

Information, Experience and Destination Marketing - The Influence of Interactivity on Tourism Website

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Abstract: This study focuses on the tourism websites that are doing destination marketing for some remote areas. This study proposes that when interactivity is put into the website to create users' virtue experience with the remote areas, different user may response differently. Two kinds of user's personal factors are investigated in this study: Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence and Personal Involvement. The research findings support the ideas proposed by Vogt et al. that values sought by information searchers are not limited to functional needs but include hedonic, innovative, aesthetic, and sign needs. The findings also indicate that interactivity feature can generate better intention to visit on users with higher personal involvement on the tour, or lower susceptibility to interpersonal influence. While on traditional tourism website, these two factors (personal involvement and susceptibility to interpersonal influence) have no significant impact on users' satisfaction. Based on these findings, marketers and advertisers can design more effective tourism website for various potential visitors to enhance their intention to visit the destination.

JEL Classifications: C91, M15, M31, O33

Keywords: Personal involvement, Interactivity, Susceptibility to interpersonal influence, Virtual experience, Intention

1. Introduction

The World Wide Web has created a new communication environment for tourism destination marketing. Traditionally, advertising has been defined as a form of controlled communication that firms attempts to persuade their consumers. But times has changed, now, those creative consumers are the new locus of value in Web 2.0 (Berthona et al., 2012). Therefore, in various researches, experiences have consistently been shown lead to stronger beliefs and attitudes than advertising (Grønhøj & Thøgersen, 2012). More and more tourism business now provides virtual experience, such as panoramic views, animation, and interactive photos, so that their consumers can get a virtual experience without actually being there (Li and Wang, 2010). To create most virtual

experience for their potential customers, many tourism destination marketing organizations have developed websites with varying levels of interactive features (Elbe, Lars and Björn, 2009). Based on the findings of our previous research, we have concluded that if the tourism website can use innovative ways to interact with their customers, it can significantly increase their virtual experience about the destination and thus increase their intention to visit (Liao, Liu and Chen, 2011). But still relatively little empirical research has been undertaken on tourism business which focuses specifically on investigating how different customers may response to the virtual experience marketing conduct differently.

This study focuses on the tourism websites that are doing destination marketing for some remote areas. In this paper, we will investigate the relationship between Intention to Visit and the interactivity design of the tourism website. The researchers of this study proposed that when interactivity being put into their website to create users' virtual experience with the remote areas, different user may response differently. There are two user's personal factors being investigated in this study: Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence and Personal Involvement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Destination Marketing and Virtual Experience

Traditionally, firms use advertising messages and direct experience as two common sources of information to communicate with consumers about their products or services (Singh, Balasubramanian, and Chakraborty 2000). These two sources of information differ significantly in their ability to foster strongly held beliefs about search and experiential product attributes. Advertising has been found to be superior at communicating search attribute beliefs and experience has been found to be superior at fostering experiential attribute beliefs (Kempf and Laczniak, 2001).

While advertising messages are capable of being easily communicated across a broad spectrum of media, experience has been somewhat limited, particularly in relation to experience products such as a vocation tour (Klein 1998; Nelson 1974; Wright and Lynch, 1995). This has been a substantial limitation for tourism businesses, as consumers use experience and advertising messages in a complementary fashion (Kempf and Laczniak 2001). Therefore, it has been argued that conventional practice of marketing on tourism, such as the advertising and promotion, tends to confirm the intentions of tourists rather than actually persuading them to visit a new destination (Morgan et al., 2002). In another words, hospitality and tourism industry may requiring a shift away from a focus on facilities and services to a focus on providing customized experiences (Knutson, Beck, Kim & Cha, 2006).

The Internet has now offers firms the unique opportunity to digitalize these attributes in multimedia formats (Alba et al. 1997; Burke 1997). The Internet is fundamentally different from traditional media in that it provides two-way interactivity for information search (Cho 1999; Hoffman and Novak 1996). According to the previous studies, these interactivity and multimedia displays can help to enhance consumer's virtual experience (Merle, Senecal and Anik, 2012; Novak, Hoffman, and Yung 2000). The pervasiveness of the Internet coupled with the keenness in competition among tourism business has led to virtual experiential marketing (VEM). VEM embraces the Internet and its various channels and technology to create an enriched environmental experience through visual and audio cues and produce an immersive experience (Chen et al, 2008). According to the VEM, user's virtual tourism experiences are the things that imitate user's real-life tourism experience, in another word, simulation of a direct experience by the computer via the Internet.

