

**Understanding tourists' information search behavior as a risk reduction strategy:  
The case of international tourists in Japan**

**Abstract**

This study aims to clarify how international tourists reduce perceived risks by developing a conceptual framework based on a theoretical exploration of the relationship among prior knowledge (familiarity and expertise), risk perception, and information search behavior (internal search and external search). Prior knowledge is suggested as the predictor of information search behavior, and risk perception is expected to be the mediator between prior knowledge and information search behavior. In the current study, Japan is selected as the research objective because of the recent increase in the number of inbound tourists and the tourism industry's vulnerability to crisis (e.g., the 2009 financial crisis) and disasters (e.g., the Great East Japan earthquake in 2011). Although the proposed theoretical model is not empirically tested in this study, academic contributions and a future study agenda are provided for the next research stage.

**Key words**

Information search, Prior knowledge, Risk perception, Culture, Japan

## INTRODUCTION

The Japanese government has actively promoted inbound tourism since the launch of the Visit Japan Campaign in 2003 (Japan National Tourism Organization [JNTO], 2006). “YOKOSO! JAPAN”—the campaign slogan—means “Welcome to Japan” and is used as the campaign’s logo. To attract more international tourists to Japan, the campaign includes various events (e.g., “YOKOSO! JAPAN WEEKS”), tourism goodwill ambassadors, public relationships with special countries and places (e.g., South Korea, Taiwan, the United States, China, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom), and relaxation of the visa requirements for visitors from China. The “DISCOVER the SPIRIT of JAPAN” website is available in four languages: Japanese, English, Korean, and Chinese (simplified and traditional characters). This campaign greatly promoted inbound tourism in Japan. As a result, the nation received 19,737,409 inbound tourists in 2015, including 16,969,126 leisure tourists, 1,641,300 business tourists, and 1,126,983 other tourists. Figure 1 shows the number of leisure tourists over the past two decades.

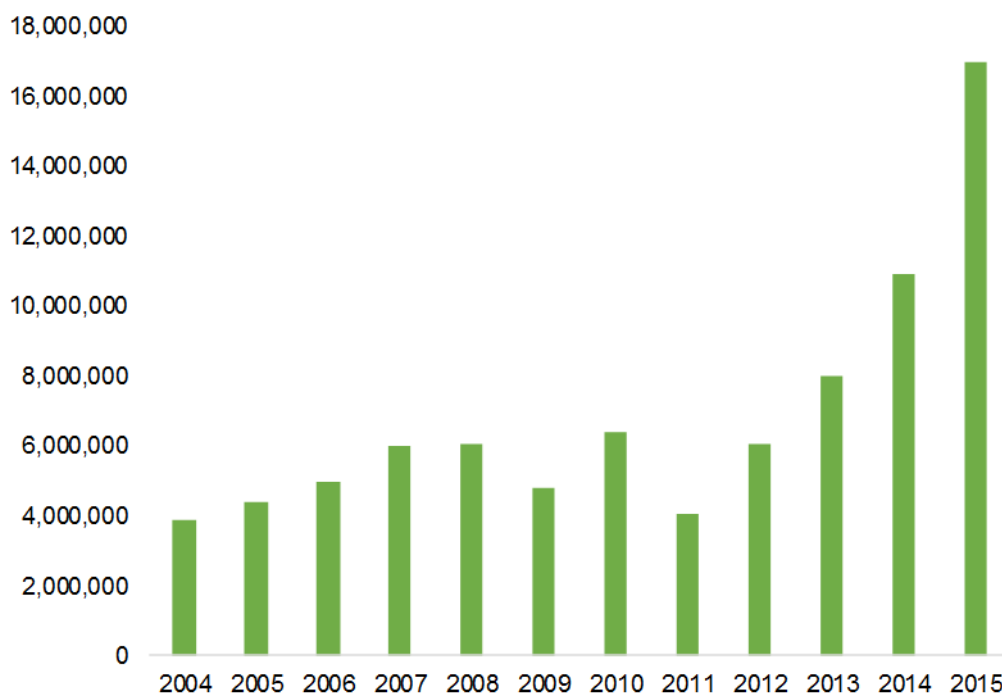


Figure 1: Number of international leisure tourists to Japan from 2004 to 2015

Source: JNTO (2016a)

The tourism industry is now seen as an important driver of Japan’s economic growth. However, it has been widely recognized that the tourism industry is vulnerable to crises and disasters (Pforr, 2009; Sonmez & Graefe, 1998; Yang & Nair, 2014). Tourists tend to be sensitive about uncertainty related to travel destinations, such as natural, political, economic, psychological, physical, and cultural factors. Although the Visit Japan Campaign successfully

increased the number of inbound tourists during the past decade, Japan's tourism industry has been negatively influenced by major events, such as the recent financial crisis (2009), the influenza pandemic (2009) and the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami (2011). Therefore, understanding how tourists perceive risks is an important issue for the tourism industry and will assist in the formulation of future marketing strategies (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2006).

