

The SOMOAR Operationalization:

A holistic concept to travel decision modelling

Abstract

Purpose: Most state-of-the-art approaches for the analysis of the process of travel decision-making follow Woodworth's neo-behaviouristic S–R or S–O–R model. However, within this model, scholars primarily focus on the S–R relationship, investigating specific decisions by describing or explaining an outcome as the result of an input of several stimuli. There is a lack of investigation into the 'O' dimension of the SOR model. This paper contributes to closing of this gap by conceptually and holistically expanding existing models with new perspectives and components.

Design/methodology/approach: The authors base the conceptual process on a subjective/interpretative research paradigm, by: (1) combining outcomes from different theories and concepts into a new, more holistic approach; and (2) challenging this approach by seeking counter-arguments as well as supportive arguments at three conferences and workshops.

Findings: The paper expands the body of literature by positing a generic conceptual operationalization model focusing on the organism ("O") domain of decision-making. To achieve this, and further to operationalize the S–O–R model, the paper proposes to integrate an M–O–A (motivation–opportunity–ability) approach.

Originality/value: The analysis of the body literature reveals that there is still a lack of analytical and especially workable models/ approaches for the analysis of the process of tourist decision making. The paper contributes to that discussion by offering an alternative and generic operationalization of the tourist decision-making process by inducing a theoretical framework from the deductions gleaned from a number of existing theories.

Keywords: travel decision making, conceptual framework, theory of travel decision making

1 Introduction

Myriad consumer behaviour-related theories and empirical studies try to describe and explain prospective tourists' travel decisions and the mechanisms leading to those decisions. Most implicitly or explicitly follow Woodworth's 1929 neo-behaviouristic S–O–R (stimulus–organism–response) approach (further enhanced and developed by Mehrabian & Russell in 1974). They base the concept on the idea that a stimulus (for example, an advertising message) is processed in an individual organism (for example, in the form of motivation and its activation, decision-making or learning processes), which then leads to reactions (for example, altered consumer behaviour) (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Today, scholars consider this approach a paradigm; that is, a universally applicable theoretical framework.

Both total and partial models and applications exist. Total models, or the “grand models of decision-making” (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005), try to fully explain consumer behaviour in terms of psychological and social processes; hence they explicitly include the organism processes. Examples of such grand models include, for instance, those of Howard and Sheth (1969), Nicosia (1966), or Kollat, Engel, and Blackwell (1970). In contrast, partial models only deliver a partial explanation (for example, attitudinal models, and the like), and/or they mostly focus on S–R relationships (with “O” as a black box) (Meffert, 2013; Sirakaya & Woodside (2005).

Even though the grand models supposedly provide a holistic process approach to decision making, they actually do not. This critical view has multiple foundations. First, and referring to Smallman and Moore (2010), they take a too-simplistic view because they depict the decision-making process as a mere input–output mechanism. That essentially leaves the organism as a black box. Second, the authors of those models had purchase decisions of

tangible products in mind – but not services, which follow a somewhat different logic. This especially holds true for tourism, where one is encountering an experiential coproduction setting. Third, several authors criticise the assumption that the decision-making process is linear, purposive (where information is actively searched for, evaluated, and saved along a funnel process), assuming rational behaviour upon contemplating and collapsing an ever-decreasing number of purchase alternatives into one choice (Cooper, 2008; Gilbert & Cooper, 1991). Finally, critique also comes from the fact that a trip is a Lancasterian type of good, with multiple indivisible components, creating trade-offs and opportunity costs, which are not accounted for (Morley, 1992). Consequently, travel decisions are much more complex in nature than the majority of other types of consumption decisions.

This is why Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) demonstrate and conclude in their review paper on decision making in tourism that partial models, predominantly around destination choice (ignoring most other sub-choices!) are prevalent. They mostly investigate one or multiple causes (inputs) – effects (outcomes); hence some sort of S–R relationships, which is why one will mostly encounter very rigid flow charts depicting decision processes. This often results in explaining the outcome of decisions without having investigated more deeply the potential differences in processes leading to them. For example, the models suggest one way, whereas one could argue that there are multiple ways to reach a decision. This shortcoming continues to exist (Seddighi & Theocharous, 2002), despite a very few exceptions and attempts to overcome it (and these are discussed below).

Therefore, and based on a short structuring analysis of the existing body of knowledge on travel decision making, this paper proposes a generic conceptual model focusing on the process of decision making – beyond just destination decision making – in the context of travel. In order to achieve this, the authors conceptually combine and holistically integrate: (1)

Woodworth's 1929 neo-behaviouristic S–O–R model with the (2) motivation-opportunity-abilities (M–O–A) model (originally proposed by Ölander & Thøgersen in 1995), complemented with a (3) choice set allocation model, such as the one by Decrop (2010). The context is travel decisions, which we may characterize as high-involvement decisions in a world of indivisible goods, one of the most complex tasks with regard to consumption decision making.

The paper proposes a working model of travel decision making and the related processes, with the exception of mental processing (which the authors consider a subset of travel decision making).

2 Epistemological position of this paper

Generally, developing a conceptual model or concept implies a subjective/interpretative research paradigm. In contrast, theory development normally follows an objective paradigm. Whereas under an objective paradigm the potential for falsification supports the quality of the theory, under a subjective design, we must build such support with soft falsification or concept scepticism, demonstrated by seeking counter-arguments as well as supportive arguments (Xin, Tribe, & Chambers, 2013).

