



## Destination Attracting from Online Imagination

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### Abstract

The research goal of this study was to investigate how motivation, consumption, and recommendation online affect the destination choice. Samples from the online travel communities were collected by mailing a questionnaire survey to participate. In total, 2,100 invitation messages were mailed to the members of the three travel communities. Of these, 456 were returned completed (a return rate of 21.71%). From the flow perspective, the information about destination will have an impact on the travelers' cognitive image of destination when a traveler visits an online travel community. Tourism marketers need to understand that the mental images that come to mind make travelers feel as though they were actually experiencing the destination featured in the advertisement. Moreover, Destinations should redouble their efforts in using advertising to grow destination advocacy through the integration of online travelers' contact points.

### Keywords

Online travel communities; Consumption vision; Recommendations; Decision making

### Introduction

Travel has become a favorite global leisure activity. Previous research has indicated that travelers behave differently in an exciting, leisure, non-home environment. The motives of travelers while on holiday include seeking unique travel destinations [1], travel products [2,3], and souvenirs related to the locations visited.

Moreover, travelers not only read and use information from online advertising during their choice-making, but also post their comments on travel products and services on the virtual environment [4]. Previous research stated online advertising credibility is core to consumer search and consumption behaviors that allow advertisers to harvest value from online communities [5]. That is, travelers' opinions posted on leading travel communities are analyzed to gain an understanding of the destination experience being manifested; Thus, the purpose of the study is a need to understand how the recommendations from an online community acts as a catalytic agent for travel decisions.

Traditionally, destination marketing has included improving the image of an area to attract travelers and increasing the range of facilities and amenities available to the local community. From the online perspective, travelers navigate through the Internet to obtain e-tourism-related content. Travelers not only read and use information from online

advertising during their choice-making, but also post their comments on travel products and services on the virtual environment [4]. Thus, the main advantage of recommendations for travel destination is that large amounts of content can be accessed quickly, and the organization of such content is flexible for travelers. Accordingly, the value of online advertising in supporting vacation planning is determined by its ease of access and navigation [6-9], and is uniquely related to its hypertext nature and the searcher's navigation behavior.

The research goal of this study was to investigate how motivation, consumption, and recommendation in the online environment affect the destination choice of travelers. We formulated the destination choice model from the perspective of flow experience and social identity theory, and we collected online travel community participation samples by mailing a questionnaire to those members who posted more than five recommendations on the European part of the travel communities regarding their travel experience.

### Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The research model of this study comes from a flow experience and social identity perspective, whereby consumption vision has a positive relationship with the destination image and choice

#### Flow experience

Flow is defined as the holistic experience that people feel when they act with total involvement, and it is also regarded as a psychological condition in which the person simultaneously feels cognitively efficient, motivated, and happy [10,11]. This definition suggests that flow comprises four components: control, attention, curiosity, and intrinsic interest. When in the flow state, people become absorbed in their activity; their awareness is narrowed to the activity itself, they lose self-consciousness, and they feel in control of their environment.

Flow has been studied in the context of information technology and is thought to be useful for understanding consumer behavior of online travel-community members [12,13]; From the flow perspective, the enjoyment of information about destination will have an impact on the travelers' cognitive image of destination when a traveler visits an online travel community, and the online advertising will be enhanced desires to travel of tourists, make tourists want to see something different that they don't normally see.

Tourism marketers will promote the destinations via online communities; hence, it is important that it should make travelers feel involved and enjoying when they search online for travel products and information around the virtual environment. That is, an online community places high value on enabling participants to achieve the best possible solutions, and a funny destination image can influence tourists' destination preferences. Moreover, knowing that travelers themselves become the technical and ethical basis for travel decisions made from virtual environment, online travel communities serve as a reference group that could significantly influence the beliefs, attitudes, and choices of travelers.

#### Social identity theory

Social identity theory is defined as the individual's knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional

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and value significance of this group membership to the individual [14-16]. It can be used to understand the role of country of origin and foreign branding in consumer behavior. The social identification of members through their online travel community experience and its positive behavioral outcomes, as well as the loyalty to an online travel community, would lead members to purchase travel products. In addition, online communities provide a potential environment to affect sales by spreading recommendations.

