

FAMILY VACATION DECISION MAKING PROCESS: EVIDENCE FROM CROATIA

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate tourists' habits and preferences when making decisions regarding family vacations, their motives for going on vacation with their family, how decisions about a family vacation are made within the family and which roles do individuals have in the decision making process.

Methodology – Empirical research about the family vacation decision making process was conducted on a convenience sample of families with children and married couples without children in the Republic of Croatia. Data processing and analysis applied methods of descriptive statistics.

Findings – The findings clearly indicate that a family vacation is an action which has been planned in advance. The primary motive for going on a family vacation is to spend quality time with the family, which stresses the importance of family vacations. The research indicates that all family members participate in the decision making process.

Contribution – This paper sheds light on a poorly researched field within the Croatian context. In practice, the research results can serve all providers of tourism services, especially those who design their offer based on the demands of families as their target market segment.

Keywords: decision making process, consumer behaviour, family vacation, Croatia

INTRODUCTION

A family is a fundamental social unit based on a joint life of close relatives, usually parents and their children (Baletić 1995). For marketing experts, families are specific consumers due to the fact that roles in the decision making process are divided among family members. On the end consumer market the family is considered to be the segment of greatest consumption. What makes a family as a group special is the fact that families try to take into account the needs of all their members, both at home and on a vacation. "Family vacation is categorized as one of the balance activities, which is a form of active leisure away from home. In comparison to other leisure forms, vacation requires a greater input of time, money, and effort and is expected to provide a unique experience in return" (Xiaoxiao, Lehto and Park 2014, 464). Family activities at home are familiar and common, while family activities on vacation require planning and setting aside money in order to make them possible, therefore they do not happen too often. A vacation, contrary to other forms of leisure activities, requires available resources such as time, money and effort, and going away on vacation means that one expects a certain experience. This is why examining a vacation away from one's everyday home is particularly important when investigating the decision making

process that leads to the purchase of a vacation. A vacation also makes it possible to distance oneself from one's daily routine and everyday commitments.

On the tourism market, families as a target segment have their own characteristics that differentiate them from other market segments. Some tourism areas form their offer in accordance with the demands of the target consumer – the family, and are therefore recognizable as family vacation destinations on the tourism market. Since Croatia is an example of a tourist destination with a predominant “sun and sea” product, and its target market segment are families with children, it is extremely important to examine the family vacation decision making process. According to data regarding the socio-demographic profile of tourists coming to Croatia, family vacation guests make up 48.5% and, in terms of guest satisfaction with the offer, one of the best rated elements is spending a family vacation (Institute for Tourism 2015, 4). Thus when developing marketing strategies, particular attention has to be given to this target consumer segment, with emphasis on researching the individual stages of the family vacation decision making process. However, previous research dealing with the family vacation decision making process was mainly published in foreign literature. The oldest published research date back to the 1970's and deals with the US tourism market, while later research was also conducted on other markets. In Croatia this kind of research has not yet generated significant research interest, therefore it can be labelled an underresearched area in the context of Croatia. Based on the aforementioned facts it can be stated that it is absolutely justified to conduct this kind of research.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the behaviour of the family as a consumer unit on the tourism market, especially with regard to habits, motives and roles in the decision making process. In accordance with the aforementioned facts, the fundamental goals of the research are as follows: (1) to research the habits and preferences of tourists who spend their vacation with their family; (2) to determine the motives for going on a family vacation; (3) to investigate the key reasons for reaching a decision when buying, i.e. selecting a tourism destination and accommodation facility; (4) to determine the dominant influence of family members across different stages of the family vacation decision making process; (5) to determine the autonomy of the family vacation decision making process, as well as to determine whether decisions regarding the family vacation are being reached autonomously or together.

The paper is divided into four sections. After the introduction, the second section provides an overview of previous research. The third part explains the research methodology and interpretation of the research results. The conclusion provides a synthesis of the entire paper.

1. LITERATURE BACKGROUND

Research of the behaviour of families as consumer units has enticed significant scientific interest since the 1970's. Table 1 displays a chronological overview of research which focused on the family vacation decision making process.

