An Empirical Investigation of Adventure-Based Incentive Travel Programs: Exploring the Relationship Between Benefits Sought, Demographic and Travel Behavior Variables, and Expected Activity Level

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Abstract: The purpose of this empirical study was to examine benefits sought from an incentive travel experience prior to departure and individuals' subsequent involvement in various activities during the experience. During September-November, 1996, a California-based adventure travel company organized two incentive travel experiences to Fiji and Kenya for radio stations in San Francisco, CA and Detroit, MI. Four primary dimensions of benefits, "relaxation," "explorer," "classic," and "show me" were uncovered. Benefit dimensions were related to the expected level of participation in swimming and shopping activities. Reasons for participating in the incentive program were uncovered through open-ended interviews. Results showed that fhe feasibility of the trip was important for participation in the Fiji and Kenya programs.

Introduction

Research has shown that people engaged in an experience or the purchase of a tangible product place a "great deal of importance" on the benefits derived from them (Gitelson and Kerstetter, 1990, p. 24). Thus, many attempts have been made to describe benefits sought from a travel experience. According to Bergier (1981) people "act upon their perception of reality rather than on objective facts" and that the degree to which participation takes place depends on individual perceptions of the benefits the activity provides(p. 150). In addition, many theories have been conceptualized about the benefits sought in a number of recreational settings. Incentive travel offers researchers a chance to explore yet another branch of the tourism industry somewhat unique from mainstream travel.

Incentive travel claims a significant portion of the overall travel industry. According to Shinew and Backman (1995), incentive travel sales totaled over $17 billion during 1994,

with predictions of tripling that amount in the next ten years. Incentive travel in this study is characterized by several distinct attributes: 1) clients were awarded the travel experience based on the purchase of advertising with a particular company, 2) clients did not have any influence as to the destination chosen as the award, 3) the travel program was identified as a soft-adventure which combined a trip to an exotic destination, deluxe accommodations, and a number of adventure-type activities (game-drives, scuba diving, sailing, etc.). Participants were fully aware they would be awarded a trip to a clearly identified destination. Incentive travel participants included the following: 1) key decision-makers or owners from various businesses which qualified for the trip based on advertising purchases made during an specified sales period, and, 2) sales staff and general managers from the corporation sponsoring the incentive travel program. Ideally, by creating a unique travel experience, the corporation hosting the incentive program hoped to solidify relations between their sales staff and their clients--in essence, to create client loyalty.

During October of 1996, a California-based adventure-travel company organized an incentive travel experience to Fiji for a San Francisco-based corporation. As a soft adventure experience, 32 participants spent 3 nights in deluxe accommodations on Viti Levu (Fiji's Big Island) Fiji and three nights on Castaway Island, a private island featuring diving, snorkeling, rest and relaxation. These waters were traveled by Captain Cook on his exploration of the South Pacific Islands and Captain Bligh when he was exiled after the famous "mutiny on the Bounty" incident.

One month later, during November, 1996, the same travel company organized an incentive travel experience to Kenya for a Detroit based radio station for nearly 70 participants. This trip featured 4 days viewing spectacular African wildlife. During their time amongst elephants, lions, and zebra, participants also had various opportunities that included visiting remote native villages, hiking, or camel riding. The game drives were offered three times a day: early morning, mid-day, and at dusk. The trip ended with two days at Mount Kenya Safari Club where participants had the opportunity to hike, golf, horseback ride, swim, and shop.

The purpose of this study was to examine benefits sought through an incentive travel program, and whether benefits sought differed with respect to socio-demographic and travel behavior variables, and expected activity level.

Methodology

Data was collected from a sample of 101 individuals who participated in the Fiji and Kenya incentive programs. A pre-trip survey was given to participants when they checked-in for the first flight of their journey to Fiji or Kenya. This survey contained questions related to their demographic background, benefits sought, travel behavior, and expected activity level.

