A PHOTO IS WORTH A THOUSAND CLICKS: AN EXAMINATION OF
THE DIFFERENTIAL EFFECTS OF PHOTOGRAPH TYPE AND PROVIDER
ON CONSUMERS’ WILLINGNESS TO BOOK

A Thesis in
Hospitality Management

by

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ABSTRACT

With the growing influence and considerable use of social media, it is common for consumers to search for photographs as well as reviews and ratings online prior to making a purchase decision. In this study, we focus on consumers’ use of user-generated and firm-generated photographs in the context of the purchase of hotel accommodation. Specifically, we examine the joint effects of photograph type (product-focused and experience-focused) and photograph provider (firm-generated, user-generated, and a combination of firm- and user-generated) on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room. An experimental design was employed to test the proposed hypotheses. Data were collected using an online survey of participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk. ANCOVA and planned contrasts were performed to analyze the data. The major finding indicates that the effect of photograph type on willingness to book a hotel room is moderated by photograph provider. We present the theoretical contribution and practical implications of the study’s findings and propose directions for future research.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .................................................................................................................. v

List of Tables ................................................................................................................... vi

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... vii

Chapter 1 Introduction ................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 2 Literature Review ......................................................................................... 5

  Overview of Images Research ..................................................................................... 5
  Photograph Type: Functional Value vs. Experiential Value ..................................... 7
  Photograph Provider ..................................................................................................... 8
  The Moderating Role of Photograph Provider ......................................................... 10
  Impact of Photograph Quality ................................................................................... 13

Chapter 3 Methodology ................................................................................................. 15

  Experimental Design .................................................................................................. 15
  Participants .................................................................................................................. 17
  Procedures .................................................................................................................. 18
  Manipulation and Realism Checks .......................................................................... 19

Chapter 4 Results .......................................................................................................... 22

Chapter 5 Discussion ..................................................................................................... 26

  Theoretical and Practical Implications .................................................................... 27
  Limitations and Future Research ............................................................................. 30

Appendix A Photographs ............................................................................................... 32

Appendix B Scenarios .................................................................................................... 37

Appendix C Scale Items ................................................................................................. 41

References ...................................................................................................................... 42
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1-1. Photos Section on TripAdvisor ................................................................. 2
Figure 1-2. Homepage of Grand Hyatt New York .......................................................... 2
Figure 2-1. A Conceptual Model of Willingness to Book a Hotel Room as a Function of Photograph Type and Photograph Provider ....................................................... 13
Figure 4-1. Interaction Plot ............................................................................................. 25
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3-1. Sample Characteristics .................................................................................. 18
Table 4-1. Willingness to Book Means by Experimental Design .................................. 24
Table 4-2. ANCOVA Results ......................................................................................... 24
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Yoojin Shin
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Social media (e.g., Instagram and Facebook) and travel websites (e.g., TripAdvisor) provide consumers a readily accessible forum for sharing travel and hotel experiences through reviews, ratings, and photographs that visualize the experiences (see Figure 1-1). This user-generated content, in addition to firm-generated content such as descriptions of services and amenities, and professional photographs available on official websites of hotel brands (see Figure 1-2), is used extensively by consumers to influence their quality perceptions and hotel choice (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Ye, Law, Gu, & Chen, 2011; Noone & McGuire, 2014). Photographs, like reviews and ratings, can serve as a great source of information and an effective decision making aid for consumers particularly in the hospitality industry because photographs can play a crucial role in reducing the uncertainty attached to the purchase of an intangible hotel experience during the pre-purchase stage of consumption (Klein, 1998; Koernig, 2003; Jeong & Choi, 2004). In fact, prior research provides support for the power of photographs by demonstrating that images can yield enhanced recall and recognition over text (Childers & Houston, 1984; Leong, Ang, & Tham, 1996).
Figure 1-1. Photos Section on TripAdvisor

Figure 1-2. Homepage of Grand Hyatt New York
Photographs can be broadly classified as communicating either functional value or experiential value. Functional value refers to assessments of the utilitarian, physical performance of products or services on salient attributes such as price, reliability, and durability (Fiore & Kim, 2007). Experiential value, on the other hand, represents interactions that involve the direct usage or the distant appreciation of goods and services (Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001).

Drawing on a functional versus experiential value framework (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Mathwick et al., 2001; Sanchez, Callarisa, Rodriguez, & Moliner, 2006; Fiore & Kim, 2007), we define product-focused photographs, for the purpose of this study, as photographs that emphasize the utilitarian, functional, physical attributes and tangible elements of a service experience (e.g., photographs of physical facilities of a hotel such as a guestroom and a lobby) whereas experience-focused photographs refer to photographs that emphasize the experiential aspect and intangible elements of a service experience (e.g., photographs of people relaxing with a glass of champagne in a guestroom or swimming in an outdoor swimming pool of a hotel). Furthermore, in this study we distinguish two categories of photograph provider: a single photograph provider and a combined photograph provider. The term single photograph provider indicates that photographs are provided by a single source, either firm- or user-generated. The term combined photograph provider, on the other hand, indicates that firm- and user-generated photographs are provided. Finally, the focus of this study is “positive” photographs which present a positive, favorable image of a hotel.

This study aims to extend the literature on the role of photographs in the hospitality industry by focusing on how consumers use firm- and user-generated photographs when they make a booking decision for a hotel room. In particular, it investigates the effects of photograph type (product-focused and experience-focused) on consumers’ willingness to book and the
moderating role of photograph provider (firm-generated, user-generated, and a combination of firm- and user-generated) in the photograph type-willingness to book relationship.

