Couples on their honeymoon represent a vital part of the tourism market. Since the destination decision for honeymooners is a joint decision, paired in-depth interviews were conducted with ten British couples to explore their honeymoon destination decision making. The themes that arose from this qualitative study were consistent with more general studies on destination choice, including: culture, natural environment, and accommodation. New themes developed from the research included familiarity, romance, and budget. The results indicate that couples were more likely to stretch their budget for a honeymoon, or appear to be less concerned about the cost of their trip, as many see it as a once in a lifetime experience. This indicates that this valuable segment of the market should be further explored.

Introduction

The honeymoon is well known as the special holiday undertaken by couples usually immediately after a marriage ceremony and commitment to life together. On average, it has been estimated that newlyweds spend between twenty percent more (Teinowitz, 1993) and three times more in the USA (Sardone, 2009) and five times more in the UK (Anonymous, 2008, 2009) on average than other holidaymakers. While these estimates vary greatly and have not been empirically generalised, it suggests that honeymooners contribute significantly to the tourism economy. Surprisingly, however, empirical research into how newlyweds choose the destination for their honeymoon is virtually non-existent, given the potential economic impact to tourism destinations. Of the small number of empirical studies conducted, it has been argued that romance tourism has become too important to ignore (Kim & Agrusa, 2005). Given the lack of prior research on honeymoon destination choice, the first area of interest was to understand what attributes are important in destination choice by tourists. A review of tourism literature was conducted to provide an overview of attributes that are believed to be important in destination choice. However, this review found inconsistent findings for attributes that are considered important in destination choice. In a meta-analysis of destination image research from 142 papers, Pike (2002) found that very few studies used qualitative research to elicit the consumers’ own perceptions of attributes associated with each destination, and over half looked at attributes associated with one destination only. This may explain the variance in attributes found in each study reviewed, as they have largely been determined by researchers rather than being elicited from respondents.

Consumer decision making in honeymoon destination selection

Jang, Lee, Lee, & Hong (2007) recognised that the honeymoon destination selection process involves two people; thus their research involved expanding the individual choice sets into creating a model that reflects the choice process undertaken by couples. They claim that when decisions involve two people potential conflict can occur, alternatives acceptable to both would only be considered and if an agreement really could not be reached “the final destination was determined by the situation inhibitors and the magnitude of relative influence that one partner
holds over the other" (p 1299, Jang et al., 2007). Their study found that as the couple’s discussions developed the individual’s choice set would reduce and gradually more of each partner’s repertoire would include a few of the same places to choose from as they had accepted some of each others’ ideas, though women were less likely to change their destination preference.

Previous research has largely assumed that travellers choose their destination based on attributes in a rational, decision-making process (e.g. Jang et al., 2007; Lue et al., 1993; Moutinho, 1987). However, not unlike in other research in consumer behaviour, it is debated whether destinations are chosen through rational choice or whether it is more a matter of the most salient destination being chosen (e.g., Sharp, Beal, & Romaniuk, 2002). Further evidence for this argument is the high level of repeat visitation to a destination and (Gitelson & Crompton, 1984; Kozak, 2001; Niininen, Szivas, & Riley, 2004) and the fact that other habitually based consumer behaviour patterns such as the duplication of purchase law suggest tourism destination brands are very similar to product and service brands (Mansfield, Romaniuk, & Sharp, 2003). Therefore familiarity with the ‘brand’ or ‘destination’ may be an important element for destination choice.

A model of traveller destination choice that accounts for both of these competing theories was developed by Woodside and Lysonski (1989). Their model presents a process combining largely a thought out decision making process, but also takes into account previous experiences. “For vacation travel behaviour, positive reinforcement (i.e. being rewarded, feelings of satisfaction) is likely to occur following most destination visits because the prior expectations of enjoying specific activities at the destinations are likely to match the actual encounters experienced” (p 10, Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). If this is the case, honeymooners who have always enjoyed beach related leisure and always resulted in a positive experience on holidays previously, might be more likely to be attracted to beach holidays for their honeymoon choice as there is little chance of disappointment as they relate the option to previous satisfaction.

**Method**

As the study was exploratory and there is limited prior research to draw from in the field, a qualitative approach was selected as most appropriate. A pilot interview was conducted to ensure the aide memoire was able to elicit sufficient responses and to give the interviewer time to reflect on how the interview could be better managed.

**In depth interviews**

Qualitative in depth interviews are one of the most common methods of data collection in programme evaluation (Clarke, 2003). They enable an in depth understanding of the perspectives of programme participants to be considered (Clarke, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). They are particularly useful in studies where the discovery of new information is sought (Norton, 2009).

