

# Marketing Innovations for Sustainable Destinations

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## 7 Tourist Decision Strategies in a Multi-Level Perspective

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## Introduction

Imagine you were to choose a destination for your summer family holiday. Your choice is likely to be influenced by a substantial number of factors, including who you are as a vacationer (i.e. personal factors such as your knowledge/experience of those three destinations), with whom you are going to make your decision (i.e., social factors such as group membership or accountability to relevant others) and what the characteristics of the decision situation are (i.e. task and context factors such as available time and money). The goals vacationers pursue is another major factor influencing the decision making (DM) process. For example, you may be driven by the goal of preserving family ties while holidaying. For achieving those goals, a broad range of decision strategies, also referred to as decision rules or heuristics, may be used. For example, you will incorporate children's expectations in choosing the vacation destination. Such decision strategies are the focus of this chapter.

As widely pointed out in the consumer behavior literature, choosing and buying products involves decisions and thereby a DM process. Pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives is a major step in such a DM process, which involves consumers' use of decision criteria, strategies/rules and goals (Beach and Mitchell, 1987). Consumers dealing with such complex decisions as travel and vacation choices plan their decisions (Bettman, 1979; Park and Lutz, 1982), i.e. they select from among alternatives of a specific course of action in anticipation of particular needs or problems. Plans are more formally defined as 'those specific procedures or actions taken to achieve a goal' (Miller et al., 1960 in Bettman, 1979: 47). When planning, consumers need to evaluate product alternatives. Therefore, they use decision strategies/rules to make a selection among a set of considered alternatives. Such strategies express the relationship between consumers' contextual and personal situation and the choice they make (Van Middelkoop et al., 2003). Vermeir et al. (2002: 709) underline the major role of decision strategies in consumer DM: 'another important factor of the DMP is the use of decision rules [strategies]. Each consumer uses certain decision rules to base their decisions on'. Despite the growing amount of published research in that field, few studies have explored the factors impacting the use of decision heuristics in evaluating products. This is even more true as far as travel and vacation products are concerned.

A few authors have proposed general models and frameworks in order to understand travel and vacation DM (for reviews, see Decrop, 2006; Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). Decrop (2006) makes a distinction between micro-economic, cognitive and interpretive models. Micro-economic models use traditional demand theory in order to explain tourism behavior. A rational vacationer is depicted who tries to maximize the utility of his or her choices under the constraint of their budget. Cognitive models focus on the mental processes that are involved in DM. Most of those models lean heavily on classical buyer

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