Structure and process modeling of seemingly unstructured leisure–travel decisions and behavior

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Available from: Arch George Woodside
Retrieved on: 23 August 2015
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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to introduce a structuring and processing model (SPM) as a framework for tourism decision making research.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs McCracken’s long interview to collect data in field settings. The study introduces advances in Mintzberg et al.’s approach to structuring seemingly unstructured decision making to explain travelers’ decision-making processes.

Findings – SPM enables mapping and comparing visitors’ plans, motivations, choices, and consequences. The results demonstrate nuanced decision-behavior dynamics and complexities of visitors’ travel-related unconscious/conscious thinking and behavior.

Research limitations/implications – SPM does not attempt to generalize findings to large survey samples.

Practical implications – Travel planning and execution dynamics dictate that a decision-making funnel metaphor in consumer research does not capture such trip complexity because additional decisions are made when the traveler arrives at the destination.

Originality/value – SPM is dynamic and inclusive explaining simultaneous planning elements as well as considering sub-decisions occurring before and after different phases in the process. This model includes both conscious and unconscious internal retrievals as well as contextual influences relating to current planning affect the decision-making process.

Keywords Tourist behaviour, Long interviews, Ethnography, Unstructured decision making, Tourism management, Decision making, Modelling, Journey planning

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Unmet needs often trigger a process where consumers collect and sort information before and while implementing decisions. The marketing management literature identifies five phases to explain leisure travelers’ trip planning processes. These phases include:

(1) problem recognition;
(2) information search;
(3) evaluation of alternatives;
selection and purchase; and
post-purchase reflection (e.g. Kotler and Armstrong, 2001, p. 193).

This model is describable metaphorically as a decision funnel suggesting consumers consciously collect information and narrow alternatives down to one final answer or choice. The decision funnel has at least two shortcomings when applied to the leisure travel decision process.

First, trip planning is not a single decision; travel planning includes a series of sub-decisions (e.g. Brathwaite, 1992; Woodside and Martin, 2008). Leisure travel decisions are a series of interrelated decisions that lead to destination choice and rejection decisions. Once at the location, more decisions are made as the trip unfolds. Leisure travel decision making is a dynamic process involving a series of seemingly unstructured and unique decisions.

Second, recent evidence suggests most consumer decision making occurs only partially with conscious awareness (see Bargh, 2002; Woodside, 2010). Zaltman (2003, p. 50) estimates at least 95 percent of cognition occurs below awareness suggesting many decisions are made without cognitive thought. Because conscious and unconscious memories affect a person’s thought process, people have difficulty explaining their own behavior (see Rapaille, 2006). Researchers must tap into the individual traveler’s unconscious mind to interpret the associative and causal processes resulting in conclusions, choices, and actions. Collecting data by long interviews and guiding participants to use reflexive thinking (see Hall, 2004) generates nuanced and gestalt images that provide insights of the traveler’s behavior and place (e.g. destinations, accommodations, attractions) attitudes. When customers describe their experiences in think-aloud introspections, tourism executives may achieve deep understanding of their brand’s (e.g. destination, hotel, car rental, restaurant, theme park) competitive advantages (see Thompson et al., 1989).

Travel decision making’s dynamic properties and the need to understand unconscious thinking inform the need for a new model to understand leisure travel. This paper introduces a structuring and processing model (SPM). SPM’s design incorporates tourist decision making’s dynamic process with qualitative data collection designed to uncover unconscious memories. SPM adapts Mintzberg et al.’s (1976) model of structuring seemingly unstructured decision making to explain travelers’ decision-making processes. SPM shows how travelers break down complex decisions into manageable decision modules.

To uncover unconscious memories influencing traveler decision making, SPM researcher employs the long interview method (McCracken, 1988; Woodside, 2010) and interpretations create thick descriptions of traveler behavior. This ethnographic approach examines socio-historical antecedents to show mapping and description of flows of conjunctive thoughts, decisions, events, and outcomes within specific contexts in leisure travel. From the data, processing and behavior streams surface showing relationships among:

- antecedent-to-trip conditions;
- trip planning strategies;
- destination activities-outcomes; and
- outcome evaluations.
The SPM assists researchers in developing gestalt understandings of conscious and unconscious thinking and behaviors (Bargh, 2002; Martin and Woodside, 2011a). Field case studies demonstrate application of SPM to travelers’ decision processes.

