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**Tween Tourists:
Children and Decision-Making.**

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Abstract

Research suggests that children influence family vacation decision-making. However, with few exceptions parents act as respondents in studies of family vacation decision-making and furthermore, children's role is often defined as a rather passive one. Thus, it is often assumed that although children might explicate wishes pertaining to holidays, they generally submit to whatever choices their parents make. In recent years, marketing researchers have taken a keen interest in the so-called 'tweens', people who are 8 to 12 years old and in between childhood and the teenage years. One key finding of research on tweens is that tweens are consumers in their own rights – especially in regard to consumption of products such as cellular phones, clothing, magazines, music and movies. However, little research focuses on tweens and vacations and accordingly, we know very little about tweens as consumers of tourism. Drawing on 89 qualitative interviews, we suggest that tweens as consumers of tourism differ profoundly from the traditional role of children in tourism consumption. The paper shows that tweens are highly experienced tourists; very active during up-front vacation decision-making; and wish for (and have) a say in regard to issues such as destination choice. Consequently, we argue that tweens should be given voice in future research on tourism consumption if we wish to gain knowledge on families as consumers of tourism.

Keywords: Family decision making, children, tweens, information search,

Introduction

Two weeks of holiday in Rio, during which you can both experience the city itself and enjoy the white beaches and crystal blue water. It is the first day of vacation and you are at the hotel swimming pool. A waiter brings you a Strawberry Daiquiri, you feel the heat of the sun and you almost sense how the rhythm of the Samba flows in the air. This is life! But then you hear a child cry and the youngest comes running to you: 'Mom, he's teasing me!' Okay, no more

relaxation or Strawberry Daiquiry for you. Instead it is time to resolve the dispute between your kids.

Perhaps the picture painted above is not altogether unknown to you? After all, in regard to the majority of vacations that people with dependent children take, the 'vocational unit' is not the individual tourist, but instead, the family. As a result, albeit we go on vacation in order to get away from the duties, roles and obligations that characterize everyday life, the parental role is seldomly left behind (Davidson 1996). Accordingly, a key purpose of the family vacation is to spend 'quality time' as a family and to share experiences (Blichfeldt 2007a; Gram 2007; McNeal 1999; Nickerson & Jurowski 2001) and hence, fulfilling the children's needs becomes an integral part of the holiday. However, this is not always a simple task as needs, wants and desires may differ profoundly across family members.

It is your third day of vacation and it is finally time to do some serious sightseeing! For the last 2 days you've been talking about going to some of Rio's attractions and sights and especially, both you and your husband are eager to go and see the famous 'Cristo Redentor' statue that so majestically looks down upon the city. You are almost ready to go when you realize that your 11 years old daughter has locked herself up in the bathroom. 'Come on, we're going to see something great' you try, but the bathroom door remains closed and behind the door you can hear that the nagging starts. 'I've told you, I don't feel like it. Why do we always have to go gawping at your stupid boring stuff? I want to go to the beach. I don't want to go look at your stupid statue – why don't you get it?'

As shown by Gram (2005) as well as Thornton, Shaw and Williams (1997), differences in needs, wants and desires across family members often transform both the holiday itself and decision-making processes pertaining to holidays to an art of compromising, negotiating, attempts to reach consensus, conflict handling, or even

'crisis management'. The majority of empirical research on 'the family holiday' focuses on vacation units comprised of parents and children, whereas less is known about vacations with teenagers (Belch, Belch and Ceresino 1985). However, holidays with teenagers might differ from the ones taken with dependent children:

It is one week into your vacation and you are having a cosy time at the Copacabana Beach. You feel good as you watch your 4 years old happily playing, trying to build a sandcastle and making trenches in the sand. How good it is to see him make the fullest of his creative abilities while you lie in the lounge and relax. But what's that? You no longer feel good about yourself. Instead your lazing about is interrupted by the techno music coming from the lounge next to you. You turn your head and look at your 15 years old son lying there wearing his baggy shorts, designer T-shirt and gigantic headset – his arms crossed and a sulky look on his face. Apparently, he still hasn't come to terms with the fact that you did not let him go downtown on his own last night.