In the following chapter, the literature relating to images and the role of photograph type and provider in online hotel choice is reviewed. The research methods employed in this research and the results are then described. Finally, the theoretical and managerial implications of this research, in addition to a discussion of potential future research, is presented.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Overview of Images Research

Images, in the form of photographs, have been studied extensively in a variety of contexts. While the technical, structural aspects of images, such as light, contrast, composition, quality, and image appeal, have received considerable attention in human vision and image processing research (Peli, 1990; Savakis, Etz, & Loui, 2000; Wang, Bovik, Sheikh, & Simoncelli, 2004; Jacobs, Goldman, & Shechtman, 2010; Gilani, Subramanian, Hua, Winkler, & Yen, 2014), the major focus of research in the domain of advertising, marketing, and consumer behavior research has been how images affect various consumer outcomes that include decision making and choice. The greater impact of images over text can be explained by the picture-word effect or picture-superiority effect, which suggest that images act as a more powerful tool to improve memorability and recall of material compared to text (Shepard, 1967; Lutz & Lutz, 1977; Kisielius, 1982; Edell & Staelin, 1983; Childers & Houston, 1984). The enhanced memorability of images increases the effectiveness of advertisements as Starch (1966) found that the likelihood of recalling a print advertisement was higher when it contained images than when it did not. Furthermore, prior studies in the context of advertising have provided empirical evidence to demonstrate that images can effectively influence consumers’ attitudes and beliefs (Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Mitchell, 1986; Miniard, Bhatla, Lord, Dickson, & Unnava, 1991). For example, Mitchell and Olson (1981) reported that a tissue advertisement that contained a picture of a fluffy
kitten resulted in more positive attitudes towards, and more favorable beliefs about, the tissue brand. Similarly, Mitchell (1986) found that positive and negative affect-laden images in advertisements changed respondents’ attitudes towards the advertisement and brand. In the hospitality literature, a number of researchers have stressed the importance, and effectiveness, of using images to influence attitude formation and behavioral intentions (Day, Skidmore, & Koller, 2002; Jeong & Choi, 2004; Phelan, Christodoulidou, Countryman, & Kistner, 2011; Pan, Zhang, & Law, 2013; Noone & Robson, 2014; Koerbitz & Onder, 2014). For example, Phelan et al. (2011) found that the presence of images on hotel websites had a significant influence on the website appeal and consumers’ likelihood of booking. Furthermore, Jeong and Choi (2004) found that the content and realism of images presented on hotel websites played a key role in affecting consumers’ attitudes towards the website. Additionally, a number of eye tracking studies suggest that consumers demonstrate some reliance on images when evaluating hotels online (Pan et al., 2013; Noone & Robson, 2014). For example, Pan et al. (2013) demonstrated that images not only helped consumers look at more hotels during hotel search but also added more hedonic elements to their decision making process. Findings by Noone and Robson (2014) also indicated that images were a crucial factor during the two stages, browsing and deliberation, of the hotel selection process. Images have also been examined from a destination management perspective in terms of their impact on destination positioning, and for benchmarking (Day et al., 2001; Koerbitz & Onder, 2014). Day et al. (2001), for example, identified the images that were most likely to motivate the U.S. market to travel to southeast Queensland. In a similar vein, Koerbitz and Onder (2014) identified the most popular travel destinations as benchmarking partners of Austrian regions by using geotagged photographs on Flickr.

In sum, it seems that, regardless of context, images are considered an effective medium for facilitating persuasive communication of messages, and influences consumers’ purchase
decisions. For the hospitality industry, in particular, it is suggested that images along with other types of information, such as price, reviews, and ratings, which are available to consumers in the online environment, play an important role in hotel choice. Thus, the role of images, in the form of photographs, in consumers’ online hotel selection merits in-depth study.

**Photograph Type: Functional Value vs. Experiential Value**

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), functional value is one of the basic, lower-level needs that should be satisfied in order to reach higher-level needs. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the purchase of an intangible hotel experience which entails a significant degree of risk and uncertainty (Murray & Schlacter, 1990). As the perceived risk associated with the purchase increases, consumers tend to search for more information about the product and service to reduce the uncertainty that the purchase brings (Murray, 1991). As a result, tangible cues in, and about, the physical environment of a firm are important to form and affect consumer attitudes and behavior (Baker, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1988; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1999). It has been suggested that consumers are more likely to seek for information that provides functional value over experiential value during their information search because they regard functional information needs more relevant for decision making (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). For example, Ryu, Han, and Jang (2010) found that utilitarian value exerts a superior impact on customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions over hedonic value in a fast-casual restaurant environment. Similarly, in the context of e-commerce, Chiu, Wang, Fang, and Huang (2014) found that utilitarian value acts as a stronger driver of repeat purchase intentions than hedonic value. Building on prior research regarding the significance of tangible cues in the hospitality
industry, and the higher relevancy of functional value over experiential value during information search, we propose:

**H1**: Product-focused photographs will have a greater influence on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room than experience-focused photographs.

**Photograph Provider**

There are two broad categories of information provider: firm and user. Firm-generated content includes descriptions of offerings, prices, and professional photographs, whereas user-generated content includes reviews, ratings, and photographs generated by consumers. Firm- and user-generated content may have a different focus in terms of what is communicated. For example, in a study comparing hotel-related firm- and user-generated photographs, Negri and Vigolo (2015) found that there was a significant difference between what hotel firms attempted to portray and what was actually shared by consumers. Specifically, they found that hotel firms tended to focus on hotel facilities such as lobbies, food and beverage facilities, and business-related facilities, whereas consumers tended to emphasize the experiential elements of a hotel stay such as the view from a guestroom, technology, quality, and cleanliness. Thus, it is suggested that firm-generated content is likely to put more emphasis on product-related information while user-generated content is likely to contain consumers’ usage experiences (Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013).

