

2020

## The Information Search Behavior of International Students when Travelling within the Countries of Study in Relation to the Effectiveness of DMO Websites

Daegeun (Dan) Kim

*The University of Mississippi*, [dkim18@go.olemiss.edu](mailto:dkim18@go.olemiss.edu)

Sheila Scott-Halsell

*Texas Tech University*, [sheila.scott@ttu.edu](mailto:sheila.scott@ttu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/jti>



Part of the [Tourism and Travel Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kim, Daegeun (Dan) and Scott-Halsell, Sheila (2020) "The Information Search Behavior of International Students when Travelling within the Countries of Study in Relation to the Effectiveness of DMO Websites," *Journal of Tourism Insights*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2328-0824.1078>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/jti/vol10/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Tourism Insights* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## Introduction

Travelling abroad today, as compared to the past, is much easier. The development of high-speed transportation and changes in visa policies have led to more international travelers. The number of youth travelling has rapidly increased due to an increase in living standards which leads to travelers from developing countries travelling for the first time. Many first-time travelers are often young and well-off (World Tourism Organization, 2016).

Among the youth travelers, international students traveling while studying abroad is prevalent. In 2017, the number of international students has increased from 2 million in 2000 to 5.3 million (UNESCO, 2019) which indicates that the international education industry is one of the fastest growing industries. There are about 2.8 million international students studying abroad in all parts of the world and the number is growing 5.5% each year (Davidson et al., 2010).

According to World Tourism Organization (2011), the number of international students traveling has increased from 136 million in 2000 to 187 million in 2010, representing approximately 20% of the international travel market. This has the potential of generating a huge profit for tourist destinations. One of the reasons why international student travel is because they are far from their homes, it is not convenient for them to visit their home countries, thereby seek for an opportunity to travel within the country of study and subsequent experiencing the culture of the host countries and the indigenous people (Buffa, 2015; Lee & King, 2016; Michael et al., 2003). As mentioned previously, international students not only bring financial resources to the destination countries through living expenses while participating in education, but also generate a large amount of financial resources by travelling. Within the tourism industry, the influence of the international students has drawn attention due to the growth of the markets and the scale of studying abroad (Gardiner et al., 2013). International students tend to travel frequently within the country in which they are studying, which is essential typical experience when studying abroad (Payne, 2009). Since most of the international students are young, the travelling behaviors heavily are often impacted by price and the attractions themselves (Vukic et al. 2015).

Students and young independent travelers tend to plan their trips without the help of tour agents, which categorizes them as “independent travelers” (Richards & Wilson, 2004). Usually these young backpackers gather information through the internet or the destinations’ websites. International students are also referred to as backpackers due to the fact that they travel in groups and gather information by

themselves. Most international students studying abroad tend to rely on the sources or information of word-of-mouth (WOM) or gather information from family or friends (Ladhari & Michaud 2015; Leung et al. 2013). The development of technology leads many students to search for information online and the role of destination marketing organizations (DMOs) is recognized as an important factor when promoting a destination or providing qualitative information to international students. As an example, in Australia's case, there were several studies conducted on recognizing international students as a market segment (Pearce & Son, 2004; Shafi et al., 2020; Son & Pearce, 2005). According to Glover (2011), the destination of study for international students may be affected not only by the promotional material and general destination information, but also for destinations with academic benefits. Evidence showed that international postgraduate tourism students tend to put more importance on the location than the institution and program when they made their decision to study in Australia (Ruhanen & McLennan, 2010).

In 1963, international students were defined as a type of tourists by the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) (Page & Connell, 2006). Much research has been conducted regarding the impacts, contributions and travelling behavior by international students living in specific countries (Shi et al., 2010).

Although the number of international student travelers is increasing rapidly, reviewed DMO websites typically neglect to target this market specifically. Although DMOs use social media and their official websites, these focus on visitors or travelers who come to and stay in the destination for a short period of time.

Informational searching behavior of international students tends to differ as compared to domestic or general international visitors (Ortega & Rodriguez, 2007). Since the majority of international students are typically young, they tend to spend much of their time on the internet gathering information on tourism activities in their country of study (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012).

The purpose of this research was to determine informational search behaviors of international student who study abroad and the effectiveness of DMO websites in the search process. By identifying these behaviors, information could be made available to DMOs on better serving this market of traveler.