Consequently, the authors have combined and expanded, as transparently and coherently as possible, outcomes from different theories and concepts into a new approach, while ensuring that the results are consistent with the problem that initiated this research in the first place (that is, enhancing validity). The authors deliberately sought counter-arguments at three conferences. These included the annual meetings of:

- (1) TRC (Tourist Research Center; <http://trc.aiest.org/>) in Lisbon (Portugal) on 1 April 2017. The heads of the leading tourism research institutes of Europe attend this annual business and research meeting.
- (2) International Academy for the Study of Tourism (www.tourismscholars.org) in Guangzhou (PR China) on 25 May 2017. Top scholars/researchers in tourism related fields attend this biennial meeting.
- (3) AIEST (International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism; www.aiest.org) in Tbilisi (Georgia) on 3 September 2017. A mix of tourism scholars and practitioners attend this annual meeting.

The results of myriad feedback at those three conferences are included in the discussion section.

At this point, the authors do not identify whether the outcome of our work is a concept or a theory. Many of the proposals could actually be tested (we provide possible approaches to measurement scales, where appropriate); however, the authors refrain from doing so in this study.

3 Literature review

Based on the notions discussed above, the following literature review is structured along the partial components of the S–O–R model: (1) “S–R” perspective/ outcome of decisions; (2) “O” perspective/ process of decision making leading to those outcomes (the process dimension of decision making). This chapter summarizes and overviews the state of the art of those discussions. It does not aim to provide a full-scale literature review, except with regard to the process approach of travel decision making; that is, the organism component.

3.1 *The “S–R” perspective*

This perspective is structured according to two streams: (1) the basic logic of how people make decisions (general perspective); and (2) the situation/context within which people make those decisions (specific perspective).

Basic logic of how people make decisions

According to the dual processing theory; that is, the logic of how people make decisions (and process their corresponding thinking; De Neys, 2006; Jonathan, 2007; Kahneman 2001), as well as the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), we may differentiate between two decision-making approaches. They include:

- (1) Cognitive decision-making approaches, based on thought and reason (that is, the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Chen, 1998), best described by attributes such as deliberate, explicit, controlled, rule-based, serial, and intentional in terms of outcome.

- (2) Affective decision-making approaches, based on emotion and mood (Mittal, 1988), best described by attributes such as non-deliberate, implicit, automatic, associative, parallel, and non-intentional in terms of behavioural outcome.

Cognitive decision models are associated with the paradigm of the “*Homo oeconomicus*.” They first focus on costs and benefits of different alternatives in one or multiple-choice sets, based on perceived decision attributes (for instance, the attributes of a destination) (Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Schmoll, 1977; Wahab, Crampon, & Rothfield, 1976), or hotel choice (Viglia, Furlan and Ladron-de-Guevara (2014). The theoretical underpinning and prime foundation of those models is the household production theory by the late Gary Becker (Becker, 1965; Betancourt & Gautschi, 1992; Muth, 1966). When applying this theory to a travel context, special consideration must be made with regard to the following fact: travel-related decisions are *portfolio composition decisions* (or basket goods) with regard to multiple interdependent and indivisible constituting elements (Lancaster, 1966; Morley, 1992). These constituent elements include dates and duration of travel, choice of members of the travel party, choice of destination, choice of transport and route to the destination, and choice/category of accommodation, as well as activities chosen (Hyde & Laesser, 2009; Solnet, Boztug, & Dolnicar, 2016; Tay, McCarthy, & Fletcher, 1996). Consumers make those choices: (1) in a sequence of time; (2) in some sort of hierarchical order (first-order choices versus lower-order choices); as well as (3) very often collectively with others (Moutinho, 1987; Van Raaij & Francken, 1984; Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015). Such “collectivism” and the hierarchical sequence, as well as the indivisibility of the above elements, suggests a decision environment that is significantly susceptible to trade-offs, and therefore opportunity costs, potentially leading to hybrid opportunistic behaviour (Boztug, Babakhani, Laesser, & Dolnicar, 2015). Hybrid in the sense where one might observe, for example, quite a high degree of within-

subject heterogeneity in terms of willingness to pay (for example, booking a cheap flight but an expensive hotel; saving on food, splashing out on activities).

As for affective decision models, there are several sub-streams. They topicalize, for instance, values and fundamental attitudes (Madrigal, 1995; Pitts & Woodside, 1986; Um & Crompton, 1990), risk perception, involvement, and engagement (Boksberger, Bieger, & Laesser, 2007; Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011; Lovelock & Wright, 2001; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998), or personality and psychology (Boksberger, Dolnicar, Laesser, & Randle, 2011; Laesser & Zehrer, 2012; Madrigal, 1995). We might consider the rationale for destination branding to be the tangible management outcome vis-à-vis those affective ways of decision making (Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005). Many branding attributes actually tap into the above domains.

