# The Role of Hypertext in Consumer Decision Making. The Case of Travel Destination Choice

*Raúl Valdez Muñoz*[*]

### Abstract

*Travel is one of the most popular items people tend to be comfortable with purchasing over the Internet. Hypertext is a form of electronic text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails. This study explores the importance of hypertext in the travel destination choice from websites. Results show that hypertext links containing images of destinations, informative texts, and search tools are the three most important features utilized by tourist website browsers. This study aims to offer insights into new areas for further research on tourism websites design, application and evaluation.*
*Keywords: travel, internet, websites, destination choice, hypertext.*

## Introduction

The increasing rate of online transactions and the fast growth of online users provide clear evidence of the popularity of the communications technology. Customer-oriented and information-intensive tourism enterprises are increasingly adopting E-Business models to achieve their organizational goals (Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010). The fast adoption of ICT around the world and the expansion of the Internet have affected a great proportion of industries such as tourism in many countries.

The global economy in the next century will be driven by information technology, telecommunications, and tourism. This considers very specific characteristics of the tourist sector which need to cope with the large distances usually involved between the origin and destination of travelers.

By means of e-commerce, companies are selling and buying goods and services to consumers around the world. One of the most recent developments in e-tourism applications is at the destination level. Many tourism intermediaries have successfully integrated e-tourism in promoting destinations, providing

[*]   *Ph.D. Raúl Valdez Muñoz, Department of Tourism, Business & Economics School, Universidad de las Américas, Puebla, Sta. Catarina Mártir, Cholula, Puebla, México, raul.valdez@udlap.mx.*

tourists with travel information, helping tourist enterprises to promote their products, and encouraging the creation of tourism network systems (Buhalis D., 2003; Buhalis D., 1998) (Xiaoqiu, Buhalis, & Song, 2003).

Tourism suppliers took advantage of the new opportunities and developed e-commerce applications by allowing users to access directly their products (Buhalis & Licata, 2002). Searching through the Internet is an interactive process between travelers and hypertext (the Internet) implemented through a computer and a web browser. Then, the understanding of travel information searchers' behavior on the Internet is essential to the design of useful Internet-based technology. The Internet is an interactive hypertext system where information nodes are "hyperlinked" according to their relevance (Boechler, 2001). In this way, when travelers' search for information on the Internet, their choices of links are determined by the value of relevance of the link anchors (linked texts, pictures or contextual information).

**Tourism and the Web**

Use of the Internet has grown 146.2% between 2000 and 2005 around the world. The use of the Internet is similarly high in many countries, such as USA: 61%, South Korea: 66%, Australia: 60%, Japan: 57%), Canada: 56%, UK: 53, and Germany: 50% (Gertner, Berger, & Gertner, 2006). Several regions of the world have grown even faster. The number of Internet users in Latin American and the Caribbean Countries grew by 211.2%. By 2011, the number of worldwide Internet users reached nearly two billion out of a population of approximately 6.93 billion (Stats, 2001). Changes in the economic, cultural and technological environments have definitely encouraged consumers to increase the use of the Internet in their quest to save time and money. Now, popular search engines, such as Yahoo and Google are being constantly improved to provide faster access of information for travelers (Mitchell, 2006).

Tourism is a key element of modern societies. It has contributed to local and regional economic development. Distribution becomes one of the most critical factors for competitiveness in tourism business. Appropriate distribution systems allow the building of bridges between destinations and travelers providing mechanisms for purchasing tourism products and destinations.

Internet has strengthened the relevance of electronic intermediaries and changing their positions as strategic suppliers to a degree that they can substitute traditional distribution channels. Virtual communities can be established between people with common interests enhancing the global knowledge basis by sharing advice based on personal experience (Buhalis D., 2003).

The ways that consumers search for already evaluated travel information is currently changing with the rising popularity of websites that contain content submitted by real travelers (e.g., TripAdvisor, Lonely Planet, MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube) (Cox, Burges, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009). This is possible now using

Web 2.0, which refers to the second generation of web-based services letting people collaborate and share information online in more sophisticated ways. Web 2 enables any individual to post their own content, opinions, videos, audio, or imagery on the web for other users to see and respond to.