Table 1: Overview of research on the family vacation decision making process

AUTHORS	RESEARCH FOCUS
Szybillo and Sosanie (1977)	Role division of family members in the decision making process
Jenkins (1978)	Roles of family members and criteria for making vacation decisions
Fodness (1992)	Influence of family cycle phases on the decision making process
Wang et al. (2004)	Influence of parents and children on making decisions regarding group travel
Koc (2004)	Roles of family members when reaching certain decisions regarding the choice of vacation
Decrop (2005)	Reaching group vacation decisions
Nanda et al. (2007)	Role of family members in the process of making vacation decisions
Robin (2010)	Influence of children on the choice of vacation
Therkelsen (2010)	Role of family members in the process of making vacation decisions.
Khattak and Raza (2013)	Dynamics of the purchasing decision process in the family as a consumer unit
Barlés-Arizón et al. (2013)	Women's role in the vacation planning process
Martin (2014)	Factors influencing the choice of travel
Vinerean (2014)	Motivators which affect the choice of a certain tourism service
Djeri et al. (2014)	The influence of place of residence on the decision-making process when choosing a tourist destination
Nuraeni et al. (2015)	Factors influencing young people's choice of destination

Source: Authors

An overview of the literature indicates that researchers place particular emphasis on investigating roles of family members in the purchasing process, which vary according to the decision making phase (Szybillo i Sosanie 1977; Jenkins 1978). It has been determined that the most significant phases of the decision making process are gathering information and reaching a final decision. In terms of the family vacation, previous research points to the fact that mothers mainly reach decisions on their own and that they dominate in the information research phase (Fodness 1992; Koc 2004; Barlés-Arizón, Fraj-Andrés and Maritnez-Salinas 2013). Furthermore, Wang, Hsieh

and Tsai (2004) found that children have influence in the problem discovery phase, and that their influence is seen in reaching certain smaller decisions. The influence of women dominates in the information research phase, while mutual decisions are made in the problem discovery phase and the final decision phase. Khattak and Raza (2012) conclude that the level of involvement of spouses in the decision making process varies depending on the decision and decision making phase.

The decision making process also depends on the type of vacation (Decrop, 2005). Personal and interpersonal limitations and group cohesion (i.e. level of connection between family members) also influence vacation plans. In terms of the roles in the decision making process, the husband has a dominant role, while women and children make smaller decisions. It is emphasized that children influence the activities that take place during the vacation; they are the initiators and directly influence the choice of activities (Decrop 2005; Robin 2010; Therkelsen 2010). Furthermore, Therkelsen (2010) found that there is often a conflict of interest between the husband and wife and the children who try to gain as much attention as possible, which is why children are identified as family members with the most influential roles in the decision making process. Moreover, based on previous research Nanda, Hu and Bai (2007) tried to theoretically define family member roles in the family vacation decision making process. They recognized that the family vacation decision making process primarily depends on the type of family and they emphasized that recommendations by friends and relatives have a significantly greater influence than marketing activities.

The family vacation decision making process is influenced by various factors related to the characteristics of the tourism product itself (type of vacation, price, distance of the destination, length of the voyage, etc.), factors influencing the spouses, i.e. parents (cultural factors, role division, personal characteristics), and factors influencing children (socio-demographic factors, type of family, sociability of the family) (Nanda, Hu and Bai, 2007). These factors influence whether the decision will be made by the husband, the wife, or if it will be made together, but they also influence whether the children will be involved in the decision making process or whether the decision will be reached by all family members. Bearing in mind the diversity of family members, each of them has a specific dominant role in the decision making process. Martin (2014) concluded that price plays an important role in the selection process and that some are willing to pay more in order to receive greater quality of service. Furthermore, in her research Vinerean (2014) names factors and motivators (primary, secondary, rational, emotional, conscious and clandestine) which influence tourists when buying a certain tourism service. She also discovers that motives vary depending on the target segment. Nuraeni, Arru and Novani (2015) portray factors which influence the choice of destination for young people. Their results show that young people prefer destinations where the local population is hospitable and their motives for travel are sightseeing and getting to know the local culture. Accommodation and other facilities, as well as the quality of service, are of less importance.