From the perspective of social identity theory, prior research has shown a consumer's judgment of an event (e.g., travel destination) to be contingent on the psychological distance from the event [17]. The traveler also considers whether his or her self-concept can accommodate that role while making the decision. In addition, online advertising relies on the use of images to convey messages to the audience and offers opportunities for individuals and groups to provide alternatives to the existing set of dominant ideas [18]. The content of online advertising is developed to appeal and provide information to specific groups of Internet users, and online community members rate reviews containing identity-descriptive information more positively [17]. The prevalence of reviewer disclosure of identity information is associated with increases in subsequent online product sales.

### Travelers' desire to travel

In tourism research, the motivation to travel refers to the set of needs that predispose a person to participate in a touristic activity [1,19]. With the desire to travel, tourists actively search for information and use induced sources. The most effective types of information sources for forming images are word-of-mouth communication [4], especially from family and friends, and the tourists' onsite experiences. Previous research shows that one of the important tools for destination managers in the information and promotional mix is marketing and advertising.

### Cognitive image of destination

A destination image constitutes the beliefs, ideas, and impressions a person holds with regard to a certain destination [20]. Travelers are initially pushed by internal desires or emotional factors [21], such as their personal escape [22], psychological or physical health [23], thrill and adventure [24], and social interactions [23], and then are pulled by external or tangible resources, such as natural or artificial attractions that destinations possess; travelers' motive has a significant influence on the image of destination and revisit intention [21,25]. The following hypothesis is thus proposed:

Hypothesis 1: The desire to travel of a tourist is positively associated with the cognitive image of the destination.

### Consumption vision of advertising

A consumption vision consists of a series of vivid mental images of product-related behaviors and their consequences [26,27]; this vision allows consumers to more accurately anticipate the actual consequences of product use. From the flow experience perspective, online advertising provides the opportunity to experience a different artistic sight about the destination [12,13], and emphasizes on history, heritage, and knowledge of the travel destination. That is, online travel communities basically place a communication environment; when travelers search the travel community for the destination they need, they are influenced by the message via advertising. The following hypothesis is thus proposed:

Hypothesis 2: The consumption vision of advertising is positively associated with the cognitive image of the destination.

### Recommendations in online travel communities

Recommendation is defined as the opinion a person provides to users about the items of his/her interest based on his/her past preferences, history of purchases, demographic information, and other relevant information [11]. Travelers may employ a common external search strategy, conferring with a perceived expert on the Web site when they make a decision. Thus, tourism marketers have trumpeted the importance of recommendations in creating the image of the destination. This leads to hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 3: Recommendations in online travel communities are positively associated with the cognitive image of the destination.

### Destination choice

Destinations can be classified on the basis of their components or tourist orientation [28]. Destination image provides a theoretical foundation for the assessment of the image potential tourists have prior to visitation. The cognitive image impacts affective image, the cognitive image change among visitors, and its relationship to their loyalty to a well-established destination brand [29-31]. In short, the image of a destination plays an important role in predicting destination choice. Travelers can search online for travel destination and information in the popular travel forums, and the image of the destination will impact on the behavior intention to choose a travel destination. This leads to hypothesis 4.

Hypothesis 4: The cognitive image of a destination is positively associated with the destination choice of travelers.

### Research Methodology

A survey program was developed to handle the data-collection process using the My3q Web site (<http://www.my3q.com>). The design of the questionnaire linked it to the invitation message on three travel communities: BACKPACKERS (<http://www.backpackers.com.tw/forum/>), EUROTRAVEL community (<http://www.eurotravel.idv.tw/>), and TRIPADVISOR (<http://www.tripadvisor.com.tw/>).

The questionnaire was constructed based largely on existing measures that were identified as suitable for this study. An English version of the questionnaire was first compiled and modified to suit the context of destination choice and then translated into Chinese; from content validity perspective, two professors in tourism management and one professor in information management verified and refined the survey items for translation accuracy. A pretest of the Chinese version of the questionnaire was performed, with five managers in the travel and tourism industry assessing its logical consistencies, ease of understanding, sequence of items, and contextual relevance. The comments collected from these managers led to several minor modifications of the wording and the item sequence. Furthermore, a pilot study was conducted involving 30 Master's students who were members of various online travel communities. Comments and suggestions on the item contents and structure of the instrument were solicited.

In total, 2,100 invitation messages were mailed to the members of the three travel communities. Of these, 456 were returned completed (a return rate of 21.71%). About 54.4% of the respondents were males and 45.6% were females. Majority (50%) of the subjects were between the ages of 31 and 40 years. They were also frequent users

and experienced members of the communities. Around 39.4% of the participants visited online travel communities for more than 6 years, and 68.2% reported that the frequency of using online travel community was more than 4 times per week.