The fast development of E-Commerce has dramatically changed the tourism industry (Buhalis, 2003; Ho & Lee, 2007; Buhalis &Law, 2008). By employing the Internet, Intranet and Extranet, many tourism organizations have successfully integrated this function in promoting destinations, providing tourists with pre-trip and in-trip information, helping small and medium tourist enterprises to promote their products, and internal management tasks. In tourism, a wide range of ICT technologies are used in order to reduce the cost and time required for undertaking particular activities. Computer reservation systems (CRSs) and global distribution systems (GDSs) represent technological solutions and transaction mechanisms between travel agencies, hotels, airlines, tourist destination, car rental firms, etc. CRSs and GDSs empower Internet travel portals enabling tourist enterprises to reach travelers directly.

## Promoting travel destinations by websites

ICTs and particularly web based advertising tools have been used to redefine tourism and deliver products to end consumers (Law, Qi & Buhalis, 2010; Aaron, 2006; Gretzel, Yuan & Fesenmaier, 2000). Businesses, including customer-oriented and information-intensive tourism enterprises, are increasingly adopting E-Business models to achieve their organizational goals.

Internet advertising significantly impacts travel and purchase behavior (Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Tierney, 2000) and provides a medium to disseminate information to consumers in the form of interactive scenarios between travelers and companies. Tourism literature has found that attractive and stimulating advertising content design produces a positive perception of destinations promoted in websites (Wu, Wei, & Chen, 2008). Travel is one of the most popular items people tend to be comfortable with purchasing over the Internet. A major issue of the Internet is its ability to bring travel and hospitality services and products "live" to consumers and also the consumers' ability to access the information without time and space limitation. Thus, travel marketers must pay attention to the Internet application on marketing strategies and travel information distribution (Lin, 2005). According with several travel organizations and survey companies such as US Destination Marketing; Forrester Research, Trip Advisor; Bust Media and AC Nielsen, features such as room availability and rates, travel promotions, travel bulletins and alerts, chat/forum links and, information about travel destinations are those that most encourage internet user to utilize travel websites around the world. Over one–half of travel web users traveled to cities featured in tourism portals and approximately one-third of them research trips via internet. Forecast statistics demonstrate that in USA online leisure

and individually booked business travel sales are projected to reach US $162.4 billion in 2012, and travel planning online increases spectacularly by means of thousands of websites (e.g. Lonely Planet, Travel Online, Travel Notes, Itravel net, When We...Get There, etc.) existing now around the world (Miller, Washington, & Miller, 2009).

Traditional media were previously used to deliver messages; if consumers noticed a tourist-destination advertisement, they had to physically travel to a store to make a purchase. Now, Internet stores combine both advertising and purchasing, thus enabling consumers to make a purchase instantly. Internet aids destination managers in identifying target markets and in accurately matching traveler's demands, hence, websites benefit enterprise–consumer relationships, help increase brand value, and allow the creation of a tourist image. Diverse studies demonstrate that 85% of advertising, marketing, and sales companies believe online advertising aims to increase traffic to the websites promoted. Viewing a banner on a website can convey a message; therefore, regardless of whether the consumer clicks or not, simply viewing a banner increases the chance of a purchase. (Wu, Wei, & Chen, 2008).

Online promotional sites content includes variables such as: web interface, background colors, pictures, sound effects, textual content and dynamic techniques that also contribute highly to advertisements' results. Consumers recall advertisements more effectively if they display images and texts. In contrast, confusing website designs have negative effects on the perception of tourist products and destinations, and decrease purchases generated by the website. Animated information is more likely to be recalled correctly; however, animation does not help the recall of advertisements. Users may remember animations on web pages, but those animations are not necessarily related to advertising content (Wu, Wei, & Chen, 2008).

Finally, the degree of personal involvement is a significant mediator for tourists' attitudes toward the website and its promotional effect. It has been determined that websites that engage and entertain travelers are more likely to be "clicked".

Due to the widespread use of the Internet as an important source of information, many tourist enterprises have shifted from printed brochures to the Internet during the last few years. Today, millions of travelers use the Internet to make travel plans such as getting information on destinations or checking prices and schedules. Several studies have shown the direct fit of the Internet environment for the marketing of travel and tourism products (Lin, 2005; Buhalis & Licata, 2002).