Specifically, standardised open ended interviews were conducted (Patton, 2002), also known as structured interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Such interviews offer the benefit of focusing respondents on the same issues and therefore providing comparable results across interviews (Clarke, 2003). As honeymoon destination choice would be likely to be a decision made by the bride and groom to be, the method selected for interviewing was paired interviews, as they are the most appropriate method when trying to understand a two person decision process (Gordon & Langmaid, 1988), and useful for in-depth discussions when the participants know each other very well (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Even in quantitative studies it has been argued that both husband and wife need to be interviewed as a pair when investigating their tourism decisions (Jang et al., 2007). Paired depth interviews are widely accepted in market research when a joint
decision is to be considered (Birn, 2004) and it is accepted that holiday and honeymoon destination choices are joint decisions (Jang et al., 2007; Moutinho, 1987).

**Sample**

A sample of twenty individuals, or ten married couples was achieved to ensure sufficient breadth and depth could be achieved without burden on the researchers in terms of the number of cases. This research utilised a form of criterion based snowball sampling, whereby participants are recruited from certain groups to ensure they meet a particular criteria (Patton, 2002); in this case that they had been on a honeymoon within a defined period. As the study was exploratory, representativeness was not a major criterion for the selection of participants. In the multiple case sampling approach, the aim is to add new participants because they will be able to bring a different perspective to the issue at hand (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Analysis of Qualitative Data**

The recordings of interviews were reviewed by the researchers. The attributes as highlighted by the review of tourism literature were used as a starting point for the checklist matrices, as well as questions and probing points outlined on the aide memoire. These allowed an efficient way of comparing results across cases and highlighting contrasts and comparisons (Miles & Huberman, 1994), as well as highlighting new themes that emerged from the data.

A key aspect of ensuring validity of results in qualitative analysis is to ensure that the interpretation made of data is not unique to the analyst. Analysis was triangulated by having two researchers analyse the interviews (Clarke, 2003), known as investigator triangulation (Patton, 2002). These were then analysed and then reviewed by both analysts. This ensures a form of intersubjective certifiability (Sharp & Eddy, 2000), where two or more researchers reach the same conclusions after reviewing the same data.

**Results and Discussion**

**Attributes important in general destination choice**

Of the ten couples interviewed, most mentioned that their weather of choice was sun, which is consistent with findings from Bigano, Hamilton & Tol (2006). One mentioned that ‘reliable, predictable weather’ was an important element. Only one couple said that the weather was not an important element in their decision process, noting ‘usually when we go abroad even go in the cooler months as neither of us sun worshippers’. While earlier research identifies climate as an attribute in destination choice, it tends not to come out as one of the more important attributes to consider (e.g. Enright & Newton, 2005; Haatai, 1986; Leisen, 2001; Yau & Chan, 1990). This finding suggests when choosing a honeymoon destination, climate is much more important than when choosing a regular holiday destination.

Cuisine seemed to be an important element to most couples, but did not seem to be something they saw as influencing their destination while it was being chosen, it was more a function of their destination choice: ‘it wasn't an attribute that determined where we booked’. Most couples that discussed food did so in light of their location choice, and it was an element of their stay, rather than their reason for destination choice. ‘Food is very important to us both — we enjoy sampling local foods and local ways of cooking’. Previous research had suggested food was one of the more important attributes in choosing holiday destinations (Enright & Newton, 2005; Yau & Chan, 1990), though in the case of honeymoons it seemed superfluous to the destination choice, rather than an element on its own.

Accommodation was mentioned by all of the respondents, and was commented on throughout the interviews, not only during that particular question. Most couples put quite a lot of time and effort into deciding where they would be staying, and this choice seemed to influence many of the other attributes (for example: food, scenery, infrastructure, safety and security).
Accommodation and familiarity seemed to be linked together in the couple’s decision process, though not in necessarily the same way. One couple chose a hotel chain they were familiar with and was a ‘brand name and trusted it would offer what it claimed to’, while another mentioned they ‘hate branded hotels – surely staying in a branded hotel defeats the object of staying in an exotic/unique location’. While most couples chose their hotel and exact location once their overall destination country/location had been decided, one couple said ‘To be honest we chose our honeymoon more on hotel, budget, sun, sea and sand than the name of the actual host country or destination’.

Almost all couples commented on the history or culture of their destination choice, and many commented that they wanted to be immersed in another culture, or to experience something completely different from their normal life. ‘We wanted to experience as much as possible and learn things we wanted to come back from ... having learnt about it, you can lie on a beach anywhere, we wanted more than that’. A few of the couples mentioned specific historical or cultural elements that they felt were important to experience while at their destination, rather than just a general statement about wanting to experience some culture. One couple mentioned that culture was not an important element in their decision.

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Haathi, 1986; Leisen, 2001), the natural environment, scenery, or nature in general was mentioned by all of the couples, though again this could be due to the type of questions asked during the interview. It was highlighted as important by most of the respondents as something they decided on before choosing a honeymoon destination. Again, as noted above, those that chose the sun, sea, or beach resorts wanted that element as part of their honeymoon, so chose destinations with views that suited their purpose. Another couple mentioned that ‘scenery is appealing -- feeling of being away from everyday rushes and at one with nature’, which is similar to the discussion on culture, in that the honeymoon couples wanted a natural environment which was different to what they had at home. A small number of couples said that scenery wasn’t an important element, and that others such as accommodation or facilities were more important to them.

