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Deborah Kerstetter

Pennsylvania State University

Kelly Bricker

Pennsylvania State University

Richard Gitelson

Arizona State University

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**THE INFLUENCE OF A SPOUSE OR PARTNER
IN TRAVEL DECISION-MAKING**

BY

DR. DEBORAH KERSTETTER, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

**LEISURE STUDIES PROGRAM
SCHOOL OF HOTEL, RESTAURANT AND RECREATION MANAGEMENT
201 MATEER BUILDING
THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY PARK, PENNSYLVANIA 16802**

KELLY BRICKER, DOCTORAL CANDIDATE

**LEISURE STUDIES PROGRAM
SCHOOL OF HOTEL, RESTAURANT AND RECREATION MANAGEMENT
201 MATEER BUILDING
THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY PARK, PENNSYLVANIA 16802**

AND

DR. RICHARD GITELSON, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND CHAIR

**HUMAN SERVICES PROGRAM
RECREATION AND TOURISM MANAGEMENT
4701 W. THUNDERBIRD
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY-WEST
PHOENIX, ARIZONA 85069-7100**

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent a spouse or partner influences the decision-making process in travel to a historic destination. Individuals were asked to indicate to what extent their spouse or partner was involved in five different decisions. Results indicated that all of the

travel-related decisions were influenced to some degree by a spouse or partner. Additionally, a significant difference was found between decision making behavior and trip type. The results of this exploratory study indicate that the role played by a spouse or partner in pleasure travel decision-making, especially that which is related to heritage travel, needs to be incorporated into future research.

INTRODUCTION

Literature related to consumer decision-making is quite extensive. Much of the early literature focused on individual decision-making but, more recently, it has become readily apparent that the focus should be on the influence of members within the social group, including the family (7). According to Dimanche and Havitz (3), "much of the family research published in the leisure literature has focused on the impact of leisure activity on family interaction and cohesion..., gender roles, and on perceptions of fun and work...".

With respect to travel-related research, studies addressing various aspects of consumer behavior have included: the planning process (6), information search (5, 12), and novelty seeking behavior (11). A few studies have focused on family decision-making. Jenkins (8), for example, found that "husbands dominated vacation information collection and decisions on length of trip, timing of vacation, and expenditures (in Fodness, 1992, p. 8). Whereas Filiatrault and Ritchie (4) found that husbands dominated decision making only in families with children. According to Cosenza and Davis (2) and Nichols and Snepenger (10), however, documenting the decision making process within a family unit is not that simple. They've found that family members' roles in decision-making vary across the life cycle. More recently, Madrigal (9) documented that issue salience was more a predictor of the role a family member had in the vacation decision process than family life cycle.

Much of the research on family decision making has focused solely on the family as the travel unit. This presents a compelling issue. What is a family? Can a family unit be

comprised of grandparents or foster children, for example? Due to the complexity of this issue, these researchers chose to address the social group, the group that actually traveled to the destination. And, due to the fact that little or no research has been conducted on heritage tourism and consumer decision-making, the objective of this exploratory study was to determine the extent to which a spouse or partner influences the decision-making process in travel to a historic destination.

METHODOLOGY

The individuals in this study were visiting sites along the Heritage Route in Southwestern Pennsylvania. The overall objective of the study was to evaluate efforts that were being made by the America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP) to promote the first leg of the Heritage Route which now includes 13 sites.

Individuals were interviewed along the Heritage Route over a five week period during the summer. Individuals were interviewed on-site and asked if they would participate in a more comprehensive follow-up study. If they agreed they were given a follow-up questionnaire and asked to complete it when they returned home. They were also asked to provide their name and address. The refusal rate was less than two percent. Three additional contacts were made to non respondents and the final response rate for the follow-up portion of the study was 78%.

Descriptive statistics were compiled to identify the role of a spouse or partner in decisions related to the trip. A chi-square procedure was used to determine whether significant differences existed between trip-

related decisions and trip type (vacation versus one day trip).

RESULTS

Individuals were asked to describe the group that was visiting the site in terms of whether or not a spouse, children, friends and/or relatives were included and whether or not everyone lived in the same household. Approximately four percent of site visitations were by individuals. Nearly 68% of the groups contained a spouse or partner (n=391). In addition, respondents were asked to indicate the type of trip they were on. For the purposes of this study, only those who were on day trips or vacation trips were included (83% of the total sample).

Respondents were then requested to indicate (based on an allocation of 100%) who in the traveling party had made various trip-related decisions. These decisions included how long to stay in the area, what to do in the area, where to eat, who was responsible for getting trip-related information, and where to stay if the trip lasted for more than a day. This methodology has been proposed as a more effective way to determine decision making responsibilities than the use of three or five-point scales (8).

Based on the percentage allocation, each relevant decision maker was assigned a category. These categories included: 1) sole decision maker, 2) equally shared role with all others, 3) dominant role, 4) lesser role, or 5) no role. For example, if 100% was allocated to the spouse category, then the spouse represented the sole or "total" decision-maker. If, however, the percentage was evenly distributed between all relevant groups, then this was considered an "equally shared" decision. If one individual received a

greater percentage than other categories, that individual was considered "dominant" and the other categories taking part were considered to have a "lesser" role. If someone (for example children) was in the travel party, but did not contribute to a particular decision, then that category (the children) was considered to have "no role." Some of the types of decisions did not apply to all groups.

The results indicated that all of the travel-related decisions were influenced to some degree by a spouse or partner. In each of the five decisions, however, less than one-fifth of the respondents indicated that the decision was made totally or dominantly by a spouse or partner. In three of the five decisions, at least 40% of the groups indicated that the decision was a shared decision.

With respect to the decision making behavior of groups by trip type, a significant difference was found via a chi-square analysis for two of the five types of decisions. Groups reporting that they were on a short vacation trip were much more likely than groups visiting the area for one day to report that their spouse or partner was likely to "share" in the decision about how long to stay in the area. The same pattern held true for the decision on what to do while in the area.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this exploratory study indicate that the role played by a spouse or partner in pleasure travel decision-making needs to be incorporated into future research. Past research has suggested that in traditional nuclear families there has been a propensity for husbands to dominate decisions related to vacations. This study did not support that

contention. Perhaps this finding is due to what Nichols and Snepenger (10) consider to be major factors changing the face of America--changing lifestyles and increasing participation of women in the workforce. Or, perhaps the finding is due to the fact that this study was limited to a sample of individuals visiting heritage tourism sites. Perhaps vacations with a narrow perspective--heritage tourism--require the group to "share" in the decision. Few, if any, activity alternatives exist for members of the travel group, so all must be interested to some degree in heritage tourism.

Additionally, studies conducted previously have limited their focus to one type of vacation trip. These results indicate that the spouse or partner's role in decision making may differ based on the type of trip being taken.

A number of important issues deserve attention in future research efforts. For example, at what point in time does a spouse or partner have influence? Does a spouse or partner impact the decision making process prior to, during, and/or after the trip? Andereck (1) suggests that information related to the timing of the decision would allow researchers to better understand tourist behavior and, as a result of this knowledge, help tourism marketers and suppliers to more effectively target their market(s). Also, are decisions about travel to heritage tourism destinations really different from decisions about travel to family vacation resorts, for instance? Answers to these questions would be invaluable for resort recreation directors interested in targeting individuals prior to their trip to the resort. Knowing who makes decisions about how long to stay or what to do while at the resort is critical.

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