Although the three pictures painted above are indeed simplistic, they do point to the fact that 'holidays with children' is a term that covers a wide variety of holidays – and also different kinds of children. Nonetheless, especially two stereotypic presentations of the 'nuclear family holiday' prevail. The first presentation relates to holidays with children that are truly 'dependent' but not toddlers. Traditionally, these children are perceived to enjoy playing, sand, beaches, water and ice cream and accordingly, the holiday is a success if the parents are able to satisfy these needs (Blichfeldt 2007a, 2007b). The other presentation relates to holidays with teenagers; teenagers who are in the midst of the process of detaching themselves from the roles as a child and as dependent upon parents (Blichfeldt 2007a, 2007b). Furthermore, especially this presentation focuses on the dilemma inherent in the combination of teenagers and holidays; i.e. that teenagers (may) prefer to spend the holidays away from their parents while the parents find that they are too immature to do so. However, not all

children and young people fit nicely into these two presentations. On the contrary, in recent years, much attention has been directed at the so-called tweens; i.e. those caught in between childhood and the teenage years (Siegel, Coffey and Livingston 2004). Some researchers (e.g. Lindstrom 2003; McNeal 1999) argue that tweens are self-confident consumers, whereas others (e.g. Linn 2006) are critical towards consumption's 'hostile takeover of childhood'. The fact remains, though, that we do not know much about these tweens – and especially we lack knowledge on them in relation to the topic 'holidays'. Hence, we do not really know whether the 11 years old, who might lock herself up in the bathroom resembles younger siblings building sandcastles at the beach or whether she has more in common with the sulking teenager.

Numerous empirical studies point to the fact that children influence family vacation decision-making. However, often children's role is defined as a rather passive one (Filiatrault and Richie 1980; Fondness 1992; Ryan 1992, Thornton, Shaw and Williams 1997). Thus, especially children are expected to effect vacation decision-making processes *indirectly*, i.e. the 'when the children are happy, then we as parents have a nice holiday' doctrine. Therefore children are expected to indirectly influence parents' vacation planning through parents' enactment of their children's needs, wants, and wishes, or as Cullingford puts it:

'It is generally assumed that they [children] submit to whatever choices their parents make, and that they have little influence on their parents' particular choice of holiday destination '(1995:123)

In relation to research on family holidays, traditionally the parents act as respondents (Nickerson & Jurowski 2001; Ottesen, 2002) and thus, information on children's (and in our case, tweens) needs, wants and desires originates from parents. Hence, research is mostly based on the premise that the parents qualify as reliable respondents (Nickerson & Jurowski 2001; Thornton, Shaw & Williams 1997) insofar children (and tweens) are concerned and thus, children's and tweens' voices are seldomly heard by tourist researchers. As an example, Nickerson and Jurowski (2001) were only able to identify *one* study within the travel and tourism literature

that interviewed children (i.e. Cullingford's 1995 study) leading them to conclude that '...for tourism there is a paucity of studies that examine children's preferences' (p20). As a result, not much research is based on children's own accounts of holidays or wants, needs and desires pertaining to these holidays (John 1999; Nickerson & Jurowski 2001). However, as one of our interviewees (9 years old Mathilde) argues: "I think you should listen to the children. It's always the grown-ups who are asked."

As Mathilde suggests, it seems that tweens do have something to voice in regard to holidays. Furthermore, as the saying goes that 'children and fools speak the truth' it does seem rather peculiar that very few tourism researchers go directly to the source (i.e. the children and/or tweens themselves) when doing tourism research, in relation to which children and/or tweens play a critical role. The purpose of the empirical study, upon which this paper draws is to tell the stories of people (in this case tweens) who do not have much 'voice' within tourism research, or, as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997:xv) put it:

'To seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they [i.e. researchers] are studying, documenting their voices and their visions – their authority, knowledge, and wisdom.'

Thus, the study seeks to move beyond accounts for tweens and their needs, wants and preferences offered by adults and focus on the tween viewpoint instead. Due to the paucity of studies on tweens and vacations the study further seeks to investigate whether this is an under-researched topic or whether extant knowledge on children and vacations covers this topic sufficiently.