**Consumer decision making**

Information-processing theory is a tenet of consumer behavior. Information-processing theory’s characteristics are found in early decision-making models (e.g. Engel et al., 1968; Nicosia, 1966). Gilbert (1991) summarizes these studies and concludes six commonalities exist among them:

1. consumer behavior is a constant decision-making process;
2. the individual consumer is emphasized;
3. behavior is utilitarian and can be explained;
4. a buyer actively searches, evaluates, and stores information;
5. collected information is narrowed down to choose alternatives; and
6. final purchases affect future purchases.

This rational process assumes choices are deliberate, calculated, and seldom unconscious. A decision maker identifies each future choice’s consequences and chooses the best alternative. Consumer information processing steps require significant inputs from socio-environmental and symbolic stimuli. Automaticity allows some steps to be skipped and the process can be disrupted at any point. Finally, completing the steps does not guarantee purchases.

Some scholars identify fundamental flaws in rational choice theory (e.g. Wilson, 2002). Rational choice theory assumes all relevant information is available to decision makers, so decisions are based on all possible alternatives. Growing evidence suggests decisions are less deliberate than rational choice theory proposes. Zajonc (1980, p. 154) proposes “It is further possible that we can like something or be afraid of it before we know precisely what it is and perhaps even without knowing what it is.” This proposition regards unconscious thought as a key process in decision making. Bargh (2002) furthers this proposition by concluding unconscious thinking influences most decisions.

Constructive choice theorists apply choice heuristics or information processing shortcuts rather than “omniscient rationality” (see Ladhari, 2007). Although unconscious thinking is relatively unexplored, this theory affirms subconscious information processing’s influence. Constructive choice decision makers seek to maximize the choice accuracy while minimizing cognitive effort. Subconscious heuristic processing creates spontaneous choices. Choices are based on ease of justifying the resolution to peers.

Ecological systems theory contends an awareness of a person’s environment helps to understand individual choices and behaviors. This approach “incorporates the interactions between the individual, other individuals, and the social structures of society to explain human development” (Raymore, 2002, pp. 41-42). Research insight increases from considering the individuals’ environmental-life constraints in order to fully understand their behavior. Allen’s (2002) FLAG model applies constructive choice theory to ecological systems theory. Detailed descriptions of the informants’ lives include how surroundings and upbringing shape their current implicit and explicit thoughts.
Modeling consumer decision making is complex because several antecedents affect the process. Some decisions are cognitive and require considerable planning and some weighing of features of alternatives; however, other decisions just feel right. Leisure travel decision making likely involves both elements (Martin and Woodside, 2011b). Decision making continues throughout the trip – a dynamic process. Modeling this behavior requires a departure from the traditional consumer decision funnel.

The dynamics tourist choices
The present study recognizes that interpretive researchers carry some implicit, personal views into the field. Considering ying and yang (i.e. the possibilities of opposable beliefs, rationales, and actions that may be representative in a given case study) propositions help interviewers probe in situ with informants – an abductive stance. Abductive inference permits reasoning by considering the possibilities of alternative planned heuristics and behaviors that may be applicable to a specific case (Eco, 1976; Holbrook and Grayson, 1986). A couple traveling together discusses possible travel destination routes for their upcoming trip before booking air travel tickets (and consider alternative heuristics – possible rules for deciding). The couple reports moving from disagreeing to concurrence before finalizing trip plans (the result) – an illustration of pre-trip negotiations.

Prior studies about tourist purchase consumption systems inform how unconscious thinking and ecological systems theory help explain consumer decision making (e.g. Woodside and Dubelaar, 2002). Purchase decisions often are sequential mental and observable steps undertaken by consumers. These acquisitions often lead to a purchase sequence involving other products. Qualitative comparative analyses create useful trip decision typologies (Becker, 1998). Multiple dependent variable influences are described in Woodside et al.’s (2004) thick descriptions demonstrate complex destination behaviors and influence travelers’ thoughts and actions. These variables suggest a dynamic tourist decision process beginning prior to the actual trip decision and continuing after the trip ends.

Figure 1 displays nine issues relevant to construct flows of travel decisions and behaviors. These issues focus on destination choices such as antecedents and consequences of implementing the decision. Although not displayed in Figure 2, other tourism foci include decisions such as mode/route, accommodations, and participation in specific activities. Prior studies suggest these issues are relevant to traveler decision making (e.g. Martin and Woodside, 2008), so only a brief description of these relationships appear below.