Forty-five percent (n=45) of the participants responded. Sixteen surveys were collected from Fiji participants and 29 from the total number of Kenyan participants. A much

higher response rate had been anticipated; however, the trip coordinator was overwhelmed by dual responsibilities of data collection and trip operations, and many participants lost their survey by the time the trip coordinator was able to focus on survey retrieval.

The two data sets from the Fiji group and Kenya group were merged using SPSS for windows. The data analysis included basic descriptive statistics for the demographic variables, a principal components factor analysis with a varimax rotation on 26 benefit items, and analysis of variance procedures to explore the relationship between demographics, benefit dimensions, and expected activity level.

Results

A principal components factor analysis with a varimax rotation was conducted on 26 benefit items drawn from the vacation travel literature (Table 1). Although it is recognized that with such low numbers (n=45) that this procedure may be tenuous, the investigators wanted to explore how items loaded together and as such, document distinct benefit dimensions. Seven factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 explained 75.3% of the variance. However, two of the factors contained just one item and were eliminated from further analysis. A Cronbach's alpha was computed for the remaining 5 dimensions which ranged from .46 to .90. The dimension (Factor 5) with the .46 alpha was eliminated from further analysis. Due to low factor loadings or items loading in factors with low reliability, the following 5 items were eliminated from further analysis "Meet new people," "Go shopping," "Return to a favorite vacation site," "Be in control," and "Learn about yourself." Twenty-one items in each remaining factor (identified in Table 1) with a loading of at least .50 were considered for the formation of the scales.

Table 1. Factor scores for Fiji/Kenya participant motives/benefits sought.

Survey Statements	Factor 1 Relaxation (.90)	Factor 2 Explorer (.89)	Factor 3 Classic (.84)	Factor 4 Show Me! (.81)	Communalities
1. To relax	.91				.860
2. Get away from it all	.91				.855
3. Get recharged	.89				.825
4. Release tension	.74				.772
5. Experience solitude	.72				.738
6. Be able to do nothing	.61				.727
7. Not have to rush	.50				.692
8. View scenery		.87			.820
9. Learn new things		.86			.815
10. See interesting sights		.83			.810
11. Explore new places		.80			.725
12. Do something w/spouse		.53			.672
13. Visit with friends			.75		.809
14. Eat good food			.71		.762
15. Have privacy			.60		.792
16. Escape			.51		.756
17. Do a specific activity				.81	.769
18. Experience luxury				.67	.742
19. Do exciting things				.52	.655
20. Be entertained				.51	.712
21. Share a familiar place with others				.50	.666
# of Items	7	5	4	5	
Alpha	0.90	0.89	0.84	0.81	
Eigenvalue	8.41	4.05	1.97	1.61	
% Variance Explained	32.38%	15.59%	7.59%	6.18%	
Total % Variance Explained	32.38%	47.96%	55.55%	61.74%	

Factor 1, 'Relaxation,' included seven items and had an alpha of .90. It is unfortunate that the numbers were so low to make any generalizations beyond this data set since the alpha values were so high and 7 of 9 items loaded on this factor which has been supported in the vacation travel literature. Factor 2, 'Explorer,' included four items, most of which focused on exploring new sights. These items loaded as expected and are supported by the literature. However a fifth item, "Do something with family," loaded at .51 on this factor. If deleted, the alpha value would be .91. This item doesn't quite fit the "Explorer" theme. It is interesting to note however, that because a majority of the people traveled with their spouse, "doing things with family" was very important in terms of exploring with

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regard to this particular sample; thus, with that logic in mind, the item was left in the dimension. Factor 3 included items that tended to represent a number of classic examples of incentive travel motives, thus, the investigators chose "Classic." These motives have been observed through the investigators participation in several incentive programs. Factor 4 included 5 items that involved seemingly different themes. As a result, the investigators chose "Show me" which describes the nature of the incentive travelers overall expectations for their journey.