Information searching is an important element on creating virtual experience on a tourism website. The main reason for tourists to use the website is their needs to know more about the destination in terms of accommodation, transportation, sightseeing, and other activities. Traditional theory about tourism decision-making process tends to recognize that information is collected and used largely for functional reasons (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). But various recent studies had recognized that both consumption and decision making processes related to tourism are to a large extent driven by hedonic and emotional aspects (Chung and Rao, 2012; Gretzel and Fesenmaier, 2003) and memory of trips are a function of trip-related experiences and the stories we construct from them. In another words, values sought by information searchers are not limited to functional need but include hedonic, innovation, aesthetic, and sign needs, experiential aspects of information need to be regarded as another crucial cornerstone for what to present (Vogt et al., 1993). Vogt & Fesenmaier (1998) had offered a framework for understanding the needs for information search on the tourism decision making since experiences are the core product in that industry. According to Vogt & Fesenmaier, there are five needs of individual to call for information search on using a tourism website: functional, hedonic, innovation, aesthetics and sign.

2.2 The Development of the Experience-based Tourism System (ETS)

The Experience-based Tourism System (ETS) that we used in this study was developed by the CYCU Internet Behavior Lab in the year 2010. In order to create the most virtue experience, The ETS is a traditional tourism website with advanced interactivity feature. The interactivity feature in the ETS have followed the procedure of leisure and recreation decision proposed by Chubb and Chubb(1981) in order to assist users to schedule their tours. To schedule his tour to certain destination, the user of ETS has to interact with his Personal Travel Assistant (PTA). The PTA is a computer agent that will work with the users through three steps: 1. Recommendation, 2. Evaluation and 3. Negotiation (Figure 1). Every time when the user needs to make a decision (e.g. Where should I stay at night?), he can request the PTA to make a recommendation for him. When the user had made a decision (e.g. I want to stay at KiTin Hostel.), the PTA will do the feasibility evaluation for him. If there are any conflict exist (e.g. “I want to stay at KiTin Hostel” may conflict with “I want to arrive at my hotel no later than 7PM”), the PTA will do the negotiation with the user and try to come out a better solution. After the user had finish scheduling his tour, the PTA will generate a tour handbook according to the format selected by the user himself.

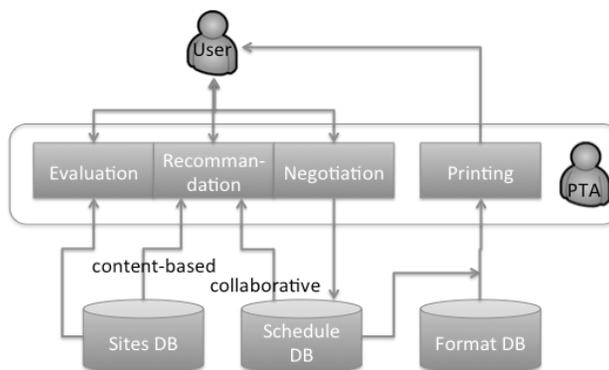


Figure 1. Experience-based tourism website

In the year of 2010, the ETS was installed for a remote area call Bunun in Taitung County in Taiwan. It quickly became a quite welcomed tourism website in Taiwan. In its first year, there are more than half million visits to the site. It was estimated that over 20% tourists (that is around 11,000 people) have visit the website before they pay a visit to Bunun area.

2.3 Personal Decision Making

After the success of the ETS, an interesting question emerged, that is, why people respond to the ETS so differently. The main issue here is that, on our observations, the effect of interactivity offer by the ETS seems vary according to different types of users. This is somewhat different from the traditional “information-oriented tourism website” that the CYCU lab had developed in the past.

When we have setup a traditional tourism website, most users will respond positively. But on the ETS with the interactivity feature, even though a lot of people responded even more positive, we have notice that some of our users are not and some of them may actually dislike the new interactive feature in the ETS.