Web site development and Internet access have become popular and easy to use, broadening the scope of the production and consumption of this media. The typical user visits 25 websites a week spending as little as 48 seconds on each site. Hence, this short amount of time means that alternative tourist destinations

are advertised seductively for the virtual tourist's gaze, designed specifically to attract the hurried user (Holman, 2011). However, other studies demonstate that travel planners can also stay for longer periods of time searching on tourist websites in order to choose the right leisure place, and, if the Web site contains the information that potential tourists are looking for, the information search process will be more efficient and satisfactory (Pan & Fesenmaier,2006).

All marketing strategies and sales tactics are based on implicit beliefs and concepts about consumer behavior. Consumer behavior concerns the process that consumers use to select, use and dispose of products, services, experiences or ideas to satisfy their needs and desires. Thus, knowledge of consumer behavior can be an important competitive advantage for tourism enterprises.

Essentially a marketing strategy is a set of decisions and commercial actions focused to provide superior customer value to target markets. These decisions and actions constitute the marketing mix; that is to say, the product, price, communications, distribution and services provided to the target market. In the web market context, online consumers perform all the functions of traditional consumers on a computer while interacting with a system, thus, the physical store has been transformed into a virtual store through many tools of ICTs.

In the past seventeenth years, online consumer behavior has become an emerging research area with an increasing number of publications per year. Most of the components of consumer behavior theory have been applied to the study of online consumption; however, results demonstrate that there are significant differences between offline and online consumer behavior that warrant a distinguishing conceptualization.

Early studies on online consumer behavior largely were oriented to explore how consumers adopt and use Internet tools. Later, other studies found that: a) personal innovativeness is a key personality trait that explains consumer online purchase, b) internet shopping is strongly affected by the presentation mode, search engines, and navigation structure of product items, c) trust in an Internet store is a salient determinant of online shopping, and, d) consumer trust and satisfaction were the key antecedents of continued purchase.

More recently, studies seem to be oriented to build models to understand the main aspects of consumer behavior online (e.g. information acquisition, purchase decision, reasons for not shopping online, etc.). Several studies aim to determine if online consumers think and act differently than offline consumers; other studies attempt to explain why online consumers are more demanding and utilitarian in their shopping expeditions; and, finally, diverse studies try to determine the reason by which customer loyalty on the web is generally low in comparison with offline customers.

Business-to-consumer (B2C) electronic commerce depends not only on consumer acceptance of Internet technologies as viable transaction means, but on consumer recognition of web retailers as reliable suppliers. The Internet

infrastructure generates an implicit uncertainty around on-line transactions because it exist a spatial and temporal separation between consumers and web retailers. Certainly, a risk of monetary loss exists, since consumers have to rely on electronic information and thus become vulnerable to incomplete or distorted information provided by web retailers, and also, a risk of loss of privacy derived from providing personal information to web retailers (Pavlou, 2003).

Product information search can be a fun-seeking experience and can improve consumer decision making through complex, nonlinear, and non-directed queries being an important incentive for people to shop online (Koufaris, 2002). In the new electronic competition, web stores have responded to the call for customer control by providing various site features like internal search engines and systems to enable consumers to easily find what they need, learn more about products/ services and quickly purchase them.

As well as in offline purchasing, price, quality, and product type constitute three key elements in shaping consumers' perception online. Attributes such as ease of use, quality, security and reliability are included in the study of electronic commerce systems. Indeed, web specific factors such as ease of navigation, interface and network speed are also considered. Finally, factors pertaining to merchant and intermediaries characteristics like service quality, privacy and security control, brand/reputation, delivery/logistic, and post sales services integrate the broad field of online consumer behavior (Koufaris, 2002; Pavlou, 2003; Cheung et al., 2003).

### The destination choice process from websites

Nowadays, in tourism business, destinations must design online marketing strategies to succeed in their efforts to attract visitors. In 2005, a survey of 18,000 online consumers in 18 countries showed that in 14 of those countries the web was the most important source of information employed by Internet users in deciding where to go for their vacations. Through the increased use of the Internet, the tourism website has emerged as a useful lens with which to examine the shifting nature of global flows of information, experience and consumer behavior.

