

# The Search for Kenya: How Chinese-Speaking Generation Z Does Its Online Travel Planning

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**Abstract.** Travel planning is highly reliant on the websites of tourist bureaus, professional travel writers and experienced (non-professional) travelers. This study examines the search preferences of Chinese speaking Generation Z (alternatively known as Post-Millennials, the iGeneration, Founders, Plurals, or the Homeland Generation) as they plan a trip to a destination unfamiliar to them. The findings indicated more than 70% of the websites they frequented were well-known international sites, including user generated content (UGC) and the sites of business entities. The sites most preferred by Generation Z were UGC websites, with 100% of the participants saying they frequently use them while travel planning. The Destination Management Office (DMO) website was not a popular source, being frequently used by only 13% of participants. Of the nine dimensions of destination information, the two rated most important were *natural resources* and *natural environment*, which suggests that travel planners strongly associate Kenya with these qualities. *Leisure and recreation information* ranked least important. The results indicate, firstly, the perceived destination image affects the perceived importance of the destination information, and secondly, with the exception of popular world-wide travel websites, travelers prefer using local sites which share the same language and cultural background.

**Keywords:** DMO website · Destination information · Generation Z  
Post-millennials · Search behavior · Preferred websites

## 1 Introduction

Information technologies have revolutionized the tourism industry in regard to the promotion of travel products and the ways that tourists search for and purchase travel related products (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Official websites and online social media networks are the main sources of destination information for potential tourists (Xiang, & Gretzel, 2010). The sites are managed by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), which are non-profit entities aimed at generating tourism demand for a given area. “DMOs are generally involved with developing a unique image of an area, coordinating most private and public tourism industry constituencies, providing information to visitors, and leading the overall tourism industry at a destination” (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica & O’Leary, 2006, p. 116). Hence destination official

websites offer local information and news to tourists, particularly information relating to such things as accommodations, dining, attractions and events (Gretzel, Yuan & Fesenmaier, 2000). Online social travel networks are proficient with helping tourists gather and share travel related information before and after their trips (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). User Generated Content (UGC) in the form of travel reviews has become a major source for trip preparation (Leung, Law, Van Hoof & Buhalis, 2013).

This study investigates the information differences between online social travel networks and the websites of DMOs, comparing tourists' perceived information according to various dimensions of a destination. Beerli and Martín's (2004) nine-dimensional destination image framework is used to analyze the perceived destination images of potential tourists. The nine dimensions are: natural resources; general infrastructure; tourist infrastructure; tourist leisure and recreation; culture, history and art; political and economic factors; natural environment; social environment; and atmosphere of the place. Each dimension is a slice of the tourists' perceived destination image, and the frequency of the terms in each dimension defines its weight relative to the image. One can then compare and contrast the dimensions by means of their respective weights, to show, in multiple layers, how tourists perceive the image of a destination. This study aims to examine the search preferences of Generation Z as they plan a trip to a destination unfamiliar to them.

## 2 Literature Review

A destination image can be described as a compilation of beliefs and impressions based on the information processed from a variety of sources over time (Choi, Lehto & Morrison, 2007). The image can be categorized into two types: primary and secondary destination images (Phelps, 1986). Primary images are formed by internal sources, images of what one sees and hears, such as from past experience, whereas secondary images are formed by external sources—information obtained from others, for instance from their comments (Phelps, 1986). Baloglu and McCleary (1999, p. 874) distinguish between “symbolic stimuli” and “social stimuli”. The former refers to “the promotional efforts of a destination through media”; the latter concern “friends' and relatives' recommendations or word-of-mouth”. Destination's official websites and online social travel networks are two excellent examples of online official channels and online UGC platforms.