The descriptive profile of the participants show that respondents were affluent, well educated and traveled predominately with their spouse. Table 2 presents a summary of socio-demographic characteristics. Fifty-seven percent of the participants were male and 43% were female. A combined total of 78% had a college degree or greater. Note that 27% had a graduate degree. Based on frequencies, the age variable was grouped into three categories to create somewhat even groupings. For the variable "Traveling Companion," the largest percentage of the sample traveled with a spouse. With regard to income, each sponsoring corporation targeted "key decision makers" to participate in the incentive program. Because of this strategy, most participants are business owners or CEO's--thus the average income level is quite high with 84% of the group earning over $70,000 annually. Since the numbers were so low in all the other categories, this variable was not used in further analysis.

Table 2. Demographic profile of Fiji/Kenya survey participants.

Descriptive Characteristics	N	Percent of Total
Gender (n=44) [a]		
Male	25	57
Female	19	43
Education (n=45) [a]		
H.S. Diploma	5	11
Business / Technical	5	11
College Diploma	18	40
Some Graduate School	5	11
Graduate Degree	12	27
Age (n=44)		
25-39	16	37
40-49	16	37
50-66	11	26
Traveling Companion (n=44)		
Friend, Family, & Associate	16	38
Spouse	28	62
Income (n=43) [a]		
Less than $35,000	1	2
$35,000 - $39,999	0	0
$45,000 - $49,999	1	2
$50,000 - $59,999	1	2
$60,000 - $69,999	3	7
Greater than $70,000	37	84

[a]The difference in the number of cases for each variable are due to missing values.

The relationship between the four benefit dimensions (Factors 1-4) and socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, education, age, income, travel companion) was tested using one-way analysis of variance. One significant relationship was found (Table 3). The relationship between travel companion and the "Explorer" dimension was significant at the .05 level. Those who traveled with a spouse rated the "Explorer" dimension higher than those people who traveled with a non-family member. It is important to note that the majority of the participants traveled with their spouse. In interviews with participants conducted by the investigators, several individuals noted that they felt 'safe' traveling with their spouse in a group and that they were more likely to try adventure activities with their spouse while traveling as part of group than they might normally do on their own.

Table 3. The relationship between Travel Companion and the *Explorer* Dimension.

Traveling Companion	n	Explorer (Mean)
Friend, Family, Business Assoc.	16	2.76
Spouse	28	3.30

F = 6.04   p ≤ .05

Eight activities were common to both Fiji and Kenya incentive programs (Table 4). Respondents were asked to rate their level of expected participation during the trip (1 = Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Occasionally; 4 = Frequently). Fine dining, swimming, special excursions, and hiking were rated as the most frequent activities they expected to participate in the most, while golf and fishing represented those activities people expected to participate in the least.

Table 4. Expected activity level.

Activity	n	Never	Seldom	Occasionally	Frequently
Fine Dining	43	2%	16%	42%	40%
Swimming	42	10%	19%	41%	31%
Special	44	9%	16%	52%	23%
Hiking	44	14%	39%	30%	18%
Shopping	44	2%	25%	57%	16%
Locals	45	4%	20%	60%	16%
Golf	41	63%	24%	10%	2%
Fishing	43	58%	23%	16%	2%

Further one-way analysis of variance procedures were employed to test the relationship between expected activities and benefit dimensions. Results indicated that only swimming and shopping activities were significantly related to two of the four benefit dimensions. The respondents indicating "never" or "seldom" with regards to swimming and shopping activities were combined into one group due to such a small response in those particular categories. The results were the same after collapsing the "never" and "seldom" categories. Individuals who did not expect to swim or seldom expected to swim rated the *Explorer* dimension higher than those who occasionally or frequently planned to swim. These results are difficult to

interpret since swimming in Fiji may be considered active involving diving and/or snorkeling from a beach or boat while swimming in Kenya consisted of swimming in a pool at located in a lodge which is more passive in concept.

Table 5. The relationship between swimming and *Explorer* dimension

Swimming[1]	n	Explorer (mean)
Never/Seldom	12	3.52
Occasionally	17	2.93
Frequently	13	3.05
		$F = 3.22$ $p \leq .05$

[1] Tukey's B- test of significance was used to examine differences between groups.

