

ICTTP 2016 - 6th International Conference on Traffic & Transport Psychology, Brisbane, Australia, 2-5 August.

Travel choice as an interdependent task: social mindfulness and choice architecture in flight booking.

Thierry Meyer (1) and V Graber (1)
Universite Paris Ouest, Nanterre, France (1)

Background

Purpose: Travel websites offer unnumbered choices, options and attributes (location, safety, price, time, etc.) that fit more or less with consumers' self-interests and social motivations. Beyond one's own preference for a destination, travel choice is an interdependent task as one's own choice changes the range of possible outcomes for next consumers who will do the same choice. In this research we explore travel choice (booking a flight) within the social mindfulness (SoMi) paradigm. Social mindfulness is defined as "being thoughtful of others in the present moment, and considering their needs and wishes before making a decision" (Van Lange & Doesum, 2015). Social mindfulness depends on personality, prosocial cultural background, and situational demands. In the present research, we apply social mindfulness to the flight booking domain. We explore three main factors: cognitive control (time pressure), choice architecture (number of options), the value of option (price) and other's attractiveness or hostility.

Method .

Participants (93 students) had to simulate book flights. Before their own choice, they were instructed that another consumer will choose just after their own choice. This consumer was presented either attractive or hostile. Participants had to pick up one flight among three vs. four flight options. Only one option (among three or four) was unique (e.g. Paris-Madrid, Paris-Madrid, Paris-Barcelona). The choice of the non unique option operationalized a social mindful choice that allowed a choice for the next consumer. The cost of the flight was manipulated as a function of distance: Half of the flights were short distance flights (low price) and the other half flights were long distance flights (high price). In one case participants were instructed that their response time will be recorded, in another case participants were instructed to make the choice without considering time.

Results .

The hostile target was judged less pleasant than the attractive target (manipulation check). The number of non-unique (i.e. social mindful) choices remained largely beyond random. A repeated analysis of variance showed that globally an attractive target benefited more of social mindful choices than as an hostile target [$\eta^2 = .13$], specially when price is high (interaction of price and target [$\eta^2 = .09$]). A low price induced a more social mindful choice than a high price mainly with a three options choice (interaction between price and number of options [$\eta^2 = .21$]). Price was a significant attribute only for a hostile target (interaction between target and price [$\eta^2 = .09$]), and a three options choice [interaction between target, price and option [$\eta^2 = .06$]]. Time pressure increased this effect, and low time pressure increased social mindfulness toward an attractive target for high price and four options choice (interaction between time pressure, number of options, target and price, [$\eta^2 = .04$]).

Conclusion .

When interdependence of travel choices is salient, the intrinsic values of options (travel destination, price, scarcity, etc.) and self-interest are only one part of decision making, social mindfulness contributes to the choice as function of other's attributes and choice architecture.

Implication

This study sheds light to the interest of social mindfulness construct in transportation choices when transportation resources are limited and interdependent. This line of research could help to design better individual choices that results in mutual positive consequences (making aware of interdependence in car booking and sharing, soft and public transportation modes, etc.).

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