Prior studies on information providers have mostly focused on written information, such as reviews, to investigate how consumers are affected by different information providers. It is generally held, in the context of written content, that user-generated content exerts a greater influence on consumer outcomes than firm-generated content (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Dickinger, 2011; Goh et al., 2013; Sparks, Perkins, & Buckley, 2013). For example, Bickart and
Schindler (2001) found that user-generated comments on an online discussion forum generated greater interest about a product than firm-generated content on a corporate website. In a similar vein, Sparks et al. (2013) found, in the context of online travel reviews, that specific comments written by travelers were considered more trustworthy and useful than those written by managers. Goh et al. (2013) also found, in the context of a brand community for an apparel brand, that posts and comments written by consumers had a greater influence on purchase than those written by marketers. It has been suggested that user-generated content is perceived as more relevant, reliable, and credible than firm-generated content because it is consumer-oriented in that it is written by fellow consumers from a consumer’s point of view (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). A sense of identity as fellow consumers can reinforce the persuasive influence of user-generated content (Price, Feick, & Higie, 1989).

Within the context of the hospitality industry, a number of studies have examined the role of firm- and user-generated content in consumer choice. For example, Noone and Robson (2014) found that consumers were more likely to depend on a mix of firm- and user-generated content as they moved from the browsing phase to deliberation phase of online hotel search. Focusing specifically on photographs, Sivaji, Tzuan, Yong, and Russin (2014) found that, contrary to previous findings regarding the superiority of written user-generated content over written firm-generated content, firm-generated photographs had a greater impact on Malaysian travelers’ perceptions of hotel guestroom quality and their attitudes towards a hotel brand than user-generated photographs. Given the dearth of research in the domain of visual information such as photographs, the goal of the current study is to better understand the role of photograph provider in consumer’s use of photographs in hotel choice.
The Moderating Role of Photograph Provider

Product-based photographs, by their nature, objectively capture the tangible elements of a service experience. In this context, we suggest that, when both firm- and user-generated photographs are of high quality, and present a positive image of the same key tangible elements of the service experience, consumers will not favor the photographs provided by a combined photograph provider over those provided by a single photograph provider. When the content of a user-generated photograph, in the form of an image of a specific tangible element of the service experience, matches the content of a firm-generated photograph, the addition of user-generated photographs to the professional photographs provided by a firm on a brand website will result in information redundancy. Information redundancy can be described as overlapping or repeating the same information (Kajtazi, 2012). Prior research suggests that the repetition of an identical message does not result in a significant attitude change than a one-time presentation because recipients do not receive novel information from repeated communications (Goldberg, 1954; Johnson & Watkins, 1971). Johnson and Watkins (1971), for example, found that the repetitive presentation of a message about the use of chest X-rays did not have a significant influence on subjects’ attitudes towards, and agreement with the message. In a similar vein, Liang and Fu (2017) found that, in the context of social media usage, people intentionally unfollowed users that provided redundant information. Here, we suggest that the repetition of product-based information across user and firm-generated photographs will result in consumers’ perceptions that they are receiving redundant information. In other words, the provision of user-generated photographs in addition to firm-generated photographs will not yield any incremental learning about the tangible elements of the service experience nor will they provide any novel insights that could improve the quality of the purchase decision. Further, we suggest that consumers are more likely to favor a single photograph provider over a combined photograph provider as this will
enable them to maximize decision-making efficiency. Since photographs represent only one of the many information sources available to the consumer during the online choice process, an ability to discard redundant information can prevent consumers from experiencing information overload. Information overload can be defined as the reduced quality of decision making and performance of an individual as a result of receiving too much information (Chewning & Harrell, 1990; Eppler & Mengis, 2004). Thus, to prevent themselves experiencing information overload in the information-rich online environment and maximize the efficiency of the choice process, consumers will favor a single photograph provider over a combined photograph provider, with a single photograph provider yielding a greater impact on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room than a combined photograph provider.

Conversely, we propose that, in the context of experience-focused photographs, a combined photograph provider will exert a greater impact on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room than a single photograph provider. Unlike product-focused photographs where a higher degree of uniformity in content can be expected across both firm- and user-generated photographs, the content of experience-focused photographs tends to be driven primarily by the individual photograph provider. Thus, experience-focused photographs visually communicate providers’ relatively more subjective interpretations and personal descriptions of the service experience. It has been suggested in the context of consumers’ online review, which by their nature are subjective, that the stories that consumers communicate have the power to persuade other consumer by “immersing” them in the stories (Green & Brock, 2000). For example, Black and Kelley (2009) found that online hotel reviews with story elements were perceived as more helpful to the hotel choice decision than reviews without story elements. Similarly, Hamby, Daniloski, and Brinberg (2015) found, in the context of consumer reviews for a running shoe, that story-based reviews had a greater impact on consumers’ involvement in the review, and their
behavioral intentions, than non-story-based reviews. In the same manner, consumers’ personal stories and subjective experiences depicted visually in experience-focused photographs are expected to facilitate persuasion among consumers. Accordingly, we suggest that augmenting existing firm-generated experience-focused photographs with user-generated experience-focused photographs will offer the consumer novel content and, by extension, unique information that is not provided by the firm alone. This creates added value that assists consumers during the decision-making process (Zeithaml, 1988; Ravald & Grönroos, 1996). Moreover, augmenting firm-generated experience-focused photographs with user-generated experience-focused photographs may offset any lack of authenticity that the consumer may associate with firm-generated experience-focused photographs. Essentially, the provision of user-generated photographs may improve the perceived genuineness of firm-generated photographs and thus, positively impact the trustworthiness and credibility of the firm-generated photographs. By virtue of greater added value and credibility that the addition of user-generated photographs can bring, it is expected that experience-focused photographs will have a greater influence on willingness to book when provided by a combined photograph provider rather than a single photograph provider.

**H2:** When photographs are of high quality and present a positive image of the tangible and intangible elements of the service experience, the effect of photograph type on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room will be moderated by photograph provider.

