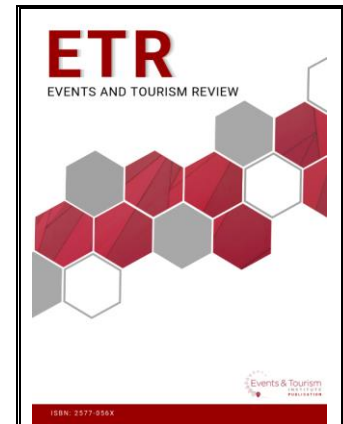


Important Secondary Information Sources to Form Destination Image

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Abstract

This study examined what secondary information sources were important in forming individuals' image of a destination. In addition, this study looked into the differences in important information sources based on sociodemographic variables. The results of the comparative analyses showed some significant differences in information sources for destination image among four country context groups. Of the sociodemographic variables, differences were found between certain information sources and education level. Also, significant relationships were found between information sources and age. This study has implications for destination marketing organizations.

Keywords: Information Sources, Destination Image, Sociodemographic Variables, Comparative analysis

Introduction

There are numerous destinations in existence, which translates to intense competition among them. People may not be aware of destinations due to the lack of information or perceived negative image that can lead to an adverse chance of being selected as a potential site for visit. There are an abundance of research findings that point to the fact that image has a major influence on the decision-making process and post-decision behaviors, especially for destinations (e.g., Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Castro, Amario, & Ruiz, 2007; Chen & Kerstetter, 1999; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2012). Therefore, it is important for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) to understand how people form an image in an effort to sway them at the right time using the right communication channel.

Image is formed by an individual's rational and emotional interpretation based on cognitive evaluations (i.e., perceptions, knowledge, and beliefs) of the product and affective assessment (i.e., feelings) of the product (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Gartner, 1993; Gwinner, 1997). There are many factors that influence image formation. These factors include physical stimulus factors, such as various information sources, previous experience, and distribution and personal factors, such as characteristics of the person (Baloglu, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Crompton, 1979; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Gunn, 1972; Stern & Krakover, 1993; Um & Crompton, 1990).

Without first-hand experience, people tend to search for information and form a perception about a destination or an event through a multitude of sources, such as friends and family, books, TV, advertisements, movies, Internet, and social media. What people see and hear from these various information sources become a perception in their minds and develop into an image of the destination. Moreover, where individuals get their information from and how it is perceived might differ based on personal characteristics. There is a general understanding that people are different and how they acquire information and process it varies. Therefore, destination marketers might need to tailor their marketing accordingly. With the increasingly diversified global market, a standard one-size-fits-all marketing campaign might not be the most effective.

The purpose of this study is to understand what secondary information sources were important in forming individuals' image of a destination. In addition, this study attempted to identify differences in the importance of information sources based on sociodemographic characteristics. This study will suggest information sources and personal factors that marketers should pay attention to when sending out information regarding the destination. Lastly, this study will add to the limited and dated literature regarding information sources and sociodemographic characteristics.

Literature Review

Image Formation

For the past couple of decades, research related to destination image has evolved to include different aspects in an effort to gain a better understanding of it. Of those studies, both how people form an image of a destination and what influences the formation have been an interest of many researchers (e.g., Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). First-hand experience and various information sources have an imperative role in forming an image of a destination. Individuals learn about a destination through actual visitation or search of information including the amount of time spent on processing the information (Gursoy, 2011; Prentice & Andersen, 2003).

According to Gartner (1993), the image forming process can be described as a continuum of different information sources that operate separately to form one single image in people's minds. Gartner (1993) identified five agents or information sources: (1) overt induced – traditional advertising in mass media; (2) covert induced – using celebrities in promotion activities, reports, or articles; (3) autonomous – mass media broadcasting news, documentaries, films, television programs about the destination; (4) organic – information received from friends and relatives based on their knowledge or experience; and (5) a visit to the destination – the final point of the continuum in the image formation process. Based on this continuum, Gartner (1993) suggested that an actual visit is a secondary image that is formed after the other agents. On the contrary, Phelps (1986) considered the first-hand experience the primary image. Phelps (1986) also implied that image formed by organic, induced, and autonomous information sources are secondary images. Govers, Go, and Kumar (2007) proved that secondary information sources were important in influencing image prior to visitation. However, in the existence of previous experience, an actual visit may be more influential than information gained from other information sources when making a decision (Mazursky, 1989). When there is a first-hand experience, the individual might not feel the need to search for additional information (Beerli & Martín, 2004). Based on the above discussion, this study will categorize information sources by primary and secondary where primary information source is related to first-hand experience and secondary information sources are related to other induced, autonomous, and organic sources that are not based on the actual visit.