After having examined the related literature we can conclude that the family is an important consumer unit in the field of marketing, and especially in the field of tourism marketing. The majority of authors hold similar views regarding the decision making process in families. Almost all of the research states the complexity of the process

itself, the need to consider the needs of all family members and the existence of a large number of influential factors on the process. Also, the majority of authors find that the decision making process is influenced by all members, but not with the same intensity. What particularly stands out is research that focuses on children as the most influential family members in the family vacation decision making process. However, we also note a lack of such research in Croatia, which is recognizable on the tourism market as a sun and sea destination suitable for a family vacation.

2. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The following part of the paper describes the research methodology and the results.

2.1. Research methodology

In this study the survey method was used. The research instrument was a structured questionnaire consisting of five parts and developed on the basis of previous research (Wang, Hsieh, Yeh and Tsai 2004, Hilbrecht, Shaw, Delamere and Havitz 2008, Robin 2010, Jenkins 1978, Klarin and Gusić 2013). The first part consists of eight multiple choice questions of which the respondents could only choose one. These questions aim to gather basic information regarding the habits and preferences of the respondents related to family vacations and travel. The second part of the questionnaire refers to the motives for going on a family vacation, as well as factors that are significant when choosing the destination and accommodation. These questions consist of statements which the respondents have to assess with the help of a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 – I do not care about this at all, to 5 – this is extremely important to me). The third part of the questionnaire contains questions that refer to the influence of individual family members in the family vacation decision making process. The fourth part of the questionnaire deals with assessing the way decisions are made before going on vacation in order to determine whether the spouses make the majority of decisions regarding the family vacation autonomously or together. The final, fifth, part of the questionnaire refers to socio-demographic data (gender, age, region of residence, level of education and average monthly income of the family).

Research of the family vacation decision making process and the factors that influence it was conducted on a convenience sample consisting of families with children and married couples without children in the Republic of Croatia. The research was conducted from 11-19 May, 2015. The internet was used to distribute the questionnaire. The research instrument was a questionnaire created with the help of Google Docs, which was accessed by the respondents via the social networking site Facebook.

2.2. Research results

The online questionnaire was accessed by a total of 144 respondents and each questionnaire was completed correctly. Table 2 shows the socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 2: Socio-demographic profile of the respondents (N=144)

ITEMS	RESPONDENTS	
	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Gender		
Female	136	94.4
Male	8	5.6
Age		
19 – 25	15	10.5
26 – 35	85	59.0
36 – 50	42	29.1
51 – 65	2	1.4
65 and more	0	0.0
Level of education		
Non-qualified worker	1	0.7
Qualified worker	3	2.1
Medium expertise	73	50.7
Higher expertise	21	14.6
High expertise	46	31.9
Average monthly income in EUR		
Less than 500	7	4.9
500-999	51	35.4
1.000-1.999	74	51.4
More than 2.000	12	8.3
Number of family members		
2 members	13	9.0
3 members	42	29.1
4 members	52	36.1
5 members	15	10.5
6 members	20	13.9
7 members	1	0.7
8 members	1	0.7
Number of children in the family		
No children	12	8.3
One child	49	34.0
Two children	47	32.6
Three children	19	13.2
Four children	15	10.4
Five children	1	0.7
Six children	1	0.8
Number of employed family members		
None	2	1.4
One	51	35.4
Two	82	56.9
Three	4	2.8
Four	5	3.5

Source: research results

Out of a total of 144 respondents who completed the questionnaire, 94.4% were women and 5.6% were men. The majority of them belonged to the age group from 26 to 35 (59%), followed by those between the ages of 36-50 (29.1%), then by those from ages 19-25 (10.5%). Two respondents belonged to the age group from 51-65, which makes 1.4% of the respondents, and none of the respondents were older than 65.

With regard to the number of family members, children and employed members of the family, the majority of respondents had families consisting of four members (36.1%), followed by families of three members (29.1%), families of six members (13.9%), five members (10.5%) and families consisting of two members (9%). One of the respondents came from a family of seven members and one from a family of eight (0.7%). The majority of respondents (34%) have families with one child, followed by families with two children (32.6%), three children (13.2%) and four children (10.4%). Twelve respondents were married couples without children (8.3%), one respondent came from a family of five children and one from a family of six children.