**H2a:** For product-focused photographs, consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room will be higher when the photograph provider is a single photograph provider (i.e., firm or users) vs. a combined photograph provider (i.e., firm and users).
**H2b:** For experience-focused photographs, consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room will be higher when photograph provider is a combined photograph provider (i.e., firm and users) vs. a single photograph provider (i.e., firm or users).

![Diagram](image)

Figure 2-1. A Conceptual Model of Willingness to Book a Hotel Room as a Function of Photograph Type and Photograph Provider

**Impact of Photograph Quality**

Thus far, we have considered the role of photograph provider and photograph type in the context of high quality, positive photographs. While we expect that the professional photographs generated by a firm will always be of high quality, this may not be the case for user-generated photographs. In fact, there is a great degree of variability in quality associated with user-generated photographs. We previously hypothesized that, for experience-focused photographs, a combined photograph provider will have a greater influence on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room than a single photograph provider. However, will this hold when the user-generated photographs remain positive but are of low quality? In other words, will the subjective content of
user-generated experience-focused photographs be able to persuade other consumers and create added value regardless of photograph quality? In general, it is believed that high quality photographs will have a more positive effect on consumer outcomes than low quality photographs (Bhattacharya, Sukthankar, & Shah, 2010). Bhattacharya et al. (2010) found that high quality photographs were more aesthetically appealing and stimulate consumers in a more psycho-visual way than low quality photographs. As a result, much research has been focused on identifying the factors that determine a high quality photograph, and developing methods for objective photograph quality assessment (Ke, Tang, & Jing, 2006; Sheikh & Bovik, 2006).

Given prior research regarding the superior impact of high quality photographs over low quality photographs on consumer outcomes, it can be expected that high quality user-generated experience-focused photographs, when used to augment high quality firm-generated experience-focused photographs, will enhance consumers’ willingness to book due to their visual attractiveness and stimulus. On the other hand, we expect that, when low quality user-generated experience-focused photographs are used to augment high quality firm-generated experience-focused photographs, the low quality user-generated photographs will not add significant value over and above the high quality firm-generated photographs because they are not as easily accessible or visually appealing as their high quality counterparts. Thus, they may lack some informational value and may not act as an effective visual stimulus that influences consumers’ perceptions and thoughts. Therefore, we propose:

**H3:** For experience-focused photographs, a combination of high quality firm-generated, and low quality user-generated, photographs will not yield a significant increase in consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room over high quality firm-generated photographs alone.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Experimental Design

A 2 (photograph type: product-focused and experience-focused) × 3 (photograph provider: firm-generated, user-generated, and a combination of firm- and user-generated) between-subjects experimental design was employed as a basis to test Hypotheses 1 through 2b regarding the interaction effect of photograph type and photograph provider on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room in the context of high quality photographs. Further, to test the hypothesized differential effect of high and low quality user-generated experience-focused photographs on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room (H3), an additional condition was included in the study design: high quality firm- and low quality user-generated experience-focused photographs.

Each firm- and user-generated photograph set comprised of four photographs, with four aspects of the hotel environment captured: the guest bedroom, food and beverage facilities, outdoor guest facilities, and the interior public space. In the single photograph provider conditions, only one set of 4 photographs, firm- or user-generated, was given to participants. In the combined photograph provider conditions, 8 photographs were presented to participants (4 firm-generated photographs and 4 user-generated photographs). It should be noted that this design wherein 4 photographs were presented in the single photograph provider conditions and 8 photographs were presented in the combined photograph provider conditions allowed us (1) to
test the effects of augmenting firm-generated photographs with additional user-generated photographs, and (2) to control for photograph content across experimental conditions.

In terms of photograph selection for this study, firm-generated photographs were gathered from the official website of a well-known, global hotel brand while user-generated photographs were collected from guest photo galleries on the brand website, as well as travel websites such as TripAdvisor. Both product- and experience-focused photographs were selected to reflect the definitions that we applied to each photograph type in this study. Specifically, photographs that described the physical facilities and products of a hotel were chosen as product-focused photographs. When selecting product-focused photographs, we matched firm-generated photographs with user-generated photographs for a specific hotel property in terms of the content and angle of photographs as much as we could to ensure that product-focused photographs, regardless of photograph provider, objectively described the physical facilities and products at that hotel and thus, told the same story about the hotel. For experience-focused photographs that highlight the experiential aspect and intangible elements of a service experience, we selected photographs that featured people who were experiencing and enjoying their stay at a hotel. Based on our observation that most of the experience-focused photographs available online tend to depict a romantic or family-based hotel stay, this study used family-oriented experience-focused photographs to eliminate any possible gender effects that might arise from the use of photographs associated with a romantic hotel stay. A pre-test using an undergraduate student sample (n = 54) confirmed that the manipulation of photograph type (product-focused and experience-focused) was successful and that participants noticed the difference between product- and experience-focused photographs (see Appendix A for a full list of photographs).

Photograph quality was assessed in terms of brightness, sharpness, composition, and resolution, and photograph classification into high and low quality photographs based on these
dimensions was verified during a pre-test using an undergraduate student sample (n = 54). None of the photographs selected for the study were altered from their original form.

### Participants

Data were collected by using a scenario-based survey on an online survey platform, Amazon Mechanical Turk. The targeted participants were U.S. residents who were 18 years of age or older, and had experience of personally making hotel reservations online for their leisure trips in the last 12 months. Since the experience-focused photographs used in this study captured family vacation experiences, participants also had to have stayed at a hotel for a family vacation with children under the age of 16 during the last 12 months. After these 3 screening questions to ensure that all participants satisfied the eligibility requirements of the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of the 7 scenarios and were asked to complete a survey corresponding to each scenario (see Appendix B for a full list of scenarios).