Primary Information Sources

Information sources are called stimulus factors (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999) or image forming agents (Gartner, 1993) that affect the formation of perceptions and evaluations. They are related to the amount and variety of information sources people are exposed to (Beerli & Martín, 2004). This includes information gathered about a destination after visiting, which is first-hand

experience. Several researchers have found that a first-hand experience with a destination influences its image. These researchers advised that images formed during an actual visit tend to be more realistic, complex, and different from images formed through secondary sources (Gartner & Hunt, 1987; Pearce, 1982; Phelps, 1986). In addition, the more frequent the actual experience, a more positive image will be generated (Beerli & Martín, 2004; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Milman & Pizam, 1995; Sharifpour et al., 2014). However, Beerli and Marín (2004) found that the number of past visits to a destination influenced the cognitive image, which could be rather negative. Milman and Pizam (1995) and Sharifpour et al. (2014) suggested that experience and familiarity with a destination increased the interest in visiting and lessens risk perceptions of the destination. Echtner and Ritchie (1993) suggested that people that are more familiar with a destination hold more holistic, psychological, and unique images. On the other hand, people that are less familiar have images based on attributes, functional aspects, and common features (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). On the contrary, Sparks and Pan (2009) did not find prior visit as a significant factor in influencing destination image.

Secondary Information Sources

Without the existence of first-hand experiences, people seek information from a mixture of sources to acquire knowledge regarding the destination. Fodness and Murray (1998, 1999) found that tourists ranked the use of brochures, friends/relatives, social clubs, and personal experience highly. However, the authors noted that the sources used depended on the phase of travel. According to Beerli and Martín (2004), word-of-mouth from friends or family is considered to be the most influential communication channel. Based on their findings, the authors suggested that it is important to match the reality of the destination when transmitting information out to the market. Govers et al. (2007) found that overall covert induced and autonomous agents – television, literature, the Internet, pictures, and movies – were important information sources for destinations. Of those sources, television was ranked as the number one information source, closely followed by direct experience (first-hand experience). Word-of-mouth, magazines, and the Internet were also ranked in the top five. The authors also found that different information sources influenced perceptions based on the destination. For example, their study of seven destinations showed that information related to Florida was collected via television, movies, and magazines, compared to Dubai, where information was gathered through word-of-mouth. Similar to Govers et al. (2007), Sparks and Pan (2009) found that television programs were the top source for Chinese tourists when collecting information about Australia as a destination. The second most important source was friends followed by fashion magazines and travel books, then newspapers and tourist brochures. About half of their respondents gathered information on Chinese websites. Based on the literature, the following hypothesis was developed:

H₁: Important information sources for destination image are different among destinations.

The advancement of technology and global media in modern society influence the types of information sources, and the way information is searched, received, and processed (Frías et al., 2012). The Internet has become a major source of information for tourists (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Wu, Wei, & Chen, 2008). With the massive amount of information available, searching on the Internet has increasingly become the

leading source of travel information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). The Internet and social media are interactive in nature (Govers et al., 2007) and are platforms where people are able to not only retrieve comprehensive and up-to-date information (Vich-I-Martorell, 2004) but also freely publish information about a destination (Llodrà-Riera et al., 2015). People are no longer passive consumers. They generate content, collaborate, and comment through social networks (Llodrà-Riera et al., 2015). It has become a challenge for destination marketers because people tend to believe and rely on user-generated content (UGC) than what is disseminated by marketers (Munar, 2011).

