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ACADEMIC PAPER

How decision strategies and school-based pull factors associate with students' choice of tourism schools

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Abstract

This study has three specific questions: (1) To what extent do decision strategies used by students when making their choice of school correlate with their level of satisfaction with the chosen school?, (2) To what extent do such strategies correlate with their future behaviour (e.g., word-of-mouth recommendation or switching to a different school)?, and (3) To what extent do school-based variables (e.g., equality, accessibility) relate to the fundamental variables – satisfaction, recommendation and switching? The discussion of findings is based upon the analysis of primary data collected from university students studying tourism in Turkey.

Keywords: decision strategies; school-based variables; tourism education.

Introduction

Universities, academies and colleges, are technical institutions that contribute to the brain drain (Kotler & Fox, 1985). Universities are autonomous institutions carrying out training and research, which produce knowledge for the benefit of communities, and convey and disseminate that knowledge. In the context of society and the world, universities are expected to demonstrate scientific consistency and quality in relation to their missions. Higher education institutions (HEIs) have a mission to provide education and research, which contributes to social development through supplying knowledge. It seems that knowledge transfer and sharing will become much more important for future generations in organising both their educational and professional life. For these reasons, the position and function of educational institutions have changed. Universities have turned into cultural interaction centres pioneering the euphoria, development and respectability of a society, and playing an effective role in economic and political life. Universities are in an undeniable position with regard to undertaking scientific research, producing and disseminating knowledge, providing education and training, educating and training qualified labour, leading society and managing

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public opinion. It has been observed worldwide that countries which invest in education, training and research at the higher education (HE) level have made great progress, in terms of economic development and social change, in contrast with other countries, and that these countries are regarded by students as centres of attraction.

In Turkey, enrolment in an HEI is controlled by the Center for Students' Central Placement Exam (OSYM) through the Central Students' Placement Exam (OSYS). OSYS is an annual exam which takes place in June and can be taken by final-year college students. From 2007, the number of candidates taking the OSYS has exceeded 1.5 million. Of these, the 1,130,859 candidates who passed the exam, achieving more than the minimum score of 185.00, earned the right to choose any undergraduate programme from all those available. OSYS is seen not as a way of choosing a department but as a means of choosing a vocation. Almost half of a human being's life is spent at work so the choice of the right job is crucial.

Perhaps for this reason, there is a great deal of excitement amongst parents and in neighbourhoods both before and after the exam. In addition, the candidates are extremely aware of the importance of such exams and educational life has turned into a marathon centred on OSYS. The eliminative nature of OSYS that has gradually come into force has meant that the prospective lives of the young people of Turkey are based on an exam that is completed in a very short period of time. Students who do not pass the OSYS study anew for the exam, which can be taken in subsequent years. Many students take the exam multiple times as failing the university entrance exam leaves no other options in education: an undesirable result both for students and their parents.

Over the last two decades, demand for employees in the tourism industry has increased, both at the domestic and international level. In Turkey, as elsewhere around the world, the number of tourism schools at undergraduate level has increased in line with demand. Schools of tourism at the university level are classified into two main groups: undergraduate schools, which take four years; and colleges, which take two years. From only four or five in the 1980s, Turkey now has 40 undergraduate schools. The number of tourism schools at the college level is currently around 150. The launch of new tourism departments mirrors the increase in the number of new universities, which has been a significant factor in the development of the tourism industry.

Several authors have regarded students as consumers and have widened their research to investigate their preferences, perceptions and behaviours in relation to educational institutions (e.g., Eagle & Brennan, 2007). Looking at undergraduate students as consumers and universities as products, this study has three specific questions:

1. To what extent do decision strategies used by students in making their choice of school correlate with their level of satisfaction with the chosen school?
2. To what extent do such strategies correlate with their future behaviour: their intention to recommend through word of mouth or their intention to switch to a different school in future?
3. To what extent do school-based variables (e.g., quality, accessibility) associate with the above mentioned three fundamental variables in the same order (i.e., satisfaction, recommendation and switching)?