A strong country brand with a clear focused image can be used to attract tourists, investors, and businesses that will stimulate the economy and create economic growth. Countries can be taught to use marketing to manage their promotional activities in creating a brand that facilitates worldwide tourism. In Europe the shaping of image and marketing of a country has been put into action in countries such as Germany, France, Portugal, Estonia, and Poland. Destinations are treated as products and specifically, holiday destinations are considered place-products within a marketing system. Destination branding involves the creation of a single, strategic idea that captures what the country/destination has to offer. The capacity to offer travelers a flexible and personalized relationship

is probably one of the most important advantages offered by e-commerce to tourism retailers. It allows them to provide accurate and timely information to consumers which, in turn, often generate additional sales. Also, personalization increases the level of loyalty consumers hold toward a retailer.

Consumer decision process intervenes between the market strategy - as implemented in the marketing mix - and the outcomes. A company can succeed if consumers see a need that its product can solve, choose this product, proceed to buy it and become satisfied with the results of the purchase. Thus, consumer satisfaction is a major concern of companies.

A central component of consumer decision process is the problem recognition. Problem recognition involves a discrepancy between consumers' desired state (what they would like) and their actual state (what they perceive as already existing). Hence, if this discrepancy is sufficiently large and important, consumers will search for solutions. Relevant information from consumers' memory (internal search) or from external sources is used to determine if a satisfactory solution exists. Memory of past searches, personal experiences and learning are the mayor internal sources.

Today, a most relevant external source of information used by consumers is the Internet or World Wide Web (WWW). WWW consists of search engines, websites, specific addresses or files in the network, to access to those with the requested characteristics. The Internet contains market data in the form of advertising messages associated with search, entertainment, and general information sites and Internet presence Sites (IPS) also called home pages. A home page is a Web site created and maintained by organizations (enterprises, government agencies, altruist organizations, cultural organizations, etc.) or individuals that provide detailed product and organizational data. Into the Web pages, banner ads are a very important promotion tool.

Banner ads represent today a powerful mean to lead consumers to the company or product home page. In tourism industry, the banners ads play a very important role connecting travelers with thousands of websites of travel agencies, hotels, transportation companies, restaurants, car rental companies, etc. and, maybe more important, with thousands of tourist destination sites available to be chosen.

Tourist destination managers must visualize major decisions concerning the use of Internet. Having a destination Web site, they need to decide if the site should be active or passive. A passive Web site focused on providing only specific information about a tourist destination whereas an active Web site allows the destination managers to develop a relationship with visitors over time and provide them with additional information related to the site facilities and other tourist attractions and services. No matter if a Web site is active or passive; it needs to be easy to access, up-to-date, logical and oriented to travel needs. The

more complete and interactive the Web site, the more effective and useful it will be for marketing and commercial purposes.

Web 2.0 enables any traveler to post their own content, opinions, videos, audio, or imagery to the web for other travelers to see and respond to. Web 2.0 includes the ability to integrate information in new forms, the desire to harness distributed knowledge, and the need to engage users as co-developers (Cox, Burges, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009). Hyung-Park, Lee, & Hang (2007) establish that online consumer reviews are often considered more trustworthy and credible than information which is provided by suppliers of products and services, presumably because consumers provide more trustworthy information.

Consumer characteristics of travelers affect perceptions about benefits and search costs of use websites. A satisfying experience with a particular destination increases the probability of a repeat choice of this destination. In contrast, a negative travel experience decreases the likelihood of travel to the same place and/or choice a similar destination. Travelers who are highly involved with a destination category normally seek information relevant to the destination category on an ongoing basis. Research has demonstrated that tourists use different types of online information sources depending on where they are at in the travel planning process—that is the pre-trip, during trip and post-trip stages (Choi, Letho, & O'Leary, 2007; Seabra, Abrantes, & Lages, 2007).

Concerning how travelers make destinations choices, they can follow sequential process based on attributes or on attitudes about alternative places to be considered. Attribute-based choice required the knowledge of specific and distinctive attributes of each place and attribute-by-attribute comparison across places. In the field of tourism, it is extremely important for destination managers to understand how travelers search for and review information at the various stages of their travel decision making process (Choi, Letho, & O'Leary, 2007).