Llodrà-Riera et al. (2015) focused on web platforms as an information source construct that influences destination image formation. The authors incorporated Web 1.0, which offers first-hand information about a destination and suppliers and Web 2.0, which offers UGC as sources of information about a destination. Unlike previous studies that suggest the Internet, as a whole, as an induced source that influences the perceived image of a destination (e.g., Beerli & Martín, 2004), the authors suggested that there are various web platforms of the Internet that can be classified as either organic, induced, or autonomous. For web platforms, the authors used web pages, blogs, social networks, portals, photo or video sharing applications, forums, and even maps. Of the different web platforms, search engines (e.g., Google) were the most important, followed by online maps. Of the web pages that offered UGC, user appraisals (e.g., Tripadvisor) and social networks were the most important. Overall, web pages by intermediaries and suppliers were not as useful as the abovementioned (Llodrà-Riera et al., 2015).

Personal Factors

Besides past experience, sociodemographic characteristics and information sources are important factors that form images of destinations. People develop images of a destination via the exposure to various stimulus factors – information sources – but how the attributes and aspects that make up that image is perceived vary based on individual characteristics (Um & Crompton, 1990). In other words, how people receive information that is funneled through a variety of sources will be different depending on personal factors. These personal factors are composed of psychographic characteristics (e.g., motivations, values, personality, lifestyle, etc.) and sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, education level, income level, family lifecycle, place of residence, etc.) (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Bramwell & Rawding, 1996; Gartner, 1993).

Individuals' information search behavior is influenced by personal factors, such as learning, perception, motivation, personality, and attitude (Luo, Feng, & Cai, 2004). It has been found that demographic characteristics can be used to represent individual factors that affect information search behavior (Luo et al., 2004). Woodside and Ronkainen (1980) reported that people with a higher socioeconomic class preferred the use of travel agents as an information source. Gitelson and Crompton (1983) found that older people tend to use travel agents and people with higher education levels (college-educated) were more likely to use destination specific literature. On the other hand, Schul and Crompton (1983) did not find any statistical significance between sociodemographic variables and travelers' information search behavior. The authors suggested that psychographic variables are more effective than sociodemographic variables in explaining external search behavior of international leisure travelers. Pitkow and Kehoe (1996) stated that people that use the Internet as an information source tend to be white males who represent a higher socioeconomic status. Another study on the usage of the Internet

by Bonn, Furr, and Susskind (1998) noted that gender, education, income, race, and occupation have an influence. Luo et al. (2004) found that gender and household income influenced information search preference. More specifically, they found that males with higher household incomes were more likely to use the Internet. The same study did not find any difference in information source preference based on age, education, and occupation. In their study of gender differences in online travel information search, Kim, Lehto, and Morrison (2007) showed that females value general websites and official destination websites more than males. In addition, females rated printed materials (e.g., brochures, travel guidebooks) higher than males. On the other hand, TV, newspaper, and travel agents did not show any significant gender differences.

Based on the literature on personal factors, the following hypothesis was developed to test the relationships between information sources and gender, age, marital status, educational level, income, and ethnicity:

H₂: Important information sources for destination image are different based on sociodemographic variables.

Methodology

A structured survey was designed with items adopted from past literature. The importance of information sources for destination image (6 items) and the importance of information sources for the Olympics Games image (6 items) were measured on a 7-point importance scale (1=Extremely unimportant, 7=Extremely important). The importance of information sources items were based on several studies (e.g., Beerli & Martín, 2004; Fodness & Murray, 1998, 1999; Govers et al., 2007; Llodrà-Riera et al., 2015). The current study will only focus on the information sources for destination image. The main part of the survey included country image (9 items based on Kim, Kang, & Kim, 2014; Lai, 2015), destination image (12 items based on Tasci, 2009; Tasci and Gartner, 2007; Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007), and Olympic Games image (10 items based on Deng and Li, 2013; Florek and Insch, 2011; Hallmann, Kaplanidou, and Breuer, 2010; Kaplanidou, 2009). However, these items were not the focus of the current study. Items related to past experience with the country and the Olympics as well as familiarity with the Olympics and interest in the Olympics were included in the questionnaire. Lastly, sociodemographic information was collected at the end of the survey (i.e., gender, age, education level, marital status, residence state, annual income, and ethnicity).