The discussion of findings is based on an analysis of primary data collected through a questionnaire survey carried out among those students who had the advantage of being enrolled in tourism schools through the 2007 OSYS exam.

Literature review

The importance of decision making is the cornerstone concept in the mainstream theory of consumer behaviour. Over the past decade, researchers have widely acknowledged the importance of decision strategies on purchasing intentions and their role in final choice. However, it has also been observed that comprehensive studies which cover all of the

strategies at the same time are not available. Through a review of past literature (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998; Decrop & Snelders, 2004, 2005; Hoyer & MacInnis, 2004; Payne, Bettman, & Johnson, 1993), the strategies that are effective in consumers' decisions about their lives are classified into seven categories. The meaning and properties of each strategy are summarised below. As decision making is a multidirectional subject, these kinds of strategies are applicable to various decisions in the lifecycle of human beings at different times.

The university entrance system is designed to push all the candidates taking the OSYS exam to compete against each other for the same position. Each department has a set number of places for students and no ability to accept all those who achieve the set standard. Taking into consideration the number of schools and the effect of the OSYS system on the younger generation, it is important to investigate the type of decision strategies candidates are likely to apply. In the literature on consumer research, decision strategies have generally recorded an application in parallel with the behaviour of consumers before or during purchasing. However, little attention has been paid to the use of these strategies in fields such as tourism education. For that reason, in this study, which deals with young people's OSYS choice in Turkey, each strategy is supported with examples of how that strategy was influential in the student's choice.

Attribute-based strategies

With attribute-based strategies, there are a few variables that a person gives priority to and all alternatives are reviewed in the light of those strategies (Payne et al., 1993). When a person thinks they have found what to look for first, the second most important variable is then evaluated and the process continues this way. The variable itself is important in this group. For example, while the name, location and quality of a university might be important, other variables might not be influential at all. These kinds of strategies could be used by conscious decision makers who are confident about what they are looking for. For this reason, the individuals involved might be more likely to make decisions quickly.

Alternative-based strategies

Contrary to the attribute-based strategies described above, with alternative-based strategies, it is more important to evaluate each alternative by itself. In other words, the decision maker tends to make a preference on the basis of alternatives (Payne et al., 1993). For this reason, every single alternative is evaluated from the variables available, and then the next alternative is evaluated in a similar manner. In this way, the person decides which alternative is the most suitable for them. For example, a student evaluates School X in terms of seven variables such as its location, position, quality, score, image, cost and distance. After obtaining a rough idea about the School, the person follows a similar analysis for all the other schools in turn.

Compensatory strategies

The fundamental characteristic of a compensatory strategy is that an unfavourable characteristic of an alternative can be compensated by a favourable characteristic of the same alternative (Bettman et al., 1998). Thus, rather than evaluating just one aspect of an alternative, the person tends to take the compensatory aspects of the same alternative into consideration. Compensatory strategies are therefore suitable for cautious people rather than those who make quick decisions. For example, school X might be in a very expensive city but look superior in terms of the opportunities offered and the quality of education. The student might therefore make a preference in that direction. Or the lower cost of education might be regarded as the compensatory characteristic in choosing a different school.

Non-compensatory strategies

Non-compensatory strategies are the opposite of the compensatory strategies mentioned above. Although an alternative may be attractive in many different ways, this might not be sufficient and it may be eliminated because of a single unfavourable characteristic (Bettman et al., 1998). To put it another way, the person might not be tolerant in their search for a

particular characteristic and might be prone to choosing an alternative that they think is most suitable in every way. For instance, one school might be attractive in all senses, but not in the city characteristics. If the character of the city is equally important, a student might decide not to choose that school because it is expensive and located in a small city.

Constraint-based strategies

Decision makers may choose constraint-based strategies. These are not directly related to the process of decision making itself, the alternatives or the variables. They are chosen in cases where economic, psychological or environmental barriers exist (Decrop & Snelders, 2004), such as family structure, friends, values, attitudes, climate, profit or accessibility. For example, a student's family might prefer their child to start a school than to wait for the next exam, or economic conditions might force a student to make a decision about a school. This situation might not be related to an individual's preferred choice. It is essential that how content students are with the choices made in these situations is investigated.