Tweens and vacation decision making

Although conducting extensive literature reviews, the authors have not been able to identify much research that focuses on tweens *and* vacations. On the contrary, our literature reviews suggest that different streams of research contribute with different pieces of the 'tweens and holidays' puzzle, thus suggesting that knowledge on this issue is highly fragmented. However, two main streams of research are of interest. First, studies on tweens (e.g. Acuff 1997; De Mesa 2005; Hymowitz 1998; Lindstrom 2003; Nestoras 2007; Schaffer 2000, Siegel et al 2004; Sutherland and Thompson

2003; Tufté 2007) contribute with knowledge on tweens; albeit seldomly knowledge pertaining to vacations. Secondly, consumer behavior and tourism research (e.g. Cosenza and Davis 1981; Cullingford 1995; Gram 2005, 2007; John 1999) contributes with knowledge on family vacation decision-making, including the roles of children; albeit these studies tend to investigate 'the family', which may include toddlers, children, tweens, and/or teenagers. In the following sections, we account for the main contributions of these two streams of research to our study.

The saying goes that it is a simple matter to identify a tween because a tween is simply a child that spends a lot of time surfing the internet and who thinks (s)he is too cool to be seen on a family trip. KGOY (Kids Grow Older Younger) is a concept often associated with tweens (Lindstrom 2003). The KGOY concept means that children are becoming consumers in their own rights, who draw upon goods and services (and especially personal items such as clothes and mobile phones) in their search for their own identity (or identities). Moreover, tweens strive to be more mature than their actual age prescribes (Lindstrom 2003; Nestoras 2007). Nonetheless, the nuclear family still qualifies as a highly appreciated 'comfort and safety zone', albeit peers are also very important (McNeal 1993). Furthermore, most definitions of tweens (e.g. Acuff 1997; Lindstrom 2003; Siegel et al 2004; Tufté 2007) draw on age as a key characteristic. Although researchers do not agree upon the exact age span of tweens, most of them draw on age intervals close to Piaget and Inhelder's (1971) concrete-operational stage (i.e. 7 to 12 years). Researchers seem to agree that tweens turn to their peers, *not* parents, for recognition (Sutherland and Thompson 2003); albeit the family is still the locus of their lives (McNeal 1992, 1999). Finally, tweens are often described as a group of consumers that are best described as 'I am what I consume and what I have' (Gunther and Furnham 1998) and thus, materialism is argued to be a key characteristic as well.

As evident in John's (1999) excellent literature review, consumer researchers have generated an impressive pool of knowledge on children as consumers, which covers issues such as children's knowledge on products, brands, advertising, shopping, decision-making strategies, negotiation strategies and consumption motives and

values. Furthermore, there is quite a substantial body of knowledge on family decision-making. Tourism researchers generally acknowledge that the holiday 'product' is, predominantly, bought and consumed by groups, not individual consumers and especially by groups in the form of families. Nonetheless, studies on family vacation decision-making mainly focus on the husband and the wife (Cosenza and Davis 1981) and to a lesser extent on children (Cullingford 1995).

Those studies that do discuss children and the roles they play in regard to vacation decision-making, in general, show that children are part of these decision-making processes. For example, Foxman, Tansuhaj and Ekstrom (1989) reported that in sixty percent of families, adolescents have an influence on travel and vacation decisions. However, researchers offer different suggestions as to which phases of vacation decision-making children and/or tweens partake in and/or influence. For example, Shoham and Dalakas (2005) as well as Wang et al (2004) argue that children predominantly influence problem recognition, whereas others find that children especially take part in information search (e.g. Gram 2007; Nestoras 2007) or in the actual buying decision (Carr 2005). Furthermore, several researchers (e.g. Carr 2005; Gram 2005, 2007; Johns and Gyimothy 2002) differentiate between children's direct and indirect influences during the decision-making process and further McNeal (1999) suggests that indirect influence predominates in the later stages of the process. Nonetheless, most researchers (e.g. Carr 2005; Wang et al 2004) argue that the parents have the final say.

