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Destination choice by young Australian travellers: a theoretical explanation to a practitioner problem

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Destination Choice by Young Australian Travellers: A theoretical explanation to a practitioner problem

*Conceptual and Theoretical perspectives in Australian Tourism Studies*

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Key Words: Destination Choice, Fashion Theory, Ritual Inversion Theory, Young Australian Travellers, Australian Tourism
Abstract

Domestic tourism in Australia is in decline. This is particularly the case with young Australian travellers (YATs) who seem to prefer to travel overseas rather than consume domestic tourism experiences. This paper first provides an overview of theories of destination choice which concludes that such models may be inadequate in understanding destination choice on the part of YATs. A conceptual model of destination choice which examines the potential importance of and relationships between ritual, ritual inversion, and fashion is presented, following which an agenda for research is proposed.
Introduction

Domestic travel within Australia is in decline despite increases in international travel by Australians. During the first quarter of 2009, there was a 9 percent reduction in overnight trips for the equivalent period in 2008. For the same period international travel increased by 5.8 percent (Tourism Forecasting Committee, 2009). This decline in domestic tourism has been attributed to the introduction of low cost carriers and improved interlining to ‘exotic’ destinations (Tourism Forecasting Committee, 2009).

The Tourism Forecasting Committee (2009) advised that although all age groups reduced their propensity to travel within Australia, the largest decline was the 25 – 44 age group having a fall of 24% during the 2002 to 2008 period. It seems that younger Australians in particular prefer international tourist venues in contrast to domestic destinations. A straw poll undertaken by the authors of 58 Australians currently enrolled in their second year of university (aged between 18 and 25 years) nominated international destinations as the preferred choice for future travel. Not one person nominated an Australian destination. This finding provided the motivation to seek an explanation as to the why and where of young Australian travellers; that is those between 18 and 25 years of age; a group which constitutes 11.4 percent of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Given the decline in Australian domestic tourism, actions designed to increase the consumption of domestic tourism are important. Central to this issue is the need to understand destination choice.

Destination Choice

Destination choice is one of the core elements of the evaluation of travel. This is the process by which a potential traveller chooses a destination from a set of destinations for the purpose of fulfilling their current travel-related needs (Hwang et al., 2006). Travellers follow a ‘funnel like’ procedure to narrow down their choice, commonly following a five stage process (Hwang et al., 2006). These stages are:

i) Recognition of need,

ii) Formulation of goals and objectives,

iii) Generation of alternative set of destinations,

iv) Information search about the properties of alternative destinations under consideration,

v) Judgement or choice of destination,
The decision is followed by the act of travel and the assessment of the experience relative to expectations.

Essentially a potential traveller makes decisions ‘whether to travel’ and ‘where to travel’ – the push and pull factors identified by Crompton (1979). A traveller’s destination choice has often been viewed as an activity that is influenced by a number of factors internal to the individual as well as factors in the environment (Sirakaya, Sonmez and Choi, 2001). Both factors help decision makers construct awareness and facilitate the creation of competing destinations for the individual’s evaluation and consideration (Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). Contextual factors such as income, household size, age, occupation, size of the city of origin and the personal attitude towards a vacation influence the travel decision (Godfrey, 1999; Nicolau and Más, 2005). Travellers also assess the attractiveness of a destination (Sirakaya, Sonmez and Choi, 2001). Positive associations with a destination increase the likelihood of the individual visiting that destination (Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). Actual destination choice, is however, affected by both intention to visit and situational variables that surround the decision (Woodside and Lysonski, 1989; Oppermann, 1999; Sirakaya, Sonmez and Choi, 2001). Other psychological characteristics such as individual values, knowledge, travel experience, personality and attitudes towards certain destinations have also been noted to affect the tourist’s destination choice (Hwang et al., 2006).

Although the destination choice process may vary between tourism consumers, tourism marketers need to develop explanatory models which assist in predicting the behaviour of target segments. Hwang et al. (2006) suggest that the approaches used can be conceptualised into four main frameworks. These frameworks are:

i) **Choice set models which focus attention on the funnelling or selection process individuals use to select a single destination from a larger subset**;

ii) **General travel models that are based on consumer theory and focus on the process that individuals adopt in their destination choice process**;

iii) **Decision net models that examine the travel decision at an aggregate level analysing the different aspects of travel planning and the relation between them; and**

iv) **Multi-destination travel models used to explain processes involved where more than one destination is considered**.