Based on the previous research findings, we can conclude that if the tourism website can provide enough utility and value recognition by their users, it may increase users' intention to visit. In another words, by creating potential customers' virtue experience related to the destination through information search, the website can be a critical tool for destination marketing especially for those remote areas. But for users, interactivity are time consuming, it takes effort for user to interact with the system. So it is obvious that if the user did not recognize the value for himself, the interactivity of the ETS may be consider useless by this user.

Specific personal attributes may have some effect on the value recognition of specific user. First is the user's personal Involvement on this decision making. Interactivity from the user's point of view, is a way of information processing during the decision process. Various studies have identified that personal involvement is a critical factor of user's chose of routes on the decision making (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1985; Park & Young, 1986). Involvement was defined by Zaichkowsky (1985)as "A person's perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values and interests". According to The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty et al., 1983; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984), high-involvement consumers will take the central route and thus have a higher attitude and stronger intention to information search and processing (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; Zaichowsky, 1985; Barki & Hartwick, 1989). For ETS, the interactivity is taking by the process of scheduled a tour to visit the destination. For users who take the central route, they may create more vivid virtual experience by interact with the ETS. But on the contrast, user with low involvement may take a peripheral route, and thus the interactivity may be useless for them on building up their virtual experience during their decision making. In another word, consumers with different involvement on the tour may value the ETS's interactivity feature differently, thus affect their intention to visit differently.

Other than doing tour scheduling with the users, the interactivity on ETS has another unique feature, which is the use of Personal Travel Assistant (PTA). Nass and Lee. (2001) had demonstrated that computer personality can be easily created using a minimal set of cues and people will respond to these personalities in the same way they would respond to similar human personalities. And others' influence was considered as an important determinant on individual's behavior. Models used to explain consumer behavior frequently include interpersonal influence (Stafford and Cocanougher, 1977). It is obvious that, in order to understand the behaviors of the ETS users, we have to recognize that their behavior cannot be fully understand unless consideration is given to the effects of user's susceptibility to interpersonal influence. User with low susceptibility may value the service of PTA since it allows him to set his own rule on scheduling this vocation. While for individual with high susceptibility, he may believe that it is easier for him to simply follow the tourist schedule suggested by the website.

2.4 Research Model and Hypotheses

According to Vogt & Fesenmaier (1998), tourism website facilitates a decision-making process in order to satisfied the five tourist's Information Needs call for information search. By satisfy their needs, user's virtual tourism experiences can be created through the simulation of a direct experience. According to the researches of Holbrook & Hirshman(1982), and Phelps(1986), when user search and browse tourist information, they will more understand and interest of the touring spots and encourage their intention to take the tour in the future. In this study, we believed that via satisfied their information needs, the ETS will increase the tourists' Intention to Visit (Hypothesis 1). In order to satisfy the potential visitors' Information Needs, our ETS can use two Presentation

Types (Information Webpages Only and Interactivity Feature enabled) to service its users. By enable the ETS's interactivity feature that allow them to arrange their own touring schedule and produce their customized tour handbooks, the tourists' Information needs will be better satisfied and thus create more vivid virtual experience (Hypothesis 2). In this study, the model, proposed by Vogt & Fesenmaier (1998) which influence the use of communications relate to their tourism experiences, were used to represent user's satisfaction of his information needs. The Personal Involvement and Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence was identify in this model in order to investigate the impact of personal attributed on responding to the interactivity on the tourism website. Thus, Personal Involvement (Hypothesis 3) and Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (Hypothesis 4) are moderators on the relationship between Presentation Types and the Information Needs. Personal Involvement was measured by the Personal Involvement Inventory (PII) proposed by Zaichkowsky (1985). The users' Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence was measured by measurement proposed by Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel(1989).