Methods

As mentioned previously, the purpose of the empirical study, upon which this paper draws is to unfold and interpret tweens' stories about vacations in order to avoid that "researchers operate from an ivory tower and are 'out of touch' with the real world" (Hackmann 2002:54). In order to ensure that tweens' own voices are documented (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) the study is comprised of a series of semi-structured and focus group interviews with tweens. Due to the fact that the researchers wanted to engage the informants in dialogues, in which the interviewer(s)

is/are non-directive listener(s) and the tweens offer first-person descriptions of their experiences pertaining to holidays (Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1989) a choice was made not to do individual interviews. As such, an overriding ethical consideration was that a tween, who would have to face one or two researchers on his/her own might feel uncomfortable or even intimidated and as a result, a choice was made to let tweens participate in interviews together with their peers.

Accordingly, all interviews are either focus group interviews or 'duo interviews' (i.e. interviews with 2 tweens who knew each other well prior to the actual interview). Furthermore, the dialogues are kept in informants' terms and are best described as "collaborative, meaning-making experiences involving both the interviewer and the interviewees" (Hiller and DiLuzio 2004:2).

Although tourism researchers seldomly give voice to children, marketing researchers are more prone to do so. Furthermore, as market research firms conduct focus group interviews with groups comprised only of children, this technique is considered viable. For example, a director of a children's research company argues that children can be valuable focus group participants if researchers/moderators can talk to the children on their own terms (Spethmann 1992). This is concordant with Thomas and O'Kane (1998:346) who argue that 'By creating space for children ... speaking out about matters that concern them, reflecting upon our methodology, we may learn a great deal from them.'

A key challenge when conducting qualitative interview with tweens is to create the kind of space mentioned by Thomas and O'Kane (1998). In order to create such space, we contacted a series of schools across Denmark. The primary reason why we contacted schools was that we expected schools to qualify as 'tween spaces', i.e. places where they feel safe and comfortable (Punch 2002). In all instances, the schools were extremely helpful and furthermore, all parents gave permission to their children's participation in interviews. We are aware of the fact that, in many countries, such an approach is not recommendable and that in some countries it may even be against the law. However, the Danish national context of the present study facilitates such an approach due to the fact that both parents and teachers define the

opportunity to partake in a research interview as a positive and valuable learning experience for tweens (as well as other children). All interviews were conducted by the same three researchers with a maximum of two researchers present at each interview. This way the researchers could discuss both quality of interviews and engage in preliminary analysis during the six months that the data collection lasted. Obviously, when doing qualitative research with tweens one has to take a series of ethical considerations into account. Of particular interest is the tweens' ability to concentrate on the topics at hand. As a result, a series of more creative tasks (e.g. to draw pictures of their holidays and to produce holiday wish lists) were integral parts of the interviews. The aim of these creative tasks was both to reduce formality and to make it more fun to act as informants (Douglas 1985; Greenbaum 1998; Guber and Berry 1993; Punch 2002; Thomas & O'Kane 1998). Furthermore, cookies and juice were served during the interviews in order to 'break the ice' and build trust and rapport. Moreover, special effort was made to tell the tweens that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers and that they were the 'experts'. Concordant with other studies on tweens, each focus group was comprised of 4 to 6 tweens (Greig and Taylor 1999; Kampmann 1998). All in all, we conducted 14 focus groups (65 informants) and 12 'duo' interviews (24 informants).

All interviews were recorded (video and/or sound) and subsequently, each interview was subject to analysis at the ideographic level. Hence, the researchers ensured that enough time was set aside to do proper ideographic analysis of each interview before the next one was conducted so that analysis of one interview was part of the preparation for the next ones. Furthermore, the 26 interviews (with 89 informants) were divided into 4 'streams of research', after the completion of each the researchers spent considerable time on analysis across the interviews in that stream. This choice was made to ensure sufficient reflection and thorough assessment of quality of interviews at a series of well-defined milestones. Accordingly, the first milestone (i.e. between streams one and two) related to movement from highly explorative to more structured interviews and subsequent milestones related to issues such as saturation, refinement of interview guides, emerging themes etc. After having completed all interviews, the researchers searched for patterns of

commonality across all interviews in order to identify key themes (Miles and Huberman 1994). In the subsequent sections, we account for some of these key themes.