Data were collected for four host destinations of past Olympic Games: England – the host of 2012 Summer Olympics ($n=97$), Greece – the motherland of the Olympics ($n=97$), Brazil – the host of 2016 Summer Olympics ($n=94$), and Russia – the host of 2014 Winter Olympics ($n=95$). Although it is the city that technically hosts the Olympics, there are lasting impacts not only on the city but also on the host region and host country, such as host country's image and economy (e.g., Kang & Perdue, 1994; Kasimati & Dawson, 2009; Min Han, 1990). In addition, since the whole nation is involved in the bidding process, planning, organizing, and participating in the mega event, the spotlight is on the entire country. For this reason, the images at the country level rather than city level were measured. MTurk participants were randomly assigned to one of the four country contexts once they signed the online consent. Except for one comparative analysis of the four destination groups, the present study used the combined data

set. Descriptive statistics, frequencies, correlations, independent samples *t*-test, and one-way ANOVA tools of SPSS 23 were used to analyze the data set.

A random sample of 422 was obtained from an Internet survey marketplace of voluntary survey takers – Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Data were checked for any missing values and outliers. There were only 25 responses from outside of the United States. Since the study focused on U.S. residents’ perceptions, these cases were excluded from the study. After deleting those cases, a sample of 383 was used for comparison analyses. In preparation for comparative analyses, the normality of the distribution of values was assessed by inspecting the skewness and kurtosis values as well as the shape of the distribution. In addition, data is independent of one another. The data showed no violations of assumptions. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the importance of information sources scale was 0.71, slightly above the 0.70 threshold (Nunnally, 1978).

Results and Discussion

The demographic profiles of respondents are provided in Tables 2, 3, and 4. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 74 with the majority in their 30s (37.9%) or 20s (32.9%). The sample was almost an even split between males (54.3%) and females (45.7%). Slightly more than half have graduated from college/university (52.8%), and less than half are single (48.8%). The majority is white/Caucasian (73.8%). Income levels were almost evenly distributed. In addition to the demographic information, some travel information related to the Olympic Games were collected. Most of the respondents (93.9%) have never attended the Olympic Games. There were a total of 18 respondents that have been to the Olympics and of those, 45.5% were the Olympics held in the United States – the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games or the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. A small percentage of respondents (25.2%) expressed their interest in attending the Olympic Games in the future. The majority of respondents (91.9%) have never been to the destination they were assigned to.

Table 1. Importance of information sources for different groups in different country contexts (ANOVA)

Information Sources	England (n=97)	Greece (n=97)	Brazil (n=94)	Russia (n=95)	One-way ANOVA Test significance
Prior visit	3.91 (1.963)	3.78 (1.804)	3.51 (1.849)	3.73 (1.910)	.637
General knowledge from school	4.83 (1.083)	4.89 (1.030)	4.29 (1.569)	4.81 (1.104)	.001**
TV programs	4.98 (1.196)	4.73 (1.254)	4.80 (1.295)	4.67 (1.125)	.186
Word-of mouth	5.22 (1.283)	5.43 (1.172)	5.02 (1.336)	4.94 (1.428)	.030*
Printed or online news media	5.18 (1.170)	5.09 (1.242)	5.45 (1.322)	5.34 (1.017)	.172
Social media	4.43 (1.547)	4.70 (1.260)	4.97 (1.763)	4.69 (1.445)	.093

Note: 7-point Likert scales (1 = Extremely Unimportant to 7 = Extremely Important), * $p < .5$, ** $p < .01$

Table 1 presents the important information sources for destination image. Word-of-mouth and printed or online news media were the highest rated information sources, on average. Word-of-mouth was rated the highest for the England group (5.22) and the Greece group (5.43). It was rated the second highest for the Brazil group (5.02) and the Russia group (4.94). Printed or online news media was rated the highest for Brazil (5.45) and Russia (5.34) and second highest

for England (5.18) and Greece (5.09). Prior visits were the lowest rated information source for all groups. The information sources that showed a statistically significant difference among the groups were word-of-mouth ($p < .05$) and general knowledge from school ($p < .01$). Post-hoc Scheffe tests were run to find exactly where the differences were; however, the results showed that the groups are actually similar. Therefore, H_1 was not supported.