### 2.1 Destination's Official Websites

A potential destination should be in outstanding condition to attract tourists' attention. Buhalis (2000) states that the meaning of a destination now comprises tourism products, and this transformed meaning is gaining recognition as a perceptual concept that may explain consumers' inner and personal experience rather than facts such as their travel plans, cultural backgrounds, purpose of travel, as well as educational degree. To manage and develop destinations well, DMOs must, in their marketing strategies, endeavor to establish linkages between potential tourists' experiences and destination tourism products. Official destination websites are one of the promotional channels

managed by DMOs to present destinations to potential tourists online. These websites should have a user-friendly interface (Qi, Law & Buhalis, 2008). Stienmetz et al. (2013) found that destination websites should notify, instruct, publicize, persuade and entertain. Homepage multimedia such as images and video are what users first notice, and the information should be presented in ways that encourage further exploration of the site (Luna-Nevarez & Hyman, 2012). Tourists need a variety of information to decide on their travel destination. Thus, it is a key how DMOs present information on their website to influence potential tourists' pre-trip image of a never visited destination.

## 2.2 Social Media Impact on Destinations

Destination positioning and tourists' selection of a destination are mainly influenced by the perceived destination images (Liang, Scherer & Morrison, 2011). Online social media networks provide an effective platform for most of the success factors associated with the marketing of destinations on the Internet, factors that include: attracting users, engaging users' interest and participation, retaining users, learning about user preferences, and relating back to users through customized interactions (Park & Gretzel, 2007). Virtual communities have transformed communication models and interactions with online users. Travel agencies and publishers aggressively exploit diverse marketing channels to promote destinations to their online customers. Tourists also explore, arrange, share and expand accounts of their travel experiences via multiple online channels including blogs and microblogs (e.g., Twitter), online communities (e.g., Facebook and TripAdvisor), media sharing sites (e.g., YouTube), social bookmarking sites (e.g., Delicious), social knowledge sharing sites (e.g., Wikitravel) and other channels (Leung, et al., 2013). There is growing interest in the effects of these online channels on destination images (Leung et al., 2013).

This study will investigate how prospective tourists obtain destination information of Kenya from different online channels. Since gaining independence from the United Kingdom in 1963, Kenya has become a popular tourist destination, receiving over 6% of total international tourist arrivals (Akama & Kieti 2003). The visitors are mainly from Europe, North America and other developed countries, and are attracted by wildlife parks and the coast (Akama, 1997; Akama & Kieti 2003). Tourist arrivals increased by 4% between 2015 and 2016, and the 2016 market share distributes as: Europe 35%, Africa 29%, Asia 17%, America 14%, Middle East 3%, and Oceania 2% (Kenya Tourism Board, 2017). The objectives of this study are: (1) to identify popular online channels selected by Generation Z; (2) to examine the role of DMO websites for travel planning; (3) to evaluate the perceived importance of nine dimensions of destination-related information, relative to each other and the two groups studied.

## 3 Methodology

This study aims to investigate how Generation Z searches for travel information for an unfamiliar travel destination. Due to financial restriction, Generation Z in both Taiwan and Macau mainly have short-haul trips in Asia during their vacation. Therefore the

researchers picked an African country—Kenya as this is not a popular travel destination among Generation Z in Taiwan and Macau. A quantitative research method is used in gathering tourists' perceptions as to the destination image of Kenya via websites. A total of 153 students were chosen using a convenience sample. The questionnaire was distributed to two English speaking colleges in Macau and Taiwan from mid-May to early June 2017. Only those who had never visited Kenya were qualified to participate in the study. The questionnaire was divided into two main parts: part A requested demographic information from the participants. Part B sought to capture, in accordance with Beerli and Martín's (2004) nine-dimensional framework, the attributes determining the importance and usefulness of the travel information that Kenya's travel websites provided. Each dimension contains four to 12 items. Students were asked to spend at least 30 min browsing all the information that Kenya's travel website presents. A pilot test was conducted with two university students before the formal data collection. The students were not confused by the questionnaire, nor did they have any suggestions other than to remark that they needed at least 40 min to review and collect information, and then five to 10 min to complete the questionnaire. Therefore, during the data collection process each respondent was given 40–50 min to search for information, then 10 min to complete the questionnaire. All students were required to perform the entire process in the campus computer lab. The collected questionnaires were transferred into SPSS for further data analysis. Descriptive statistics, Chi-square test and T-test were used to examine the behavioral differences among two groups of students.