Simplistic strategies

Simplistic strategies are particularly used to ease decision-making processes that are comprehensive and complicated. They deal with alternatives that enable a person to be informed in an easier way, with the purpose of avoiding risks (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2004). The alternatives or variables are expected to influence the preference of the person in terms of the properties they possess (Swait & Adamowics, 2001). The purpose is to find a way out in order to avoid a risk that emerges after decision making that will cause regret. For this reason, there is a tendency that a student will choose in the light of the data available without doing comprehensive research. For example, owing to their previous experience or that of people they know, a student may put a familiar school or a school in a familiar city on the list without detailed information.

Opportunistic strategies

With opportunistic strategies, a previously planned or organised choice is not under discussion. The individual might take into consideration an opportunity that arose most recently while forming their list of choices or making a decision. For this reason, they might be open to more options (Decrop, 2006; Hoyer & MacInnis, 2004). An opportunity that arises might pave the way for the student to put it on the list. For instance, a student who hears good things about a school at the time they have to make their choice might put that school on their list. Or a student who does not want to put too much pressure on themselves might form a superficial list of choices. These types of strategies might be valid for those students whose expectations are relatively lower in the developing competitive atmosphere.

In relation to the inclusion of school-based variables over students' preferences, Brookes (2003) emphasised the benefit of using student evaluations as an essential component in the quality management and enhancement process applied to tourism schools. Thus, there has been a growing amount of research dealing with tourism education: for example, the motivations and preferences of tourism students, the quality of tourism schools. One study identified the context for reasons why college students prefer studying hospitality and tourism management (Lee, Kim, & Lo, 2008). Other studies have been carried out to identify students' perceptions of the importance and difficulty of hospitality courses (Kang, Wu, & Gould, 2005) or to analyse their perceptions of tourism careers (Akis Roney & Oztin, 2007). In the context of the perceived service quality, Pereda, Airey and Bennett (2007) aimed to investigate the major variables which tourism students give value to. Students attach four factors of service quality to their institution's reputation: recognition; quality of instruction and interaction with faculty; sufficiency of resources; and, aspects of physical quality.

Akis Roney and Oztin (2007) noted that, although the tourism industry is perceived to provide generally unfavourable working conditions, students' willingness to study tourism and their commitment to work in the industry are likely to compensate for the unfavourable picture of tourism careers. When students are truly interested in studying tourism and pursuing a career in the industry, they are likely to become more realistic about the nature of tourism-

related jobs. Similarly, a study by Koyuncu, Burke, Fiksenbaum, & Demirer (2008) indicated that students with higher levels of engagement and lower levels of burnout generally hold more favourable views of tourism careers. All these findings support the relationship between perceptions and intentions. As in many other basic marketing books and articles, Kozak and Rimmington (2000) declared that overall satisfaction leads to stimulating future behaviour and repeat visits. As such, there are grounds within the education literature to explore whether a similar relationship of satisfaction and future behaviour might exist in the context of applying decision strategies and analysing school-based variables for the college students' preferences in relation to tourism schools at the university level. The reason for using the types of decision strategies and school-based variables in the choice process may relate to the quality of experience, such as ultimate feelings of comfort or discomfort.

Methodology

This study was carried out using a questionnaire consisting of the list of decision strategies and school-based variables obtained from the literature review. Development of the questionnaire took place over a period of one month. Meanwhile, the questionnaire was proofread by a group of three faculty members. Then, together with a team of seven postgraduate students, each question in the questionnaire was scrutinised under the supervision of researchers. Questions that were difficult to understand, which looked similar to one another, or which seemed to convey no meaning, were excluded from further evaluation. The validity and reliability of the questions was retested by piloting the questionnaire with a group of five students. In order to have a good number of responses for each research question given above the questionnaire method was used to reach a large sample size and quantitatively indicate the size of the association between dependent (i.e., satisfaction, recommendation and switching) and independent variables (e.g., decision strategies and school-based characteristics).