According to the JNTO (2016a), the number of Asian tourists who visit Japan is much higher than the number of tourists from other places in the world. Asian tourists represent more than two thirds of inbound tourists to Japan. They are also the fastest-growing market in Japanese tourism because of several major changes, such as the increase in disposable income in Asian countries due to economic growth, visa relaxation, and increase in flights operated by low-cost regional carriers. Although the majority of international tourists come from Asian countries, the number of tourists from other places, such as Europe, North America, and Oceania, is also increasing (JNTO, 2016a). Kozak, Crotts, and Law (2007) noted that tourists' degrees of risk perception of a certain travel destination vary among national cultures. To continue to increase the number of international tourists from a variety of source countries during the next decade, it is necessary to fully understand how risk perceptions vary among cultures and the demographics of how tourists search for information to reduce their perceived risk.

In addition to macro-changes (such as the economy, policy and transportation), micro-changes affect the tourism industry. With the development of information and communication technology (ICT) and the commodification of social media, tourists rely not only on travel agencies but also have more information search sources than ever before, such as TripAdvisor and other online social communities. This tendency increases the importance of understanding how tourists acquire knowledge in terms of marketing management decisions and the design of effective communication campaigns and service delivery (Srinivasan & Ratchford, 1991; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

This current study aims to develop a conceptual framework regarding international tourists' search information to reduce risk perception before and during their visit to Japan. Based on a review of existing literature, an integrative model with eleven propositions are proposed. Although many variables affect international tourists' information search behavior, this study discusses only two variables ("prior knowledge" and "risk perception") and their effects on internal search and external search in information search behavior from a cross-cultural perspective. Although the proposed theoretical model is not empirically tested in this study, academic contributions and a future study agenda are provided for the next research stage.

## **INFORMATION SEARCH BEHAVIOR**

### ***Information search behavior in consumer behavior studies***

Information search behavior is a critical subject in consumer behavior studies (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a, 2004b; Schmidt & Spreng, 1996), and how consumers solve problems during the process of data acquisition has been much studied (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Information search behavior in the field of consumer studies is defined as “the motivated activation of knowledge stored in memory or acquisition of information from the environment” (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995, p. 182).

Assael (1984) described five stages consumers follow when they search for information, which include the input variables stage (such as consumer factors, environmental factors, and marketing factors), the information acquisition stage (such as external sources and internal sources), the information processing stage (such as categorization, evaluation, organization, and retention), the brand evaluation stage, and the purchase and consumption stage. The second and third stages emphasize information acquisition and information processing. This model has been adopted in studies on information search behavior in relation to purchase decisions and comparisons of cost and benefit (e.g., Um & Crompton, 1990; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Kotler, Bowen, and Makens (2013) suggested five stages in buyers’ decision-making process. The five stages are need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase decision. During the information search stage, how to search for information varies among individuals and is closely related to the amount of information that consumers have, the value of the new information, and the satisfaction that results from searching (Kotler et al., 2013).

### ***Information search behaviors in the tourism context***

Understanding information search behavior among tourists is also a critical challenge for tourism practitioners, and destination marketers in particular (Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1998; Nishimura, King, & Waryszak, 2006, 2007) as understanding this behavior can aid in targeting specific customer segments (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a, 2004b). Based on Assael’s (1984) model, Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) developed a conceptual model of information search and source utilization aiming to explain the factors that influence the use of communications the scholars related to the recreation and tourism experience. In this model, a new intermediary stage was proposed to recognize tourists’ multiple information needs or roles, which include functional, hedonic, innovation, aesthetic, and sign.

Fodness and Murray (1999) examined the links among tourist information search strategies, search contingencies, tourist characteristics, and behavioral search outcome. The authors suggested spatial (internal and external), temporal (ongoing and pre-purchase), and operational

(contributory and decisive) dimensions related to information search strategies and found that tourist information search strategies were the result of a dynamic process in which tourists used various types and numbers of information sources to respond to internal and external contingencies. Fodness and Murray (1999) deepened the understanding of how tourists select, acquire, evaluate, and use information related to their vacation trip and their findings provided a basis for segmentation, product positioning, and promotional strategies in the tourism industry.