Table 2 shows the correlation between age and important information sources. The results show that age has a small to medium negative relationship with three information sources. To be more specific, the older the age, prior visit, general knowledge from school, or social media is considered a less important information source. Based on the results in Table 3, there were no significant differences found between males and females.

Table 2. Correlations of information sources and age ($n=381$)

	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	Age	Prior visit	General knowledge from school	TV programs	Word-of-mouth	Printed or online news media	Social media
Information Sources for Destination Image	Age	1						
	Prior visit	-.166**	1					
	General knowledge from school	-.145**	.094	1				
	TV programs	.057	.087	.281**	1			
	Word-of-mouth	.014	.126*	.146**	.295**	1		
	Printed or online news media	.007	.012	.219**	.354**	.277*	1	
	Social media	-.192**	.220**	.196**	.239**	.301*	.282**	1

*: Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
 **: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Importance of information sources comparison between males and females (t -test)

Information Sources	Males ($n=207$)	Females ($n=174$)	t	Sig.
Prior visit	3.81 (1.882)	3.68 (1.914)	.655	.513
General knowledge from school	4.78 (1.136)	4.74 (1.042)	.375	.708
TV programs	4.77 (1.243)	4.70 (1.165)	.624	.533
Word-of mouth	5.07 (1.287)	5.25 (1.273)	-1.363	.174
Printed or online news media	5.23 (1.215)	5.15 (1.026)	.666	.506
Social media	4.68 (1.434)	4.49 (1.405)	1.286	.199

Note: 7-point Likert scales (1 = Extremely Unimportant to 7 = Extremely Important)

Tables 4 presents the differences in important information sources depending on education level, marital status, ethnicity, and annual income. When comparing the different groups based on the education level of the respondents, statistically significant differences were found in word-of-mouth. The post-hoc Scheffe test revealed that the actual difference lies between respondents with a high school degree and those that have a vocational school/associate degree ($p < .5$). For marital status and ethnicity, there were no statistically significant differences found between the groups.



Table 4. Importance of information sources comparison based on sociodemographic variables (ANOVA)