The final version of the questionnaire form consisted of four parts. In the first part, there was a total of 36 variables as a pressing force in decision making. Here the subjects were obliged to mark on a 6-point Likert scale how effective each strategy was when forming a list of choices for the 2007 OSYS exam. The scale ranged between 1 (*definitely disagree*) and 6 (*definitely agree*). The second part included three questions which investigated the extent to which participants were satisfied with their final preference list and with the school they qualified to study in, the extent to which they would recommend it to others and whether they preferred another school after that stage. The third part comprised a list of school-based variables which were relevant when students were choosing the school they studied. This part included 18 questions, designed in the form of a 6-point Likert scale as in the first part. The fourth part of the questionnaire included basic questions considered necessary to obtain information about students' profiles.

In the data collection stage, students who had qualified to study in five different tourism schools were chosen as the subjects. There were no specific criteria for nominating these schools as a sample, but we had a contact person in each school. All schools were located in the centre of tourism-dominated areas. Four schools were located on the coastline (Çeşme-İzmir, Mersin, Muğla and Mersin) while the other was located in central Anatolia (Nevşehir). A lecturer from each school was chosen as the representative and was informed about the content of the survey. The survey was given to the students who enrolled in 2007: the questionnaires were handed to the students and collected while they were in the class. At the end of the period of research in October 2007, 597 usable forms had been returned, and the data produced was then analysed.

Discussion of findings

Concerning the socio-demographic profiles of the sample population, the students' average mean score was 19.4. A great majority graduated from the vocational tourism colleges (42%). On average, respondents took the OSYS exam 2.2 times. Respondents had an average of 14.7 preferences/schools in their final choice list, 7.5 of which were tourism schools. In other words, tourism schools were represented at the level of 50%. About half of

the students were qualified to enrol in the first five schools on their lists (53%). Looking at the regions where students' parents lived, the majority were from metropolitan cities (31.1%), followed by the centre of the provinces (27.5%) and districts (26.0%). In relation to the distribution of geographical regions, the majority were affiliated with the west and central part of the country, with a much lower proportion coming from the eastern and southeastern regions (13.6%).

The alpha value of the scale was calculated as .80, which proved that the scale was internally consistent and reliable (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). Following the Kaiser rule of eigenvalues ≥ 1 , a seven-factor solution was generated after varimax rotation, accounting for 53.6% of the total explained variance (KMO = .841; Bartlett test = .000). The alpha value for the first four factor solutions was .70 and varied between .37 and .53 for the other three solutions. The first factor consisted of six items and constituted non-compensatory strategies. The second factor, with five items, included attribute-based strategies. The third factor, another five items, involved opportunistic strategies. The fourth factor, alternative-based strategies, also consisted of five variables. The fifth factor comprised simplistic strategies and consisted of two items. The sixth factor constituted compensatory strategies. The seventh factor, with three items, was associated with constraint-based strategies.

Table 1 presents the results of correlation analysis which was conducted to measure the relationship between decision strategies and the students' satisfaction with the school they were currently studying at. The non-compensatory strategies appeared to be the most significant factor ($p < .01$), followed by opportunistic ($p < .01$) and alternative-based ($p < .05$) strategies. Among these, the opportunistic strategies had a negative correlation. In other words, unsurprisingly, the greater the tendency to wait until the last moment to make their preferences, the less satisfied the participants were with their current preferences. At this stage, compensatory strategies appeared to have no significant correlation. The items that constituted the compensatory strategies included: "I prefer this school because I believe that I can compensate its negative aspect with a positive aspect"; "I prefer this school because I think I will feel less regretful in the future"; "I prefer this school because I think it will not be much challenging". These results show how the students considered various elements and responded carefully during the decision process.