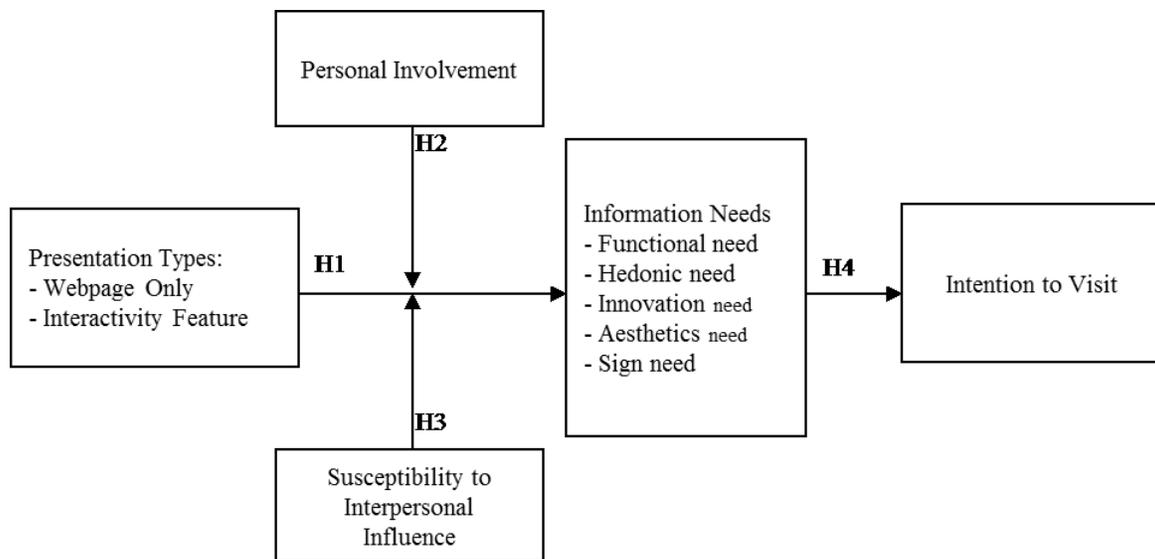


Figure 2. Research Model

Thus, the following hypotheses were investigated:

- Hypothesis 1: When users have higher satisfaction on their information needs, they will have higher intention to pay a visit to the destination that promoted by the website.
- Hypothesis 2: Compare to the traditional website, website with interactivity feature will generate higher satisfaction on user's information needs.
- Hypothesis 3: Using the interactivity feature, users with high involvement on the tour will have higher satisfaction on their information needs compare to users with low involvement.
- Hypothesis 4: Using the interactivity feature, users with high susceptibility to interpersonal influence will have lowered satisfaction on their information needs compare to users with lower susceptibility.

3. Research Method

3.1 Experimental Design

In this study, the experiment scenario was defined after several preliminary studies in order to ensure the effectiveness of the settings. Based on the preliminary studies, a not-so-popular tourism region in Taitung: the Yen-Pin County, was selected as the destination that our ETS website wants to promote. The Yen-Pin County comprises of four aboriginal communities with unique natural and cultural resources and some dramatic geological features. In this experiment, participants were asked to use our tourism website to schedule a trip to Yen-Pin. The participants were recruited through ad banners posted on a leading commercial website in Taiwan: www.sogi.com. We randomly selected 203 individuals from 532 volunteers to participate in the experiment. Among them, 198 participants completed the experiment. Participants were divided into two groups:

(1) Group A: Website with Interactivity Feature

100 participants were assigned to Group A. Participants in this group use the same website just like Group B. But their ETS website allows them to interact with the website in order to schedule their customized tour to Yen-Pin and then generate a customized tour handbook for their tour.

(2) Group B: Traditional Tourism Website

98 participants were assigned to the Group B. Participants in this group use the ETS without the interactivity feature. In this mode, the ETS is a website copied from a popular commercial information oriented tourism website in Taiwan. On this website, users can browse the tourist information and read several suite of tourist schedule suggested by the website.

Before and after their usage of the website, questionnaires were distributed to those participants. The first questionnaire was filled by participants before their usage of the ETS. The questionnaire was organized into three sections. Section A contains respondent’s demographic items (i.e., gender, age, education, occupation, online experience, length of online experience). Section B contains questions related to the respondent’s Personal Involvement on the tour. Section C contains questions related to their Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence. After their usage of the ETS website, a second questionnaire was distributed. Section A of this questionnaire contains respondent’s satisfaction on their information needs. Section B contains questions related to their intention to visit the Yen-Pin County. The items in both questionnaires were taken from prior researches and refined through focus group discussions and interviews with experienced tourists. Responses were measured on 5-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