Much of the prior research has focused on the individual’s characteristics (e.g. socio-demographics) and less on the influence of the individual’s environment. A number of studies have focused on travel by students. Psychological factors have been identified as influencing students’ destination choice (Sirakaya, Sonmez and Choi, 2001). Thrane (2008) suggests that students with strong escapist motivations are more likely to travel abroad. Students who scored high on the constraint motive or were more home-loving
tend to take more domestic vacations. The level of travel experience of the student may also influence their destination choice (Thrane, 2008). In addition, although often having less discretionary income, students tend to have more discretionary time relative to others in the population, perhaps increasing the probability of taking a vacation to a distant destination (Nicolau and Más, 2005) particularly as international transport costs decrease.

Notwithstanding the contributions of the studies and models referred to, there is a need to better understand the travel motivations and decisions of tourists. Two arguments are put forward in support of this claim. First, as has been shown in the previous sections, different groups of tourists may have differing reasons for deciding to travel – there is a no ‘one rule fits all’. This work will focus on young Australian travellers where it is possible their destination choice decision is very different from other Australian travellers and even travellers of the same age from other countries. Second, many of the models assume a rational consumer and may not accurately explain many of the decision-making processes of these consumers. Ariely (2009) suggests that most humans are predicably irrational. In the context of tourism, Franklin and Crang (2001) question the approach taken to tourism, referring to Morris’s (1988) claim that an academic ‘boom’ suggests not only quantitative expansion but also a tendency for studies to follow a template, repeating and reinforcing a specific approach. Franklin and Crang (2001 p. 6) also question the treatment of tourism as purely “an economic thing” and put forward Rojek and Urry’s (1997) argument that the treatment of tourism as a set of economic activities results in questions of taste, fashion and identity being exogenous to the system.

Franklin and Crang (2001) point out that the way tourism is studied is in itself a problem. Not only do they refer to the assumption of the ‘Rational Economic Man’ (Ingliss, 2000), they question the tendency of tourism researchers to focus too much on the development of typologies. They state that while there is a role for thinking of typologies, there is an obsession with taxonomies and a ‘craze for classification’ and put forward Löfgren’s (1999 p. 267) claim that the priority to produce lists represents a “tradition of flat-footed sociology and psychology which is driven by an unhappy marriage between marketing research and positivist ambitions of scientific labelling”.

The advice of Franklin and Crang (2001) has motivated the writers of this paper to seek to gain a better understanding of the destination choice of YATs rather than take the approach of ‘simply’ developing a competitive marketing mix for the segment. Further motivation for our approach was provided by Decrop (2010 p. 94) who calls for a better understanding of travellers’ choice sets, claiming that much of the current literature deals with why consumers seek to limit and simplify the brands they consider rather than how consumers form their choice sets, claiming that “the
literature is largely silent about the process of forming a choice set”. Decrop (2010 p. 94) also criticises the static nature of choice-set models which make “little room for hedonistic, adaptive and opportunistic perspectives” and further, that choice-set literature “fails to explore the dynamics of choice sets both across and within usage occasions.”

If those responsible for marketing domestic tourism in Australia are seeking to explain why there is a decline in tourism consumption by YATs, not only is there a need to identify where they travel but why they travel. Preliminary discussions with YATs revealed that they wanted to break with the routine in their lives and were also influenced by trends within their reference groups. The objective of this work is to present a conceptual model derived from a search of the literature and some preliminary empirical findings which might better explain why and where YATs travel. Three theories seem to have relevance, these being ritual, ritual inversion, and fashion. These theories are now introduced and an explanation is offered as to how they might be relevant to the decision to travel on the part of YATs. A conceptual model is put forward, which following empirical validation, may make a contribution to theory relative to types of tourism consumption and be of use to practitioners.

The Ritual of Travel

A leisure tourist is defined as a person who “voluntarily visits a place away from home for the purpose of experiencing a change” (Smith, 1977 p. 2). Goossens (2000) argues that leisure needs, such as escape and relaxation, represent culturally learned leisure behaviour. Even more so, Urry (2001) reflects on Kaplan’s (1996 ix) claim that today travel and tourism was “unavoidable, indisputable, and always necessary for family, love and friendship as well as work”. Urry (2001) explains that Kaplan was born into a culture that took travel for granted and further there was an entitlement to travel.

In a world of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), Heimtun (2007) refers to tourism as “social capital” and the “tourist syndrome” where the objective is fulfilment of social obligations and the performance of rituals.