**Measures**

We first conducted literature reviews on related topics to examine the external validity of our research model. We then developed the questionnaire items based on the literature. The measures used to operationalize the constructs in the research model were mainly adopted from some of the related studies conducted in the past, with minor wording changes tailored to the interviewees. This resulted in the identification of 23 potential research items. These scales are summarized in Table 1.

**Analysis and Results**

We follow the two-step procedure to analyze the collected data [32,33]. Specifically, before incorporating the structural restrictions, we estimated and re-specified the measurement model. The LISREL 8.50 program was used to perform confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the convergent and discriminant validity of the remaining items and scales.

As shown in Table 2, all the  $\lambda$  values in the CFA model exceeded 0.5, the model fit for CFA was reasonable, with a root mean square error (RMSE) of 0.07, and a comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.91. All loadings are of a reasonable magnitude and are significant at  $p < 0.05$ . This pattern of strong loadings provided preliminary evidence of scale validity. Further, the construct reliabilities were in a reasonable range between 0.87 and 0.93. Except for environmental uncertainty, the average variance extracted (AVE) of the remaining constructs was greater than 0.5 (Table 3). In general, these results suggest acceptable unidimensionality, internal consistency, and adequate reliability for these measures.

Structural equation modeling was performed to test the hypothesized model; the overall goodness-of-fit was assessed in terms of the model fit measures: Our finding that GFI is 0.87, IFI is 0.91, CFI is 0.91, AGFI is 0.83, RMR is 0.045, RMSEA is 0.078 PNFI is 0.72 and PGFI is 0.64. The results of this hypothesized destination choice model indicate an acceptable fit of the model.

Results for hypotheses testing through structural model estimation are summarized in Table 3. Among these hypotheses, three are supported, and Hypotheses one is not supported in the study.

**Conclusions and Implications**

First, the findings of this study provide interesting insights for consumption vision created in destination choice. As our analysis, the desire to travel of a tourist is positively associated with the cognitive image of the destination was not supported. Compared with push motivation was directly influence destination loyalty and satisfaction of customer. That is, desires to travel will be positively associated with the cognitive image of the destination; however, there are other variables that may replace the motivation of travel in the study.

Tourism marketers need to understand that the mental images that come to mind make travelers feel as though they were actually experiencing the destination featured in the advertisement [27]. That is, online advertisements make travelers fantasize about the opportunity to experience the featured destination. Thus, tourism marketers should create attractive advertisements in the online travel communities, and the destination images that come to the mind of travelers form a series of events in their mind, events of which they are a part.

For example, in maintaining a good relationship and clear communication between destination marketers and their customers in online travel communities, marketers in the online environment

**Table 1:** Scale development.

Factor	Item	Reference
Desires to Travel of Tourist (DTT)	1. I want to see something new and exciting.	Sangpikul, (2008)
	2. I want to see something different that I don't normally see.	
	3. I want to experience cultures that are different from mine.	
Cognitive Image of Destination (CID)	4. This destination offers a lot in terms of tourist facilities.	Walters, Sparks &
	5. This destination provides a variety of recreation activities.	Herington, (2007)
Consumption Vision (CV)	6. This destination has a variety of travel services.	Walters, Sparks & Herington, (2007)
	7. This destination lets me think of local culture.	
	8. The mental images that came to mind formed a series of events in my mind in which I was a part of.	
	9. The mental images that came to mind made me feel as though I was actually experiencing the destination featured in this advertisement.	
	10. This advertisement made me fantasize about having the opportunity to experience the featured destination.	
	11. I could easily construct a story about myself and the featured destination based on the mental images that came to mind.	
	12. It was easy for me to imagine being at this destination.	
Recommendations (RECM)	13. Whilst reviewing this advertisement I found myself daydreaming about the featured destination.	Cheung et al., (2008)
	14. Whilst reviewing the advertisement many images came to mind.	
	15. Recommendations about destination online will affect destination choice of mine.	
	16. Recommendations about destination online will provide me with different advisory opinion.	
Destination Choice (DC)	17. Recommendations about destination online will change my traveling intention.	Moghimehfar & Nasr-Esfahani, (2011)
	18. I will make decision by the recommendations from virtual environment.	
	19. Recommendations online will change the destination I intend to travel.	
	20. My destination choice was affected by the low price of infertility treatment.	
	21. My destination choice was affected by lack of expertise.	
	22. My destination choice was affected by legal restrictions.	
	23. My destination choice was affected by tourist attractions.	