Gursoy and McCleary (2004a) employed three consumer information search approaches (psychological/motivational, economics, and information processing) to present a model of tourists' information search behavior. They qualitatively explored the relationships among the variables previous visits, involvement, international learning, incidental learning, familiarity, expertise, cost of internal/external information search, and internal/external search. Tourist information search behavior was found to be directly related to internal/external cost, as well as the level of involvement in which tourists engage in information search. Gursoy and McCleary (2004a) also highlighted the importance of the mediating roles of familiarity and expertise in tourists' information search behavior.

In addition to the studies that developed models of tourists' information search behavior, many studies investigated how tourists acquire information and what influences their decision making. For example, Hyde (2006) identified six search strategies that are practiced by first-time vacation tourists to New Zealand within the first 24 hours of arrival. Ho and Liu (2005) highlighted the essential role search engines play in the Internet era. Law and Huang (2006) detailed that the Google search engine in particular is perceived by tourists as the most important tool. Buhalis and Law (2008) emphasized the role of mobile technology, as this technology makes it possible for tourists to gather information from any location.

### ***Internal and external information search***

In terms of searching for information about a destination, it has been shown that tourists tend to rely on internal and external sources (Fodness & Murray, 1997), and tourists' information search behavior varies due to their planning horizon (Gitelson & Crompton, 1983), motivation (Gitelson & Crompton, 1983), and level of involvement (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). Internal and external sources are used to explain how tourists search for information before they make their final purchase decisions (e.g., Fodness & Murray, 1997; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a, 2004b; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998).

An internal information search is understood as a cognitive process of memory searching based on prior consumption or experience (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013) and a scan of long-term memory for relevant product knowledge (Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1998). In the tourism literature, Chiang, King, and Nyguyen (2012) suggested that internal information searches often provide the initial step when tourists plan a vacation trip. In contrast, an external information search is defined as information from the external world (Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1998), such

as media (e.g., television, radio, newspaper, and magazine advertisements), retailers (e.g., visits and phone calls made to retail stores), interpersonal (e.g., consulting friends, relatives, and neighbors), and neutral sources (e.g., *Consumer Reports* or similar neutral publications; Beatty & Smith, 1987). In the tourism industry, travel agencies are found to be the most frequently used external information source (Chen & Gursoy, 2000; Snepenger, Megen, Snelling, & Worrall, 1990). However, as Internet-based social communities have greatly expanded as a result of the development of Web 2.0 technologies, tourists increasingly use the Internet to obtain information on trips before, during, and after their vacation (Parra-Lopez, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutierrez-Tano, & Diaz-Armas, 2011), and even use social media to organize their vacation trips (Parra-Lopez et al., 2011). These behaviors have been generalized into what has been called Travel 2.0 (Adam, Cobos, & Liu, 2007).

As internal information sources are tourists' memory and images of a certain destination, tourists tend to perform external information searches when an internal search is insufficient to help them to make a decision (Chiang et al., 2012; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a). Because of the significantly increasing number of international tourists to Japan, it is supposed that a large number of international tourists are "first-time visitors" and their reliance on internal information sources are limited. Therefore, it is assumed these first-time visitors tend to perform external information searches by using various external sources, such as information from travel agencies, online sources (including the official government website) and online virtual tourism social communities, and advice from friends and relatives.

***Proposition 1:*** *International tourists to Japan tend to perform an external information search when their internal information is insufficient.*

## **RISK PERCEPTION**

### ***Risk perception in consumer behavior studies***

Perceived risk in the field of consumer behavior has been widely discussed over the past five decades (e.g., Bauer, 1960; Mitchell, 1992), and it is understood as a critical influencer in the early stages of consumers' buying process (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2006). Risk perception is defined as "the concerns about potential consequences, long-term adverse impacts and the involuntariness of exposure" (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011, p. 267). Based on consumer behavior studies, the types of risk perception are physical risk (the risk related to an individual's safety and physical health), financial risk (the possibility that the product will not be worth the financial price), social risk (the possibility that a purchase will not match the opinions of reference groups), psychological risk (the possibility that a purchase cannot satisfy the consumer's self-image), time-loss risk (the possibility that the wait time is likely longer than the product consumption duration), opportunity-loss risk (the possibility that the final purchase

decision is not the best alternative), and information risk (the possibility that an individual cannot gain as much information as he or she expected; Engel et al., 1995; Lu, Hsu, & Hsu, 2005).