One of the objectives of this research is to determine the habits and preferences of tourists who spend their vacation with their family. Table 3 displays the results of the research.

Table 3. **Vacation preferences (N=144)**

DESCRIPTION	FREQUENCY	%
Frequency of going on a family vacation		
Once a month	1	0.7
Several times a year	33	23.0
Once a year	82	56.9
Other	28	19.4
Preferred forms of tourism		
Adventure tourism	2	1.4
Sun and sea	90	63.0
Rural tourism	3	2.1
Wellness and spa tourism	11	7.1
Visiting friends and relatives	22	15.3
Other	16	11.1
Time needed to plan a family vacation		
2 – 3 weeks	46	32.0
1 – 3 months	46	32.0
4 – 6 months	16	11.1
Longer than 6 months	6	4.2
I do not plan ahead	30	20.7
Reason for going on a family vacation		
Visiting friends and relatives	21	14.6
Enjoying the sun and sea	64	44.4
Getting to know other cultures and customs	1	0.7
New experiences	29	20.1
Other	29	20.2
Mode of transportation on family vacation		
Car	135	93.8
Bus	2	1.4
Train	0	0
Plane	1	0.7
Other	6	4.1
Average length of family vacation		
0 – 5 days	46	32.0
6 – 10 days	67	46.5
11 – 15 days	29	20.1
16 – 20 days	1	0.7
More than 20 days	1	0.7

Source: research results

It is visible that the majority of families (56.9%) go on vacation only once a year, and 23% go on vacation several times a year. A significant share of the surveyed families (19.4%) selected the response “Other”, which indicates that they go on vacation less than once a year, that is to say very rarely or never.

Croatian families usually opt for “sun and sea” vacations (63%), followed by visiting friends and relatives (15.3%). Therefore also the main reasons for going on vacation are enjoying the sun and sea (44.4%), new experiences (20.1%), other (20.2%) and visiting friends and relatives (14.6%).

A third of the respondents plan a family vacation for 2-3 weeks, whereas 32% plan their family vacation for 1-3 months. This is followed by respondents who do not plan a family vacation (20.7%), then by 11.1% of respondents who plan their family vacation for 4-6 months and 4.2% of respondents who plan their family vacation for over 6 months. Families go on vacation mostly by car (93.8%), and they usually spend 5 (32%) or between 6 to 10 days (46.5%) on vacation.

The following objective of this research was to determine the motives that encourage a family to go on vacation. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of the individual motives by selecting grades ranging from 1 to 5 on the Likert scale. Table 4 displays the results.

Table 4: **Importance of motives for going on a family vacation (N = 144)**

MOTIVES FOR GOING ON A FAMILY VACATION	MEAN	SD
Trying something new	3.70	1.06
Escaping stress	4.35	0.95
Escaping the everyday routine	4.22	1.02
Bonding with the family	4.69	0.63
Spending quality time with the family	4.74	0.57
Being able to participate in family activities together	4.28	0.93
Bonding with your children	4.58	0.85
Making it possible for your children to experience something new	4.26	0.92
Being together, but not at home	4.19	0.95

Source: research results

The previous table clearly shows that the primary motive for going on a family vacation is to spend quality time with your family, with an average grade (M=4.74, SD=0.57), and to bond with the family (M=4.69, SD=0.63). This is followed by bonding with your children (M=4.58, SD=0.85), escaping stress (M=4.35, SD=0.95). The motive “trying something new” was the least important motive for the families involved in this research (M=3.70, SD=1.06). Therefore, the highest rated motive was spending quality time with the family.

In order to create marketing strategies and develop entry strategies for the tourism market it is important to know the factors that determine purchasing decisions, i.e. in this case selecting a tourist destination and accommodation facility. Tables 5 and 6 show the key factors that determine the choice of destination and accommodation facility.