Figure 1 provides an abductive template of topics covered during the long interview process. This ethnographic methodology builds minimal structure into the inquiry so the reviewer benefits from surfacing explicitly his or her own tentative system of if-then propositional relationships before entering the field. The arrows represent tentative propositions relevant to following the flow of the general questions. The following descriptions summarize each proposition.

Proposition 1 (P1), box 1 to 2 in Figure 1, proposes visitors’ demographics and lifestyles affect how they frame leisure choices (Fodness, 1992; Hsu et al., 2007). This proposition recognizes household related variables with individual-related factors relate to the decision-making process. Proposition 2 (P2) suggests unexpected or unplanned events occur that may affect the framing of leisure choices. A television
Figure 1.
Theoretical map

Structure of leisure-travel decisions
Figure 2: Structure and process theory of leisure travel decision making

**Phase 1**
First time and repeat visitors making decisions to visit destinations

**Phase 2**
Once the decision to make the trip has been finalized, additional changes are made, particularly on-site

**Phase 3**
Is the experience resulting in a positive experience? Will the destination become part of the invoked set for a trip alternatives in the future?

**Phase 4**
Has a degree of customer loyalty or emotional attachment developed between the customer and the destination?

1. Demographics
2. Framing leisure choices; deciding on how to decide
3. Pre-framing and pre-planning trip issues
4. External influences
5. Choice of trip and destination(s), transportation methods, specific carriers, and accommodations
6. Key activity drivers in planning trip
   - Pre-framing and pre-planning trip issues; trip party members, trip scheduling
   - Trip booking actions
7. At destination activities
8. Situation on-site influences
   - Initiate trip: in-route experiences, decisions, and actions
   - During trip evaluation
9. Post-trip reflecting and reporting to others
program or movie featuring a destination may trigger thoughts about planning a visit (see Kim et al., 2007). Proposition 3 (P3) proposes external and internal personal influences affect framing leisure choices (e.g. Baggio and Sainaghi, 2011). Tapachai and Waryszak (2000) break these stored images into functional, social, emotional, conditional, and epistemic values creating beneficial images in tourists’ minds and affecting destination selection. Proposition 4 (P4) proposes features and perceived benefits in framing leisure choices influence the destination choice. Long-term memory information is recalled to working memory tipping the balance in trip decision-making (Woodside and Lysosnki, 1989).

Proposition 5 (P5) states that information collected for framing and trip planning affects the process of selecting and rejecting destination alternatives (Lockyer and Roberts, 2009). Conscious and unconscious memory retrieval result in either a cognitive decision making process, or a decision based on gut feeling. In the latter case, informant responses express an inability to provide reasons or explanations beyond simply reporting, “It just felt right” (see Allen, 2002). The external stimuli affect leisure choice framing (P2) and influence the final destination choice. Social forces in travel decisions are particularly strong (Moutinho, 1987). Proposition 6 (P6) contends recalling reference groups’ opinions and thoughts influence the selection or rejection of destination alternatives. Proposition 7 (P7) contends key activity drivers solidify destination decisions such as concrete plans and pre-trip actions. Often multiple activity drivers must line up perfectly for an activity to occur (Woodside and Martin, 2008).

Proposition 8 (P8) states key activity drivers affect what is planned and done in a destination. Proposition 8 begins the third phase of the visitor’s unstructured decision making process. Box 7 shows proposition 9 (P9). Visitors interpret events and activities while visiting. This behavior extends Weick’s (1995) proposition about often knowing what we think only after listening to what we say. Surprisingly, experience-related research remains under-represented in tourism research (Ritchie et al., 2011). Finally, proposition 10 (P10) concludes that activities done (and not done) affect the attitude and intention consequences resulting from, and associating with, visiting a destination (see Frazer, 1991). Central to consumption decisions is the proposition that prior purchases and experiences trigger later purchases and recommendations to other people.