### ***Risk perception in the tourism context***

Tourism and risk are closely related (March & Woodside, 2005), because tourism is characterized by “service-specific” characteristics such as intangibility, inseparability, and variability (Zeithaml et al., 2006). In addition, travel products are vulnerable to negative events, such as bad weather, terrorism, disease, and natural disasters (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011; Mair, Ritchie, & Walters, 2014).

In addition to the types of risk perceptions identified in the consumer behavior literature discussed in the previous section, several types of risk perceptions specific to the context of tourism have been identified, such as terrorism, war, political instability, natural disasters, crime, cultural differences, and language barriers (Basala & Klenosky, 2001; Dimanche & Lepetic, 1999; Dolnicar, 2005; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005; Richter, 2003; Sonmez, Apostolopoulos, & Tarlow, 1999).

Risk perception in tourism has been studied from various aspects. For example, Fuchs and Reichel (2011) examined differences between first-time and repeat visitors’ risk perception of traveling to Israel, which was defined as a highly volatile destination in the study. The differences between the two groups showed that first-time visitors perceived the following types of risks as greater than repeat visitors: human-induced risk, socio-psychological risk, food safety, and weather. However, repeat visitors tended to perceive financial risk, service quality risk, natural disasters, and car accidents. Lepp and Gibson (2008) focused on personality traits and their relationship to the level of risk perception associated with international destinations. Using the Sensation Seeking scale to assess participants’ personality traits, the study showed that sensation seeking was not related to perceptions of risk as high- and low-sensation seekers showed similar perceived risks. To enhance understanding of tourists’ risk perception, Yang and Nair (2014) built a conceptual framework related to risk perception. In their model, the relationship chains include four stages: direct stimuli (event and object), cognitive/emotional response (risk perception and fear), diffuse feelings (uncertainty and anxiety), and cognitive response (worry). Based on theoretical background, Yang and Nair (2014) suggested that uncertainty, worry, fear, and anxiety are closely related to risk perception. Ritchie, Chien, and Sharifpour (2016) categorized tourists based on their risk perceptions by using an integrated approach that included psychological and behavioral variables, and aimed to identify whether risk-related variables can be used as the basis for categorizing and understanding the travel market. The authors found that risk-free behaviors differ across carefree travelers, risk-reducing travelers, and seriously concerned travelers, as well as socio-demographics. They also found that the use of information can help reduce perceived risk.

## ***Risk perception and information search behavior***

The links between tourists' perceived risk and their information search behavior have been discussed in many tourism studies (e.g., Fodness & Murray, 1997; Fuchs & Reichel, 2006; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a, 2004b; Sharifpour, Walters, Ritchie, & Winter, 2014). Previous researchers, such as Floyd and Pennington-Gray (2004) found a positive relationship between tourists' risk perception and information search behavior which means that tourists tend to actively search for external information from various sources, when the tourists perceive high risk. The higher the risk they perceive, the more external information they would like to search.

Based on data on inbound tourists from 2004 to 2015, the number of tourist arrivals in Japan dropped significantly (21.3%) in 2009 because of the global financial crisis and decreased sharply (36.2%) in 2011 after the Great East Japan earthquake (JNTO, 2016a). Recently, the number of tourist arrivals (including business tourists) fell 2.7% in May 2016, because of the Kumamoto earthquake in April 2016 (JNTO, 2016b).<sup>1</sup>

Tourism in Japan is deeply influenced by various risks, especially natural disasters, such as earthquakes and tsunamis. To reduce international tourists' risk perception, the Japanese government provides information in various foreign languages about these unexpected natural disasters. Moreover, a large number of international tourists are expected as "first-time" visitors, and language barriers cannot be neglected. Thus, the perceived risk, in particular perceived natural disaster risk, before and during visits to Japan seemed to be high. Therefore, it is assumed that tourists who perceive high risk tend to actively search for information to reduce the perceived risks.