Variables	Overall satisfaction	Word-of-mouth recommendation	Switching to a different school
Non-compensatory	0.48 (**)	0.40 (**)	-0.28 (**)
Attribute-based	0.09	0.07	-0.06
Opportunistic	-0.30 (**)	-0.28 (**)	0.15 (**)
Alternative-based	0.11 (*)	0.13 (**)	-0.06
Simplistic	0.08	0.09 (*)	-0.05
Compensatory	0.06	0.02	-0.07
Constraint-based	-0.08	-0.13 (**)	-0.03
Overall satisfaction		0.79 (**)	-0.44 (**)
Recommending to others			-0.42 (**)

Table 1: Correlation analysis (decision strategies)

* significant at $< .05$; ** significant at $< .01$

In a subsequent analysis, five strategies were found to be significant with relation to decision strategies and the intention to recommend the school. Non-compensatory strategies ($p < .01$) again turned out to be significant, and among the others were opportunistic ($p < .01$), constraint-based ($p < .05$), alternative-based ($p < .05$) and simplistic ($p < .01$) strategies. As seen above, both the opportunistic and constraint-based strategies had a negative correlation. In other words, the greater the students' tendency to make their decisions at the last moment and the more obliged they were to make their preferences under restrictions,

the less likely they were to recommend their school through word of mouth. Such a finding should not be considered surprising. A further observation suggests that both the attribute-based and compensatory strategies had neither positive nor negative correlation with the students' intention to recommend their current schools.

Table 1 indicates that only two strategies were significant when considering the correlation between decision strategies and the intention to choose another school instead of the current school. Among them, non-compensatory strategies ($p < .01$) had a negative correlation, while opportunistic strategies ($p < .01$) had a positive correlation. In other words, the students seemed to be less willing to choose another school to the same extent when they tended to apply non-compensatory strategies. Looking at the items in the non-compensatory strategies, one sees how such a relationship is valid. For example: "as it is the school which makes up the highest value with its all aspects"; "as it is acceptable with all its properties", and "I have preferred the best option for myself".

In both correlations, with respect to the level of satisfaction the students yielded from their current schools and their tendency to recommend these schools, opportunistic strategies, unsurprisingly, had a negative association. Although this type of strategy group seemed to have a positive correlation, the students' tendency to choose another school actually had a negative outcome which greatly affected their current school preference. For that reason, the more likely they were to apply opportunistic strategies, the greater the likelihood that they would choose another school in the future. This group of opportunistic strategies consisted of the following attributes: "I do not like making plans in advance, I decided about this school at the last moment"; "I preferred this school as I did not have any information about it before"; "I waited until some people made me an offer, then I decided"; "I was not interested in any school, but I had to choose one". The students who were indifferent about their current school might therefore consider a different school in future.

The second stage of the data analysis investigated the extent to which the properties of the city where the chosen school was located related to students' choice. The value of the scale required for the reliability analysis was .90. As this value is within acceptable limits, the scale was regarded to be internally consistent and reliable (Hair et al., 1998). The factor analysis produced a four factor solution, explaining 64.3% of the variance ($KMO = .883$; Bartlett test = .000). The alpha values of each factor solution were quite high and ranged between .79 and .86. The first factor consisted of six items concerning location and the quality of life. The second factor consisted of six items and referred to the educational quality of the chosen school. The third factor included four items and was related to the distance to the hometown and familiarity. The fourth factor, with two items, related to the physical condition of the schools. As seen, all items were directly included in the factor analysis.

Variables	Overall satisfaction	Word-of-mouth recommendation	Switching to a different school
Location of the city and quality of life	0.13 (**)	0.17 (**)	-0.15 (**)
Quality of education	0.33 (**)	0.34 (**)	-0.19 (**)
Accessibility and familiarity with the city	0.10 (*)	0.09 (*)	-0.12 (**)
Physical quality	-0.00	0.06	0.08

Table 2: Correlation analysis (school-based variables)

* significant at $< .05$; ** significant at $< .01$

A correlation table was developed in order to measure the relationship between the properties of the preferred school and the city, and the level of satisfaction with the decision made (Table 2). The results of this analysis indicated three significant factors: quality of education; location and quality of life; and, accessibility and familiarity with the city. Although the coefficient values were different, these three factors were also important in students' intention to recommend through word of mouth and switching to another school in future for the same degree. In other words, the higher the perceived education quality, the higher the

perceived quality of life; and the more positive the levels of accessibility and familiarity, the more satisfied the students and the more likely the intention to recommend. An additional finding was that the tendency to choose another school in the future is quite as low. Finally, we noted that the physical condition of the schools had no correlation with these variables.