Finally, conative decision-making approaches provide a different perspective on the two previous ones by differentiating between intentional and non-intentional behaviour, such as is discussed in the theory of planned (social) behaviour (Ajzen & Driver, 1992; Mansfeld, 1992). They essentially try to explain behaviour as a result of attitude (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Again, ad relating to the dual processing theory, non-intention is often and closely associated with: (1) non-conscious or reduced consciousness (Nordgren, Bos, & Dijksterhuis, 2011); and/or (2) impulsiveness, which can be characterized as a non-reflective, non-informed type of decision making (Laesser & Dolnicar, 2012; Mayo & Jarvis, 1981). Evidence also exists that intentional behaviour can result from non-intentional/non-conscious needs; that is, there is unconscious reasoning for a stated and observable intentional behaviour (Tran & Ralston, 2006).

Situation/context within which people make decisions

These models expand the boundaries and specifically include the situation and context about and within which an agent makes a decision. They include endogenous as well as exogenous factors to decision making (Moutinho, 1987). For practical reasons, we may group them according to: (1) the personal context; and (2) the travel context (Bieger & Laesser, 2000).

(1) Personal context: we may first subsume all of the basic logic of decision making as an integral part of the personal context (see above). Then, and according to the literature, the authors add several domains (the following references serve as examples). They include cultural background (Laesser, Beritelli, & Heer, 2014), a wide range of possible socio-demographic descriptors (Pang, 2014), the consumption environment (Hopkins, Rodi, & Vincent, 2002), the information environment (Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015), and so on. The information environment is particularly important, because it not only incorporates the way information is collected and processed (Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Laesser, Bieger, & Beritelli, 2007), but also which signals/cues an individual is exposed to and how they evaluate and process them.

(2) Travel context: the travel context can first be derived from the aforementioned constituting elements of the travel portfolio decision (Bieger, 2004). In addition, a wide body of literature suggests including a tourism typology to better specify a travel context. Examples can be found in the domain of, for example, adventure tourism (Williams & Soutar, 2009), heritage tourism (Kerstetter, Confer, & Graefe, 2001), or nature-based tourism (Pennington-Gray & Kerstetter, 2002), just to name a few.

3.2 *Process dimension of decision making*

Overview

While travel decisions are quite well researched in terms of their S–R perspective, one still needs to learn about travellers' decision processes (Michie, 1986; Van Raaij, 1986). This idea still appears to hold true (Seddighi & Theocharous, 2002). Nevertheless, although most travel decision models follow an S–R model, fortunately one may find several concepts that describe and/or test several different approaches to the process of decision making (discussed below). They include several input variables and a simple phased/ sequential process that includes, for instance, a motivation phase, an information acquisition phase, a procession phase (including heuristics for decision making); or a pre-purchase phase, a purchase phase, and a consumption phase (Choi, Lehto, Morrison, & Jang, 2011; Correia, 2002; Mansfeld, 1992; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

Although process models are still scarce, scholars have researched two important domains within the travel decision very well: (1) information search (not processing!); and (2) travel motivation (as demonstrated by a plethora of literature).

The importance and attractiveness of information search as a research object likely stems from the fact that travelling is largely associated with the purchase of – in part – intangible services, which in turn are typical information goods (Lovelock & Wright, 2001; Murray, 1991). One may observe a similar research approach to the information search problem as to the overall travel decision-making problem: taking either a content or process perspective, or combinations thereof. Fodness and Murray, for instance, examined in 1999, for the first time, the correlates of information search behaviour by tourists. They specified and tested a model in which tourist information search strategies were related to search contingencies, individual

(tourist) characteristics, and behavioural search outcomes (Fodness & Murray, 1999). A source process model was later introduced by Bieger and Laesser (2004), which took an additional source processing view to the information sourcing problem. They suggest that there is a sequence of information processing during the holiday decision-making process, particularly observable when it comes to destination versus transport factors, where there is a potential hierarchy.

The importance and attractiveness of *motivation* as a research object likely stems from its properties: travel motivation can be considered as the conjunction between personal and travel context via the creation of behavioural intention (Fodness, 1994; Mansfeld, 1992). That property regarding the level of motivation activation can either be internal (from within a subject) or external (from outside a subject) (Hsu, Cai, & Li, 2009; Parrinello, 1993). A similar differentiation holds true with regard to the impact of travel motivation: whereas push motivation can be associated with the personal context, pull (with an appetitive impact versus repelling) motivation can be associated with the travel context and the destinations under consideration (incorporating many attributes regarding the travel context) (Uysal & Jurowski, 1994). We may thus infer motivation to be the result of behavioural changes in reaction to internal or external stimuli (Pearce & Caltabiano, 1983).

However, and apart from abovementioned stream of literature regarding information sourcing and travel motivation, the body of knowledge with respect to the organism's role in decision making is still quite limited. The discussion of several corresponding studies follows below.

Presentation of selected approaches

Moutinho (1987) provides us with a very dynamic model that also includes the choice behaviour of tourists beyond a mere destination choice context. The core of the model is a main process, structured in different sub-processes, including a wide variety of existing consumer behaviour theories. The final choice making *per se* at the end of those sub-processes is a separated process. He further points out that a destination choice is one of many choices (that is, a sub-choice), thus referring to the indivisibility of travel choices (Lancaster, 1966).

Woodside and Lyonski (1989) present a general model of traveller destination awareness and choice, under special consideration of the mental categorization process of destination brands (which can be considered as core part of the process). They take a microscopic perspective, demonstrating how different positions of brands at the time of decision making determine the final choice of destination brand. Crompton and Decrop later take up this stream of research: the first of the two proposes three stages of the specific decision-making process, including an initial consideration set, a late consideration set, and an action and interaction set (Crompton, 1992); the second provides an exploratory longitudinal study in which he investigates the brand choice set formation process (Decrop, 2010). Others follow this stream of literature, including, among others Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez (2001; on the image formation and destination choice process).