While previous research suggests that architecture and landmarks views and scenery, and/or sightseeing are important attributes in destination choice (Enright & Newton, 2005), for honeymoon destination choice it did not seem to be an important element for most couples. For most couples who mentioned this element, it was noted as an afterthought, ‘do a little sightseeing’, rather than something planned beforehand. It seemed to depend on how much of the culture the honeymooners wanted to experience, with comments ranging from ‘generally immersing ourselves in what's going on and see things every day,’ to ‘walking, visiting sites, new places, scenery, being together’. One couple planned their entire holiday around sightseeing and different cultures: ‘we wanted to learn about the history of the island – hence choosing to stay in the main city ... to learn about the past slave trade, the religious context of the island and to see the famous [landmarks]. We also took a day trip ... to learn about ... main trade. And we enjoyed an insight into the modern history of the island by visiting a small eco-island off the west coast, aimed at protecting much of [the] beautiful coral reefs’.

Attributes and benefits important in honeymoon destination choice

A number of new themes were drawn from the interviews. Some themes were based around the questions that were asked in interview, and another few emerged from the data once the interviews were transcribed. These attributes are discussed in the following paragraphs.

One new attribute explored by this research was that of budget, and its impact on honeymoon destination choice. Again, as this attribute was part of the interview questions it was commented on by all couples. However, similar to accommodation, it became a running theme in many of the interviews, highlighting its importance. Most couples were happy to ‘relax’ the budget while on honeymoon, comments similar to ‘but the budget we essentially said we will spend what we spend in order to make it the great honeymoon, so budget wasn’t an important
factor’ were common with the couples. However, this did not mean that budget was not an important consideration. Even those couples who were ‘prepared to pay more than normal holiday’ had some limits on what they were willing to pay for the ‘holiday of a lifetime’. ‘We kind of had a ballpark figure that we wanted to work towards but if it went over we would have made an exception as it was our honeymoon’. Many couples mentioned the cost of the wedding or another previous holiday a restriction on the money that was available for the honeymoon, and only one couple said they put off the honeymoon for a year because they couldn’t afford it at the time. Previous research has suggested the cost of the holiday is a key consideration when choosing a destination (Haahti, 1986; Yau & Chan, 1990). The results of this study suggest when choosing a honeymoon destination, price is of lesser importance than other attributes.

Another new attribute explored was familiarity, and its impact on honeymoon destination choice. There seemed to be two distinct groups of couples in this category: those that wanted something completely new and different, and therefore unfamiliar, and those that wanted some level of familiarity on their honeymoon, consistent with previous research suggesting that holiday destinations are often repeat destinations (e.g., Gitelson & Crompton, 1984; Kozak, 2001; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). In the first group, the couples wanted something that ‘was completely un-familiar to us, a complete culture shock. Out of our comfort zone’. In the second group, the couples wanted either a mix of unfamiliar with familiar, or a destination that they were familiar with and therefore comfortable with. ‘Equally it was nice to know...we could also have home comforts like chips and English speakers if we needed to or if we came into any difficulties’. One couple said that familiarity had no impact on their choice, ‘it was not something we consciously thought about; we were just looking forward to getting there.’

Predictably, a romantic theme emerged from the interview transcripts, with all couples commenting on elements of this nature. However, as one couple noted ‘we created our romance not the destination itself’, it may be a theme that is difficult to define, as the term ‘romance’ itself has different meanings for different people. One couple mentioned ‘romance was important but that wasn’t made by others, quality time together was important and romantic’. Many couples commented that because they were on honeymoon they received ‘romantic treats’ at their accommodation, though there were two views on this. One couple ‘joked with another honeymooning couple that it’s probably worth attempting to always pretend you’re on honeymoon when on holiday in order to get some special treats’. Another noted ‘no amount of extra touches, champagne on arrival, flowers etc made any difference to us. We wanted to make it our own, quiet weekend of our own. Didn’t need anything from others’. Overall, a romantic feel or vibe did seem to be an important element of honeymoon destination choice: ‘the destination was romantic looking yes, and it was attractive to us that the environment was an extension of our wedding experience so yes romance important in that respect’. While previous research has highlighted the importance of ‘being with others’ as a benefit sought from travel (e.g., Krippendorf, 1987), not surprisingly such a benefit would be key in a honeymoon related escape.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the destination attributes that attract British couples to their chosen honeymoon destinations. However, it is apparent that when isolating themes and studying results there is much interlinking between themes, and therefore single attributes alone are not enough to define what attracts honeymooners to their destination. Instead there needs to be a selection of attributes that match compatibility with the couple’s expectations, motivations, and personal choices in order for the destinations to be considered attractive. Future research should empirically examine the attributes and benefits sought by honeymooners.
References