**Structure and process model: dynamic modeling theory of leisure travel decision making**

Leisure travel process’ complexity and opportunities for structural deviation suggest the decision funnel is imprecise. Many decisions are made after the visitor arrives. Jenkins’ (1978) identifies a series of sub-decisions both before and during the trip. Using Porter’s (1985) value chain, Brathwaite (1992) provides evidence that trip perceptions are based on linked experiences. Sharma and Christie (2010) show how weak elements in the value chain affect trip experiences. These studies suggest tourism decision making’s dynamic process is unstructured and full of contingencies. To simplify decision making, travelers split decisions into smaller and more familiar decisions. For example, planning a trip is broken down into subroutines such as destination choice, transportation, lodging, key activities, and contingency activities. This partitioning is similar to the process organizations employ when making
infrequently encountered decisions. SPM's primary departure is accounting for the conscious/unconscious dynamic and personal factors influencing travel decisions.

Mintzberg et al.’s (1976) unstructured decision making model explains a process organizations employ when encountering unstructured or infrequently encountered decisions. Their model reduces decisions into identification, development, and selection phases. Once a phase is identified, one or more familiar central routines are enacted to guide the decision maker through the process. Interchangeable sets of familiar routines are applied to the phases to reduce the decision’s complexity. Mintzberg et al.’s (1976) model is more complex than SPM because business and other organizations involve more stakeholder groups. Tourist decision making typically is between two or three key decision makers, so fewer subroutines are needed.

Figure 2 modifies and extends Mintzberg et al.’s (1976) general structuring of unstructured (mainly) organizational purchasing decision processes to individual and family leisure-travel decisions. For consistency with Figure 1, Figure 2 includes the numbering of the activity boxes. Phase one represents the foundation for destination selection. This subroutine combines demographics, pre-framing based on conscious and unconscious memories, and external influences to create criteria to decide which destination to choose. Once criteria are decided, phase two may begin. Failure to reach a decision in phase two typically results in returning to the first phase.

In phase two, alternative destination choices are evaluated based on key activity drivers (e.g. budget constraints). If this subroutine’s key elements line up perfectly, the traveler books the trip. When all key elements do not line up perfectly, the traveler returns to the first phase. For example, Woodside and Martin (2008) describe a husband and wife that required four key elements to line up in order for their trip to pass through phased two. If one tipping points is not met, the trip is cancelled. Once the trip is booked and the traveler departs, the third phase begins.

Phase three occurs during the vacation. This phase is very dynamic because additional stimuli add new variables creating new alternatives and eliminating planned activities. A lost piece of luggage in-transit changes a couple’s plans for their first night at a resort. Positive and negative surprises influence an ongoing evaluation of the trip.

Next, the fourth phase is a self-reflection process. The trip’s evaluation affects the next travel planning process’ first phase. Surprisingly, memories are dynamic and the interpretations vary over time (Zaltman, 2003). Stories often are fragments pieced together differently depending on the situation. Memories serve as external influences to reference groups also framing their next trips. Phase 4 is important because destination loyalty and traveler influence on reference group behavior are key ingredients to destination growth.

Method

Previous consumer research studies suggest direct (reason why) questions are not effective for understanding tourist’s unconscious thinking. Schank (1990) concludes that people tend to process and store information as stories rather than using item-by-item categories. Adaval and Wyer’s (1998) findings confirm this view by showing that information stored as a narrative has more impact on consumers’ judgments than when stored as a list. Cox (1967) offers supporting evidence by understanding grocery shopping behavior through weekly conversations with consumers. Long interviews
enable informants a method to become aware and to report on how cultural and socio-historical forces affecting consumers' thoughts and actions.

To demonstrate application of SPM, an ethnographic field study collected data using McCracken’s (1988) long interview method guidelines. This approach allows respondents to access conscious and unconscious memories. The data unfolds using the structure their minds stored the information (Schank, 1990). As respondents tell their story, they self-interpret the experience providing deeper meaning to their actions and feelings (see Weick, 1995).

Based on the propositions in Figure 1, loosely structured and probing follow-up questions were developed in order to try to understand the rationale behind the decision making process, outcomes, and respondents’ feelings throughout their trip. Interviewers were trained to ask probing or follow-up questions in the event that unexpected issues or experiences surfaced during the interview process (e.g. Hsu et al., 2007). They practiced by interviewing each other.

The field study includes for 60 to 90 minute, in situ interviews. Interviewing tourists while they are experiencing their visits allows interviewers to be reflexive in qualitative analysis (see Hall, 2004). In situ data collection helps interviewers develop etic interpretations of phenomena. In-person interviews also allowed researchers to observe nonverbal communication modalities. An estimated 70 percent of face-to-face conversation is nonverbal suggesting in-person interviews tell most of the story (Hall, 1973).