A total of 214 adults participated in the survey: 78 males (36.4%) and 136 females (63.6%). Most of the participants were Caucasian (75.2%), and in the 25-34 (42.5%) or 35-44 (26.2%) age groups. The majority of the participants made Internet-based hotel reservations (85.5%) and stayed at a hotel with their family (84.1%) one to five times within the last 12 months. A detailed description of the characteristics of the sample used in the study is provided in Table 3-1.
Table 3-1. Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>18 – 24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 – 34</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35 – 44</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45 – 54</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55 – 64</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>65 or over</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>75.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Native American</td>
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<td>.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
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<td>Income</td>
<td>Under $25,000</td>
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<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>$25,000 to $49,999</td>
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<td>$50,000 to $74,999</td>
<td>61</td>
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<td>$75,000 to $99,999</td>
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<td>$100,000 to $124,999</td>
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<td>6.5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$125,000 to $149,999</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$150,000 or more</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Internet-based hotel reservations*</td>
<td>1 to 5</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>85.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 to 10</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than 10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of hotel stay with family*</td>
<td>1 to 5</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>84.1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6 to 10</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than 10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Within the last 12 months

**Procedures**

In each scenario, participants were informed that they were planning a leisure break with their family in a resort hotel and needed to make a reservation for a hotel room for four nights. They were told that after doing some Internet research, they had come across a well-known brand
of hotel that provided all of the features that they desired and was in their desired price range. They were then informed that prior to making a purchase decision, they checked some photographs to take a virtual tour around the hotel. The photograph set relevant to each scenario was then presented. Following a review of their photograph set, participants were asked to respond to the items measuring the variables of interest in the study, in addition to some demographic questions.

The dependent variable, willingness to book, was measured using 3 items on a 7-point Likert scale adapted from Grewal, Monroe, and Krishnan (1998). The 3 items were anchored by very low and very high (Cronbach’s α = .93). Given that product involvement may influence consumer reaction to the stimuli presented to participants, it was included as a control variable in the analysis using a 3-item, 7-point Likert scale adapted from Mittal and Lee (1989). The 3 items were anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree (Cronbach’s α = .79). In terms of demographic variables, frequency of Internet-based hotel reservations and frequency of hotel stay with family were measured, in addition to gender, age, ethnicity, and income. See Appendix C for a detailed description of the scales and measurement items used in the study.

**Manipulation and Realism Checks**

To ensure that the manipulations for photograph type, photograph provider, and photograph quality were successful and effective, participants were asked about the extent to which they agreed with a number of items (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Four items were employed as manipulation checks for photograph type: “The photographs currently on your screen mainly show the physical features of the hotel and the products it offers”; “The photographs currently on your screen mainly show the products and facilities that the hotel
provides”; “The photographs currently on your screen mainly show people experiencing their stay at the hotel”; and “The photographs currently on your screen mainly show people during their stay at the hotel”. Two items were used as a manipulation check for photograph provider: “The photographs currently on your screen are taken by the hotel company” and “The photographs currently on your screen are taken by other guests”. Lastly, for a manipulation check for photograph quality, participants were asked about their perception of the quality of the photographs provided using the following item: “The photographs currently on your screen are of high quality”.

A one-way ANOVA on the manipulation check items for photograph type was performed and indicated that product-focused photographs were perceived as different from experience-focused photographs. For the firm-generated photograph conditions, the means for the 2 product-focused items (“The photographs currently on your screen mainly show the physical features of the hotel and the products it offers” and “The photographs currently on your screen mainly show the products and facilities that the hotel provides”) were significantly higher for product-focused photographs than for experience-focused photographs (6.30 versus 4.02, F = 81.16, p < .001, and 6.39 versus 4.28, F = 74.18, p < .001, respectively). Conversely, the means for the 2 experience-focused items (“The photographs currently on your screen mainly show people experiencing their stay at the hotel” and “The photographs currently on your screen mainly show people during their stay at the hotel”) were significantly lower for product-focused photographs than for experience-focused photographs (1.49 versus 6.10, F = 661.95, p < .001, and 1.44 versus 5.65, F = 357.86, p < .001, respectively). The manipulation checks for the user-generated photograph conditions also showed similar results. The means for the 2 product-focused items were significantly higher for product-focused photographs than for experience-focused photographs (5.93 versus 4.24, F = 40.19, p < .001, and 5.88 versus 4.30, F = 37.49, p < .001, respectively). On the contrary, the
means for the 2 experience-focused items were significantly lower for product-focused photographs than for experience-focused photographs (2.47 versus 6.22, F = 255.68, p < .001, and, 2.40 versus 6.29, F = 302.46, p < .001, respectively).

A one-way ANOVA on the manipulation check items for photograph provider suggested that firm-generated photographs and user-generated photographs were perceived as expected. In the firm-generated photograph conditions, the mean for the firm-generated item (“The photographs currently on your screen are taken by the hotel company”) was 6.18 with no significant difference between the scenarios (F = 1.76, p = .141) whereas the mean for the user-generated item (“The photographs currently on your screen are taken by other guests”) was 1.62 with no significant difference among the scenarios (F = 1.94, p = .107). In the user-generated photograph conditions, the mean for the firm-generated item was 1.57 without any significant difference across the scenarios (F = 1.84, p = .125) while the mean for the user-generated item was 6.53 with no significant difference between the scenarios (F = 1.36, p = .251).

A one-way ANOVA on the manipulation check item for photograph quality demonstrated that high quality photographs were perceived as significantly higher in photograph quality than low quality photographs. For the firm-generated photograph conditions, the mean was 6.43 with no significant difference across the scenarios (F = 1.57, p = .185). For the user-generated photograph conditions, the mean was significantly higher for high quality photographs than for low quality photographs (5.98 and 3.39, respectively, F = 128.55, p < .001).