Information Sources	Sociodemographic Variable					One-Way ANOVA	
	High School (n=80)	Vocational School/ Associate (n=44)	College/ University (n=201)	Master's or PhD (n=56)			
Education Level							
Prior visit	3.65 (1.801)	3.66 (1.892)	3.68 (1.889)	4.25 (2.020)		.211	
General knowledge from school	4.73 (.856)	4.80 (1.091)	4.68 (1.203)	5.05 (.942)		.157	
TV programs	4.78 (.941)	4.82 (1.147)	4.73 (1.288)	4.66 (1.311)		.916	
Word-of mouth	4.88 (1.236)	5.59 (1.106)	5.18 (1.284)	5.09 (1.392)		.027*	
Printed or online news media	5.16 (1.024)	5.20 (1.002)	5.16 (1.231)	5.34 (1.014)		.760	
Social media	4.40 (1.249)	4.48 (1.486)	4.64 (1.467)	4.77 (1.440)		.417	
Marital Status	Single (n=186)	Married (n=124)	Divorced/ Separated (n=33)	Other (n=38)			
Prior visit	3.80 (1.911)	3.83 (1.886)	3.18 (1.868)	3.76 (1.786)		.345	
General knowledge from school	4.76 (1.040)	4.79 (1.191)	4.82 (.805)	4.61 (1.215)		.814	
TV programs	4.72 (1.185)	4.76 (1.278)	4.79 (1.213)	4.74 (1.017)		.984	
Word-of mouth	5.17 (1.282)	5.04 (1.271)	5.27 (1.295)	5.32 (1.037)		.600	
Printed or online news media	5.23 (1.156)	5.15 (1.190)	5.30 (.907)	5.03 (1.014)		.684	
Social media	4.61 (1.396)	4.60 (1.464)	4.27 (1.634)	4.74 (.963)		.555	
Ethnicity	White/ Caucasian (n=281)	African American (n=23)	Hispanic (n=25)	Asian (n=39)	Others (n=13)		
Prior visit	3.68 (1.953)	3.70 (1.329)	4.40 (1.323)	4.15 (1.899)	3.08 (2.221)	.147	
General knowledge from school	4.77 (1.117)	4.87 (.869)	4.64 (.860)	4.74 (1.186)	4.54 (1.059)	.894	
TV programs	4.69 (1.233)	4.78 (.998)	4.84 (1.281)	4.97 (1.112)	4.69 (1.135)	.720	
Word-of mouth	5.14 (1.309)	5.17 (1.114)	5.12 (1.364)	5.26 (1.044)	5.08 (1.729)	.986	
Printed or online news media	5.16 (1.168)	5.00 (1.279)	5.44 (.821)	5.33 (.955)	5.31 (1.160)	.589	
Social media	4.54 (1.471)	4.61 (1.118)	4.88 (1.166)	4.85 (1.226)	4.23 (1.687)	.491	
Annual Income	Under \$15,000 (n=75)	\$15,000- \$24,999 (n=72)	\$25,000- \$34,999 (n=64)	\$35,000- \$49,999 (n=55)	\$50,000- \$74,999 (n=75)	\$75,000 or above (n=40)	
Prior visit	3.48 (2.120)	3.46 (1.711)	3.61 (1.882)	3.98 (1.769)	4.07 (1.913)	4.13 (1.991)	.152
General knowledge from school	4.80 (1.013)	4.76 (1.055)	4.72 (.983)	5.00 (1.247)	4.65 (1.121)	4.60 (1.265)	.493
TV programs	4.64 (1.111)	4.75 (1.097)	4.72 (1.315)	4.96 (1.465)	4.73 (1.131)	4.63 (1.329)	.735
Word-of mouth	5.03 (1.294)	5.15 (1.252)	4.95 (1.463)	5.25 (1.205)	5.41 (1.209)	5.05 (1.085)	.309
Printed or online news media	5.04 (1.224)	5.25 (.946)	5.20 (1.237)	5.25 (1.092)	5.29 (1.075)	5.08 (1.204)	.742
Social media	4.35 (1.428)	4.72 (1.406)	4.41 (1.706)	4.93 (1.152)	4.72 (1.279)	4.40 (1.532)	.138

Note: 7-point Likert scales (1 = Extremely Unimportant to 7 = Extremely Important)



For annual income, there was an interesting result in prior visits. It is the only information source that showed a steady increase in importance rating as the income level rises. The results of the correlation, *t*-test, and ANOVAs show partial support for H₂.

Conclusion and implications

The purpose of this study was to identify important sources people use when searching for information about a destination. In addition, this study looked into whether different information sources are important depending on the destination in question. Lastly, this study examined the important information sources based on sociodemographic variables.

The study results showed some significant differences in information sources for destination image among the four country context groups. Word-of-mouth and printed or online news media were the top two information sources people used to form their images of countries. More specifically, the England group and Greece group considered word-of-mouth as the most important information source, whereas the Brazil group and Russia group rated printed or online news media the most important. The results indicate that England and Greece depend more on word-of-mouth than Brazil and Russia for individuals' forming an image. Beerli and Martín (2004) also found word-of-mouth to be the most influential communication channel in their study. This could be due to the fact that people are more familiar with England and Greece by previous experience. England was the most visited destination of the four (22.7%). Of the four destinations, Brazil and Russia have been in the news related to the Olympic Games more recently than the other two destinations due to the fact that the Games were held in 2016 and 2014, respectively. In addition, there was a good amount of negative publicity that could have left a more lasting effect on people. Destination marketers of Brazil and Russia should strategically target various print and online news media for positive image formation. Govers et al. (2007) found that different information sources influenced perceptions depending on the destination, which is confirmed by the current study.

The lowest rated information source for destination image was related to prior visits. This means that the respondents did not see the importance of actual visit in forming their image of a destination, which agrees with Sparks and Pan (2009). It shows that destination image can be formed through secondary information sources. In this case, where the majority of respondents do not have the first-hand experience, this finding is in line with Gartner (1993) that suggests an actual visit to be the secondary image and Govers et al. (2007) that proved secondary information sources to be important in influencing the image prior to visitation.