Individuals who did not expect to shop or seldom expected to shop rated the *Relaxation* dimension higher than those who occasionally or frequently planned to shop. These results indicate that participants did not perceive shopping as a "relaxing" activity (Table 6).

Table 6. The relationship between shopping and the *Relaxation* dimension.

Shopping[1]	n	Relaxation (mean)
Never/Seldom	12	3.00
Occasionally	25	2.38
Frequently	7	2.84
		$F = 3.30$ $p \leq .05$

[1] Using the Tukeys-B test for significance, no two groups are significantly different at the .0 5 level.

Further exploration of individual reasons for traveling was conducted through an open-ended question. Respondents were asked to list as many reasons that came to mind for choosing travel to Fiji or Kenya. A total of 72 reasons were documented. The open-ended responses were grouped into eight categories (Table 7). While these reasons were not analyzed statistically, they are included as a comparison to the items/dimensions previously explored.

Table 7. Reasons for traveling

	% of Total Responses (n = 72)
Feasibility	19%
Escape / Relaxation	18%
Experience Something New	17%
Personal Development	15%
Adventure	14%
Activity Specific	14%
Enjoyment	4%
Relationship Building	4%

Conclusions and Implications

Four distinct benefit dimensions were found: "relaxation," "explorer," "classic," and "show me." The first and third factor dimensions, relaxation and classic, were common to other travel research studies. However, explorer and show me, the other two dimensions were somewhat unique, suggesting benefits sought through incentive travel may be different. Further research should address this issue. The open-ended comments regarding (benefits/reason for) incentive travel shed additional light on this issue. For example, respondents indicated that they travel because it is "feasible" Does this suggest that some individuals may not have strong intrinsic motivations for traveling and are simply doing so because it fits in with their schedules or is economically feasible? Secondly, individuals noted that they were traveling for "personal development." While this notion has been uncovered in research related to heritage tourism, it is still relatively new. Perhaps this finding suggests that people are looking to better themselves through travel--we as providers of services must recognize this.

None of the demographic variables were found to be significantly related to the benefit dimensions. Past research has been mixed - some research has found significant differences and some have not. Given that this is a new area of research, this relationship should continue to be studied.

The results of this study show that perhaps incentive travelers participating in the Fiji and Kenya programs were somewhat homogenous socio-demographically and that unlike some vacation travel literature, socio-demographics are not a strong predictor for benefits sought. We did however, find that some of the factor groupings were similar to the general population and these factor groupings had very little to do with the activity level participants sought. Within the open-ended responses, the top 3 categories indicated that people traveled because it was something that they were presented with and conveniently fit with their schedules. Additionally, to get away and experience something new was also emphasized. Directions for further research could be to examine the decision-making process in incentive travel and to try to further understand the importance that the actual destination has as opposed to the benefits sought. This study does imply that expectations of incentive travelers change from what they might be if they were to plan the entire trip themselves (i.e., perhaps because of the nature of the trip itself because they were given the trip and did not choose the destination).

According to Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) future research should begin to broaden the scope of our understanding of travelers by addressing issues such as "fantasies, feelings, and fun" (p. 139). When the destination is already pre-determined in incentive programs, perhaps more emphasis should be placed on integrating motives and needs with benefits offered by the destination. The degree to which participants seek a novel

experience may in part, depend on the security felt within a group as opposed to traveling individually. Some of the participants had indicated that they might never have traveled to such an exotic destination such as Kenya, if it had not been offered to them as an incentive. Further investigation into this area may reveal interesting benefits not addressed by previous travel research. Another area we feel would be worth investigating with regards to incentive travelers is that of "prestige." In our interviews with participants, some noted the importance of the destination being distinctive or notable in a variety of ways. Because of the exclusive nature of these incentive programs and the subsequent promotions associated with them, prestige-worthy tourism behavior (Riley, 1995) is another aspect of this type of program which should be addressed.

And lastly, because the number of participants in this sample was so small these results should be interpreted with extreme caution, especially as it pertains to the factor analysis procedures. We recognize the shortcomings of the methodology and suggest repetition of this study on other incentive programs which demonstrate unique characteristics from mainstream travelers.

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