence of two groups of cruisers: those who go through complex decision-making (participants who did not know that they were going to cruise ABC immediately) and those who are brand loyal (participants who sailed ABC before and knew immediately that they were going to cruise with ABC). The former went through the funneling process before reaching their final decision, as suggested by Crompton and his associates (Crompton, 1992; Crompton and Ankomah, 1993; Crompton et al., 1998).

The latter went through a process that contradicted the choice sets model, by skipping earlier stages. It was revealed that these passengers seem to follow Langer's (1978) notion of mindlessness: they simplified their decision-making with minimal processing of available information, and did not go through all three phases of the choice sets model. Crompton and Ankomah (1993) argued that the choice sets model would only be effective for non-routinized and highly involved decisions. While it can be argued that the decisions of the current respondents were highly involved (as per Assael, 2004), it appears as if these decisions were routinized. This held especially true for repeat ABC travelers, which is similar to Opperman's (1998) postulation that for tourists who have previous experience, their entire set of choices may include only one option. In this case, it was not that they had taken that specific vacation before (no participants had ever sailed on the "ship" before), but they had purchased other products from the brand before (ABC).

The above finding is in accordance with Prentice and Anderson (2000) who suggested that familiarity could become the ultimate determinant of visitation, and with Crompton and Ankomah (1993) who postulated that decisions that involve familiar

destinations would reduce the number of choices in the late consideration set. It is further possible that this finding is related to Decrop's (1999) proposition that there are distinct differences between "brand loyalists" (those with intensive experience) and "variety seekers" (those with extensive experience). The role of prior experience in decision-making is thus very complex, and certainly warrants further research. For cruise management this finding reveals the importance of maintaining customer loyalty, and that the use of loyalty programs could be very beneficial.

Interestingly, the three first-time ABC cruisers who knew that they wanted to take a ABC cruise the second they decided to go on vacation demonstrated a new decision-making behavior that does not fall into traditional understanding: they had not been brand loyal yet (i.e., no previous experience with the brand), and did not utilize complex decision-making. In examining their decision-making processes, it was revealed that these respondents chose their vacation, based on social influences (i.e., a family member, other cruisers, a travel agent). It appears as if these cruisers absorbed the information from external sources perceived as credible and these perceptions became part of their memory. Once they decided to go on a vacation, they retrieved this information internally, and their entire information search process stopped there (i.e., no more external information search was necessary). Thus, internal information search preceded external information search in terms of both order and importance, which supports Bettman's (1979) conceptualization.

This finding seems to suggest that there is a sequence of information search, such as internal information based on one's own past experience → internal information based on previously collected, credible information → internal information based on

other memories → external information search. As proposed by Sirakaya and Woodside (2005, p. 827), “additional theoretical work and empirical reports are needed to help understand heavy search behavior by visitors with extensive prior travel behavior experiences to the destination areas that they are about to visit, as well as non-search behavior exhibited by some leisure first-time visitors to a given destination area.” From a managerial perspective, this finding suggests the importance of word of mouth advertising, as it appears that for some visitors, just hearing a confirmation that the product is a good one, justified their purchase.

Results of the current study also validate portions of the DeCrop and Snelders (2005) decision-making typology. They proposed that decision-makers can be classified as: habitual, rational, hedonic, opportunistic, constrained or adaptable, and that these groups are not mutually exclusive. Present results suggest that many of the ABC cruisers are habitual cruisers, as they tended to make the same final decisions that they have in the past (routinized). Additionally, some of the respondents could be classified as rational (chose ABC as it was less risky) and as opportunistic (i.e., went with a group that made the decisions for them). While it would be assumed that many of the visitors made decisions based on hedonic (for pleasure) reasons, the scope of the study did not reveal this as a motive. Additionally, the groups of constrained and adaptable did not appear to be part of this sample. Future research should include methods to examine whether or not these groups of decision makers exist for cruise vacations. This knowledge could be very useful to cruise management in determining target markets, and their differences.

Results of the current study also revealed that for decisions that were more complex, perceptions of value tended to be the most important decision-making factor. This finding is similar to Sirakaya, McLellan and Uysal (1996) who found that cost is one of the most important variables related to final choice. The importance of value may be even a larger draw for ABC passengers, as ABC has been awarded “World’s Best Cruise Value” for the past thirteen years (CruiseNetwork, 2005). This suggests that ABC should utilize messages related to value, as it appears to be a major pull factor to their market. Future research should examine whether this finding is similar across lines.