Decision making processes

Although the empirical study, upon which this paper draws both covers decision-making processes and activities before, during and after the vacation, a choice is made to only discuss up-front vacation decision-making processes in this paper. This is merely a pragmatic choice based on the fact that our in-depth and focus group interviews with 89 tweens simply generated far more results than one can account for within the scope of one article. In the following subsections we account for key findings pertaining to up-front vacation decision-making. However, as an introductory note it ought to be mentioned that our informants have travelled a lot. For example, 12 years old Peter and 11 years old Nina, top-of-mind, told the following about their previous holidays:

“I was on a trip around the world when I was around 1 year old. My cousins, uncle and aunt live in the US, so we’ve also been there – I think 3 or 4 times. I’ve also been in Australia and Spain and Mallorca”

“I’ve travelled a lot since I was 3 years old. When I was 3, we were in Thailand for 2 weeks and I’ve been to Malaysia and the Philippines and I’ve also been in South Africa and Paris and this winter I was in Austria”

As exemplified by these two quotes, our informants have travelled much and have quite substantial travel careers. Furthermore, although the packaged tour predominates, most of their travel careers (or patterns) are comprised of very different types of holidays. While this paper draws on a qualitative study that does not generalize statistically it is worth mentioning that we did not ‘go’ for informants, who have travelled a lot and thus, there seems to be no reason why our informants should be different from other Danish tweens in terms of extent of travel careers.

However, we do acknowledge that our sample, most certainly, does not generalize across various national and cultural settings. As one of the reviewers politely remarked 'It would seem that they [theinterviewees] are children from middle or upper class families'. The reviewer furthermore, and utterly correctly, pointed to the many tweens that have only travelled domestically and/or short haul – as well as to those tweens that have not travelled at all. The study accounted for in this paper depends heavily on its national (i.e. Danish) context and we cannot generalize beyond this at best. Nonetheless, this paper opens up a number of lines of enquiry that could be explored in other contexts and by other methods if appropriate.

Reasons to go on vacation

As discussed by, for example, Decrop (2006), the first decision in the vacation decision-making process is usually the generic decision 'to go' and thus, this decision has much in common with the 'need arousal' phase of consumer behavior models. Some authors (e.g. Gram 2005; Nickerson & Jurowski 2001) argue that children do not differentiate between holidays and other leisure activities and henceforward, that children are not motivated much by push factors. Some informants corroborate this line of reasoning. For example, 12 years old Jamie explicated reasons to go on vacation as follows:

"It's nice and you experience lots of things and you go to the beach and you swim in the pool. And you sunbathe"

The fact that our informants are driven by physical travel motivations (McIntosh & Goeldner 1990) that relate to relaxation, swimming and sunbathing is no surprise. However, in opposition to extant theory, the majority of our 89 informants argue that push factors (i.e. to get away from home) are also important to them, or, as 10 years old Didde put it: "Cool to get away from home and experience new things and stuff like that"

The fact that our informants mention that it is nice to get away from home somewhat contradicts extant theory. Thus, some informants seem to experience the need to

escape as much as adult tourists do. For example, 12 years old Ozge argued as follows:

“It’s like, I don’t call my classmates [when on holiday] because at that point in time I don’t want anything to do with my stressed life. Holidays are about being on your own”

Furthermore, our informants also emphasized travel motivations in the form of cultural and learning related motivations. For example, 12 years old Hector and 8 years old Philip relate to these issues as follows:

“Well, it’s the entire experience; that thing about experiencing entirely different surroundings and languages. Often, if I am like in [a specific destination], then I don’t understand what they say. And then I just think that everything, like the culture, food, music and just to walk around in other streets than the ones I know”

“But, to experience something new ... you see lots of stuff and you grow wiser sometimes”

The fact that the majority of our informants mention escape, culture, food, music, and learning as key reasons to go on holiday does not align well with traditional conceptions of children, according to which children want a nice holiday on which they can to play on the beach, swim and eat ice cream (Blichfeldt 2007a). However our empirical study suggests that tweens differ substantially from children insofar travel motivations are concerned. Thus, our study paints a picture of tweens as tourists that are driven by more complex motivational sets than we traditionally think – including the rather ‘mature’ wishes to escape everyday life, to experience other cultures and to have learning experiences.