Woodside and colleagues developed and tested an extensive decision-making model based on the analysis of process models created on a grounded theory research approach (Woodside, MacDonald, & Burford, 2004). They not only include pre-departure decision making, but onsite decision making as well, and identify a multitude of domains of decision-making

processes within their model. The sheer extension of the model and chosen methodology (ex post narratives) results in a macroscopic but holistic perspective.

Correia (2002) provides us with an application and conceptual framework of the S–O–R model for tourist decision situations, focusing on motivation, expectation and choice.

Whereas she picks up most of the domains of decision making discussed earlier in the literature review, she fails to provide us with a more detailed way of operationalization.

Hence, the perspective of her model is also a macroscopic. The same holds true with a five-stage model proposed by Eugenio-Martin (2003), which proposes a hierarchical process of decision making vis-à-vis the (indivisible) constituting elements of travel.

In a recent research note, Hudson and Thal (2013) consider how social media will affect the customer decision journey (they base their original model on a McKinsey publication). The storyline in the paper is essentially a continuation of the one by Woodside and Lysonski and Crompton and Decrop (as discussed earlier), keeping a macroscopic perspective.

More recently, Manthiou, Ayadi, Lee, Chiang, and Tang (2016) examined – based on the S–O–R model – the behavioural intention in the context of consumer events. They tested various hypotheses among stimuli (for example, environmental, and staff interaction), organism (self-concept), and mediator (memory), emphasizing the importance of self-concept and memory in the prediction of consumer behaviour.

Assessment of the existing body of knowledge

In sum, existing process approaches still focus largely on a mere destination choice and the variables (allegedly) influencing that choice, neglecting the process and the associated decision heuristics (Choi, Lehto, Morrison, & Jang, 2011). In addition, they assume the

decision process to be linear, with a starting point and an ending point prior to departure. For instance, DiPietro, Wang, Rompf, and Severt (2007) contest that assumption, and posit – in line with others – a much more extensive decision-making horizon, reaching well into the consumption phase and beyond (Ortega, Rodríguez, & Kitchen, 2014). At the very least, we may identify communalities with regard to the relevant choice variables (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005): they are either internal, external, contain characteristics of the intended trip, or account for previous travel experiences.

The above diagnosis prompts an alternative, more process-oriented conceptualization.

4 The concept

4.1 Introduction

First, and most directly: SOMOAR stands for stimulus–organism (motivation–opportunity–ability)–response. We expand the rationales of this approach below.

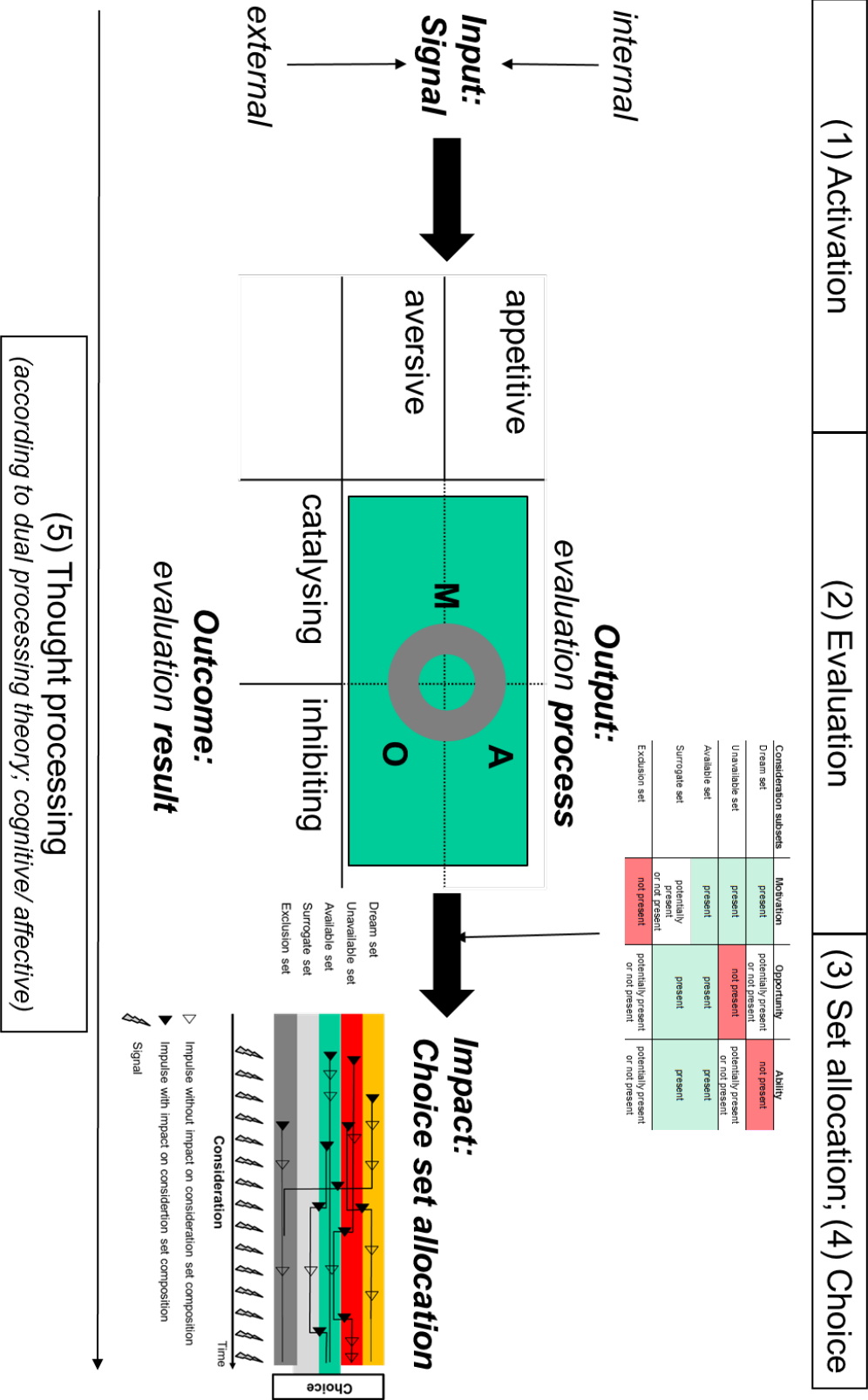
This section first provides an overview of the concept and then presents selected details of its core elements, followed by a summary, then a discussion.