The realism of the scenarios was checked on a 7-point scale (1 = highly unrealistic; 7 = highly realistic). The mean was 5.29 for the firm-generated photograph conditions and 5.86 for the user-generated photograph conditions with no significant difference across the scenarios (F = .64, p = .632; F = 2.03, p = .094). This result indicated that the scenarios were perceived as realistic and believable.
Chapter 4

Results

The cell means by experimental condition are provided in Table 4-1. A one-way ANCOVA was performed to test Hypothesis 1, with results indicating that photograph type had a significant effect on willingness to book (F = 5.31, p = .022). The mean of willingness to book was significantly higher for product-focused photographs compared to experience-focused photographs (Overall M<sub>product-focused</sub> = 6.08; Overall M<sub>experience-focused</sub> = 5.72). This finding supports Hypothesis 1, suggesting that product-focused photographs have a greater impact on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room than experience-focused photographs.

To test Hypotheses 2a and 2b regarding the interaction effect of photograph type and photograph provider on willingness to book, a two-way ANCOVA was performed (see Table 4-2). According to the ANCOVA results, there was a significant interaction effect of photograph type and photograph provider on willingness to book (F = 3.30, p = .039). This result provides support for Hypothesis 2. Subsequent planned contrasts were conducted to examine how the effect of photograph provider on willingness to book differs depending on photograph type (see Table 4-1). For product-focused photographs, the means of willingness to book for each photograph provider were as follows: firm-generated (6.34), user-generated (6.08), and a combination of firm- and user-generated (5.80). For experience-focused photographs, the means of willingness to book for each photograph provider were as follows: firm-generated (5.54), user-generated (5.47), and a combination of firm- and user-generated (6.16). Planned contrasts indicated that the means for the single photograph provider conditions (i.e., either firm- or user-
generated) were significantly different from the means for the combined photograph provider conditions (i.e., a combination of firm- and user-generated) regardless of photograph type ($t_{\text{product-focused}} = -2.03, p_{\text{product-focused}} = .045; t_{\text{experience-focused}} = 2.42, p_{\text{experience-focused}} = .017$). Taken together, the results of planned contrasts suggested that for product-focused photographs, a single photograph provider contributed to a significantly higher willingness to book than a combined photograph provider while for experience-focused photographs, a combined photograph provider exerted a greater impact on willingness to book than a single photograph provider did. These findings support Hypotheses 2a and 2b.

A t-test was performed to test Hypothesis 3 regarding the impact of low quality user-generated experienced-focused photographs on willingness to book (see Table 4-1). As hypothesized, the mean for willingness to book in the combined photograph provider condition with high-quality firm-generated and low quality user-generated experience-focused photographs ($M = 5.58$) was not significantly different to the mean for the high quality firm-generated experience-focused photograph condition ($M = 5.54, t = .11, p = .914$). This provides support for Hypothesis 3, suggesting that for experience-focused photographs, presenting low quality user-generated photographs to augment high quality firm-generated photographs does not produce better results in terms of willingness to book than just providing high quality firm-generated photographs.
Table 4-1. Willingness to Book Means by Experimental Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photograph Provider</th>
<th>Photograph Type</th>
<th>Willingness to Book</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Firm-generated</td>
<td>Product-focused</td>
<td>6.34 (1.01)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience-focused</td>
<td>5.54 (1.20)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User-generated</td>
<td>Product-focused</td>
<td>6.08 (.81)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience-focused</td>
<td>5.47 (1.49)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A combination of firm- and</td>
<td>Product-focused</td>
<td>5.80 (.89)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>user-generated</td>
<td>Experience-focused</td>
<td>6.16 (.81)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience-focused:</td>
<td>HQ firm- and LQ user-generated</td>
<td>5.58 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The mean scores reported in this table are raw means; HQ = high quality photographs; LQ = low quality photographs.
*High quality photographs

Table 4-2. ANCOVA Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33.72</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>5.35</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>163.03</td>
<td>163.03</td>
<td>155.26</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.98</td>
<td>14.98</td>
<td>14.26</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.66</td>
<td>5.66</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type * Provider</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.93</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>182.71</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>6518.22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>216.43</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Involvement = product involvement; Type = photograph type; Provider = photograph provider.
Legend:
- Firm-generated
- User-generated
- A combination of firm- and user-generated

Note: This interaction plot is based on adjusted means that are controlled for product involvement.
Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of photograph type on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room, and the potential moderating effect of photograph provider on the relationship between photograph type and willingness to book. The findings of this study suggest that product-focused photographs have a greater influence on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room than experience-focused photographs. Our results also indicated a significant interaction effect of photograph type and photograph provider on consumers’ willingness to book, suggesting that the effect of photograph type on consumers’ willingness to book depends on who provides the photographs. Specifically, the study’s results suggest that, for product-focused photographs, those provided by a single photograph provider (either firm- or user-generated) have a greater impact on consumers’ willingness to book than a combined photograph provider (augmentation of firm-generated photographs with user-generated photographs). Conversely, for experience-focused photographs, a combined photograph provider (augmentation of firm-generated photographs with user-generated photographs) exerts a greater effect on consumers’ willingness to book than a single photograph provider (either firm- or user-generated). In addition, photograph quality matters for experience-focused photographs. When a set of user-generated experience-focused photographs is provided to the consumer in addition to a set of firm-generated experience-focused photographs, it should include high, rather than low, quality user-generated photographs to maximize the likelihood of purchase.
Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research contributes to the extant literature in a few ways. First, this study extends the literature on the role of photographs in consumer choice. Prior research suggests that photographs are an effective marketing tool due to their ability to enhance recall and recognition (Starch, 1966; Shepard, 1967; Lutz & Lutz, 1977; Kisielius, 1982; Edell & Staelin, 1983; Childers & Houston, 1984; Leong et al., 1996) and influence consumers’ belief and attitudes towards a brand (Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Mitchell, 1986; Miniard et al., 1991; Jeong & Choi, 2004). However, the role of photographs in hotel choice has received little attention in the literature, unlike other non-price information sources (e.g., consumer reviews) available to the consumer online (Vermeulen & Seegers, 2008; Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009; Zhang, Ye, Law, & Li, 2010; Kim, Mattila, & Baloglu, 2011; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Noone & McGuire, 2014). In a study using eye-tracking and in-depth retrospective think-aloud interviews, Noone and Robson (2014) studied how consumers used firm-generated content and user-generated content during the online hotel choice process. They found that photographs were not only one of the top three information types that consumers used to browse hotels but also the most influential factor that drove consumers’ final decision to choose a hotel. Building on their research, this study focused solely on hotel photographs and took into consideration various photograph attributes such as type, provider, and quality to examine the joint effect that these attributes can have on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room.