The meaning of the product is one of the variables that predict searching and buying behavior. Meaning is derived from the practical utility of the product and is intrinsically linked to its convenience, efficiency, and the exchange value per se (Vaz & Pérez-Nebra, 2007). The symbolic meaning is the result of social experiences, which lead to the subjective categorization of the product, by means of social institutions, communication systems, and the culture of a society. In the field of tourism, research has found that tangible and abstract attributes of tourist sites influence destination choice behavior. These attributes can be considered by tourists as symbolic meanings of places affecting their destination choice process (Klenoski, 2002).

Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) note that travel consumers tend to seek information related to 10 key sub-decisions regarding the trip-travel partners: the destination; expenditure required; activities; travel dates; attractions to visit; transportation providers; length of trip; rest stops; and food stops. Jeng & Fesenmaier (2002) note that travelers generally collect and review various

forms of travel information early in the travel decision making process in order to minimize the risk of making a poor destination decision. The central role that individual consumers have in submitting, reviewing, and responding to online content is reflected in terms such as user-generated content (UGC) or consumer-generated media (CGM) that are commonly used for Web 2.0 (Gretzel, 2006, 2007). In the marketing context, UGC sites are effectively a form of consumer to consumer e-marketing (Ahuja, Michels, Walker, & Weissbuch, 2007).

**The role of the hypertext in the travel destination choice from websites**
Destinations satisfy the need for travelling and are recognized as a set of products, facilities and services that comprise the total tourist product. With the continuing growth of the Internet and, in particular, the World Wide Web (WWW) a new marketing potential exists for tourist destinations. Websites offer information on a variety of categories, including travel, geography, tourist information centers, reservation services and an events calendar. All destinations bring together many tangible elements and attractions (e.g. museums, theatres, parks, monuments, etc.) and also a number of intangible aspects (e.g. art, ambience, culture, etc.) as well as facilities and services (e.g. hotels, restaurants, information offices, etc.) for tourists.

Despite the prevalent use of Internet sites in the travel planning process, there is still limited research available on the information search process and decision making behavior related to online vacation planning (Ho & Liu, 2004; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006). A vital aspect of Web pages is to be visually attractive to their readers The problem is that many Web pages tend to contain too much text, too little graphics and not enough attractive appearance. Then, the challenge for Web pages is to offer relevant travel-related information together with useful links and graphical illustrations of tourist attractions.

Hypertext is a term originally used by Theodor H. Nelson in the 1960s. It refers to a form of electronic text that follows a non-sequential writing and "allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen". Computer hypertext contains an enormous number of signifiers and it can be defined as a "text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails (Landow, 2009). Specifically, hypertext is a medium of gathering information linking verbal, nonverbal and other forms of data. Hypertext expands the notion of text beyond the solely verbal concept, linking passages of written discourse to images, maps diagrams and sounds (Landow, 2009).

Utilizing hypertext users have the possibility of creating, adding, connecting and sharing information from diverse sources, and the possibility of acceding to documents in non-sequential way, unlike more traditional information systems in which the access is naturally sequential. This flexibility allows readers to navigate across different documents and/or the Web pages interlinked around a central subject.

## Methodology

One of the most unclear and understudied issues in the travel industry is the role that Web site links (e.g. hypertext tools) have in the users' travel behavior and decision making processes. However, academicians and practitioners agree that websites are a very important source of information for prospective travelers when they are in the research phase (i.e. information search) of the travel planning process and, particularly when they need to choose a leisure destination.

Studies conducted in the USA demonstrate that approximately one third of website users are influenced by links with social content sites when making purchase decisions (Cox, Burges, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009). This suggests that the potential for websites to have a strong and credible influence on travelers' destination choice depends on how credible and transparent the information appearing in these sites is.

To explore the importance of hypertext in the travel destination choice from websites, a quantitative study was conducted using a survey of individuals who were known to use the Internet to gather information when choosing leisure destinations. The survey was developed based on website features such as texts, photographs, videos, links with tourist services and other web page elements.