4.2 Overview: *The SOMOAR decision-making conceptualization*

Please refer to Figure 1 for an overview of the concept, and then imagine an individual.

At any given time, this individual can – thought activation provided – potentially think about anything, including a trip as a tourist. The prime condition for a thought-object to be trip related is, that at least one constituting element (as discussed previously) would be present.

Figure 1: Conceptualization overview



(1) Activation

Activation (= input) of thoughts does not come by itself: the necessary but not sufficient conditions for any type of activation is the: (1) reception, and consequently (2) processing of a signal, as well as responding to it. A “signal” is either a random or sought-after conveyor of information, with the potential to become a stimulus by providing an appetitive or aversive type of reason for change in behaviour (thinking about something versus not thinking about something favourably or unfavourably).

The thought-object is equivalent to a potential choice alternative, which in turn is defined by a given set of all or at least a limited number of interdependent and indivisible constituting elements of a trip (that is, a “Lancasterian” basket good; see Lancaster, 1966). These elements include dates and duration of travel, choice of members of the travel party, choice of destination, transport and route to the destination, and choice/category of accommodation, as well as activities. The reason for classifying the choice alternative as “potential” stems from the fact that unless a choice is imminent, the given alternative is just an element of a consideration set and process (but not an object in a final choice set).

(2) Evaluation

In an interpretative evaluation process (= output; based on the individual logics of decision making), and activated by the stimulating signals mentioned above, individuals evaluate choice alternatives and their constituting elements according to three domains. They include: (1) WANTS (or goals; that is, M standing for motivation, activated by the signal), (2) CANS (endogenous capacity and willingness for the obtaining of results; that is, A standing for ability), and (3) POSSIBLES (exogenous conditions for the obtaining of results; that is, O standing for opportunities).

(3) Set allocation

The result of this this evaluation process (= outcome) is either catalysing or inhibiting in such a way that the individual allocates each potential choice alternative to potentially different subsets of an ongoing consideration set, ranging, for example, from a dream set to an exclusion set (= impact). The result of this allocation process is potentially subject to change, because each signal received by the individual, if it was a stimulus, activates an evaluation process with a potential catalysing and inhibiting outcome. New or adapted (in the sense of their constituting elements) choice alternatives evolve, or choice alternatives are rejected altogether.

(4) Choice

Once an individual or a group needs to make a final and ultimate decision, they draw the alternatives for a temporary choice set from an existing consideration set of mainly available and surrogate choice alternatives. All alternatives of the other sets go into a pool of rejected alternatives and serve as a potential signal in the future.

Due to repetitive character of signals and stimuli, the processes (1) *activation*, (2) *evaluation*, and (3) *set allocation* are repetitive as well – similar to a circular process. In contrast, the process (4) *choice* is singular in such a way that it implies the temporary conclusion of a decision-making process, as well as a reset of the set allocation, a set allocation which notably will be reshuffled again in the future each time signal and stimuli are being processed.

4.3 Details of the elements of the concept

For a deeper understanding, this section presents more details with regard to the elements of the concept, by moving along the process described previously.

(1) Activation: signals: affect – activation – action (= input)

Any process, including travel decision-making processes, needs some sort of activation. From the motivation activation theory (Hsu, Cai, & Li, 2009; Parrinello, 1993) we may derive that internal or external signals exist. They can – depending on their force – become stimuli which affect people in such a way that they are able to activate either an appetitive or aversive motivation for (against, respectively) a specific behavioural action and output (Bradley, Codispoti, Cuthbert, & Lang, 2001; Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 1997). In our case, this behavioural output is a thought (the result of a combination of cognitive, affective, and conative thought processing), initiating an evaluation process. Hence, signals are necessary antecedents to motivation, because motivation is the force deployed by the (stimulating) signal towards a specific behaviour or behavioural output. The character of a signal is first some random or sought-after a piece of information, and the assignment of either an appetitive or aversive character is based on an individual interpretative process (further described below).