Graburn (1983 p. 12) with reference to Durkheim (1912) and Chapple and Coon (1942) identify two types of leisure tourists. The first is the “modal type” of tourism which, in the Western world, is regular, even predictable, where people take holidays at set times such as Christmas and Easter and mark the progress of “cyclical time”. The second type of tourism “marks the passage of personal life from one status to another”. This second type is argued to be similar to other milestones including graduation, promotion marriage and retirement. Graburn (1983 p. 13) refers to the “rite of passage” type tourism and is “commonly associated with major life changes, such as the emergence into adulthood”. This tourism is a demonstration of individual
freedom and, similar to other rites of passage in societies, is proof that the individual has advanced to a new life stage.

In Australia there are examples of the tourism ritual. Known as ‘schoolies week’ Winchester, McGuirk and Everett, (1999) write on the vacation taken by many Australian school leavers (Schoolies Week) as a “rite of passage”. In this situation the destination choice is usually a domestic location; Queensland’s Gold Coast for many students from Australia’s eastern States. It is likely that following this ritual to mark the conclusion of one’s school life, the next tourism ritual is to express higher levels of independence and freedom by travelling to overseas locations. It will be the objective of further research to confirm if overseas travel by young Australian travellers is viewed by them as being more aligned to Graburn’s (1983 p. 13) second classification of tourism – that is, travel by YATs is “commonly associated with major life changes, such as the emergence into adulthood”. As Graburn (1983 p. 13) points out, “the modern society may not impose enough satisfactory rites of passage for people to mark the progress and vicissitudes of their lives.” In this regard, perhaps Australian domestic tourism does not offer the rite of passage sought by YATs. The possible objective of YATs is to consume tourism at this time in their lives not only to fulfil utilitarian needs but to “give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity (Giddens, 1991 p. 81). If such a finding is confirmed, those responsible for marketing domestic tourism to YATs may find the obstacles more deeply embedded in the minds of these consumers and not as some might suggest their demand being a result of the strong Australian dollar and cheap international flights.

The Ritual Inversion of Travel

As well as the ritual of tourism, there is a desire on the part of a tourist to escape the every-day ritual, to seek something different. Such a desire is ritual inversion, the overturn of habits. It allows the gratification of pleasures otherwise denied (Costa and Martinotti, 2003). Rritual inversion suggests that the desire for a different experience is the central motivation of tourism (Costa and Martinotti, 2003). Tourism may therefore provide an environment wherein an individual may gratify the need for optimal stimulation and arousal (Iso-Ahola, 1980). If activities routinely participated in are perceived to require relatively little energy, individuals tend to use vacations to burn up that extra energy while, an individual who perceives his regular routine to be strenuous and energy-consuming would prefer a relatively relaxing vacation. Crompton (1979) suggests that a vacation is an essential break from an individual’s regular routine necessary to restore balance in a person’s life. It provides an escape not only from their home but also from their work and social environment (Crompton, 1979; Bello and Etzel, 1985). Studying the travel habits of students, (Thrane, 2008)
proposed that foreign travel as opposed to domestic travel may be particularly associated with the students' need to ‘escape’ during vacations. This might be interpreted to assume that students do not think of domestic travel destinations as being far away from the home environment either in physical or psychological contexts.

A phenomenon called sunlust may be used to characterise vacations motivated by the desire to experience different or better amenities than are available in the environment in which one normally lives (Crompton, 1979). Similarly, Williams & Zelinski (1970) suggest that in situations where a host destination is perceived to offer a contrasting or desirable climate, environment, culture or lifestyle when compared to the individual’s home destination, one might expect individuals to travel to that destination. Pleasure vacations therefore allow individuals to participate in activities and experiences that are inconceivable within the context of their daily routine but facilitated during vacations by the withdrawal from the individual’s usual role, obligations and responsibilities (Crompton, 1979).

Ritual inversion is important to tourism and is explained with reference to the demand-side (the tourist) and the supply-side (the provider). The demand of the tourist seeks the opposite of their normal life. Graburn (1983 p. 15) explains that tourism is a “structured break from ordinary reality”. Reflecting on the types of ritual inversion of YATs who might see their location as ‘dull and boring’ for example, may look for places that offer excitement. If they live away from the coast, a coastal destination may be sought. If they live in a cold climate, a warm climate might be desired. On the supply-side, tourism places offer an advertised reality of “extraordinary tourist worlds” (Hummon, 1988). Hummon (1988) explains that tourist places create and project identities of a tourist world which provide contrasts between the reality of ordinary places and the reality of tourist worlds. This is shown in Figure No 1 below.
It is suggested that a desire for ritual inversion is an important consideration on the part of tourists, particularly YATs. Those marketing tourism in Australia as well as tourism operators might suggest that Australia is large and diverse enough offer tourism products which satisfy the need for ritual inversion. For instance, a YAT who lives in a small inland community might seek a vibrant seaside location which can
surely be offered within Australia. Perhaps importantly, it is likely that there may be a required or necessary level of ritual inversion needed on the part of YATs to meet the required or necessary level of ritual. This relates to Graburn’s (1983) earlier mentioned point that modern society may not impose enough satisfactory rites of passage for people to symbolise a milestone in their lives. It might be that international travel fulfils the ritual and ritual inversion required by YATs necessary to demonstrate their transition from ‘beyond schoolies’ into adulthood, such symbolism not being achieved from the consumption of domestic tourism. An understanding of the required or necessary levels of ritual and ritual inversion would assist those wishing to attract YATs and also an understanding as to how these levels are determined. Fashion theory might contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon.