A questionnaire of ten questions was designed and used to collect the information needed. This instrument was developed based on website features such as texts, photographs, videos, links with tourist services and other web page elements. It contained two sections: the first section was focused on discovering the type of links considered by travelers as the most useful when they search information about leisure places and, more important, when they choose a tourist destination. The final section asked for the demographic characteristics of participants.

The sample of the study was integrated by individuals having experience as Web browsers. Experience of Internet use was, therefore, a filter, and non-users were excluded from the survey. In order to determine the proportion of Web browsers, the questionnaire was applied to 1000 individuals over a two-week period in the city of Puebla, Mexico, in diverse university campuses and travel agencies. The proportion of Web users was 66% and the proportion of non-users was 34%.

To obtain effective measurement tools, the questionnaire was submitted to a pilot-test. During this stage, the questionnaire was refined and the size of sample (345 individuals) was determined following the probabilistic-proportions formula (where Z=1.96, 95% confidence level; p=0.66; q=0.34; E=0.05).

The survey process was carried out applying 365 valid questionnaires in order to anticipate a 5% of invalid questionnaires. The database was processed using the software SPSS 18 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

## Results

Respondents were split between male 134 (36.71%) and female 231 (63.27%) individuals. Ages ranged from 18 years to 57 years, with a mean of 21.3 years (σ = 2.83). The great majority of respondents were students (98%) and, 83.3% of them use the Internet daily, whereas only 16.7%, some days a week.

The importance granted by individuals to Web page links was measured by means of question 1 utilizing a 4-point ordinal scale, where the value of "1" is assigned to the most important link, and the value of "4" to the less important link. Results demonstrate that the images shown, the search section, and the informative texts are the three more important features of tourist Web pages (ranked first (53%), second (35%), and third (29%) respectively). Chi-squared tests were performed to identify if correlations between the three more important links identified by individuals and their age and gender exist. Results demonstrate that there are not statistically significant correlations between these variables (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Correlations between the most important links and demographics of individuals

| Variables | Pearson Chi-Square $\chi^2$ | df | Sig.† |
|---|---|---|---|
| Web images vs. gender | 3.880 | 2 | 0.140 |
| Informative texts vs. gender | 2.880 | 2 | 0.236 |
| Search section vs. gender | 0.383 | 2 | 0.826 |
| Web images vs. age | 30.692 | 30 | 0.431 |
| Informative texts vs. age | 37.098 | 28 | 0.117 |
| Search section vs. age | 14.035 | 16 | 0.595 |

† * Sig.<0.05; ** Sig.<0.01

The use of links (hypertext) appearing in tourist websites was evaluated by means of a 4-point nominal-type scale anchored at value 4 (always use the links) and 1(never use the links). The most frequent answer was point 2 (many times use the links) with 48.5% of responses, followed by point 3 (few times use the links) with 47.7% of responses.

The importance of links in tourist websites was determined using a 4-point nominal-type scale anchored at value 4 (extremely important) and 1 (not important). Results show that point 2 (very important) was the most frequent answer with 65.7% of responses. Indeed, Chi-squared coefficients were calculated to explore if gender, age and occupation of interviewers could be correlated with the use of hypertext links in tourist websites. Results show that links usage and gender are correlated variables, with women using the hypertext links more frequently. In contrast, age and occupation of respondents are not correlated with the use of links in tourist websites (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Correlations between link's usage and demographics of individuals

| Variables | Pearson Chi-Square $\chi^2$ | df | Sig.† |
|---|---|---|---|
| Links' use vs. gender | 8.850 | 3 | 0.035* |
| Links' use vs. age | 57.477 | 45 | 0.100 |
| Links' use vs. occupation | 7.728 | 15 | 0.934 |

† * Sig.<0.05; ** Sig.<0.01

To explore the existence of correlations between the demographic characteristics of Web users and the importance assigned by them to hypertext links, Chi-squared tests were performed. Results also demonstrate that there are not significant correlations between these variables (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Correlations between links' importance and demographics of individuals

| Variables | Pearson Chi-Square $\chi^2$ | df | Sig.† |
|---|---|---|---|
| Links' importance vs. gender | 2.795 | 4 | 0.593 |
| Links' importance vs. age | 67.860 | 60 | 0.227 |
| Links' importance vs. occupation | 9.014 | 20 | 0.983 |

† * Sig.<0.05; ** Sig.<0.01

To identify the types of links preferred by tourist websites users an ordinal scale was utilized. In this scale, the value of "1" corresponds to the most preferred link, and the value of "4"to the less preferred link.