The sample size is more a function of gathering enough evidence to explain the phenomena than a specific number of interviews. While McCracken (1988) recommends at least five interviews, theoretical sampling achieves the desired results. Theoretical sampling leads to an analysis of specific events and continues until representativeness and consistency are achieved (Corbin and Strauss, 1990, p. 9). The key is collecting evidence to represent a phenomena rather than general findings to a broader population.

Interviews took place at locations and situations considered to provide the “greatest opportunity to gather the most relevant data about the phenomena under investigation” (Stauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 208). Security concerns limit some relevant locations (e.g. the local airport). A second challenge is finding people willing to spend 60-90 minutes talking about their vacation. People on a one-week vacation are very protective of their leisure time. Despite these limitations, interviews were conducted at a variety of locations frequented by tourists including hotel’s recreational areas, a high-end tourist shopping mall, informal tourists’ social gatherings, and staging areas where tourists adjusted to the high altitude for star gazing tours.

The research team deliberately proceeded to sample tourists so that similarities and differences could be maximized. On-site data collection allowed interviewers opportunities for reflexive interpretation to increase their self-discovery of the assessment process (Hollinshead and Jamal, 2007). Informants were tourists visiting Hawaii’s Big Island (BI) between August and October 2006. Both first-time and repeat visitors participated. Care was taken to assure first-time visitors were interviewed at the end of their trips. With the exception of Japanese tourists, all other visitors were interviewed in English. Two bilingual interviewers were employed for Japanese tourist interviews. Each informant received $50 (USD) and a Hawaii-themed t-shirt for their cooperation.
Prospective informants were approached and pre-screened with general questions about their visit and whether they would be willing to participate in an interview. Informants agreeing to participate signed a consent form and they were told that their compensation was not dependent on answering all the questions. The questionnaire includes questions asking for:

- demographic information about members of the traveling party;
- pre-trip planning and sources of information;
- activities and destinations – planned and unplanned;
- issues surrounding flights, accommodations, and ground transportation; and
- overall impressions of their travel experience.

On average, interviews lasted about 80 minutes and the informants answered most questions. At the end of the interview, the informants signed a receipt for their cash payment and chose from a variety of Hawaii-themed t-shirts. To prevent potential for myopic interpretation of the results, researchers not involved in the specific interviews analyzed and interpreted the results.

Written, thick descriptions were completed for each informant. Each case study report was read and revised by the research team. These protocols ensured consistency in the data interpretation.

Findings
Due to the length of the thick descriptions, the findings are presented in terms of how they relate to the SPM (Figure 2). First, a brief description of the participants informs each case study report.

**Helmut**

Helmut is in his early 60s. He and his wife, Helga, are first-time visitors from Bonn, Germany. They visited Hawaii for three weeks and split time between BI, Oahu, and Kauai. Helmut works full-time as a professional scientist (PhD in physics); Helga is in her late 50s and manages their home full-time which includes three children (17, 18, and 21 years old).

This trip denotes the first time that the couple felt confident that all three children could manage without adult supervision. While away, the couple kept in daily contact by telephone with their children back home in Bonn. Helmut’s 90-minute interview was conducted poolside at a hotel in Kailua-Kona. Figure 3 shows Helmut’s dynamic trip modeling process.

Being a scientist, Helmut was fascinated about volcanoes. Helmut followed stories about Hawaii’s volcanoes in the news for many years and he consciously and unconsciously thought about visiting BI to see lava flows. The couple saved more than 20 years of Delta frequent mileage points to take this trip. Besides concerns about the children, they were very economy minded. A necessary condition was accumulating enough mileage awards for first class airline tickets. Over the 20-year wait, Helmut likely explored other options (e.g. enter phase two); however, everything did not line up perfectly. Once the award miles were sufficient and the children old enough, the trip planning began.
Figure 3. Helmut's structure and process theory of leisure travel decision making.
Helga insisted they make a stopover on the US mainland. While Helga supported Helmut’s dream, she wanted to see more than the volcano. Helmut booked a stopover in San Diego. Car rentals and hotels were booked over the internet because the couple was very price sensitive.