The Fashion of Travel

Sproles (1981) defines fashion as a custom temporarily adopted by a proportion of the population as it is perceived to be appropriate for that time and situation. It is a behavioural complex underlying all stylistic innovations (Robinson, 1958). Although fashion has commonly been applied to clothing; fashion may be observed within aspects of science, art, education and literature (Sproles, 1981). These aspects of application are relatively public in nature and can be observed by other members of the relevant community (Reynolds, 1968). It is therefore not difficult to keep up-to-date with fashion trends. The development of fashion may be influenced by the industry as well as the consumer (Sproles, 1981). While the industry may employ the use of mass media to communicate fashion, consumer leaders or segments may also influence the development of certain trends.

While the influence of peers on individuals’ consumer decisions is documented (For example, Venkatesan, 1966), literature on the influence of peers in destination choice is relatively scarce. Fashion, in the context of tourism is described as being the meaning that individuals assign to a destination based on their group of influence. This is evident based on the influence of social referrals and word of mouth on the selection of tourist destinations (Michael, Armstrong and King, 2003). Word of mouth helps the traveller move up the travel ladder to higher order motives due to the accumulated information collected, experience and increased expectations (Balakrishnan, Nekhili and Lewis, 2010). Likewise, Todd (2001) suggests that although tourist may not be comfortable with travelling, they may still participate in tourist activities due to the associated status. This indicates the role of society as a ‘push’ factor for travel and suggests the influence of fashion on the individual’s decision to travel.

As a brand, a destination has functional and symbolic attributes (Keller, 1993; Hankinson, 2004). While functional brands satisfy immediate and practical needs, symbolic brand elements satisfy needs such as those for self-expression and prestige
The consumption of certain products depends on the social meaning inherent in them (Solomon, 1983). Symbolic values inherent in a product exert a stronger influence in developing fashion (Miller, McIntyre and Mantrala, 1993).

Similarly, although functional brand components have been noted to play a key role in assisting the customer to develop the initial destination choice set (Balakrishnan, Nekhili and Lewis, 2010), leisure may be motivated by other symbolic elements and be viewed as a form of symbolic consumption to enhance one’s self image and esteem (Dimanche and Samdahl, 1994). Even the very desire to travel or not to travel may be influenced by one’s interpretation of fashion. Visitors from different geographical regions may therefore place different meanings on their travel experience (Colton, 1987). The same destination may be perceived as being fashionable by one individual and not fashionable by another based on their groups of reference.

The Ritual, Ritual Inversion and Fashion of Travel

Together, theories of ritual, ritual inversion and fashion may assist in explaining the destination choice of tourists, particularly YATs. Characteristics of fashion theory may act as a moderating variable (Baron and Kenny, 1986) in the destination choice by YATs. This is shown conceptually in Figure 2.

![Diagram](image)

Figure No. 2: The possible relationship between ritual, ritual inversion, and fashion on destination choice by YATS
It is suggested that in addition to the functional benefits of travel sought by YATs, it is likely that more importance is given to the symbolism of travel on the part of these consumers. What is also important to consider is that any such conceptual model cannot be rigid. It must be flexible to take into account changes in tourism fashion in a world of *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2000); a world which does not hold its shape for long (Franklin, 2003).

A research agenda for this work has been developed which includes conducting focus groups with members of the population of YATs to identify potential factors which contribute to the explanation of ritual inversion and fashion to destination choice. The second stage is to develop hypotheses regarding relationships between these factors following which a structured questionnaire will be designed and distributed to a nationally representative sample of YATs. If this model is validated in future research, the practical implications will require tourism marketers to be aware of not only the demands for ritual and ritual inversion by YATs, but as well, the need to formulate strategies which will portray selected Australian destinations as being fashionable.
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