3.2 Measurement

SPSS were used to perform statistical analyses. First, the constructed reliability and validity of the survey instrument were evaluated. Cronbach’s α was calculated for each scale to ensure internal consistency among the items. The scale reliabilities are reported in Table 1. Factor reliabilities, as represented by Cronbach’s α , were between 0.700 and 0.906 for each factor. Analysis of the herein-considered sample showed a reasonable level of reliability ($\alpha > 0.70$, Table 1). Factor analysis also confirmed that the construct validity of the scales could be

Table 1. Construct Items and Reliabilities

Constructs	No. of Items	Cronbach’s α	
Personal involvement	9	0.906	
Susceptibility to interpersonal influence	6	0.788	
Satisfactory of Information needs	functional	4	0.849
	hedonic	3	0.700
	innovation	4	0.783
	aesthetic	2	0.719
	sign	3	0.731
Intention to Visit	3	0.887	

carried out adequately. Using the 'principal component' method with varimax rotation, construct validity was examined. The factor loadings for all items exceeded 0.6 and indicated that the individual items also had discriminated validity.

4. Research Findings

Before testing our four hypotheses, we run t tests on Personal Involvement and Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence between group A and B (Interactivity and Webpages). The result (Table 2) has shown that participants from both groups have no significant difference on their Personal Involvement with Yen-Pin ($P=.615$) and their Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence ($P=.235$).

Table 2. Test on Personal Involvement and Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence

Ind. Variable	Dep. Variable	N	mean	s.d.	diff	t	p
Personal Involvement	Interactivity	100	3.3389	.57646	-.04206	-.504	.615
	Webpages	98	3.3810	.59803			
Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence	Interactivity	100	3.3650	.48240	-.08058	-1.192	.235
	Webpages	98	3.4456	.46822			

It was hypothesized that the satisfaction on information needs would lead ETS participants to higher intention to pay a visit to the destination. Hypothesis 1 was supported by the data as Information Needs was significantly related to Intention to Visit (Table 2, $P<0.001$). When participants' information needs were highly satisfied they will have higher intention to pay a visit to Yen-Pin that promoted by the ETS.

We then divided the Information Needs into five types: Functional, Hedonic, Innovation, Aesthetics and Sign, as Vogt & Fesenmaier (1998) had suggested. The results of regression analysis testing include path coefficients and R2 values (Table 4). The data have indicated that: Hedonic need ($\beta = 0.293$, $p < 0.001$), Innovation need ($\beta = 0.132$, $p < 0.1$), Aesthetic need ($\beta = 0.130$, $p < 0.1$) and Sign need ($\beta = 0.389$, $p < 0.001$) have positive effects on Intention to Visit. The Sign need has the strongest impact on Intention to Visit, followed by Hedonic need. All types of needs except Functional need have a significant positive impact on participants' intention to visit Yen-Pin.

Table 3. Test on Satisfaction on information needs with Intention to Visit

Ind. Variable	Dep. Variable	β	Std. β	t	p
Information Needs	Intention to Visit	.599	.301	4.417	.000***
$R^2 = 0.019$		*** indicates statistical significance at the level of 0.001.			

It was further hypothesized that interactivity will enhance user's virtual experience through higher satisfactory of their information needs. This hypothesis 2 was also supported by the data (Table 5) as participants on Group A (Interactivity) have significantly higher satisfaction on their Information Needs then the participants on Group B (Webpages).

Table 4. Regression Analysis on information needs to the Intention to visit

Ind. Variable	Dep. Variable	β	Std. β	t	p
Functional	Intention to Visit	-.025	-.026	-.362	.717
Hedonic		.336	.293	4.290	.000 ***
Innovation		.176	.132	1.857	.065*
Aesthetic		.137	.130	1.831	.069*
Sign		.494	.389	5.909	.000 ***
R ² = 0.208					
***, **and * indicate statistical significance at the level of 0.001, 0.05 and 0.10, respectively.					

Table 5. Test on Satisfaction of Information Needs with two Presentation Types

Dep. Variable	Ind. Variable	N	mean	s.d.	diff	t	p
Information Needs	Interactivity	100	4.0343	.31404	.2027	4.843	.000 ***
	Webpages	98	3.8316	.27306			
*** indicates statistical significance at the level of 0.001.							