Despite more than 20 years of dreaming about Hawaii, Helmut spent no time gathering information about the destination. His face showed disappointment when describing the rough beaches and coastlines making swimming difficult. Helmut did not realize his dream to witness lava flowing. The lava flowed during his visit; however, the best vantage point required taking a helicopter ride. Helmut decided not to spend $100 (USD) to charter a helicopter. Given the effort saving for the trip, Helmut’s lack of research and planning is surprising. Helmut even described Hawaii as being located in the South Pacific. The couple avoided shopping and tourist package options, preferring a relatively sedentary BI visit. The evidence suggests the couple unlikely will return to BI in the future.

Michiko
Michiko is a Japanese woman in her mid-30s. She visited Hawaii in October 2006 with her husband and nine-year-old son. The family lives in Hyogo Prefecture in Japan. The husband works full time for an insurance company; Michiko works part-time at a clothing store. BI was their only destination. They stayed for six nights in the Waikoloa area of BI. Although this trip was Michiko’s second visit to BI, neither her husband nor son had visited Hawaii previously.

The 70-minute interview was conducted at the Ellison Onizuka Visiting Center on Mauna Kea. This location is a staging place for people waiting to acclimate to the change in atmospheric pressure. The family was returning from a star gazing tour on top of Manua Kea. Figure 4 shows Michiko’s dynamic trip modeling process.

When the family started to think about their annual vacation, Hawaii was on the family’s radar. Guidebooks and travel magazines about Hawaii had been collected and read over the previous months. The choice set was limited to splitting time between Oahu and BI, or just BI. Michiko’s first visit to BI apparently left a strong, positive impression in her unconscious memory because she insisted that the entire vacation be spent on BI. She was very impressed with Volcanoes National Park and Michiko had strong feelings that her son must visit that destination.

While phase one really did not require too many decisions, several events had to line up perfectly for phase two. First, the husband only had one specific week that he could take the vacation. If affordable flights and accommodations were not available, the planning process would return to the first phase. The family used their Hilton Travel membership to help plan their trip. Both the hotel and car were booked through Hilton. Michiko booked the air ticket through a travel agent because past bookings always had been less expensive than other alternatives.

The biggest surprises were during phase three. While the visit to BI fulfilled Michiko’s wishes to show her son the volcano, some unexpected events affected their plans. After reading in the travel magazine about star gazing, the family was disappointed that their rental car was not powerful enough to drive up the mountain.

To go star gazing, they were forced to pay for an expensive tour. The star gazing was fabulous; however, Michiko wished they had rented a four-wheel drive vehicle. Also, the family concluded that a three-night stay was sufficient to see everything on BI.
Figure 4. Michiko's structure and process theory of leisure travel decision making
How does SPM explain tourism behavior?
Quantitative tourism decision making studies have difficulty structuring questions to capture large sets of perceived attributes (see Mazanec and Strasser, 2007). Open-ended qualitative studies allow respondents to tell stories – allowing data to flow naturally rather than fit into positivist categories. Once data are collected, a flexible model is necessary that allows researchers to explain the dynamic process. Brathwaite’s (1992) value-chain approach partially solves these problems by creating a dynamic series of micro-decision funnels. Micro-decision funnels assume decision making is linear and not very holistic. SPM solves these problems by creating a flexible method to collect information and a structure allowing for non-linear and holistic decision making.

For Phase 1, memories, demographics, ecological factors, and unconscious memories influenced how both groups framed decision making criteria. Michiko wanted an educational experience for her son. Helmut and Helga chose Honolulu as the last leg of the journey in case they needed to return home early. External influences also were important for framing the destination choice. Helmut’s years of media exposure to Hawaii, unconsciously affected his behavior. Imagine saving 20 years worth of frequent travel awards for a free trip?

Phase 2 moves the decision to making actual plans. Most travelers interviewed searched the internet for the booking because of cost savings. Surprisingly, the internet was not used much to collect information about destination activities. Key activity drivers would make or break the trip. Helmut’s wife was not going to agree to the trip unless they stopped on the mainland US for a few days. Michiko’s husband only had a one-week window of opportunity to travel; a possibility existed that the family would need to travel elsewhere. Activity drivers were attached to the specific destination. Both Helmet and Michiko had strong desires to see the volcano. For most travelers interviewed, destination options really were limited to how much time to spend on each Hawaiian island.