Another part of this study was to find differences in important information sources based on sociodemographic variables. The findings of the correlation analysis of age and information sources showed a small to medium negative relationship between age and prior visits, general knowledge from school, and social media. The results indicate that the older the age, the importance of prior visit, general knowledge from school, and social media decreases. In other words, the younger the respondent, the more important the individual considered those three information sources. Of the three, the negative relationship is strongest in social media. This result is understandable because studies show that the younger generation is more dependent on social media for collecting information (e.g., Llodrà-Riera et al., 2015). When asking about an information source related to general knowledge from school, the respondent is answering based on his/her memory. Therefore, the younger the respondent, their recollection of what they

learned in school might be livelier. This finding indicates that what is taught during school years do have an impact on forming people's perceptions.

When comparing the information sources based on education level, overall, there were no significant differences except for word-of-mouth between high school graduates and vocational school/associate degree holders. This shows that education level is not a good predictor for understanding what information sources will be used to form an image. Similar to education level, the income level of respondents is not a good variable to provide an understanding of information source selection. In contrast, Pitkow and Kehoe (1996), Bonn et al. (1998) and Luo et al. (2004) found that income influenced information search preference online.

For the remaining sociodemographic characteristics, gender, marital status, and ethnicity were examined. There were no statistically significant differences found in important information sources based on those characteristics. Along the same vein, Schul and Crompton (1983) did not find any statistical significance between sociodemographic variables and travelers' information search behavior. The authors suggested psychographic variables to explain the external search behavior of international leisure travelers. Unlike previous studies conducted by Pitkow and Kehoe (1996), Bonn et al. (1998), Luo et al., (2004), and Kim et al. (2007), the current study did not find significant differences between males and females. In terms of ethnicity, Bonn et al. (1998) had found that race influenced the usage of the Internet as an information source. There are previous studies that found cultural differences (Chen and Kerstetter, 1999; Frías et al., 2012). However, the respondents of this study all reside in the U.S., although there are different ethnicities. This could have influenced the study results.

The findings of this study suggest that destination marketers should seek and understand the factors that influence information search behavior, including the Internet, social media, and psychographic characteristics. Word-of-mouth consistently ranked highest or second across the board. It seems that individuals are able to obtain information about destinations more easily through organic and personal experiences. Printed or online news media was another information source along with word-of-mouth that ranked highest. Therefore, destination marketers need to remain cognizant of what is being portrayed in the media and continue with strong marketing campaigns that highlight the positive side of the destination. The key implication for marketers of destinations is to make sure they do their best to convey realistic and consistent messages across all communication channels. For information sources like social media where control is difficult, destination marketers need to be aware of what information is being disseminated. This study also suggests that other than age, sociodemographic characteristics do not provide destination marketers with strong suggestions for information sources to focus on to form destination image. Regarding age, destination marketers can concentrate resources on social media for image formation of the younger generation. For academia, this study was able to add to the limited and dated body of literature regarding sociodemographic variables and the important information sources for destination image.

Limitation and Suggestions for Future Research

The limitations of this study present opportunities for future research. First, this study only compared important information sources based on sociodemographic variables. Future research should include psychographic characteristics such as motivation, cultural interest, familiarity, activity, and travel-specific behaviors to see if these variables can better explain

information source selection. Secondly, this study only conducted comparative analyses. Causal relationships were not examined in this particular study. It would be interesting to see which information sources have a stronger influence on destination image. Third, the majority of respondents have not been to the destinations in question. Future studies should include a larger sample of people that have first-hand experience with the destination. In addition, the number of visits, the duration of the visit, and the degree of involvement with the destination during the stay should be collected for more meaningful interpretation of results. Fourth, in terms of information sources, future studies should be more specific about the categorization of the sources. For example, this study only had one option for news media that included both printed and online sources. Therefore, it is difficult to fully understand whether it is the printed news media or online news media that is important. Similarly, there was only one category for social media. With social media becoming a major information source, having it further classified based on the different social media platforms would provide a better understanding of important information sources. In addition, it would be interesting to compare the results with a more diverse sample, in terms of ethnicity or diverse cultures. Lastly, this study only focused on destination image. A future study can concentrate on information sources for event image and see how the results differ from the current study.

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