The most preferred links (45.9% of responses) were those that connect users with tourist services (e.g. travel agencies, hotels, transportation firms, etc.) others than those appearing in the website. In second place, the links offering information about the website's attractions (41% of responses) and, in third place, the links containing information about tourist services available in the website browsed. Also, Chi-squared coefficients were calculated to identify the existence of possible correlations between the demographic characteristics of Internet users and the three most preferred links explored by them. Again, Chi-squared coefficients showed that there are not significant correlations (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Correlations between the most preferred links and demographics of individuals

| Variables | Pearson Chi-Square $\chi^2$ | df | Sig.† |
|---|---|---|---|
| Tourist services in other places vs. gender | 1.131 | 2 | 0.568 |
| Tourist services in other places vs. age | 22.185 | 26 | 0.679 |
| Tourist services in other places vs. occupation | 7.362 | 4 | 0.118 |
| Site tourist-attractions vs. gender | 1.950 | 2 | 0.377 |
| Site tourist-attractions vs. age | 15.486 | 26 | 0.948 |
| Site tourist-attractions vs. occupation | 3.760 | 6 | 0.709 |
| Site tourist-services vs. gender | 0.692 | 3 | 0.875 |
| Site tourist-services vs. age | 30.090 | 30 | 0.461 |
| Site tourist-services vs. occupation | 9.845 | 15 | 0.829 |

† * Sig.<0.05; ** Sig.<0.01

The level of influence of hypertext links on tourist's destination choice was evaluated using a 4-point Likert-type scale anchored at values: 4 (essential for make a choice) and 1 (non-required for make a choice). Answers to this question show a mean value of 2.79 ($\sigma$=0.706, mode=3, median=3) that, being close to value 3. This means that Internet users consider that hypertexts exert a powerful influence on the destination-choice-processes of travelers.

In addition, a t-test was performed to explore possible differences between the opinions expressed by men and women concerning the influence of hypertexts on their destination-choice decisions. Results show that the responses of men and women are very similar (t=-1.303, df=363, sig. =0.193>0.05), hence, the gender of respondents does not influence their tourist destination choice.

Finally, an ordinal scale was used to rank the three more influential links on the travel-destination choice of Web users. Results of this analysis show that hypertext links having photos were ranked in first place (47%), the links containing information about the destinations' attractions were ranked in second place (45%), and the hypertext links connecting with tourist services (e.g. hotels, travel agencies, transportation services, etc.) available in the destinations (24%) were ranked in third place.

No significant correlations were detected between these three more influential links and the demographic characteristics of individuals (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Correlations between the most influential links and demographics of individuals

| Variables | Pearson Chi-Square χ2 | df | Sig.† |
|---|---|---|---|
| Destination's photographs vs. gender | 0.288 | 2 | 0.866 |
| Destination's photographs vs. age | 42.719 | 30 | 0.062 |
| Destination's photographs vs. occupation | 15.404 | 10 | 0.118 |
| Site tourist-attractions vs. gender | 4.09 | 2 | 0.129 |
| Site tourist-attractions vs. age | 26.189 | 28 | 0.563 |
| Site tourist-attractions vs. occupation | 3.394 | 6 | 0.758 |
| Site tourist-services vs. gender | 0.710 | 2 | 0.965 |
| Site tourist-services vs. age | 11.283 | 16 | 0.792 |
| Site tourist-services vs. occupation | 7.395 | 8 | 0.495 |

† * Sig.<0.05; ** Sig.<0.01

Considering that this study was carried out to explore the importance of hypertext links on travel destination choice, two correlation analyses were performed between the most important link of tourist websites and: 1) the most preferred link, and 2) the most influential link on the tourist-destination choice. The results demonstrate a low level of correlation between these variables ($ρ=0.062$, and $ρ=0.195$ respectively). Hence, we can conclude that the use of hypertext links showing beautiful images of destinations (the best ranked) are not correlated with the use of both the links connecting with tourist services others than those appearing in the website (the most preferred) and the links containing destinations' photographs (the most influential on the tourist-destination choice).