Second, this study broadens the literature on information value. One of the major findings of this study is that product-focused photographs exert a greater influence on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room than experience-focused photographs. Product-focused photographs can be considered a medium that convey utilitarian value, and experience-focused photographs can be seen as a frame for hedonic value. Therefore, this finding is consistent with
prior studies that discussed the two dimensions of information value, utilitarian value and hedonic value (Babin et al., 1994; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998; Ryu et al., 2010; Chiu et al., 2012).

Specifically, past studies suggest that utilitarian value has a greater influence on consumer outcomes such as satisfaction, repeat purchase intentions, and behavioral intentions than hedonic value (Ryu et al., 2010; Chiu et al., 2012). This study supports the greater impact of utilitarian value over hedonic value on willingness to book by using photographs as the medium to deliver each type of information value.

Third, this research supplements the literature on credibility of information. Stories, typically in the form of written text, allow mental simulation and narrative transportation to occur (Polkinghorne, 1991; Fiske, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000). Consumers mentally simulate events and construct stories where they can be main characters of the scene (Polkinghorne, 1991; Fiske, 1993; Escalas, 2004). When consumers “immerse” themselves in the stories, the persuasive strength of stories comes into play (Green & Brock, 2000). In this study, experience-focused photographs constitute a unique form of consumers’ individual stories and experiences in that those stories are visually described. Our result that a combined photograph provider leads to a higher willingness to book than a single photograph provider for experience-focused photographs suggests that user-generated experience-focused photographs, when provided in addition to firm-generated experience-focused photographs, tell much more enriched stories about the consumer experience and thus, persuade other consumers more than a single photograph provider alone. For experience-focused photographs, the augmentation of firm-generated photographs with user-generated photographs can not only assist consumers in better relating to the stories of hotel experiences described in the photographs, but also effectively decrease the possibility that consumers may view the firm-generated photographs as faked and not authentic. Therefore, with
enhanced genuineness, the photographs can be perceived as more reliable, trustworthy, and credible than they otherwise would have done.

This research also carries several practical implications that can benefit hospitality managers. First, this study provides hospitality managers with insights regarding the optimal mix of photographs to present on brand and travel websites to motivate purchase. Prospective consumers in the hospitality industry tend to rely on multiple cues, and not solely on price, when making quality and value assessments, and ultimately a final purchase decision (Noone & McGuire, 2014). As with other non-price information sources such as reviews and ratings, photographs can serve as a valuable source of information to support the purchase decision. Given that it is critical for hospitality managers to effectively manage the photographs that they make available online about their facilities and offerings in a way that the photographs look professional and visually appealing and stay up to date, such efforts involve a considerable amount of cost and time. This study’s findings suggest that for product-focused photographs, a single photograph provider has a greater influence on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room than a combined photograph provider. Furthermore, we found that product-focused photographs generated by a firm are not perceived as significantly different to user-generated product-focused photographs. Thus, given the considerable investment of money and time required to take and manage professional photographs, replacing them with high quality user-generated product-focused photographs can allow hospitality managers to be more efficient in terms of resource allocation and drive substantial savings while exerting a similar impact on consumer behavior. The findings also indicate that a hotel company should make both firm- and user-generated high quality experience-focused photographs available to consumers on their brand websites. Given the increasing use and popularity of social media, hospitality managers can add a supplementary source of information to their websites by actively encouraging consumers
to post more photographs about their experiences at the hotel. The presentation of these user-generated photographs in addition to firm-generated photographs can contribute to providing a context that helps other consumers relate to the experience that the hotel company is trying to convey. Thus, it tells a richer story about the hotel that would be not be delivered by firm-generated photographs alone. As a way to motivate consumers to upload their photographs on such websites, hospitality managers can recognize the time and effort that consumers put into posting photographs by sending them a thank you message. Even liking consumers’ posts on social media such as Instagram and Facebook would be a great starting point to interact with consumers. Hotel companies can also leverage their rewards program by allowing consumers who post on their websites to earn points towards hotel rewards. Such approaches to interacting with consumers also fit with the goals of customer relationship management by providing hotel companies the opportunity to engage with consumers such that they can foster an emotional connection between the consumer and the brand.