## 4 Findings and Discussions

### 4.1 Participants' Background

A total of 153 students studying hospitality and tourism in two higher education institutes were selected. Ninety-one of them were studying in Macau and 62 of them in Taiwan. None of the students had ever visited Kenya, and their demographic distributions are listed in Table 1. Of these 153 students, about 25% were male and the rest were female. Regarding their travel experience, around one-third of the students had travelled three to five times and one-fourth of them had travelled more than eight times. The frequency distribution among the two study groups did not show any significant differences. However, more than half of the students in Macau had organized their latest tour by themselves, compared with one-third of the students in Taiwan. Tours for students in Taiwan were mainly arranged by family members and friends (54%) or consisted of group tours (15%). One participant had never travelled overseas.

**Table 1.** Participants' demographic frequency distribution

		Region		Total (n = 153)	$\chi^2$	Sig
		Macau (n = 91)	Taiwan (n = 62)			
Gender	Male	20	19	39 (25%)	1.459	0.227
	Female	71	43	114 (75%)		
No. of trips travelled	0–2	17	15	32 (21%)	1.459	0.692
	3–5	36	19	55 (36%)		
	6–8	14	10	24 (16%)		
	Over 8	24	18	42 (27%)		
Who organized the tour	Never travelled	0	1	1 (1%)	12.639	0.005*
	Self	51	19	70 (46%)		
	Family and friends	36	33	69 (45%)		
	Group tour	4	9	13 (8%)		

\*Significant at  $p < 0.01$

## 4.2 Types of Travel Websites Used

Students were asked to list the travel websites they frequently use for planning trips. Around 36% of the students listed three websites, and around 33% listed two websites, the maximum number listed being six. A total of 416 items were collected, 365 of them are specific domain names and the remainder consisting of web categories (e.g. travel blogs and review sites). The top 10 travel websites amounted to 73% ( $n = 266$ ; total = 365) of the listed websites. Table 2 lists the statistics of these 10 websites. The most popular site was TripAdvisor, which 56 participants reported using most often. The second most popular was Google. Participants said they just used keywords on Google and browsed for the travel information they needed. The third most popular website was Ctrip. This is the leading China-based travel hub and online travel agent, offering lots of Chinese travel information (Forbes, 2017). Of the 27 participants who used Ctrip, 24 were from Macau. As most of the participants' native language is Chinese, they can obtain travel information easily from Chinese websites. OTA's websites were also popular among participants. Of the top 10 websites, six were related to online purchasing. Interestingly, YouTube also played a role as destination information provider. Around 4% of the participants chose it as an information source. The key reason could be that a growing number of participants prefer to watch multimedia travel information rather than read texts (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2017).

**Table 2.** Top ten websites used for travel planning

Rank	Websites	Macau	Taiwan	Total (%)	Cumulative %
1	TripAdvisor	31	25	56 (15.3)	15.3
2	Google	40	13	53 (14.5)	29.9
3	Ctrip	24	3	27 (7.4)	37.3
4	Agoda	20	6	26 (7.1)	44.4
5	Airbnb	19	2	21 (5.8)	50.1
6	Trivago	7	14	21 (5.7)	55.9
7	Facebook	15	3	18 (4.9)	60.8
8	booking.com	11	5	16 (4.4)	65.2
9	YouTube	14	1	15 (4.1)	69.3
10	Expedia	13	0	13 (3.6)	72.9

The 416 websites are divided into four categories based on their content source: *user generated content* from tourists, *business websites* from tourism business entities, *information hubs* from official travel organizations and *search engines* from portals. User generated content (UGC) is further divided into three sub-categories: *travel blog*, *social media*, and *user review sites*. *Business website* is sub-divided into online travel agencies (OTA), *company website* (i.e., travel organization websites), and travel-related *metasearch engine*. *Information hub* includes *DMO* websites and online travel *guidebook*, and the last category is *search engine*. The most popular category is business websites, with a total of 160 items (38%) listed by the participants. UGC websites ranked second with a total of 153 listed, which indicates that 37% of the preferred websites were UGC websites. Search engine ranked third, with Google named 55 times. Baidu (China-based search engine) was named four times and Yahoo three times.