The provenance of internal signals is the individual themselves; with human capital as a major source (human capital containing the memorized choice repository of previously executed and rejected trips). In contrast, external signals stem from any other type of source; they can be either personal (face-to-face or intermediated however temporally or geographically synchronized), or non-personal (Berlo, 1965; Grønflaten, 2009; Shannon & Weaver, 1949), including essentially any type of content disseminated by any type of media.

Our proposition, in sum: signals can be either be appetitive or aversive. They either stem from a random or sought-after internal or external source. They activate – and thereby become stimuli – in the appetitive case the motivation to pursue an evaluation process regarding one or multiple travel choice alternatives. They do not activate, or even inhibit, this process if they are aversive in character, because there is a lack of motivation or motivation against such an activation.

(2) Evaluation: the M–O–A approach and process (= output with outcome)

M–O–A constitutes the conceptual core of our concept, and provides us with a structure for an interpretative and evaluative process with regard to an object – in our case, a potential choice alternative. M–O–A stands for motivation–opportunity–ability (Ölander & Thøgersen, 1995).

- Motivation (activated by an appetitive signal as discussed before) encompasses the striving for goals or desirable targets and/or the circumstances for their existence.
- Opportunity signifies the availability of exogenously favourable/supportive conditions that enable an action (Jepson, Clarke, & Ragsdell, 2014; MacInnis, Moorman, & Jaworski, 1991). This might include destinations’ attributes, such as the offer situation (be it of first or second nature) or its accessibility (indicated, for example, by the choice of means, time and money needed, and so on).
- Ability stands for individuals’ beliefs about their own endogenous capacity and willingness for a given performance and the obtaining of results (Hong, Thong, & Wai-Man Wong, 2002; Jepson, Clarke, & Ragsdell, 2014). This might include attributes such as the availability of resources (in terms of time and money), potential capability, authoritarian or coupling constraints (see below), as well as personal dispositions, risk/variety/novelty-seeking propensity, and the like.

The M–O–A process can have either:

- (1) a catalysing outcome in such a way that it leads to the support or even initiation of a potential choice alternative (as proposed in the original model), or it can have:
- (2) an inhibiting outcome in such a way that it leads to the challenge – or even rejection of a potential choice alternative.

Core determinants for either a catalysing or inhibiting outcome include:

- (1) capability opportunities or constraints (mostly temporal, spatial, budgetary)
- (2) coupling opportunities or constraints (mostly the concurrence of persons and their own travel motivation, time (when and how long to travel), and location-related characteristics
- (3) authority opportunities and constraints (for example, visa, opening hours, and so on), and the like (Hägerstrand, 1989; Heggie, 1978; Hung & Petrick, 2012).

The M–O–A perspective has several different foundations, ranging from (advertising) information processing theory (Batra & Ray, 1986; MacInnis & Jaworski, 1989), environmental behaviour (Thøgersen & Ölander, 2002), to tourism; for example, to predict the purchase of air transport tickets (Bigné, Hernández, Ruiz, & Andreu, 2010), or assess community participation in tourism development (Hung, Sirakaya-Turk, & Ingram, 2011), among others.

Our proposition, in sum: M–O–A depicts the major contents and the process of an evaluation of a travel choice alternative. Consequently (and thus pertaining to outcome), and with regard to a potential travel alternative, it can either be catalysing or inhibiting in nature.

(3) Consideration and choice set allocation (= impact)

A given composition of a consideration set by its subsets is the result of a recurring interpretation and evaluation process of each choice alternative within the earlier described M–O–A process. Drawing, e.g., on Decrop (2010) (any other structuration approach would be suitable as well), and at any given point of time, there will be a consideration set of potential choice alternatives, composed of two subsets:

- evoked subset: choice alternatives considered for any future decision
- surrogate subset: non-prioritized choice alternatives, but kept as spare alternatives.

The evoked set is further comprised of the following subsets (Decrop, 2010):

- dream subset: choice alternatives that are considered as ideal, but are permanently unavailable because of enduring structural inhibitors (these structural inhibitors can either be endogenous or exogenous in nature)
- unavailable subset: choice alternatives which are considered, but are temporarily unavailable because of particular situational constraints
- available subset: choice alternatives that really are feasible after considering potential constraints
- exclusion subset: choice alternatives definitely rejected.

Because our conceptualization takes a dynamic perspective, we must differentiate – along the process of decision making – between: (1) an intermediary and ongoing consideration set compositions; and (2) an imminent and temporary/ ultimate choice set composition.

At any given point, we might start with a selection of choice alternatives (one alternative in the unavailable set; another one in the available set). Over time, and during the intermediary time

as well as some signals later, new choice alternatives come up in many different sets, and set positions of existing choice alternatives change, remain, or – over time – literally cease.

As soon as one of the constituting elements (or any other elements) of a given choice alternative change in the process of decision making, a different or new/additional choice alternative emerges, creating trade-offs and opportunity costs and utilities relative to other and previous alternatives (Boztug, Babakhani, Laesser, & Dolnicar, 2015; Hyde & Laesser, 2009; Lancaster, 1966).

At the time, when a final choice needs to be made, the ultimate position of each choice alternative will determine its likelihood to be the final choice or part hereof.