It was also found that initial decisions had a tendency to be made solely by those who would be traveling (via internal information processing), while final decisions involved external information (i.e., Web sites, literature), and additional social influences (i.e., travel agent, friends) as suggested by Huan and Beaman (2003) and Maser and Weiermair (1998). This finding reveals to cruise management the importance of having accurate information available to decision makers during the final phase, and the importance of word of mouth advertising. Future research should examine what types of information are desired by decision-makers during this phase, and ways to best present it.

A final finding of the current study is that current respondents not only had to make a decision at the brand level (i.e., ABC), but also at the sub-brand level (i.e., which ship to choose). This decision was most often based on the itinerary, or the ship (in most cases, ship was chosen because it was new). This finding suggests that for cruise lines which have ships that are not doing as well as the rest of their fleet, it may be possible to increase interest by changing the itinerary to a more appealing one, and

that changing out older ships for newer ones may be an effective strategy. Since the ship utilized in the current study was the fleet's newest ship, future research should examine whether or not "newness" is an important factor in cruise passengers' decision-making processes.

While it is believed that the methods utilized in the current study were fundamentally sound, the study still had limitations. The study was limited by utilizing passengers on board only one ship, for one cruise line. Since Tyrrell, Countryman, Hong and Cai (2001) have shown differences in decision-making processes for travelers to different destinations, more research is necessary prior to generalizing the current results. The current study was further limited to only one cruising season (Spring). The demographics of cruise passengers change greatly between seasons, and further research is necessary in order to determine if decisions made for vacations at this time of the year are the same as they are during other times (i.e., are children more involved during the summer months?).

While it is difficult to generalize the results of the present study, it is believed that they offer new insights into the decision-making processes of cruise passengers. As proposed by Sirakaya, McClellan and Uysal (1996), decision-making is very individualistic, making it unrealistic to develop a model which explains all tourists' behaviors. Yet, the current study generated a better understanding of when cruise passengers' decisions are made, how/why decisions were made, and who/what influenced those decisions. Since little empirical research has been conducted in this area, it is further believed that the current results offer an initial conceptualization of the decision-making processes that cruise passengers on a premier line go through. With

the use of this knowledge, cruise management should be able to more effectively manage resources, as they should have a better understanding of their clientele.

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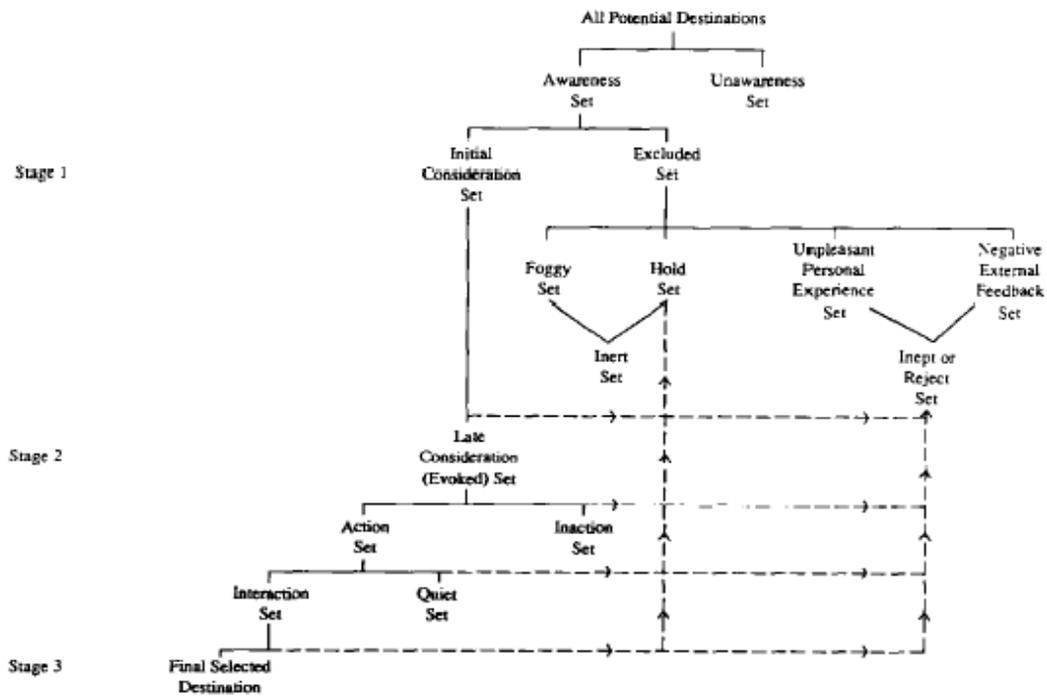


Figure 1. Structure of Destination Choice Sets

Figure 1. Structure of Vacation Destination Choice Sets (Crompton, 1992, p. 421).