**Table 3.** Travel planning website category per region

Category	Sub-category	Region		Total	$\chi^2$	Sig
		Macau	Taiwan			
Business Website	OTA	101	21	122	33.495	0.000**
	Company website	3	7	10		
	Metasearch engine	10	18	28		
	Total	114	46	160		
UGC	Travel blog	34	16	50	7.319	0.026*
	Social media	32	7	39		
	User review sites	36	28	64		
	Total	102	51	153		
Information Hub	DMO	8	12	20	0.196	0.658
	Guidebook	7	14	21		
	Total	15	26	41		

(continued)

**Table 3.** (continued)

Category	Sub-category	Region		Total	$\chi^2$	Sig
		Macau	Taiwan			
Search Engine	Google	40	15	55	9.052	0.011*
	Baidu	4	0	4		
	Yahoo	0	3	3		
	Total	44	18	62		

\*Significant at  $p < 0.05$

\*\*Significant at  $p < 0.001$

### 4.3 Travel Website Preference

In the third question of the questionnaire, students were asked if they would use a DMO website when travel planning. The preferences of the Macanese students differed statistically from their Taiwanese counterparts. Table 4 illustrates the T-test results for these two groups. Half of the Macanese students reported that they would use a DMO website, compared with 70% of the Taiwanese students. The main reason for using DMO websites was the belief that it provides trustworthy information, whereas the main reason students gave for using non-DMO sites was that they valued the opinions of other travelers more than “manipulated” official information. Table 3 shows that only 20 students (13%) frequently used a DMO website. This shows that DMO websites are not a popular information source for Generation Z.

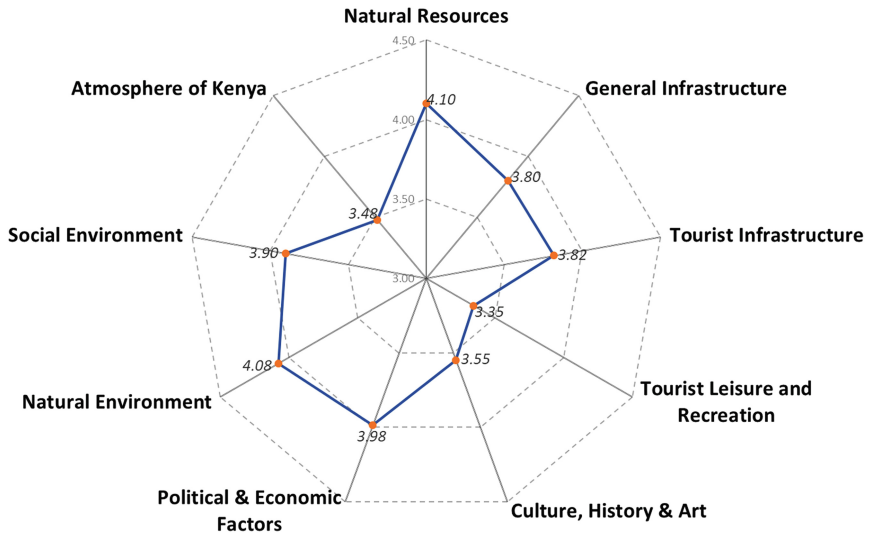
**Table 4.** Usage of DMO websites for travel planning

Use official website	Region		Total	$\chi^2$	Sig
	Macau	Taiwan			
Yes	46 (50%)	43 (70%)	89 (59%)	5.359	0.021*
No	45 (50%)	19 (30%)	64 (41%)		
Total	91	62	153		

\*Significant at  $p < 0.05$

### 4.4 Ranking of Travel Information Importance

Berli and Martín’s (2004) framework helps tourists to perceive a potential tourist stop in all its major dimensions. This study asked the participants about the importance of each of the nine dimensions when planning trips. The dimension rated most important is *natural resources*, with an average score of 4.10; *natural environment* ranked second with an average of 4.08. The least important dimension was *tourist leisure and recreation*, averaging 3.35, and the second least important was *atmosphere of Kenya*, at 3.48.