Table 5: Factors that influence the choice of family vacation destination (N = 144)

ELEMENTS THAT INFLUENCE THE CHOICE OF FAMILY VACATION DESTINATION	FREQUENCY	%
Good traffic connections	6	4.2
Accessible prices	47	32.6
Adequate accommodation facilities	14	9.7
Cleanliness and maintenance of the destination	7	4.9
Good value of offers and services	40	27.8
Safety of the destination	2	1.4
Additional services adapted to children	19	13.2
Other	9	6.2

Source: Research results

It is visible that the most influential elements for choosing a family vacation destination are accessible prices (32.6% of respondents), and good value of offers and services, which was selected by 27.8% of respondents. This is followed by additional services adapted to children (13.2%) and adequate accommodation facilities (9.7%). Cleanliness and maintenance of the destination (4.9%), good traffic connections (4.2%) and safety of the destination (1.4%) were found to affect the choice of destination significantly less than other elements.

Table 6: Key factors when choosing accommodation facilities for a family vacation (N = 144)

KEY FACTORS WHEN CHOOSING ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES	FREQUENCY	%
Size and available facilities in the room	8	5.6
Location of the accommodation facility	50	34.7
Price	65	45.1
Restaurant located in the accommodation facility	1	0.7
Additional services within the accommodation facility (swimming pool, kids' entertainment)	13	9.0
Other	7	4.9

Source: research results

The choice of accommodation facility is mostly influenced by the price (for 45.1% of respondents) and location of the facility (34.7%). Additional services within the accommodation facility such as a swimming pool or kids' entertainment (9.0%), as well as size and facilities in the room (5.6%) influence the choice of accommodation significantly less. Only 0.7% of respondents selected that a restaurant located within the accommodation facility is a key factor when choosing an accommodation facility for a family vacation.

One of the objectives of this research was to determine the dominant effect of family members during the various stages of the family vacation decision making process (table 7).

Table 7: Domination of family members during the various stages of the family vacation decision making process (N=144)

	DOMINANT INFLUENCE OF THE WIFE		DOMINANT INFLUENCE OF THE HUSBAND		DOMINANT INFLUENCE OF THE CHILDREN	
	Number of respondents	%	Number of respondents	%	Number of respondents	%
Expressing the need and desire to go on a family vacation	75	52.1	46	31.9	23	16.0
Gathering information about the family vacation destination	89	61.8	52	36.1	3	2.1
Assessing various possibilities and alternatives of the vacation	85	59.0	51	35.4	8	5.6
Choosing one of the provided alternatives	66	45.9	65	45.1	13	9.0
Reaching a final decision	80	55.5	55	38.2	9	6.3

Source: research results

Research results show that in most stages of the decision making process the wife is the dominant family member. During the stage of choosing between various possible alternatives both spouses have the same degree of influence. The influence of the children is greatest in the first stage – expressing a need and wish for a vacation, and least in the stage of gathering information about a vacation destination. However, we also researched which of the spouses makes the decisions about a family vacation. In other words, we examined whether this decision is an autonomous decision by one of the spouses or whether they make this decision together (table 8).

Table 8: Autonomy of reaching decisions regarding the family vacation (N = 144)

	WIFE		HUSBAND		TOGETHER	
	Number of respondents	%	Number of respondents	%	Number of respondents	%
Date of going on vacation	16	11.1	19	13.2	109	75.7
Duration of vacation	20	13.9	10	6.9	114	79.2
Means of transport	14	9.7	39	27.1	91	63.2
Amount of money spent on vacation	19	13.2	25	17.4	100	69.4

	WIFE		HUSBAND		TOGETHER	
	Number of respondents	%	Number of respondents	%	Number of respondents	%
Additional activities on vacation	27	18.8	14	9.7	103	71.5
Type of accommodation	38	26.4	10	6.9	96	66.7
Choice of vacation destination	27	18.7	8	5.6	109	75.7
Choice of restaurants and catering facilities	19	13.2	20	13.9	105	72.9
Decision whether or not to take children on vacation	14	9.7	4	2.8	126	87.5
Decision whether or not to go on vacation	15	10.4	1	0.7	128	88.9

Source: research results

The results in table 8 show that all decisions related to a family vacation are mainly reached together. There is a high degree of agreement, especially when deciding whether or not to go on vacation (88.9%) and whether or not to take children on vacation (87.5%). The wife's autonomous decision regarding the choice of accommodation facility occurs with 26.4% of respondents, while husbands autonomously decide on the means of transport to the destination (27.1%).

