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**Tips and Traps:
Methodological Issues Related to Conducting an Online Trip Planning Study**

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Introduction

The Internet has changed the landscape of the tourism industry. Compared with other types of sources and transaction channels, the Internet contains a larger amount of information, is more interactive, can be customized, and provides highly tailored content (Newhagen & Rafaeli 1996). In the United States, online booking has exceeded all other types of travel booking methods, including phone booking and travel agents (Milligan 2006). However, online travel planning remains a frustrating and unpleasant experience for some travelers because of the usability problems associated with the Internet as a travel information source (Pan & Fesenmaier 2006).

Bishop and Starr (1996) argued that a thorough understanding of information search needs to be achieved, without which good tourism information delivery can hardly be achieved. Thus, it seems that a better understanding of travelers' online travel planning experiences and needs is of both theoretical and practical significance. To this end, the authors conducted a quasi-experiment to examine American college students' online travel planning behavior. A mixed method approach, which integrated think-aloud protocol combined with a process tracing method, log analysis and survey techniques, was used in the study.

This methodological approach has, in previous studies (Pan & Fesenmaier 2006; Backlund, Skaner, Monthgomery, Bring & Strender 2003; Vining & Fishwick 1991) been subject to issues of reliability and validity that were addressed in the design of the current study. Specifically, questions related to whether the simulation used in this study would yield results comparable to the decision-making and search processes respondents would engage upon on their own. While the technique in previous studies (Pan & Fesenmaier 2006; Backlund et al. 2003; Vining & Fishwick 1991) has been found to deliver desirable results, the potential artificiality of the environment had to be addressed. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how this study has attempted to evolve from previous work in this area in order to increase reliability and validity.

Methods

China was selected as the destination for this study, so that participants of this study might share a similar level of familiarity before the study. Plus, as one of the largest international travel destinations, China provides a wide array of attraction options for travel planners to choose from and allows sufficient variation in itineraries, which is important for the travel planning experiment. The respondents were told to plan a week-long (Dec. 15th to 22th) trip to China for their winter break. S/he needs to decide where to visit during the stay in China. The subject needs to find out the cities s/he plans to visit and the places in each city s/he would like to visit. Due to time limitation, the subject was asked not to worry about airline tickets and hotel rooms and also s/he has unlimited

budget; instead, the subject was asked to focus on the cities, attractions, and restaurants the respondent was interested in visiting.

In total, 36 undergraduate students from a southeast public university were recruited with one extra credit for a course. Most of them are sophomore, junior, and seniors in business-related majors. The respondents were asked to fill out an online survey first. The goal of this pre-exercise survey was to collect each subject's individual characteristics, including their travel experience, information search styles, and their organic image about China.

In order to familiarize the respondents with the think-aloud method, prior to their search task, a training session was performed in order to coach the respondents to talk about their thoughts (Ramney & Boren, 2001). In the present case, the subject was asked to exercise think-aloud protocol by finding out the local weather. After this, a travel planning exercise to China was conducted; lastly, the subject filled out a post-exercise survey regarding their levels of satisfaction toward their travel information search and trip planning process. The post-exercise survey measured respondents' process and outcome satisfaction (de Bruijin and de Vreede, 1999), induced image, and several other related characteristics. The total session lasted less than one hour, in which the travel planning exercise was limited to 50 minutes. Because of technical difficulties, the videos for two respondents were not captured.

Methodological Issues

In the attempt to address issues pertaining to the artificiality of the environment several key steps were taken to ensure that the respondent was as relaxed and in the proper mind frame to go through a normal search methodology and decision-making process. The first technique was to have the respondents fill out an online questionnaire upon arrival. Vining and Fishwick (1991) in their study exploring outdoor recreation sites removed any identifying features of locations stating that they could create a preconceived notion of the location and affect destination choice. The purpose of this study was to examine a potential trip to China. To eliminate preconceived destination image which in reality would play a role in a 'real' decision-making process would essentially change a normal decision-making pattern. Therefore, while the pre-test gave valuable insights related to each respondent's individual characteristics, including their travel experience, information search styles, and their organic image about China; the respondent was left alone during this process in order to engage with the thought of China and start to form their potential search strategies. This is reflective of a normal environment where one being a decision-making process based on past learning.

Secondly, when the pre-test was completed, the interviewer helped the respondent become familiar and comfortable with the think aloud process by having them search for the next day's weather forecast. This choice of finding a non-threatening topic area further worked to ensure that the respondent was comfortable with the technology and the think aloud processes. This was based on the procures outlined by Backlund et al. (2003) who found that in a study of doctors usage of a practice case as a method for getting

respondents into the proper mind frame for the simulation was highly effective. This procedure also allowed the respondent to become used to the interviewer as being a non-threatening entity as well as becoming used to the think aloud procedures.

Last, students were told to focus only on choosing an itinerary for the trip and to not worry about transportation and accommodation choices. This procedure was outlined by Fonteyn, Kuipers and Grobe (1993) who argued that client simulations enhanced perceived relevance by the respondent and allowed them to focus and give more in-depth responses related to a specific task. By simplifying the exercise, the respondents could search in a more relaxed atmosphere concentrating on only a few key decisions rather than a large and potentially overbearing planning process. This simplification also allowed students to focus on a specific task and created an atmosphere where they could gain confidence in their abilities by focusing on a few decisions.

Findings

Upon completion of the study, an examination of whether these areas of concern were addressed adequately was conducted. In the case of the pre-test, themes related to using past learning as part of the process were evident. In several cases, students searched for things they heard about China previously. Many of these searches related to stereotypes such as searching for Kung Fu shows and for Chinese food. As respondents often began with a search for the familiar, as more learning occurred searching outside of previous knowledge was expanded. By having students remind themselves of their preconceived image of China, a base upon which learning could take place was developed.

The think aloud component of describing thoughts and feelings while searching was difficult for many of the respondents. Attempting to discuss thoughts and feelings while engaging in, what for many was new learning, was challenging. Also, the use of the computer technology and speaking aloud was counter intuitive for some. The preparatory exercise of having the students talk about finding the weather was helpful to many as it allowed them to develop the skill in a non-threatening manner. For many respondents though, consistent discussion while conducting web searches was too difficult. In many cases the recording of the screen and the researchers' field notes gave better insights into the mental process than the words which were expressed by the respondents.

Finally, the task specific component was suitable for this study. As the majority of respondents had little geographic and spatial knowledge related to the destination, to have them plan a larger trip in the available time frame would have created a frustrating experience. Even as such, because the majority of respondents did not have a lot of previous knowledge related to the destination, anxiety and stress levels were higher than expected. Using a destination which respondents had at least a working knowledge of would have lowered stress level and probably allowed for deeper insights into the planning process as opposed to the destination learning process.

Conclusions

Internet users' online travel planning process is still largely unknown. Given the infancy of the topic, the qualitative-based, mixed-method approach used in this study is deemed appropriate and has generated plentiful interesting information. For the present authors, conducting this study has become an exciting yet challenging learning experience. Methodological issues pertaining to creating a simulation that mirrors a realistic decision-making situation is a challenging area of study. There needs to be further exploration and development of methodological theory in relation to understanding the complexity of decision-making. The expected results of this study will shed some light on key determinants of satisfaction and efficiency of trip planning to China and the main usability problems of the travel information space as the bridge between China's tourism industry and American travelers. Operational significance aside, the quasi-experimental design of this study may also contribute to the tourism marketing literature from a methodological perspective.

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