Conclusion and implications

This study is one of the first attempts to identify groups of students based on their experience of applying decision strategies and school-based variables in choosing their HEI, with the assistance of factor and correlation analyses in response to three research questions. The aim was to investigate the relationship between decision strategies, students' experiences and their future intentions. In all three models, non-compensatory and opportunistic strategies emerged as the strongest variables. In other words, when this issue is handled from the angle of non-compensatory strategies, there is significant evidence emphasising how carefully the students acted and took into consideration various elements during the choice process. From the perspective of opportunistic strategies, the greater students' tendency to wait until the last moment to make their decisions, or the greater their obligation to make their choice under constraints, the lower the level of satisfaction and intention to recommend and the greater the tendency to prefer another school.

As suggested by Wickens, Forbes and Tribe (2006), listening to students helps in understanding their failure or success within school life. Thus, the structure of the education system and economic and social factors may have impacted on these specific findings. For example, according to the findings of a field study conducted by Isa Esme (an executive board member of the Higher Education Council, Turkey), entitled "What do students want?", a great majority of students (84%) who had completed their college education or were about to do so expressed anxiety about the possibility of failing the OSYS exam. Similarly, a great proportion of candidates feared disappointing their families (82%) and three-quarters (76%) expressed their discomfort at not enjoying their lives owing to their commitment to the exam. While families dedicate their lives to their children, on the one hand, their children face depression caused by the marathon of the exam. Under such circumstances, candidates may feel under pressure and try to make choices that cannot be compensated. The alternative would be a negative experience which might lead to dissatisfaction in their chosen school and to looking for various options such as switching to another school.

When a similar model considered the properties of tourism schools, variables such as quality of education; location and quality of life; and, accessibility and familiarity with the city; had a significant and direct relationship with the students' perception of their current schools and their intention to recommend positively through word of mouth, and a negative correlation with an intention to switch to another school in the future. In other words, variables such as a higher perceived quality of education and life, a better location, accessibility and familiarity lead to higher satisfaction, a greater intention to recommend by word of mouth and commitment to the school. As for the managerial implications, both the school and the city authorities could co-operate to develop a better image for their schools. Moreover, school authorities should promote the quality of both education and life as an integrated credit to their potential students.

One should also note that the schools' physical condition had no significant correlation with establishing such a relationship in all the three models. However, when schools were compared, whether the school was in the main campus or not became a primary reason for students' preferences. For example, the two schools based in Antalya and Mugla took first place in this respect. As other schools were not located in the main campuses, this result is not surprising. Once again, when schools were compared, those students studying in Antalya and Mugla were likely to be more satisfied than their counterparts studying in the other three tourism schools ($p < .05$). A similar result was also evident for students' intentions to recommend their choice of school ($p < .05$). One should note the fact that tourism schools being located in the main campuses of their universities was a significant positive factor in students' decision making.

The study has several limitations. First, while the overall reliability of the scale is high, the alpha scores appear lower for various factor solutions. In addition, the study findings are valid according to data received from five schools only. There is no guarantee that these five schools are representative of all tourism schools in Turkey. The location of these schools may affect which students they attract, and from which parts of the country. Also, the forms were distributed on the students' arrival in schools and this might have partially biased their responses. This study did not explore whether there were any differences between the type of decision strategies applied by students studying tourism and those in other fields. Last but not least, despite this modest contribution, the area is clearly under-researched and other researchers are encouraged to devote more attention to the study of decision strategies and school-based variables when studying academic tourism education. This is a quantitative-oriented study, but qualitative research methods may also be useful.

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