***Proposition 2:*** *International tourists in Japan tend to perform an internal information search when their risk perception is high.*

***Proposition 3:*** *International tourists in Japan tend to perform an external information search when their risk perception is high.*

## **PRIOR KNOWLEDGE**

Tourists can gain prior knowledge from external information sources, such as newspaper/magazine articles, travel agencies (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998), the destination's official website, online social communities, and other information sources. Additionally, tourists can also learn information from their own experiences and those of others for a certain destination (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a). Some consumer behavior studies, for example, Brucks (1985) suggested a close relationship between prior knowledge and internal information sources. This term refers to the behavior of gaining prior knowledge that is treated as an ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> The data are preliminary data estimated by the JNTO.



search that prior knowledge can enhance the consumer's internal memory and assist in making a final purchase decision.

Prior knowledge is a multidimensional variable (Sharifpour et al., 2014) that includes familiarity and expertise (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004b). Familiarity represents "the early stages and expertise the later stages of learning," and expertise refers to "the ability to perform product-related tasks and represents their objective knowledge of the product" (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a, p. 359). If a tourist is familiar with a destination, he or she would not search for external information but would rely on internal information formed by familiarity (Brucks, 1985; Fodness & Murray, 1997, 1998, 1999; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Moreover, expertise is cognitive based (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004) and is used in cognitive structures and cognitive processes (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004b). When the knowledge stored in experts' memory matches the information they receive, they tend to make rapid judgments; however, if the knowledge experts have differs from information about a product, they tend to spend more time analyzing and evaluating the product (Bettman & Sujan, 1987). Kerstetter and Cho (2004) suggested that expertise and past experience are different, as expertise is cognitive based, whereas past experiences are affective based. Therefore, this study categorizes past experience in the dimension of familiarity.

#### ***Prior knowledge and risk perception***

Several studies have investigated prior knowledge and risk perception in the context of international travel. Wong and Yeh (2009) examined the links among risk perception, prior knowledge, and hesitation. They found a positive relationship between risk perception and hesitation that tourists who perceive high risk tend to have high hesitation regarding their travel. The authors also showed the essential mediating role of prior knowledge (familiarity) between risk perception and hesitation. Sharifpour et al. (2014) investigated the influence of familiarity and expertise on tourists' perceived risk of traveling to the Middle East. They identified the different influence of familiarity and expertise in reducing risk perception and showed that familiarity is the most influential knowledge type, as it is highly relevant for tourist decision-making behavior.

***Proposition 4:*** *The higher international tourists' familiarity with Japan, the lower their risk perception of travel to Japan.*

***Proposition 5:*** *The higher international tourists' expertise regarding Japan, the lower their risk perception of travel to Japan.*

### ***Prior knowledge and information search behavior***

The relationship between prior knowledge and information search behavior has been discussed in the consumer behavior and tourism context. Some consumer behavior studies, for example, Cothey (2002), compared the different search behaviors between novices and experts when individuals use electronic information systems. In the tourism context, Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) defined knowledge as a functional need and showed that information is largely used for functional reasons. Prior knowledge is believed to be a predictor of information search behavior (e.g., Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a); however, the effect of prior knowledge on information search behavior has been shown to be negative, positive, and curvilinear (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). If a consumer has sufficient information in his or her memory, the consumer is not likely to actively search more information (Brucks, 1985) but would rely on his or her memory and use it to make purchase decisions (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). As tourists' familiarity is positively related to expertise (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004b), it is expected that the relationship between expertise and information search behavior is the same as the relationship between familiarity and information search behavior.

***Proposition 6:*** *International tourists' familiarity with Japan is positively related to their internal information search behavior.*

***Proposition 7:*** *International tourists' familiarity with Japan is negatively related to their external information search behavior.*

***Proposition 8:*** *International tourists' expertise regarding Japan is positively related to their internal information search behavior.*

***Proposition 9:*** *International tourists' expertise regarding Japan is negatively related to their external information search behavior.*

Based on the central position of risk perceptions in the conceptual model (see Figure 2), and previous research which confirm risk perceptions can mediate the relationship between prior knowledge and information search (Sharifpour, et al., 2014), this paper also develop a final set of propositions:

***Proposition 10:*** *Risk perception mediates the relationship between international tourists' prior knowledge and internal information search behavior*

***Proposition 11:*** *Risk perception mediates the relationship between international tourists' prior knowledge and external information search behavior*

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Based on this theoretical background, a conceptual framework was developed (see Figure 2). The current study shows the relationships among prior knowledge (familiarity and expertise), risk perception, and information search behavior (internal information search and external information search).