Joint decision-making processes

In opposition to the rather passive role children are often assigned during family decision-making processes (e.g. Cullingford 1995; Fondness 1992; Filiatrault & Richie 1980; Ryan 1992), our 89 tweens argue that they are quite active during

these processes. Previous research (e.g. Belch, Belch and Ceresino 1985; Foxman et al 1989; Isler, Popper and Ward 1987; Swinyard and Sim 1987) suggests that children's influence over purchases varies across different product categories and this is corroborated by our informants, as exemplified by Christian, Jonas, Louise and Ozge:

Interviewer: "Who decides on the buying of, say, cars and computers at your place?"

Christian: "My mom and dad decide on that"

Interviewer: "Are you part of it?"

Christian: "I don't know much about cars, but I usually say which one I prefer and then we talk about it. The only things I decide by myself are the mobile phone and clothes"

"Stuff like clothes, I get to decide on that, but if it's like a new car then I only get to decide a bit"

"My mom and dad look at different cars, but then they ask whether we like it ... we just bought a new car that we all liked"

"It's more normal now. Because previously, mom bought my clothes. But now we decide on our clothes ourselves ... And when it comes to mobile phones I decide myself. Because it's for me. Whenever it has to do with me, then I decide"

In accordance with existing theory, our study suggests that tweens decide the most in relation to products that 'have to do with them' (e.g. clothes and mobile phones) and lesser in relation to products such as e.g. cars. However, it does seem that our informants have a greater say in relation to the former decisions than traditional theory suggests as they argue that they 'decide myself' in relation to these products. Furthermore, albeit the tweens in our study argue that they have lesser influence in relation to products such as cars, they do argue that they 'decide a bit'. As exemplified by the quotes above, during the interviews, the tweens were also asked

(albeit in lesser depth) about decision-making processes pertaining to other products, services and activities than holidays. Although beyond the scope of this article, our data indicates that strong linkages exist between the tweens' roles in regard to vacation decision-making and other decision-making processes. Furthermore, across all of the tweens and across *all* family decision-making processes, the empirical study paints a picture of tweens as very active members of the decision-making unit. Consequently (albeit tentative in the current context) vacation decision-making *may* reflect other family decision-making processes that our tweens, and their families, engage in.

The fact that the tweens differ from traditional conceptions of children is highly evident in relation to our data on up-front vacation decision making. Thus, when asked about the extent to which they are involved in up-front decision-making processes, our informants made comments such as the following ones offered by 10 years old Mike, 9 years old Simon and 12 years old Lucas:

“We got together around the kitchen table and then mom asked where we wanted to go”

“Well, I don't decide it all when we go on holidays ... But we sit around and talk about it”

“It's like the whole family that does that”

These three comments generalize well across all of our informants and hence, our study paints a picture of up-front vacation decision-making as joint processes, during which all members of the family come together in order to make the 'holiday project' come true. Generally children are assumed to have little influence on choice of destination (Cullingford 1995). However, this assumption is contended by the tweens included in our study. Instead, they commented on destination choices in ways such as the ones reproduced below from Line 12; Jeppe 10; Jamie 12 and Kristina 10:

“In relation to holidays, I get to say where I would like to go, but it is mostly my mom and dad, who decide it”

“It’s more like my mom and dad, they say: ‘Jeppe, where would you like to go?’ France or Turkey or something like that and then my kid brother and I decide on France or Turkey”

“Well, my mom says: ‘Jamie, we might go on holiday, but I don’t know where we’re going. But you might find a place we can go?’”

“Like with Malaysia, I said that I would like to go there and then my foster parents looked at it on the computer and then they came back and said: We’re going to Malaysia”

As the four quotes show, our tweens do not simply submit to their parents’ choice of destination. On the contrary, all of our tweens have a say in regard to this decision. However, the extent of their say varies. For example, in Line’s family it is ‘mostly’ the parents, who decide and Jeppe and his brother only get to choose between destinations already included in their parents’ choice set. At the other end of the spectrum, Jamie is asked to contribute to generation of a choice set and Kristina, proactively, suggests a specific destination. Although our tweens’ extent of influence varies, all of them do have a say in regard to destination choice and thus, our study suggests that tweens differ profoundly from traditional conceptions of children, according to which they submit to parents’ destination choices. One reason why our informants have a say in regard to destination choice is that they are very active during most of the vacation decision-making process. This is also evident when they talk about information search. In fact, some of our informants argue that they are *proactive* in relation to information search. For example, 10 years old Thomas and 12 years old Louise argue as follows:

“It [information search] is just something I do myself”

“I like to be part of it [information search] ... I think it’s fun and all that. I want to know where we’re going. I use the internet ... and sometimes the TV, if

there's something from a certain place on TV. I think I mostly use the Internet to search for, like what the weather is like or how different places look”

Furthermore, some informants tell about information search as a joint activity, in which more members of the family engage, or, as 12 years old Michael put it:

“We get travel catalogues in the mail. Mom takes care of getting catalogues from all the travel agencies she knows. And then we surf the internet together and have a look at some of the places”

As indicated above, tweens seem to be capable information searchers, who especially draw upon their internet related competencies in order to obtain needed information. Although our informants draw upon information sources such as the internet, TV and travel catalogues, they respond to commercial sources in what could best be characterized as a mature and informed manner and thus, they seem to make use of what John (1999) labels ‘cognitive defenses against advertising’. For example, 9 years old Lea and 12 years old Lucas offered the following comments on source credibility:

“I don't listen to the TV because they sometimes lie. Once I listened to what they said on TV and when we got there [to the destination] it was all wrecked ... That's why I listen to my mom”

“I believe more in mom and dad than in the TV”

Mochis and Moore's (1979) study shows that when children reach the age of 8, reliance on different sources of information increasingly depends on product categories and that children especially favour parents as a source for products characterized by high degrees of perceived risk. Our study corroborates this claim as our informants suggest that although they draw on various information sources, in the end, the parents are the most credible information sources in regard to holidays and places other than home.

As evident in the work of Woodside and MacDonald (1994) vacation decision-making differs from most other decision-making processes because vacation decision-making relates to a 'composite product'. Accordingly, vacation decision-making not only relates to choice of destination, but also to choice of accommodation, mode of transportation, activities, sightseeing, food etc. Furthermore, some of these decisions (foremost choice of destination and transportation and mostly also accommodation) are made up-front whereas others (e.g. sightseeing, specific activities and choices pertaining to food) are mostly made at the destination. Rather surprisingly, our informants discriminated quite explicitly between these different sub-decisions. Furthermore, whereas they take a keen interest in choice of destination, they suggest that, quite deliberately, they leave decisions regarding accommodation to their parents, or, as Malte (9), Hector (12) and Nina (10) put it:

"When we've decided on a place to go, then my mom finds a hotel there and we're not involved in that decision, because it's rather boring to find a hotel and stuff like that"

"I don't have much of a say in that [deciding on a hotel]. I don't really care where we stay"

"They [the parents] look a lot at that [hotels] without my being part of it, but usually they ask me if they find something they like. I don't think that part is fun"

As Malte, Hector and Nina suggest, tweens' levels of interest vary across different sub-decisions and especially, they choose not to take an interest in choice of accommodation. This indicates that tweens are rather experienced members of the decision-making unit (DMU), who deliberately choose to 'outsource' sub-decisions of minor relevance. The fact that tweens are experienced members of family DMUs also comes across when they talk about vacation-decision making at a more general level, or, in the words of Jamie and Michael:

“They [children] should also get to decide on things, as much as the adults. But it’s not as if one should overdo and decide too much. My mom is like that she also wants to know what the children think ... what they want and so”

“When it comes to holidays, I think that children should make suggestions and that the parents should listen to them. Because it’s not always that kids’ suggestions are silly. They’re not always serious either. At home, I think I could decide a bit more because my mom has so bloody many rules ... I would like to decide a bit more and my mom also says that she doesn’t want to go on a holiday where she decides on everything. Kids should also decide some things when it comes to holidays.”

As the two quotes show, our 89 tweens are very explicit about (both their actual and preferred) roles in regard to vacation decision-making and although they do acknowledge limitations in both their abilities and decision power, first and foremost, they wish to be listened to during the process. Furthermore, albeit more of our informants wish to ‘decide a bit more’, in general, they suggest that family vacation decision-making is a rather democratic process, during which they do have ‘voice’ and in which their inputs are taken seriously by their parents. Thus, the tweens paint a picture of up-front decision-making processes that differs substantially from parent dominated processes and children’s subjecting to whatever parents decide, or, as 12 years old Benjamin puts it: “My parents would never go somewhere, where I don’t want to go.”