**Table 2:** Hypothesis and Results.

Hypothesis		t-value	Standard coefficients	Results
H1	Desires to Travel of Tourist -> Cognitive Image of Destination	1.73	0.08	Not Supported
H2	Consumption Vision -> Cognitive Image of Destination	7.98*	0.55	Supported
H3	Recommendations -> Cognitive Image of Destination	2.63*	0.10	Supported
H4	Cognitive Image of Destination -> Destination Choice	6.30*	0.41	Supported

P <0.05\*

**Table 3:** Reliability, Correlation Coefficients, and AVE Results.

Construct	Mean	S.D.	Composite Reliability	AVE	DTT	CV	RECM	CID	DC
DTT	4.59	0.56	0.93	0.77	<b>0.87</b>				
CV	3.29	0.90	0.91	0.66	0.225	<b>0.81</b>			
RECM	4.42	0.69	0.92	0.69	0.280	0.318	<b>0.83</b>		
CID	3.29	0.90	0.91	0.58	0.239	0.525	0.307	<b>0.75</b>	
DC	3.37	1.09	0.87	0.66	-0.73	0.292	0.079	0.352	<b>0.81</b>

Notes: [a.] The main diagonal shows the square root of the AVE; [b.] Significance at  $p < 0.05$  level is shown in bold; [c.] DTT stands for desires to travel of tourist, CV for consumption vision, RECM for recommendations, CID for cognitive image of destination, DC for destination choice.

should make and keep promises by providing full artistic advertisement about the destination, delivering the right travel product to the travelers, and offering unfailing travel service, which includes clear guide information.

Second, our findings indicate that the recommendations in an online travel community will positively influence destination choice behavior. Recommendations from members play a role of knowledge contributor between conformity in virtual communities [11], which tourism marketers should employ as a marketing tool. Although travelers with a high level of interest in selecting possess a strong motivation and desire to find a desirable travel destination, travelers view recommendations as travel seers and expect them to provide unique opinions before a wonderful journey.

For example, tourism marketers provide diverse means of viewing and customizing several features of a travel product, and through online travel communities travelers are likely to feel more satisfied with their experiences. Additionally, these positive recommendations, combined with the strong motivational tendencies and heightened involvement with advertisement previously described, are attractive to potential travelers.

Third, the findings of the study suggest that the cognitive image of a destination is positively associated with the destination choice of travelers. A destination image constitutes the beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person holds with regard to a certain destination [31]. If the tourism marketer provides a variety of recreation activities as the image of a destination, travelers will feel more attracted when choosing an entity with a name they know and trust. Likewise, we argued that the image of a destination online greatly involves recommendations to buy or try a brand when compared with other recommendations about destination. Destinations should redouble their efforts in using advertising to grow destination advocacy through the integration of online travelers' contact points. Recommendations also can be created online by offering Web visitors the ability to access the opinions of satisfied travelers.

For example, a tourism marketer can create a graphical depiction, in advertisements, of travelers discussing brands or seeking information from online travel communities as a strategy of destination choice. Moreover, recommendations influence not only flows from the opinions of online members to travelers but also spread as a result of relationships among travelers. In other

words, the promotion techniques of tourism marketers that raise the interest of travelers in a destination are important in the online travel environment.

Finally, the transfer motivation of a traveler becomes a challenge for tourism marketers. As the result of the study, the factor of failing desires to travel among tourists will be transferred by advertisement or recommendation online. The results suggest that tourism marketers play a catalyst's role in increasing the transfer travel intention in the virtual environment. An online travel business may adopt different methods to enhance its customer satisfaction level. For example, linking the government to a travel company may entail using the online travel Web site as its official Web site to retain a traveler by keeping personal data. Various incentive mechanisms that focus on relationship building may be provided, as when a potential traveler enters a significant amount of personal data or positive recommendation about a target destination at a Web site. The result of recommendations online on a destination will provide travelers with different opinions, and change their travel intention.

### Limitations

First, while this study has produced meaningful data for the development of multidimensional measures of factors that influence destination choice behavior, the data come from members of online travel communities, the conclusions and implications cannot be generalized to other professional online communities. Second, as Senecal and Nantel (2004) stated, online recommendation sources can be sorted into three broad categories. As a result, we recommend future researchers to investigate the effects of various types of online recommendation sources on the destination choice with online advertising.

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