Summary Brief

General Systems Theory of the Consumer Psychology of Travel Behavior: An Interdisciplinary View

Arch G. Woodside, Boston College

Abstract

The field of consumer psychology of tourism, hospitality, and leisure (CPTHL) focuses on describing, understanding, predicting, and/or influencing the discretionary travel and time-use motivations, beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors of individuals, households, and organizations. The present article presents a theoretical set of propositions of relationships among travel and leisure knowledge, attitudes, decisions and behaviors of individuals and organizations. Travel and leisure activities are linked with destination choices, mode of travel choices, accommodations decisions, shopping decisions, restaurant choices, and travel route decisions; these choices and behaviors are grounded in specific cultural, motivational, social, and marketing influences.

Introduction

Whether or not the travel and leisure industry is the world's largest when measured in expenditures is arguable. However, few would disagree that the field of travel and leisure, as economic and social activities, influences the quality-of-life of substantial shares of the populations of many regions, cities, and nations. Internationally, the World Trade Organization (1999) estimates that nearly 600 million international travelers spent more than $425 billion (USD) in 1997; international tourist arrivals grow by an average of 4.3 percent annually; receipts climb by 6.7 percent annually. Thus, as we enter the 21' Century, international leisure travel is experiencing rapid increases in numbers of persons and economic impacts for many nations and regions.

A General Systems Theory of the Consumer Psychology of Travel Behavior

Here are a few of the propositions that follow from a general systems view of the consumer psychology of travel behavior.

PI: travel and leisure orienting (TLO) foundation variables are the primary explanatory variables for consumers' travel horizons. For example, both heavy travelers and non-travelers have unique core value systems, lifestyles, travel-related motivations, and income and education distributions. Each segment makes use of different external sources of information and marketing influences.
P2: consumers use a blend of unconscious (i.e., automatic, see Bargh 1994) and conscious (i.e., controlled or strategic) thinking processes regarding different travel-related issues. For some segment of consumers, travelers think about thinking, that is, they have meta-cognitions about how they should go about searching and deciding a travel-related issue.

P3: consumer handling of information, both internal from memory and external from friends, family, and marketing sources, affects their travel decisions. How consumers go about combining external information with travel-related information retrieved from memory before and during their trips is a core issue in CPTHL.

P4: thinking by travelers includes bits and pieces of automatic, controlled, and partially controlled thinking processes (see Bargh 1994).

P5: discretionary travel includes several focal behaviors that may or may not include destination choices. For some trips, the activity, not the destination, dominates plans and behaviors of the visitor, for example, the golf excursion.

P6: monitoring (i.e., sense making perceptions about what is/has happened) and evaluating the worth of experiences completed are outcome variables that affect overall satisfaction and post-experience intentions toward doing similar travel-related behaviors. Thus, consumer perceptions and judgments regarding specific events experienced during travel influence global quality assessments of the trip experience. The global quality assessment affects global satisfaction with the trip; global satisfaction affects post-experience intentions toward performing similar trips as well as the word-of-mouth stories told by the traveler to friends and family members.

P7: these perceptions, quality judgments, global satisfactions, and intentions often become clear to travelers only upon their telling of their trip experiences to friends and family members; thus, word-of-mouth telling, recommending by travelers to friends, influences travelers deciding on post-experience intentions.

Only a brief introduction of a general systems framework of CPTHL is presented here. Figure 3 is intended to represent a mental map useful to broadening and deepening understanding when planning further research. Detailed development of a general systems framework of CPTHL is available elsewhere (see Woodside and MacDonald 1994).

Conclusions

Scholars devoted to increasing knowledge of CPTHL are now working on several theoretical and empirical approaches to provide deep understanding of the motivations, decision-making, behaviors, and outcomes of leisure activities. Particular note should be made of the interdisciplinary perspectives these scholars bring to the field of CPTHL. Researchers in the field of CPTHL are particularly prone to accept both qualitative and a quantitative approaches to the study of leisure behaviors.