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the conducted empirical research it can be concluded that families go on vacation together mostly once a year and that it is very important to them, hence they plan it well in advance. The primary motive for going on vacation with their family is to spend quality time with them. This finding is consistent with Decrop's (2005) research, which also determined that family vacation is a planned activity influenced by various factors, and that the decision primarily depends on the chosen type of vacation.

Price, i.e. how good the value of the offer and service in the destination is, has a significant influence on the choice of family vacation destination. This is in line with the findings of Martin (2014) who emphasized that price plays a significant role in the process of choosing a vacation destination.

All family members have a certain influence on the decision making process, dominated by the influence of the wife, which correlates with previous research conducted by Koc (2004) and Barlés-Arizón, Fraj-Andrés i Maritnez-Salinas (2013). Children exert the least influence, which is confirmed by research results from Therkelsen (2010), who found that the mother's influence is dominant and the influence of children is weaker. Our research also found that the childrens' influence is

the greatest in the first stage of the decision making process – expressing a need and desire for a family vacation, which is in line with the findings of Robin (2010) who concludes that children are the initiators when deciding on a family vacation. This research determined that decisions regarding the family vacation are made together, i.e. by both spouses, regarding all types of decisions. This was also found in the research results of Syzbillo and Sosanie (1977), while Fodness' (1992) research determined that decisions were made mostly autonomously by the mother.

Based on the conducted research it is possible to make recommendations to marketing managers in tourism. Marketing managers in tourism should continuously conduct research and market analysis with the purpose of differentiating market segments and shaping an adequate marketing strategy. This primarily consists of undertaking special effort by management with regard to differentiating an offer adapted to couples without children and families with children. Innovations have to be introduced into product development with regard to developing specialized types of offer (kids' hotels, combined vacations linking "sun and sea vacations" with cultural tours, beach facilities adapted to families). In this sense, marketing management has to be primarily oriented towards developing products that meet the needs of different family members at the same time (e.g. a vacation that offers entertainment for parents and children alike). Since price is an extremely important factor when choosing a destination as well as the accommodation it is important to adapt prices to families by offering certain discounts, a range of payment options and by creating package deals. It is important to emphasize these price-related benefits when communicating with the market. Since we have determined that the majority of decisions are reached together, but also that women play an important role particularly with regard to gathering information, it is necessary to select those mass and personal communication channels accessible to the whole family, in particular to women, for communication and sales. It would be particularly advantageous to use emotional appeals and to indicate the benefits of a vacation as an opportunity to spend time together and strengthen the bond between family members.

In reviewing the results of this study a few facts can be estimated as limiting. This paper, as has been previously stated, used a questionnaire. Since the family vacation decision making process is an extremely complex area to research, it is our opinion that the aforementioned 5 groups of questions are insufficient in order to encompass the large number of factors and processes that influence the family vacation decision. A much greater number of questions and possible answers could have been included in this research in order to delve deeper into the decision making process of the respondents, which is also considered to be a limitation of this survey. Although the methodology applied in this research was appropriate considering its needs, in order to further investigate the family vacation decision making process it would be necessary to apply other methods characteristic of this kind of research, such as focus groups or one-on-one interviews. Moreover, the type and size of the sample, as well as the manner of contacting the respondents represent a significant limitation to this research.

In conclusion, it can be emphasized that the influence of determinants and decision making processes regarding family vacations has been insufficiently researched in the Republic of Croatia. It is recommended that research of this type would be particularly useful to destinations on the Croatian coast, as well as other destinations, but primarily

those that develop their offer in accordance with the demands of the family as the target consumer. That is to say, knowing the consumer's demands and wishes, i.e. knowing the demand of the target segment, is one of the main preconditions to the successful development of the destination and the companies who work in it. It is believed that this research can represent a valuable guideline for future research.

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