

Along for the Ride:

An ethnographic study of how travelers obtain and use information to get to their destination

Kristina Olsen

Wayne State University

Abstract

The purpose of this proposal is to examine the influence of electronic devices as information resources for travelers and its impact on traditional travel information services. Looking at how the population uses mobile devices for travel, the research design applied will be an ethnographic study using two data collection tools. These are point-of-contact questionnaires and non-participatory observation. The data collected from these tools will be evaluated by the content analysis technique. This study will benefit those in the transportation industry, tourism industry, and technology industry by seeking to understand how traditional information services are affected by the shift to mobile devices and Internet usage as primary resources of consumer travel.

Introduction

The purpose of this proposal is to examine the influence of electronic devices as information resources for travelers and its impact on traditional travel information services. As society becomes more connected through digital devices, the information landscape changes. Markets and environments are adapting to the large information need of consumers. For instance, when making travel arrangements one would go to a travel agency and to purchase airline tickets, but ever more so tickets are being bought through online travel agencies such as Sabre Group's Travelocity. Thus, this shows that electronic information sources are challenging the use of traditional information services.

Travelers derive their travel directions, hotel reservations, and travel plans from information sources. Information sources can be advertisements from television, radio, or newspapers, GPS devices, family and friends, billboards, highway welcome centers, the World Wide Web, physical maps, travel atlases, and mobile apps. Traditional information services are travel agents, interstate highway rest areas, and visitor information centers. Traditional information sources and services are those in a physical format rather than digital or electronic. Building upon these definitions, one can see the difference of the effect of new information sources and services on the old information sources and services.

Literature Review

Technology is having a large effect on travelers and their destinations. Currently, nearly eighty percent of digital travelers own laptops and nearly half own smartphones (MMGY Group, 2013). Smartphones are developing apps that allow one to record his or her experiences along with providing directions to his or her destination. Wang et al. (2011) describes from his previous work, "smartphones as one kind of new media now can provide a wide range of

information services to support not only basic travel activities such as planning, reservation, and navigations, but many ‘micro-moments’ within the travel process such as finding gas stations, estimating waiting time of rides, and ‘seeing’ places as they once were.”

As such, information resources are changing and providing many more amenities to the traveler’s experience.

Furthermore, more people are turning to the World Wide Web to satisfy their information needs. D’Ambra and Wilson (2004) propose that using the World Wide Web as an information resource when traveling reduces uncertainty. In addition to reducing uncertainty, some travelers are also willing to pay more for electronic travel information (Khattak et al., 2003). The use of the World Wide Web to reduce uncertainty and the consumer’s willingness to pay for electronic travel information display the shift from traditional information sources to electronic devices.

Additionally, Tjostheim and Fesenmaier (2008) look at the mobile device as either a substitute or supplement to traditional information sources. Their study concluded that the use of a mobile navigation system and a travel guide app can serve as substitutes to traditional information sources such as maps, observing street signs, and asking people for directions. However, a large number of the sample did prefer to use the traditional information sources (Tjostheim and Fesenmaier, 2008).

After reviewing the literature, travelers are turning to technology and mobile devices as well as using multiple information sources to obtain their travel information needs. Fodness and Murray (1997) “suggest that the information sources used by tourists to plan their trips and the conditions under which they conduct such planning are the results of a number of situational, traveler, and marketplace contingencies.” It is difficult to measure how and why travelers use different information sources. Trojstheim, Tussyadiah, and Hoem (2007) recommend further

investigation in the difference in “travel motivation and types of information sought”. The literature reviewed proposes additional study into how the Internet and mobile devices as information sources affect the travel planning and the travel process in the future. Therefore, this study aims to identify how the Internet and mobile devices are becoming a primary information source in travel and how traditional information sources are affected through a qualitative research design.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design of the proposed study will include a qualitative approach where the emphasis will be an ethnographic study with a historical review of traditional travel information sources. The ethnographic study will allow the researcher to observe how travelers are using the information centers and to gauge the effect of electronic devices used by travelers on these centers through point-of-contact questionnaires.

Sample

The population of this study is those who travel by vehicle on the interstate high system. The sample chosen will be travelers who stop at the Maryland House Visitor Center on interstate 95 north of Baltimore, Maryland and the travelers who stop at the California Welcome Center on interstate 5 in Oceanside, California. These two interstate rest areas were chosen due to their high volume of travelers stopping here. All types of travelers will be considered and a distinction will be made between professional travelers and vacationers through questions asked in the questionnaire. The aim is to reach 50 participants per day at each at each travel stop over a three-day span during three different weekends.

Data Collection

Two data collection methods used in this study are point-of-contact questionnaire and non-participatory observation. At each information center, the Maryland House and the California Welcome Center-Oceanside, both tools are used. Four researchers will be collecting data, two at each information center. One researcher will recruit participants to fill out the questionnaire while the other observes. The researchers will be on site from 10:00 am to 6:00 pm local time the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of the Memorial Day, Labor Day, and Thanksgiving weekends. The days and times chosen are due to known high travel volume.

Point-of-Contact Questionnaire. The questionnaire will include closed- and open-ended questions. Participants will be approached at the entrance of the rest area facility; but before the questionnaire is distributed, the participant will be presented with a consent form indicating the extent of the study. The questionnaire will measure how people are deciding their travel plans and what they are using to make these plans. The questionnaire will ask what mobile devices and apps the traveler is using. If he or she is not using a mobile device, then what other information resources are being used. Furthermore, the questionnaire will distinguish between professional travelers such as truckers and businessmen/businesswomen. See Appendix A for the full questionnaire and Appendix B for the participant consent form.