Connecting the evaluation with the consideration and choice set allocation

The allocation of choice alternatives into the above subsets implicitly correlate with the M–O–A structuration, with logic acting as a moderator. In further operationalizing the concept, the authors propose to structure the allocation of choice alternatives across consideration subsets according to the M–O–A process outcome. Please refer to Table 1 for the corresponding outcome. For every type of consideration subset, there is a specific outcome of the status regarding motivation – opportunity, and ability.

For instance, a given choice alternative is or ends in our:

- dream set, if one would want to execute this choice alternative, however, lacking the ability, no matter if there was an opportunity or not
- unavailable set, if one would want to execute this choice alternative; however, lacking the opportunity, no matter if one were able to execute this choice alternative

- available set, if one would want and are able to execute this choice alternative and if there is actually an opportunity to do so.

Table 1: Consideration subset allocation according to M–O–A process outcome

Consideration subsets	Motivation	Opportunity	Ability
Dream set	present	both present or not present	not present
Unavailable set	present	not present	both present or not present
Available set	present	present	present
Surrogate set	both present or not present	present	present
Exclusion set	not present	both present or not present	both present or not present

Please find below a narrative example.

Mr Smith and Mrs Smith would like to go to space (motivation = present). However, there is no opportunity. Because of this lack of opportunity, they do not have to bother about their ability. Hence, they allocate this choice alternative to the unavailable set. Enter a space travel provider, offering suborbital flight for – say – \$100,000 per person. The two still would like to go to space. Now there is an opportunity. However, they now have to evaluate if they are able to make use of that opportunity and realise, that unless they win the lottery, they lack financial ability. Now, they allocate this choice alternative to the dream set.

Our proposition, in sum: each choice alternative has – at a given point in time – a given relative position within different consideration subsets. This position might change over time, as new signals come in and new evaluation processes are going on. The outcome of this process (that is, choice set composition) then consists of a choice alternative from predominantly the available or the surrogate subsets.

(4) Choice (= overall result of the process)

One may understand choice as the result of a process selecting from different choice alternatives (which have a different positioning across the consideration subsets and which have survived to the point of choice making). Again, each of those choice alternatives includes, as they represent Lancasterian types of basket goods (Lancaster, 1966), at least seven indivisible and interdependent choices: dates and duration of travel, members of the travel party, destination, transport and route to the destination, and category of accommodation, resulting in numerous possible combinations of all of the above items.

(5) Thought processing rationale (dual processing as decision-process overlay)

One may derive the way people perceive and interpret a signal, and consequently, a choice situation from the previously discussed logics of individual decision making. The relevant dimensions include: (1) affective interpretation and decision making, based on emotion and mood (Mittal, 1988); (2) cognitive interpretation and decision making, based on thought and reason (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Chen, 1998); (3) conative interpretation and decision making, based on the differentiation between intentional and non-intentional behaviour (Ajzen & Driver, 1992).

However, there are some limitations to such a clear distinction: “Because most complex decisions require both adherence to precise rules and the aggregation of information, we may hypothesize that complex decisions can best be made by engaging in periods of both conscious and unconscious thought” (Nordgren et al., 2011). This is even more true for the processing of signals, especially when they are internal in nature, for example, memories (Gao, Zhang, Wang, & Ba, 2012; Martin, 2010).

4.4 *Individual versus group decision*

As a side note, one should acknowledge that decision making is often not an individual but a group process, where a group in principle constitutes a coupling constraint. In such a situation, individual base their preferences and choices very often not their own evaluation, but on an evaluation of other members of a potential travel party as well (such as demonstrated in a couple context; see Smith, Pitts, & Litvin, 2017). If the outcome of the evaluation process with regard to a given choice alternative is congruent (hence there is “harmony”), we may assume its unambiguous position within the consideration set. However, this is not so when there is little or no congruence – or even dissent – between travel party members. In such a situation, negotiations between travel party members become necessary, in order to align different utilities from one person’s preferences with potential disutilities from others and vice versa (see Table 2). Due to the scope of this paper, the authors will refrain from expanding on this conceptual stream.

Table 2: Aligning own and others’ preferences

	Others’ preferences	
Own preferences	Utility from pleasing myself	Disutility and opportunity costs from displeasing others by pleasing myself
	Disutility from displeasing myself by pleasing others	Utility and opportunity benefits from pleasing others

4.5 *Summary*

In summary, the authors propose a generic concept to the core decision-making process according to the following principles.

- (1) People can indulge in any type of decision making at any point of time. However, there needs to be a mechanism of some sort that activates an evaluation process necessary for indulging and decision making.
- (2) Perceived signals (a signal in the sense of a conveyor of information), internal or external, can take over the role of (thought and evaluation) activator (thus becoming a stimulus).
- (3) In a perceptual process, people assign those stimulating signals either an appetitive or aversive character. In the subsequent evaluation process, people decide what type of impact its result has (evaluation outcome) on each of our choice alternatives (catalysing versus inhibiting).
- (4) The evaluation process contains three domains: motivation (want versus not wanting), opportunities (possible/ available versus not possible/ not available), and abilities (can versus cannot).
- (5) Based on the result, the evaluation process and its logic with regard to motivation, opportunities and abilities, people position each choice alternative relative to one another by allocating all of them to different consideration subsets.
- (6) From the consideration subsets, people draw an imminent and ultimate choice set, from which people then derive our final choice.