SPM’s Phase 3 is an important departure from the traditional consumer decision making. At the destination, visitors encounter unexpected occurrences and activities. Leisure activities can be categorized into four quadrants: planned-done; planned-undone; unplanned-done; and unplanned-undone. Planned-done activities typically are key activity drivers. Visitors’ destination choices are influence by planned participation in these activities. Many travelers do not engage in in-depth planning, so unplanned-done activities may represent the largest share of visitors’ leisure time pursuits (Fodness and Murray, 1999). Planned-undone activities may be due to loss of interest, an unexpected situational contingency, or the result of a tradeoff/replacement with a more desirable activity. Finally, unplanned-undone activities are when an activity is a possibility; however, the visitor does not plan nor engage in the pursuit. The case studies provide evidence that exposure to the destination serves as a catalyst for affecting behavior. Visiting the Mauna Kea caldron was interesting; however, Helmut did not see flowing lava. Unexpectedly, Helmut opted to save the money after waiting at least 20 years to realize his dream. Michiko had to literally shift gears when she discovered her rental car was not powerful enough to climb the steep roads for star gazing. She was forced to spend an unbudgeted amount of money on a start gazing tour.

Finally, Phase 4 questions whether or not the customer has developed an attachment to BI. Michiko appears to have an emotional attachment to Hawaii. Her passion for exposing her son to something she enjoyed suggests Michiko will return.
She plans to rent a four-wheel drive vehicle next time. Helmut and Helga traveled a great distance to visit BI. Their comments suggest they boarded the airplane knowing this trip was an once-in-a-lifetime adventure.

SPM provides a dynamic method of collecting information on tourist decision making. Although McCracken (1988) recommends as few as five long interviews, small samples make generalizing the results to a population problematic. Long interviews are expensive and time consuming. Training interviewers, traveling to interview sites, and locating willing participants is resource intensive. Providing a sufficient incentive is necessary to encourage tourists to participate. Fifty dollars and a $20 T-shirt were not strong enough incentives for most tourists to forfeit 60 to 90 minutes of their precious vacation time. Nine out of ten qualified informants declined to participate due to the time commitment required. Successful recruits typically were resting between activities. Unfortunately, possibly the best interview location, the airport, is no longer available to researchers because of security concerns.

**Contributions to theory and practice**

Empirical positivistic-research methods examine pre-specified relationships to test theories. The preceding analysis provides compelling evidence that complex and extended decision making takes place in leisure travel planning. SPM provides a template to examine qualitative data providing important insights for both practitioners and researchers. The examples demonstrate SPM's ability to explain how tourist decisions are made.

SPM extends Mintzberg et al.'s (1976) unstructured decision making model from business strategy to consumer decision making for high involvement service purchases. Planning a major leisure trip involves many steps and variables. SPM allows decision makers to break down the decisions into manageable feedback loops. Once a phase’s feedback loops are completed, the decision process moves to the next phase. When some missing elements occur, either new scenarios are developed, or the decision moves back to the previous phase – sometimes years later.

SPM’s data collection method also considers the importance of conscious and unconscious thinking in travel decisions. The results suggest that measuring promotional tools’ effectiveness is difficult with empirical positivistic research methods. Standardized questions cannot capture these long-term planning elements, particularly when most of the information is filed away subconsciously. Long interviews provide a tool to drill down to uncover motivations and to help explain why people act – even when they are not sure themselves.

Services typically are produced and consumed simultaneously and SPM accounts for the decisions that take place on-sight. Often these decisions are made based on learning about new activities, or a change in heart because the conditions are not right. Interviewing *in situ* allows interviewers to observe external influences on tourists’ decisions. Seeing what the tourist is experiencing helps to interpret the comments.

Case studies show systems thinking’s value to examine the influences, choices, activities, and consequences of leisure travel decisions and processes (Woodside, 2010). Both tourism and hospitality managers benefit from this research technique because SPM develops the foundation for customer relationship management. Qualitative interpretive methods often offer deeper insights than self-directed survey closed-end self-reports. They may be more useful for describing consumer behavior.
Using SPM as an abductive plan for acquiring qualitative data informs a rich and holistic understanding of tourism behavior. Long interviews asking probing follow-up questions allow researchers to ask case-focused relevant questions for achieving deep understanding of behavior – perhaps etic understandings are better than the interviewees’ own (emic) understandings prior to participating in such long interviews.

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Structure of leisure-travel decisions


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