## **Literature Review**

### *International Student Travel*

International students have influence and ongoing effect on the tourism

industry since they spend money on both education-related activities and travel within the destination (Weaver, 2003). The possibility of international students generating more revenue in the host country's tourism industry is higher due to the fact that they stay for a longer period of time in the country and have more free time during holidays and vacation periods to travel within the destination (Thrane, 2016). Another important consideration in attempting to attract international students is the potential of them becoming repeat visitors (Gardiner et. al, 2013; Weaver, 2003). Additionally, during their stay, they become an advocate by promoting the destination to friends and relatives (Gardiner et al., 2013).

#### *Tourists' Information Search Behavior*

Access to information is an important aspect influencing consumer behavior (Assael, 1995). With the tourism industry being information intensive, tourists typically search for information on their potential or selected destination(s) prior to their trip. Therefore, understanding how tourists gather information is considered an important aspect for destinations and tourism-related organizations. This information aids them in developing effective communication strategies in effort to influence the tourists' decision-making process (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004).

A traditional method of gathering information, prior to the creation of the internet, was through travel agents, brochures, and advertisements (Ho & Liu, 2005). With the introduction of the internet, the number of users has significantly increased and become the primary channel for information searching (Ho & Liu, 2005). In the tourism industry, the internet is the most frequently used channel in the pre-departure stage such as planning, booking, and purchasing tourism products (Hyde, 2008).

#### *Destination Marketing Organizations*

A DMO is a marketing entity for a destination to attract visitors. Within the tourism industry, competition is fierce, and destinations find themselves in a situation where the need to compete with other destinations is inevitable (Presenza et al., 2005). As a result, DMOs play an important role as organizers for marketing and development of the destinations (Wang, 2008). Since many tourists select a destination as they would a product (Klimek, 2013), Fyall, Leask, and Garrod (2001) indicated that DMOs should focus on potential needs of the market and how to maximize tourism. In addition, for DMOs to play their role more effectively, DMOs should clearly understand and collaborate with the stakeholders.

DMOs promote a destination and provide information to the tourists for planning trips. Other roles of a DMO are to maximize the profit of a destination and facilitate a satisfying experience for tourists (Bornhorst et al., 2010). The five functions of a DMO, suggested by Morrison, Bruen, and Anderson (1998), are economic driver, community marketer, industry coordinator, quasi-public representative, and builder of community pride.

The introduction of the internet allowed DMOs the opportunity to promote and distribute information about the destination and reservation services worldwide. Allowing them to compete more strategically within the fierce market (Romanazzi et al., 2011). The internet enables marketers to locate and target a broader range of consumers, determine their needs, and communicate with them at a lower cost than traditional marketing methods (Lau et al., 2001).

Choi, Lehto, and O'Leary (2007) stated that a DMO's website plays the role of information gateway to the destination. Unfortunately, with the maturity of the internet, many DMO websites are ineffective due to their simply providing information of products or services without concern to their audience (Hudson & Lang, 2002). It is vital for DMOs to evaluate their websites frequently to meet the needs of the potential visitors during their online experience (Li & Wang, 2010). DMOs' official websites are different than commercial tourism websites due to the fact that they promote events, heritage sites, multiple facilities and resources available within a destination (Tanrisevdi & Duran, 2011). Due to this, the content of a DMO website is important because it can influence on the image of the destination and allow the tourists to have an indirect experience (Tanrisevdi & Duran, 2011). By continually evaluating their websites, and customizing them to meet the needs of tourists, these websites can assist in converting current visitors to revisiting tourists in a cost manner. Furthermore, when DMOs help create a loyal tourist, the opportunity to communicate and increase the involvement of these visitors will increase the level of loyalty of those visitors (Li & Wang, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the travel and search behaviors of international student tourists in their destination of study in an effort to provide crucial information to DMOs to enhance their value to their constituents and stakeholders.

## **Methodology**

### *Sample, Data Collection and Analysis*

The questionnaires were distributed by "Survey Monkey" and a "Facebook" web link distribution by individual contacts. Through Facebook, 35 responses were

collected and among the number, 34 responses (97.1%) were valid. As for web link distribution of the Survey Monkey, 108 responses were collected and among the number only 99 responses (91.7%) were valid. Thus, a total number of 133 samples were used for analysis.

The questionnaire contained four sections and 23 questions in total. The first section asked the questions about international students' travelling behavior and their information search behavior. The second section was about international students' information search behavior when planning a trip within the destination in which they had studied or were currently studying. This section was primarily focused on their behavior of searching information and how internal information sources and the primary focus of travelling within the destination country influenced them when searching for information. The third section highlighted the usage and the evaluation of DMO websites using the five-point Likert scale ratings. Finally, the last section asked demographic information including gender, age and nationality.

The data which was collected were analyzed by using SPSS version 22.0 and various analyzing methods such as descriptive statistical analysis, cross-tabulation and chi-square test were used to identify the variables.