**Limitations and Future Research**

As with any research, this study has a number of limitations. First, this research employed a scenario-based experimental design. A field-based study is merited to study actual consumer response to photographs during hotel choice. Second, this study was limited to a particular setting, specifically a family vacation at a resort hotel. For future research, it would be beneficial to investigate the role of photograph type and provider in other contexts to enhance the generalizability of the findings in this study. Third, this research focused solely on the impact of photographs on consumers’ willingness to book a hotel room. As photographs tend to be used as an information source coupled with other types of information available during the online search
process (e.g., price, reviews), future research should examine the effect of photographs on consumer outcomes in the presence of other available information sources. Qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews or focus groups may also be warranted to probe situational and participant-related factors that may influence consumers’ use of photographs during the choice process. Lastly, this study concentrated on the augmentation of firm-generated photographs with user-generated photographs to reflect the definition that we used for a combined photograph provider. Thus, participants looked at different numbers of photographs for each provider condition: 4 photographs for a single photograph provider condition and 8 photographs for a combined photograph provider condition. Future research should examine the potential influence of photograph volume on the moderating effect of photograph provider on the relationship between photograph type and willingness to book.
Appendix A

Photographs

1. Firm-generated, product-focused photographs
2. Firm-generated, experience-focused photographs
3. User-generated, product-focused photographs

(1) High quality
4. User-generated, experience-focused photographs

(1) High quality
(2) Low quality
Appendix B

Scenarios

Scenario 1 [High quality firm-generated, product-focused photographs]

You are planning a leisure break with your family in a resort hotel and need to make a reservation for a hotel room for four nights. After doing some Internet research, you have come across a well-known brand of hotel that provides all of the features that you desire and is in your desired price range. Finally, you check some photographs to take a virtual tour around the hotel before you make a purchase decision. Here are the photographs provided by the hotel company about the hotel.

After carefully looking at the photographs provided above, please select your response to the following questions. You can scroll back up to the photographs at any time while answering the questions on this page.

Scenario 2 [High quality user-generated, product-focused photographs]

You are planning a leisure break with your family in a resort hotel and need to make a reservation for a hotel room for four nights. After doing some Internet research, you have come across a well-known brand of hotel that provides all of the features that you desire and is in your desired price range. Finally, you check some photographs to take a virtual tour around the hotel before you make a purchase decision. Here are some photographs provided by other guests about the hotel.

After carefully looking at the photographs provided above, please select your response to the following questions. You can scroll back up to the photographs at any time while answering
Scenario 3 [High quality firm- and high quality user-generated, product-focused photographs]

You are planning a leisure break with your family in a resort hotel and need to make a reservation for a hotel room for four nights. After doing some Internet research, you have come across a well-known brand of hotel that provides all of the features that you desire and is in your desired price range. Finally, you check some photographs to take a virtual tour around the hotel before you make a purchase decision. Here are the photographs provided by the hotel company about the hotel.

After carefully looking at the photographs provided above, please select your response to the following questions. You can scroll back up to the photographs at any time while answering the questions on this page.

Now, here are some photographs provided by other guests about the hotel.

After carefully looking at the photographs provided above, please select your response to the following questions. You can scroll back up to the photographs at any time while answering the questions on this page.

Scenario 4 [High quality firm-generated, experience-focused photographs]

You are planning a leisure break with your family in a resort hotel and need to make a reservation for a hotel room for four nights. After doing some Internet research, you have come across a well-known brand of hotel that provides all of the features that you desire and is in your desired price range. Finally, you check some photographs to take a virtual tour around the hotel before you make a purchase decision. Here are the photographs provided by the hotel.
company about the hotel.

After carefully looking at the photographs provided above, please select your response to the following questions. You can scroll back up to the photographs at any time while answering the questions on this page.

**Scenario 5 [High quality user-generated, experience-focused photographs]**

You are planning a leisure break with your family in a resort hotel and need to make a reservation for a hotel room for four nights. After doing some Internet research, you have come across a well-known brand of hotel that provides all of the features that you desire and is in your desired price range. Finally, you check some photographs to take a virtual tour around the hotel before you make a purchase decision. Here are some photographs provided by other guests about the hotel.

After carefully looking at the photographs provided above, please select your response to the following questions. You can scroll back up to the photographs at any time while answering the questions on this page.

**Scenario 6 [High quality firm-and high quality user-generated, experience-focused photographs]**

You are planning a leisure break with your family in a resort hotel and need to make a reservation for a hotel room for four nights. After doing some Internet research, you have come across a well-known brand of hotel that provides all of the features that you desire and is in your desired price range. Finally, you check some photographs to take a virtual tour around the hotel before you make a purchase decision. Here are the photographs provided by the hotel company about the hotel.
After carefully looking at the photographs provided above, please select your response to the following questions. You can scroll back up to the photographs at any time while answering the questions on this page.

Now, here are some photographs provided by other guests about the hotel.

After carefully looking at the photographs provided above, please select your response to the following questions. You can scroll back up to the photographs at any time while answering the questions on this page.

**Scenario 7 [High quality firm- and low quality user-generated, experience-focused photographs]**

You are planning a leisure break with your family in a resort hotel and need to make a reservation for a hotel room for four nights. After doing some Internet research, you have come across a well-known brand of hotel that provides all of the features that you desire and is in your desired price range. Finally, you check some photographs to take a virtual tour around the hotel before you make a purchase decision. Here are the photographs provided by the hotel company about the hotel.

After carefully looking at the photographs provided above, please select your response to the following questions. You can scroll back up to the photographs at any time while answering the questions on this page.

Now, here are some photographs provided by other guests about the hotel.

After carefully looking at the photographs provided above, please select your response to the following questions. You can scroll back up to the photographs at any time while answering the questions on this page.
Appendix C

Scale Items

**Willingness to Book** (1 = very low; 7 = very high)

If I were going to book a hotel room, the probability of booking this hotel room is

The probability that I would consider booking this hotel room is

The likelihood that I would book this hotel room is

**Product Involvement** (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree)

I have a strong interest in staying at a hotel.

Staying at a hotel is very important to me.

For me, staying at a hotel does not matter.

**Frequency of Internet-based Hotel Reservations** (None; 1 to 5; 6 to 10; More than 10)

How many times did you personally make hotel reservations online for your leisure trips in the last 12 months?

**Frequency of Hotel Stay with Family** (None; 1 to 5; 6 to 10; More than 10)

How many different times did you stay at a hotel with your family for leisure over the last 12 months?
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