Although tweens may draw upon a repertoire of negotiation strategies (e.g. begging, bargaining, compromising and/or persuasion)(John 1999), the literature on tweens emphasizes ‘pestering power’ (Nicholls and Cullen 2004). Some of our informants acknowledge that they do apply pestering. For example, 12 years old Ludvig says:

“I might nag a bit, but I may give in. I think it is a big thing to go on holiday and better than nothing. You can’t always have it your way”

However, pestering was only mentioned by a few informants and – as Ludvig – these informants used terms such as ‘a bit’ or ‘little’ in relation to pestering and further, they acknowledge that they cannot always have it their way. Instead of pestering, most of the informants argue that they use more ‘mature’ negotiation strategies. For example, 9 years old Sofie argued as follows:

“The other should also decide some things ... It’s not only the little ones that are to be spoiled. The grown ups should be so too”

Contradictive to tween researchers’ emphasis on pestering strategies, most of our informants – as Sofie – suggest that vacation decision-making especially relates to compromising based on mutual understanding and empathy. Once again, the tweens given voice in our study hence suggest that they are very different from traditional conceptions of children.

Conclusions

The purpose of the empirical study which this paper draws from was to document the voice of tweens in regard to vacations, and especially the roles they play in regard to up-front vacation decision-making. But who are these tweens? First of all, our study shows that they are a group of highly experienced tourists as they – by the age of 8 to 12 – have taken many vacations and have visited many different destinations across the globe, some of which the researchers had not even heard of before these tweens introduced us to them during the interviews. Secondly, the study shows that these tweens are highly involved in up-front vacation decision-making in very direct (or even proactive) ways. For example, more of them argue that they (sometimes) suggest which destination to go to. Furthermore, the tweens in our study are very explicit about which sub-decisions they wish to partake in. For example, they deliberately decide *not* to get involved in the choice of accommodation (a task they define as boring) whereas they take a keen interest in choice of destination. Thirdly, our 89 informants both wish to have ‘child like’ experiences (e.g. sand, sun and swimming) and aspire for more ‘mature’ experiences (especially cultural experiences). However, while these issues set tweens apart from children, they do not resemble teenagers either. Especially they differ from teenagers because they

enjoy going on vacation with their nuclear family and because they draw heavily on their parents as experts on various issues.

On the basis of an extensive review of research on children's consumer behavior, John (1999) concludes that children have only moderate degrees of influence on family activities (including vacations). However, as our study shows that tweens are highly involved in – and substantially influence – decision-making processes pertaining to vacations, we suggest that it is highly questionable (or even outright 'wrong') to draw on extant knowledge on children when the research subject is tweens. Furthermore, our empirical data suggest that tweens are both highly experienced and 'professional' decision-makers and hence, they do not have much in common with the picture of family vacation decision-making painted by current research drawing on adults' accounts for children's roles in such decision-making processes.

As with any explorative study, our research has some limitations. For example, we took a special interest in holidays tweens take with their parents and hence, our study does not cover issues relating to holidays taken with friends or grandparents; nor does it cover school trips etc. As another example, our study only draws on Danish tweens and one should not expect these 89 informants to represent tweens as such. Finally, as a key purpose was to give voice to the tweens themselves, we did not interview parents; albeit it would be quite interesting to compare tweens' accounts for vacation decision-making processes to those offered by their parents (or by siblings). Finally, we have only contrasted tweens with existing literature on children whereas a comparative study incorporating children, tweens and teenagers would probably be ideal. Due to all of these deficits and drawbacks, our study cannot – and should not – stand alone. Nevertheless, our study does suggest that there 'is something more' to tweens than what is revealed by extant research. Furthermore, we argue that it is not only possible, but indeed imperative to give voice to this group of tourists if we wish to better understand family holidays. Thus, we hope that this paper encourages other researcher to turn to an under-investigated, but very interesting group of tourists; i.e. the tweens

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