## Result and Discussion

Several cross-tabulation tests were conducted to identify the connection between variables. The first cross tabulation test was conducted between the two variables of gender and the frequency of travelling. Twenty-eight respondents (21.1%) were male students who travel one to two times a year, in general. As for female students, 42 respondents (31.6%) responded that they travelled one to two times a year. A Chi-square test was conducted to identify the relationship between the variables and no significant difference was found between gender and how often they travel in a year ( $\chi^2 = 0.35, p = 0.84$ ). See Table 1 for complete results.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation between gender and the frequency of travelling ( $N = 133$ ).  
How often do you travel in a year?

			1-2 times	3-4 times	More than 5 times
<i>Gender</i>	Male	<i>N</i>	28	16	9
		%	21.1	12.0	6.8
	Female	<i>N</i>	42	27	11
		%	31.6	20.3	8.3

Sixty respondents (45.1%) who travel one to two times per year responded that they feel it is important to search for information when they travel and 39 (29.3%) who travel three to four times did as well. There was no significant relationship between the two variables which indicates that if the respondents had travelled more than once, they felt the need to search for information when planning for their trip ( $\chi^2 = 4.25$ ,  $p = 0.83$ ).

Most of the respondents used the internet as a source of information. One hundred and eighteen respondents (88.7%) indicated that the main reason for using the internet was accessibility. Out of 113 respondents who traveled less than five times a year, only three respondents (2.3%) identified that they used their past experience to get necessary information for planning a trip. A chi-square test showed that there was a significant relationship between the two variables ( $\chi^2 = 46.48$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Also, there was no significant relationship between source of information and frequency of travel ( $\chi^2 = 11.33$ ,  $p = 0.33$ ). See Table 2 for complete results.

Table 2. Cross-tabulation between frequency of travel and the importance of searching for information ( $N = 133$ ).

			How important is information search for you when planning a trip?				
			Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
How often do you travel in a year?	1-2 times	<i>N</i>	2	1	7	39	21
		%	1.5	0.8	5.3	29.3	15.8
	3-4 times	<i>N</i>	1	0	3	26	13
		%	0.8	0.0	2.3	19.5	9.8
	More than 5 times	<i>N</i>	0	1	2	9	8
		%	0.0	0.8	1.5	6.8	6.0

One hundred and twelve respondents (84.2%) gathered information prior to arrival about the destination where they studied or were currently studying. However, 21 respondents (15.8%) did not gather information about the destination prior to their study. Seventy-four respondents (55.6%) had prior knowledge of the destination and gathered information from the internet prior to their visit to the country. However, although they had information about the destination, 18 respondents (13.5%) did not have the chance to visit the country in advance of study.

The reason for identifying this was to determine whether prior knowledge and experience with a destination influenced their information search behavior. The chi-square test between the two variables and the result showed no significant relationship between the two ( $\chi^2 = 8.35, p = 0.21$ ).

When international students travelled within the destination where they were studying or had studied, 129 respondents (97.0%) searched for information in advance. One hundred and thirteen respondents (87.6%) answered that the internet was their primary source of information. Although the majority chose the internet as the main source of searching, nine respondents (7.0%) relied on information from friends and families. A small number of respondents relied on past experiences. See Table 3 for complete results on why information sources were chosen.

Table 3. Cross-tabulation between source of information and reasons for choosing those sources ( $N = 133$ ).

		Why do you usually use the selected information source?					
			Cost effective	Accessibility	Accuracy	Quality of information	Others
Where do you usually gather information from?	Internet (e.g. websites, social media, reviews, DMO websites, etc.)	<i>N</i>	12	74	5	26	1
		%	9.0	55.6	3.8	19.5	0.8
	Newspaper/ Magazine advertisement	<i>N</i>	0	0	0	1	0
		%	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.0
	Friends and family	<i>N</i>	0	0	2	2	0
		%	0.0	0.0	1.5	1.5	0.0
	Past experience	<i>N</i>	0	1	2	0	0
		%	0.0	0.8	1.5	0.0	0.0
	Travel agencies	<i>N</i>	0	0	0	2	0
		%	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	0.0
	Guide books	<i>N</i>	0	2	0	3	0



	%	0.0	1.5	0.0	2.3	0.0
--	---	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

The primary concern of both male and female students was the budget. Of Asians students, 44.4% indicated that budget was a concern. Only 12.8% of European students indicated that their primary concern was budget. The chi-square test for gender and the main concern of travelling within the country where they studied or were studying did not have a significant relationship ( $\chi^2 = 9.37, p = 0.15$ ).