5 Discussion

This section critically reflects on this conceptual work. The authors first reflect on the feedbacks from the three conferences mentioned in Section 2 (that is, Tourist Research Center; International Academy for the Study of Tourism, and the International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism). Afterwards, we assess the body of knowledge added with our contribution.

5.1 *Reflection on the feedbacks*

First, the concept acknowledges and accounts for both inputs and consequent impact of the decision-making process, as well as recognising that the decision-making process itself is random in nature, in terms of starting and ending point. Because of that randomness, there is ultimately no clear delimiting boundary when a decision process starts – and therefore when it ends. Humans are – theoretically – permanently exposed to signals potentially relevant for travel decisions. This poses a serious challenge once one wants to turn this theoretical concept into a working one; that is, one that provides us with help when it comes to depicting and modelling effective consumer decision making and subsequent choices. One possible solution to that challenge consists of measuring the dynamics and the variance within the consideration set composition over time as a function of prior constructs in the process.

This leads us to the second particularity of the concept. Essentially, there is a realistic potential for measuring a multiplicity of its domains, including:

- (1) the relevance (impulse strength) of signals and their classification as either appetitive or aversive by means of the valuation of attributes

- (2) the considerations within the evaluation process (M–O–A), because there are measurement scales for all three domains
- (3) the outcome of the evaluation process (either catalysing or inhibiting) on an existing or new choice alternative
- (4) the impact on the classification and degree of prioritization according to the original definitions of the different subsets.

However, there are some shortcomings with regard to the concept presented in this paper.

First, the concept does not include attributes of choice alternatives in the conceptualization; however, those attributes can be included easily, especially when one bears in mind that they have a distinctive function: describing a choice alternative.

Second, people often make decisions in a group. The concept does account partially for group decisions. One could counter-argue that from an individual perspective, a group decision situation essentially constitutes a specific coupling constraint, which we may deal with as such.

Third, the concept does not account for the mental processing and the associated heuristics within the decision making process, such as discussed, for example, in the domain of the dual processing theory. Thus, this is a shortcoming which the concept does not account for, because of serious measurement issues (how, for instance, shall one measure non-conscious parts of decision making?). Consequently, this is an avenue of research that will need further exploration.

5.2 *Own assessment in the context of the literature*

The authors base their own assessment of our work on our previous assessment of the existing body of knowledge.

Citation from the literature analysis: “In sum, existing process approaches still focus largely on a mere destination choice and the variables (allegedly) influencing that choice, neglecting the process and the associated decision heuristics” (Choi, Lehto, Morrison, & Jang, 2011). By introducing a more generic as well as a portfolio perspective on travel decision making, the new concept at least partly overcomes the dominance of mere destination choice. The SOMOAR operationalization allows for a more holistic but also less stringent depiction of the travel decision-making process.

A noteworthy citation from the literature analysis: “In addition, they assume the decision process to be linear, with a starting point and an ending point prior to departure. For instance, DiPietro, Wang, Rompf, and Severt (2007) contest that assumption, and posit – in line with others – a much more extensive decision-making horizon, reaching well into the consumption phase and beyond” (Ortega, Rodríguez, & Kitchen, 2014). In the SOMOAR operationalization, the authors attempt to overcome this linearity by stipulating an ongoing circular process with the occasional need to make a decision (in order to travel in the first place). If this process is repetitive, one needs to operationalize it in a sufficient generic way that may potentially depict many different options and ways as well as results of the decision-making process. To overcome the reproach of “too generic”, the authors try to clearly define and delimit every step and single domain within the concept.

Another noteworthy citation from the literature analysis: “At the very least, one can identify communalities with regard to the relevant choice variables (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005):

they are either internal, external, contain characteristics of the intended trip, or account for previous travel experiences.” In the SOMOAR operationalization, the authors have tried to include all these communalities, with the risk of having to face the reproach of “too generic”. However, and as mentioned above, the authors think that there is a strong counter-argument against such an assessment of this type of conceptualization.

6 Conclusion

6.1 *Summary*

This paper proposes an alternative conceptualization of travel decision making, under special consideration of the decision-making process (not thought-processing mechanisms) and its components. Preliminary feedback – as discussed in the discussion section – has generally been supportive. However, extensive testing and possibly adaptations to our approach will be necessary. We therefore invite our peers to test the different properties of our concept by means of analysing and conceptualizing different decision-making narratives. We claim that concept holds true, as long as there is no decision-making narrative that cannot be analysed and conceptualized as such.

6.2 *Implications for research*

As shown above, the concept bears potential for empirical operationalization. Scoping and focusing future research around the intercepts of the concepts might be promising areas to further work on the idea. That means, exploring associations with regard to (1) signals → stimuli → activation of evaluation, (2) activation of evaluation → the M–O–A process →

choice set allocation, and (3) choice set allocation → choice. A further domain of study could consist of following up choice alternatives, which were not chosen at the point of time of immediate choice making. Finally, and as already indicated above, another interesting research avenue could consist of integrating mental processing into the concept, under special consideration of the non-conscious parts of decision making.

6.3 *Limitations and merit of our work*

We do not tell the audience what attributes are important in decision making, nor do we explore all details with regard to each step in our process concept. What we in turn provide is a bigger picture on the decision-making phenomenon that is very often complicated by the discussion of all details associated with it. We would be happy to receive feedback.

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