**Fig. 1.** Perceived importance among nine Web travel dimensions in terms of average scores

Figure 1 shows that *natural resources* ranked first and *natural environment* second in importance as destination image dimensions. However, when comparing the participants' rankings by region, we find several differences. First, average scores of students in Macau in eight out of nine dimensions were higher than those in Taiwan, and the remaining dimension, *tourist leisure and recreation*, was only 0.009 lower than Taiwan. From the T-test results, four dimensions show a significant difference between the two groups. *Political and economic* factors got the highest difference ( $t = 4.375$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ), with students in Macau 0.5 points higher than students in Taiwan. This indicates that students from Macau are more concerned with the political and economic situation of the places they consider visiting. The second dimension is *natural resources*, which include the local weather, natural attractions and the uniqueness of these attractions. The difference between the two groups is 0.3 ( $t = 2.568$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). Evidently students in Macau are more concerned than their counterparts with what can be seen at a destination. The third dimension was *tourist infrastructure*, the differences being 0.2 ( $t = 2.145$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). The infrastructure includes transport networks, airports, health services, wireless services and commercial infrastructure (Beerli & Martin, 2004). All these facilities could directly and indirectly affect tourists' travel and stay experience. The Macau group indicated a higher perceived importance than the Taiwan group. The last dimension that shows statistical differences is *natural environment*, which includes such factors as the attractiveness of the cities, cleanliness, overcrowding, pollution level and traffic congestion. All these factors affect tourists' overall impression of the destination, and the Macau group was 0.2 points higher than the Taiwan group ( $t = 2.038$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 5).



**Table 5.** Perceived relative importance of nine web travel dimensions

Dimensions	Region	Mean	Std.	T	Sig.
Natural resources	Macau	4.206	0.529	2.568	0.012*
	Taiwan	3.952	0.646		
General infrastructure	Macau	3.890	0.660	2.145	0.034*
	Taiwan	3.677	0.558		
Tourist infrastructure	Macau	3.820	0.549	0.087	0.931
	Taiwan	3.811	0.655		
Tourist leisure and recreation	Macau	3.342	0.660	-0.074	0.941
	Taiwan	3.351	0.711		
Culture, history and art	Macau	3.567	0.715	0.392	0.696
	Taiwan	3.523	0.650		
Political and economic factors	Macau	4.190	0.698	4.375	0.000**
	Taiwan	3.681	0.713		
Natural environment	Macau	4.169	0.597	2.038	0.044*
	Taiwan	3.946	0.704		
Social environment	Macau	3.918	0.709	0.324	0.746
	Taiwan	3.880	0.688		
Atmosphere of Kenya	Macau	3.495	0.464	0.503	0.616
	Taiwan	3.458	0.425		

\*Significant at  $p < 0.05$ \*\*Significant at  $p < 0.01$ 

## 5 Conclusion and Limitations

This study has examined the importance of travel information from the perspective of Generation Z. The findings bring insights on tourists' travel activities, information channels and their information search behavior. The results indicate that out of the nine dimensions proposed by Beerli and Martín (2004), Generation Z perceived *natural resources* and *natural environment* as the two most important travel dimensions they consider for their travel planning, and *tourist leisure and recreation* the least important dimension for Kenya. This may indicate that when Generation Z travels to African countries, they expect to see the natural environment but are not looking for leisure and recreational activities. Business websites were the most popular source of travel information. One reason could be concern over price, since all participants are university students, and thus have limited travel budgets. The results also show that more than one-fourth of the websites used for travel planning are related to UGC sites. This reflects the importance of word-of-mouth and the influence power of peers (Erkan & Evans, 2016). In addition, 40% of the participants said they prefer to use a search engine as their entry point when searching for travel information. Even though DMO websites provide comprehensive and trustworthy information, around 40% of the participants said they prefer not to use these sites because they believe the information has been face-lifted to attract tourists. Prior research indicates there are differences in

social media usage depending on nationality, gender and age (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2017). Interestingly, when we compare the statistical results from the two study regions, we find several significant differences in travel behavior and information search behavior, even though the demographic backgrounds are quite similar. Students in Macau prefer to use Mainland Chinese websites, whereas students in Taiwan use Taiwanese websites.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small, and all the participants were university students, so the results might not fully generalize to Generation Z's behavior. Second, this study was conducted in Taiwan and Macau, so the results reflect only the behavior of Chinese-speaking regions. Finally, given that three-quarters of the participants were female, male travel behavior and information search behavior may be under-represented.

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