The primary purposes of international students' trips were cultural tourism experiences, 46.6%, nature tourism, 22.6%. This result can be referred to Pearce and Son's (2004) research indicating international students tend to focus on having cultural experiences, which includes visiting landscapes, when they travel within the country they studied or are studying. Nationality and purpose of travel within the country where they studied or were studying had a significant relationship ( $\chi^2 = 64.64, p < 0.05$ ).

Only 56 respondents (42.1%) used a DMO website within the country where they studied or were studying. Among the respondents who used the DMO website, the majority of respondents, 55.4% responded that they used the DMO website to search for a destination's general information. As for the effectiveness of the DMO website, 80.4% responded that the DMO websites were effective or very effective. As for the post-purchase behavior, half of the respondents responded that they would recommend the DMO website to friends and family.

Although the effectiveness of a DMO website was determined to be effective, as mentioned previously, 57.9% did not use a DMO website to gather information for their trips within the country of study. Forty-three of those respondents (55.8%) indicated that they chose to use other methods for their information search, while 27.3% indicated the DMO website did not have the information needed. This corresponds with the literature that indicated that high quality information comes from accessing the data which is organized and fits to the user's requirements (Lam & McKercher, 2013). When the DMOs do not provide the information which the users do not need, it can be assumed that it is not playing its roles. Interestingly, 10 of the respondents (13.0%) did not know that DMO websites existed. See Table 4 for effectiveness of DMO websites.

Table 4. Effectiveness of the DMO website within the country of study ( $N = 133$ ).

	<i>N</i>	%
Very ineffective	1	1.8
Ineffective	1	1.8
Neutral	9	16.1
Effective	43	76.8
Very effective	2	3.6

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, this study was conducted in the U.K., and the respondents to the survey were mostly international students within the U.K. Therefore, generalization of the findings to other regions is limited. It is recommended for this study to be replicated in additional locations. Second, the definition of international students was vague. The period of staying for their academic pursuits may vary. The longer period of study within the country, will provide more opportunity for travel, which can affect their behavior of information searching. Therefore, it is recommended to clarify the target sample for further studies.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This research critically evaluated the information search behavior of international students when travelling within the country of study and the effectiveness of DMO websites in the perspective of international students. Through the primary research and result from the main findings, various recommendations can be proposed to DMOs. The main purposes and travel concerns of international students should be recognized. Since the majority of international students tend to travel on a limited budget and prefer cultural experiences, DMOs could provide suggested itineraries focusing on cultural experiences within a minimal budget. This could provide an opportunity to promote the destination to the international students and through a positive experience can transform them into repetitive visitors or potentially draw more visitors to the destination.

International students as a target market in the tourism industry is still at an early stage of growth. Little research was found on integrating information search behaviors of international students as travelers. Future research might be conducted to provide a more detailed analysis and richer data by using qualitative methodology.

## References

- Assael, H. (1995). *Consumer behavior and marketing action*. (5th ed.). Nashville, TN: South-Western College Publishing.
- Bornhorst, T., Brent Ritchie, J. R. & Sheehan, L. (2010). Determinants of tourism

- success for DMOs & destinations: An empirical examination of stakeholders' perspectives. *Tourism Management*, 31(5), 572-589.
- Buffa, F. (2015). Young tourists and sustainability. Profiles, attitudes, and implications for destination strategies. *Sustainability*, 7(10), 14042-14062.
- Choi, S., Lehto, X. Y., & O'Leary, J. T. (2007). What does the consumer want from a DMO website? A study of US and Canadian tourists' perspectives. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 9(2), 59-72.
- Davidson, M., Wilkins, H., King, B., Hobson, P., Craig-Smith, S., & Gardiner S. (2010). *International education visitation: Tourism opportunities*. Gold Coast: CRC for Sustainable Tourism Pty Ltd.
- Fyall, A., Leask, A., & Garrod, B. (2001). Scottish visitor attractions: A collaborative future. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 3(3), 211-228.
- Gardiner, S., King, B., & Wilknis, H. (2013). The travel behaviors of international students: Nationality-based constraints and opportunities. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 19(4), 287-299.
- Glover, P. (2011). International students: Linking education and travel. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 28(2), 180-195.
- Gursoy, D., & McCleary, K. W. (2004). An integrative model of tourists' information search behavior. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 31(2), 353-373.
- Ho, C., & Liu, Y. (2005). An exploratory investigation of web-based tourist information search behavior. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 10(4), 351-360.
- Hudson, S., & Lang, N. (2002). A destination case study of marketing tourism online: Banff, Canada. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 8(2), 155-165.
- Hyde, K. F. (2008). Information processing and touring planning theory. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 35(3), 712-731.
- Jacobsen, J. K. S., & Munna, A. M. (2012). Tourist information search and destination choice in a digital age. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 1, 39-47.
- Klimek, K. (2013). Destination management organizations and their shift to sustainable tourism development. *European Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Recreation*, 4(2), 27-47.
- Ladhari, R., & Michaud, M. (2015). eWOM effects on hotel booking intentions, attitudes, trust, and website perceptions. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 46, 36-45.
- Lau, K., Lee, K., Lam, P., & Ho, Y. (2001). Web-site marketing for the travel-and-tourism industry. *The Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 42(6), 55-62.
- Lee, C., & King, B. (2016). International Students in Asia: Travel Behaviors and Destination Perceptions. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 21(4), 457-476.