## Conclusions and managerial implications

Appropriate electronic distribution systems provide good mechanisms for purchasing tourism products and destinations. The Internet has increasingly impelled the relevance of tourist-product suppliers and has contributed to replacement of traditional distribution channels. Certainly, through the Internet, tourism companies have successfully promoted a great variety of destinations.

Promoting travel destinations online is today a great business and many travel developers provide information to viewers interested in leisure destinations. This study examines the influence of hypertext links appearing in tourist websites on the travel-destination choice of leisure travelers.

Important conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study. Results show that the use of links in tourist Web pages is a very frequent practice (48.5% of responses) for young individuals (21 years, average), and, principally, for female undergraduate students (64%). Thus, hypertext links available in tourist websites must be considered as a very important promotional tool utilized by individuals when search and evaluate tourist destination alternatives.

Hypertext links containing images of destinations, informative texts, and search tools are the three most important features utilized by tourist website browsers. Then, we can conclude that hypertext links appearing in tourist websites exert a powerful influence on the tourist-destination choice processes of Internet users.

Results demonstrate that links connecting with accommodation services, travel agencies, transportation companies and other complementary tourist services were ranked the most preferred types of links used by individuals. Specifically, links containing photographs of tourist sites (47%) and informative texts (45%) were classified by individuals as the most influential features when they choose a tourist destination. Only the gender of respondents seems to be related with the use of links available in tourist websites. In contrast, their age and occupation are not related with the importance, use, and types of links preferred by them when browsing tourist websites. Hence, Regardless of age, or occupation, individuals "click" on hypertext links that allow them to visualize destinations, to get relevant information about these places, and to contact tourist services suppliers that facilitate their travel decision.

Previous studies have established that the search of travel destinations in the Internet is determined by the relevance of the link anchors as pictures, texts or other hypertext features. For managers of tourism destination companies, tourist wholesalers and other tourism business, the results of this study can serve as a reference to help them identify the strengths and weaknesses of their websites and take competitive advantage in the market place because more effective tourist websites draw consumers into purchasing viewing destinations in a more favorable light.

Results of this study suggest that the demographic profile of individuals browsing tourist websites is not a salient factor influencing the destination-choice processes of individuals. Furthermore, results of this study also suggest that tourist websites designers must emphasize the inclusion of hypertext links containing attractive visual features, non-extensive texts and search tools enabling Internet users to get relevant information about tourist destinations. Hence, companies competing in tourism markets must include more attractive hypertext tools in order to improve the effectiveness of their promotional Web pages.

Studies concerning online tourism behavior have focused principally on consumers' profiles and tourist product characteristics, but they have neglected other factors such as the influence of website features on the destination-choice decisions of travelers. This study expects to offer insights into new areas for further research on tourism websites design, application and evaluation. For this reason, this study focused on analyzing website hypertext links in different scope that other precedent studies. Nevertheless, it would be worthwhile for future research to analyze more deeply other important issues related to use

of hypertext links and their implications on tourist behavior. The findings of this study are expected to benefit researchers and practitioners by helping them better understand the importance and the role played by hypertext links in the context of tourist-destinations choice behavior.

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### Abstract (in Polish)

*Podróżowanie należy do najpopularniejszych produktów, które nabywane są za pomocą internetu. Hipertext jest formą elektronicznego tekstu złożonego z bloków słów (lub obrazów) połączonych elektronicznie przy pomocy różnorodnych ścieżek, łańcuchów i szlaków. Niniejsza praca bada istotność hipertekstu w wyborze docelowych miejsc podróży poprzez strony internetowe. Rezultaty badań wskazują, że hipertekstowe łącza zawierające obrazy miejsc podróży, informacje w formie testu i narzędzia poszukiwania informacji są trzema naistotniejszymi cechami stron internetowych dla osób zainteresowanych tematyką turystyczną. Praca oferuje wgląd w przyszłe obszary badawcze nad projektowaniem, zastosowaniem i oceną stron internetowych.*

*Słowa kluczowe: podróżowanie, internet, hipertext, webpage*