Non-participant Observation. The researcher will not only make observations about peoples' interactions of information sources, such as brochures and maps displayed along the walls, but will also include an evaluation of the environment and facility usage. Field notes, along with images captured will be used for recording data.

Data Analysis

The data analysis tool used will be qualitative content analysis. This method will provide insight into how people are getting their information and why they are using certain information sources. Furthermore, it allows for subjectivity from the participant while still allowing objective inferences to be made.

Limitations

There are several limitations to consider. First, the time period for this ethnographic study is short. Most ethnographic studies take place over a long period of time where the same people are examined. This study takes place during three weekends throughout the year, a total of seventy-two hours of observation. Secondly, by using point-of-contact questionnaires, recruiting participants will be a challenge. The travelers may be on a time constraint or they simply prefer to not participate. Lastly, using the content analysis tool for data analysis is time consuming and is subject to error. Text may be difficult to interpret and may be difficult to code.

Trustworthiness

Credibility. Credibility is established through peer scrutiny and debriefing, use of multiple data collection methods, and negative case analysis. Because there are several researchers and breaks between observation sessions, peer debriefing can take place and along with sharing and obtaining feedback from others in the field. Furthermore, the use of several data collection methods makes up for the individual differences between the methods.

Transferability. In order to apply transferability to this research study, the researcher will need to “provide data sets and descriptions that are rich enough so that other researchers are

able to make judgments about the findings” (Wildemuth, 2009) so that the hypothesis can be applied to another context.

Dependability. Dependability is how easily the study can be repeated. To insure repeatability, the processes described and how the research was executed in the study should be in given in great detail.

Confirmability. Confirmability is how well the results are presented from the data and not from the researcher’s own biases. To ensure confirmability, the researcher should maintain a high level of objectivity.

Concluding Remarks

The results presented by this study will help those interpret and understand information seeking and human information behavior in the context of mobile devices and the travel experience. Those who will benefit are those in the transportation industry, the technology industry, the tourism industry, and the business industry. This study will help the Department of Transportation see how travelers are using information along the interstate system. It will help hotels, tourist destinations, and businesses recognize marketing avenues. Lastly, it will help those technology companies identify how their services are used and who is using them. This study will further help those see the changes in their respected fields and allow adjustments to be made to incorporate the use of mobile devices.

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APPENDIX A: Questionnaire Participant Consent Form

Research Information Sheet

Title of Study: Along for the Ride: an ethnographic study of how travelers obtain and use information to get to their destination

Principal Investigator (PI): Kristina Olsen
[Department]
517-740-8224

Purpose:

You are being asked to be in a research study of the how individuals use information resources to when traveling because you are a traveler who is using an information center chosen for this study. This study is being conducted at the Maryland House visitor center on interstate 95 and at the California Welcome Center-Oceanside on interstate 5.

Study Procedures:

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire regarding your use of mobile devices, the Internet, physical maps, and travel agents when traveling and making travel plans. Questions are open- and closed-ended. You will be asked your age and the distance you are traveling, but no other personal information will be recorded such as your name and where you going and coming from. The questionnaire should only take five to ten minutes to complete.

Benefits

As a participant in this research study, there may be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

Risks

There are no known risks at this time to participation in this study.

Costs

There will be no costs to you for participation in this research study.

Compensation

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Confidentiality

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept without any identifiers.

Voluntary Participation /Withdrawal:

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. Your decision will not change any present or future relationships with Wayne State University or its affiliates.

Questions:

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Kristina Olsen or one of her research team members at the following phone number 517-740-8224. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Human Investigation Committee can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

Participation:

By completing the questionnaire, you are agreeing to participate in this study.

APPENDIX B: Questionnaire

1. How old are you?
 - ☐ 18-29 years old
 - ☐ 30-39 years old
 - ☐ 40-49 years old
 - ☐ 50+ years old
2. How far are you traveling?
 - ☐ Less than 150 miles
 - ☐ Between 150 and 500 miles
 - ☐ More than 500 miles
3. What is the purpose of your travels?
 - ☐ Business
 - ☐ Pleasure
4. How often do you travel?
 - ☐ Once per year
 - ☐ 2-3 times per year
 - ☐ 4-5 times per year
 - ☐ 6+ times per year
5. What is your primary mode of navigation?
 - ☐ Map or travel atlas
 - ☐ GPS – navigation systems (i.e. Garmin, TomTom)
 - ☐ GPS – mobile phone (i.e. iPhone map apps, Android map apps)
 - ☐ Internet (i.e. MapQuest, Google Maps, Bing maps)
 - ☐ None
6. When deciding on where to vacation to, what sources of information did you use? Select all that apply.
 - ☐ Advertisements – Magazines/newspapers
 - ☐ Advertisements – Radio
 - ☐ Advertisements – TV
 - ☐ Brochures
 - ☐ Friends and family
 - ☐ Highway Welcome Centers
 - ☐ Internet
 - ☐ Mobile (smartphone) Travel Apps

- ☐ Personal experience
- ☐ Travel Agent
- ☐ Travel Guidebooks
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other

7. Of the choices selected above, which is the primary information source? Why?
8. Is this your first time traveling to your destination?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
9. If you selected no in the previous question, are your information sources the same as the previous time you traveled to your destination. If so, how are they different?
10. What is the likelihood of a change in travel plans? What could be the influencing factors?
11. When using Welcome Centers such as this, what information sources do you use? (Do you pick up brochures of local attractions, maps, hotels, etc.?)