- Leung, D., Law, R., Hoof, H., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social media in tourism and hospitality: A literature review. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 30(1-2), 3-22.
- Li, X., & Wang Y. (2010). Evaluating the effectiveness of destination marketing organizations' websites: Evidence from China. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 12(5), 536-549.
- Michael, I., Armstrong, A., & King, B. (2003). The travel behavior of international students: The relationship between studying abroad and their choice of tourist destinations. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 10(1), 57-60.
- Morrison, A. M., Bruen, S. M., & Anderson, D. J. (1998). Convention and visitor bureaus in the USA: A profile of bureaus, bureaus executives, and budgets. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 7(1), 1-19.
- Ortega, E., & Rodriguez, B. (2007). Information at tourism destinations: Importance and cross-cultural differences between international and domestic tourists. *Journal of Business Research*, 60(2), 146-152.
- Page, S., & Connell, J. (2006). *Tourism: A modern synthesis*. (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
- Payne, K. (2009). *International students as domestic tourists in New Zealand: A study of travel patterns, behaviors, motivations and expenditure*. New South Wales: Southern Cross University.
- Pearce, P., & Son, A. (2004). Youth tourism markets in Australia: Comparing the travel behaviors of international English language students and backpackers. *Tourism - An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, 52(4), 341-350.
- Presenza, A., Sheehan, L., & Brent Ritchie, J. R. (2005). Towards a model of the roles and activities of destination management organizations. *Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Science*, 3, 1-16.
- Richards, G., & Wilson, J. (2004). The international student travel market: Travel style, motivations and activities. *Tourism Review International*, 8(2), 57-67.
- Romanazzi, S., Petruzzellis, L., & Iannuzzi, E. (2011). "Click and experience. Just virtually there." The effect of a destination website on tourist choice: Evidence from Italy. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management*, 20(7), 791-813.
- Ruhanen, L., & McLennan, C. L. (2010). 'Location, Location, Location'-The relative importance of country, institution and program: A study of tourism postgraduate students. *Journal of hospitality and tourism management*, 17(1), 44-52.
- Shafi, R., Delbosc, A., & Rose, G. (2020). Travel attitudes and mode use among Asian international students at an Australian university. *Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment*, 80, 102259.
- Shi, Y., Nakatani, T., Sajiki, T., Sawauchi, D., & Yamamoto, Y. (2010). Travel behavior of international students at a university in Japan: A comparison of Chinese and Non-Chinese students. *Journal of China Tourism Research*, 6(1),

61-72.

- Son, A., & Pearce, P. (2005). Multi-Faceted Image Assessment: International Students' Views of Australia as a Tourist Destination. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 18(4), 21-35.
- Tanrisevdi, A., & Duran, N. (2011). Comparative evaluation of the official destination websites from the perspective of customers. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing and Management*, 20(7), 740-765.
- Thrane, C. (2016). Students' summer tourism: Determinants of length of stay (LOS). *Tourism Management*, 54, 178-184.
- UNESCO (2019). *Outbound internationally mobile students by host region*. UNESCO. <http://data.uis.unesco.org/Index.aspx?queryid=172>
- World Tourism Organization (2011). *Affiliate members global reports, Volume two - The power of youth travel*. World Tourism Organization. <https://www.unwto.org/publication/am-reports-volume-2-power-youth-travel>
- World Tourism Organization (2016). *Affiliate members global reports, Volume thirteen - The power of youth travel*. World Tourism Organization. <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284417162>
- Wang, Y. (2008). Collaborative destination marketing: Roles and strategies of convention and visitors bureaus. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 14(3), 191-209.
- Weaver, D. B. (2003). The contribution of international students to tourism beyond the core educational experience: Evidence from Australia. *Tourism Review International*, 7(2), 95-105.