After divided the information needs into five types, the results (Table 6) indicated that ETS with Interactivity Feature have a significant higher satisfaction level on the Functional need (p<0.001), Hedonic need (p<0.1) and Innovation need (p<0.001). But the traditional information webpages have a significant higher satisfaction level on the Aesthetic need (p<0.1). There are no significant difference on the Sign need between two groups.

The data indicated that the Personal Involvement has a positively influences on the satisfaction of the Information Needs when participants are using the ETS with Interactivity Feature (P<0.001). On the other hand, when using ETS on the traditional information webpages mode, there are no significant relationship between Personal Involvement and participants' satisfaction of Information Needs (P=0.552).

Table 6. Test on five types of Information Needs with two Presentation Types

		N	mean	s.d.	diff	t	p	
Satisfaction of Inf. Needs	Functional	Interactivity	100	4.0175	.42381	.50474	5.955	.000 ***
		Webpages	98	3.5128	.73162			
	Hedonic	Interactivity	100	3.8167	.54716	.12959	1.698	.091*
		Webpages	98	3.6871	.52610			
	Innovation	Interactivity	100	4.2825	.45179	.45852	8.001	.000 ***
		Webpages	98	3.8240	.34658			
	Aesthetic	Interactivity	100	3.9650	.61650	-.16255	-1.967	.051*
		Webpages	98	4.1276	.54352			
	Sign	Interactivity	100	4.0900	.46386	.08320	1.203	.230
		Webpages	98	4.0068	.50875			
	***, **and * indicate statistical significance at the level of 0.001, 0.05 and 0.10, respectively.							

Hypothesis 3 was supported as the result indicated that Personal Involvement is a moderator on the relationship between Presentation Types and the participants' satisfaction on their Information Needs (Figure 3). In another word, using a highly interactive tourism website, user with higher Personal Involvement on the tour will have a higher satisfaction on their information needs and thus have a higher intention to pay a visit to the destination, while on the traditional tourism website, Personal Involvement has no impact on their satisfaction.

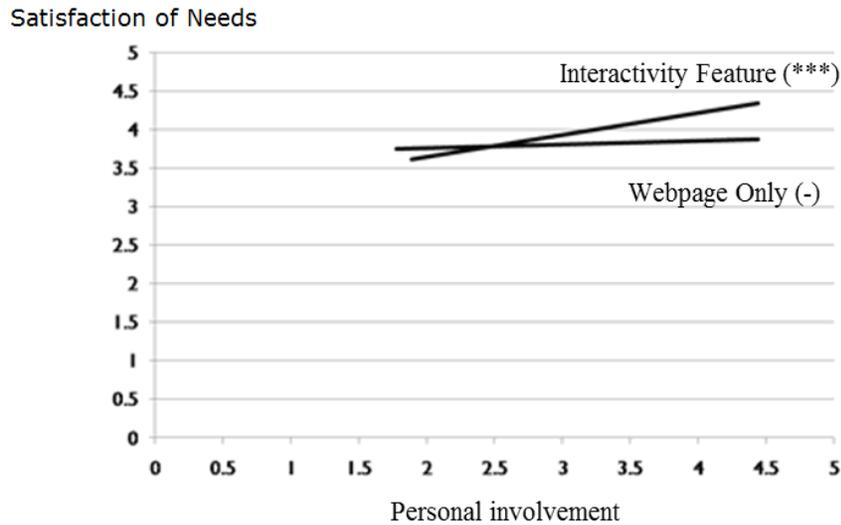


Figure 3. Personal involvement moderates the relationship between satisfaction of information needs and presentation types

It was hypothesized that the Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence has negative influences on the satisfaction of information needs when participants are using the ETS with Interactivity Feature (Hypothesis 4). This hypothesis was supported by the data ($P < .05$). On the other hand, participants who are using the traditional information webpages have no significant relationship between their Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence and their satisfaction of Information Needs ($P = .623$).

The result indicated that Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence is a moderator on the relationship between Presentation Types and the satisfaction on Information Needs. Using traditional tourism website, Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence has no impact on users' satisfaction, but in a high interactive situation, user with lower Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence will have a higher satisfaction on their Information Needs and thus have a higher intention to pay a visit to the destination.