A future study will add culture variables and compare how tourists from different cultural backgrounds vary in the literature on the use of prior knowledge to reduce perceived risk and the influence of risk perception on information search behavior, because conducting comparative cross-cultural studies will help identify behavior differences in the international tourism context (Osti, Turner, & King, 2009). Although many studies (e.g., Kim, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2002; Luo, Feng, & Cai, 2004) have shown that demographic variables, such as gender, age, income, and education level, significantly affect tourist information search behavior and perceived risk, few studies from a cultural perspective have been conducted.

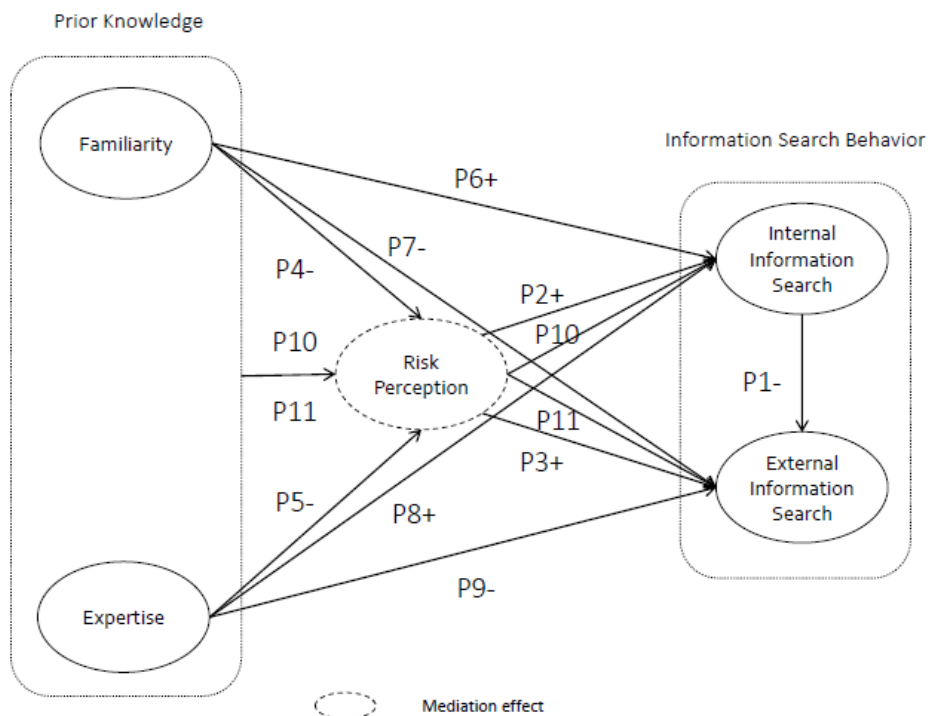


Figure 2: Conceptual framework for future research

Culture is one of the most important factors that influences the consumer decision-making process and has been shown to be an incentive factor in the consumer purchase behavior model (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2013). In the tourism context, studies have reported different patterns and attitudes in information search behavior among tourists from different cultural

backgrounds (e.g., Kozak, Crofts, & Law, 2007; Osti et al., 2009) and various levels of perceived risk, safety, and anxiety among different national cultures (e.g., Kozak et al., 2007; Reisinger & Mavondo, 2006). As presented above, Japan receives many international tourists mainly from Asian countries, but tourists also come from other regions. Because of the increasing number of international tourists and the nation's high risk of natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes and tsunamis), it is critical to understand how international tourists with different cultural backgrounds search for information to decrease perceived risk.

Therefore, a future study is proposed to explore how international tourists in Japan perceive travel-related risks before and during their visit and how they search for information to reduce perceived risk. The future study will also explore how prior knowledge influences risk perceptions and information search behavior. As tourists' cultural backgrounds may influence their perceived risk and information search behavior, differences among national groups will also be examined.

The current study theoretically analyzed tourists' information search behavior based on the level of perceived risk and prior knowledge, two essential variables that have been discussed in numerous studies (e.g., Brucks, 1985; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004a, 2004b; Kerstetter & Cho, 2004; Sharifpour et al., 2014; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). In addition, this study not only explored tourist information search behavior in terms of reducing perceived risk but also proposed to clarify the model by comparing tourists with different cultural backgrounds, because culture has also been shown to have an important effect on consumer behavior (Kotler et al., 2012). The results of the future study are expected to contribute to the Japanese tourism industry as understanding how international tourists from different cultural backgrounds search for travel information to reduce their levels of perceived risk will aid Japanese practitioners and policymakers in enhancing the country's inbound tourism.

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