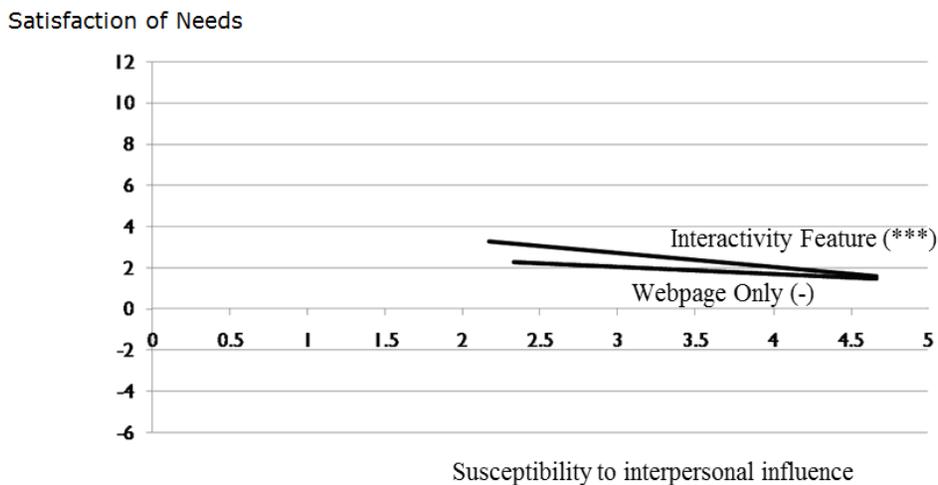


Figure 4. Susceptibility to interpersonal influence moderates the relationship between satisfaction of information needs and presentation types

5. Conclusions

This study tries to generate vivid evidence on what users will respond to the interactivity features provided by the tourism website. The present study has shown that tourism website is a useful tool for performing destination marketing. Despite its presentation types, a tourism website will increase potential tourists' intention to visit the destination. And, tourism website with interactivity feature has a high satisfaction level on users' information needs. The findings indicate that when interactivity is put into the website to create users' virtual experience with the remote areas, different users may respond differently. In this study, two moderators were tested: Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence and Personal Involvement on the tour. Our findings indicate that interactivity feature can generate better satisfaction on information needs for users who have more Personal Involvement or lower Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence. While on traditional tourism website, Personal Involvement and Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence have no impact on users' satisfaction.

Our findings also support the ideas proposed by Vogt et al. that values sought by information searchers are not limited to functional needs but include hedonic, innovative, aesthetic, and sign needs. Contradictory to the traditional theory about tourism decision-making process, our findings indicate that functional information need has no significant impact on participants' intention to visit the destination. The researchers believe that this may indicate that the intention related to tourism is to a large extent driven by hedonic and emotional aspects. In other words, values sought by information searchers are not limited to functional needs but include hedonic, innovative, aesthetic, and sign needs, and, experiential aspects of information need to be regarded as another crucial cornerstone for what to present.

While the interactivity feature can enhance the satisfaction of users' information needs. It can only benefit information need that focuses on intrapersonal or individual-based needs. That is the functional, hedonic and innovative needs. For the sign need which describes the interpersonal, social, symbolic, or more general "sign" aspects of information acquisition and knowledge transfer (Mick 1986), our findings indicate that interactivity incorporated into the tourism website does not benefit users' satisfaction on this domain. For aesthetic need, interactivity will cause a negative impact on participants' satisfaction. We believe that this may be caused by the design of our ETS website. The ETS implemented its interactivity feature by dynamic webpages which are not so easy to be well formatted like those static webpages. Future research in this area should attempt to understand the relationship between each five types of information needs with the presentation type and users' intention to visit and examine other possible explanations of the results.

This study represents an initial attempt to conceptualize virtual experience of users with different personal attributes in tourism website. Answers to these research questions are not only essential to our understanding of this new challenging experience, but also significant for destination marketing practice. With advanced knowledge of virtual experience, marketers and advertisers can design more effective tourism website for various potential visitors to enhance their intention to visit the destination.

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