

**UNIVERSITY OF DERBY**

**SYSTEMS OF LEISURE TRAVEL  
INFORMATION PROVISION AND USE:  
THE 'GREY MARKET' AND THE  
INTERNET**

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### **Chapters**

*Appendix II*

*Appendix III*

### **Other**

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## **Abstract**

The information age and the information society have become dominant features in the new millennium. However, these terms are often referred to with the younger generations in mind, neglecting the older and more experienced members of our society.

This thesis focuses on the 'Grey Market' (travellers over the age of 50) who use the Internet on a regular basis – therefore also referred to as 'Silver Surfers' – and in particular for their travel and tourism decision-making. It aims to identify experiences and processes of travel decision-making, analyse the impact on the use of the Internet as an information search as well as evaluate the effectiveness of the Internet in providing information for particular and not mainstream market segments.

The methodology employed in this particular piece of research builds on positivism as most consumer behaviour theories do; however a more inductive approach was taken. While relying on existing theories newer and less well tested methods of data collection were put to use. The methods were triangulated, utilising both quantitative and qualitative research methods which complement each other in the results. An initial pilot study questionnaire was followed up with semi-structured in-depth interviews which then led to the completion of the final survey, that was administered by 'e-surveying' using both convenience and snowball sampling and resulted in 517 valid responses from 'Silver Surfers' around the United Kingdom.

Main findings of this thesis show a distinct pattern of behaviour in the travel decision-making process of this particular market segment as well as what kind of information they were researching on the Internet. Most importantly, the respondents do not consider themselves too different from other (younger) age groups and even though some of their information requirements are distinctive, they do not want to be considered just as 'the older consumers'.

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*“Silent gratitude isn't much use to anyone”*

*G.B. Stern*

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# **I. Introduction**

## **1.1 General introduction and purpose**

“The changing presence of the Internet from a medium for elites to one in common use in our everyday lives raises important questions about its impact on access to resources, social interaction, and commitment to local community.” (Haythornthwaite and Wellmann, 2005: 3).

Haythornthwaite and Wellmann (2005) stated that we have moved on from the first age of the Internet where it was not relevant to everyday life, and have now entered the second age of the Internet, where it has become embedded in day-to-day life. Some authors (e.g. Barlow, 1995) have argued that the Internet revolution could be compared to Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in 1447; however, the grand scale of the development of the Internet has shown that one would be more accurate to compare the cyberspace revolution to the capture of fire. Internet research itself has come a long way from early discussions about technological developments and cautionary tales. Technically speaking, not a long time has passed since these early articles (early 1990s), however, in the digital age, it has been a much longer time span (Haythornthwaite and Wellmann, 2005). Soon a discussion on e-commerce followed and, since this was a more exciting development, attention to the provision of information on the Internet was partially neglected in academic research. However, numerous studies have shown that finding information was always more important to users than actually buying online (Haythornthwaite and Wellmann, 2005 based on a UCLA Internet Report, 2000). That same report also showed that finding travel information was already in the top ten most popular Internet activities of US Internet users in the year 2000 (Haythornthwaite and Wellmann, 2005 based on a UCLA Internet Report, 2000).

As revolutionary and new as it once was, as the Internet becomes part of our everyday lives and existence it is in great danger of starting to be taken for granted. Nevertheless, the danger of ignoring the Internet (as happened to the 'boring' [the excitement of new technology calmed down relatively fast] telephone a century earlier) is as huge a mistake as seeing it as a saviour. It is this routineness and dullness that makes the Internet so interesting because it means that the Internet has been incorporated in people's lives. This argument leads to the acknowledgement that there is a need for a more differential analysis of the Internet as part of everyday life (Haythornthwaite and Wellmann, 2005).

There is little doubt that the Internet has enriched the way in which information is provided. However, not all changes are for the better. Since there is unlimited space available in cyberspace, the information provided can also be unlimited and we are therefore overloaded with information. To process this information can be difficult for anyone but particularly for people over a certain age who have not grown up with these technologies but rather had to learn how to use Information & Communication Technologies (ICTs) for work or leisure purposes.

Internet usage in the United Kingdom has risen increasingly fast, within the last few years in particular. While there were 15,400,000 users (26.2 percent of the population) in 2000, in 2005 this number has risen to 35,807,929 (59.8 percent of the population) and then again to 38,512,837 (63.8 percent of the population) in 2007. These numbers indicate the emergence from novelty to necessity, (ITU/Nielsen, 2006).

A longitudinal study 'Digital Living' has examined the acquisition and usage of ICTs of some 2,000 users, looking at changes in their behaviour and their social, symbolic, and economic capital in the United Kingdom. Results of the study underline the importance of this particular research study, emphasising senior citizens' usage of the Internet. The researchers of this study, Anderson and Tracey (2005), found that a significant number of British users of retirement age are heavy Internet users. They also state that retirement from a job that included computer or Internet access at the place of work can set off

acquisition of a home computer and later access to the Internet. In isolated cases, the retirees even took the computers with them from work. Other examples from this study show that retirees have acquired Internet access in order to keep in touch with remote relatives (e.g. grandchildren). Anderson and Tracey's (2005) study shows that there is definitely potential in this age group when it comes to Internet usage; however, the tourism literature in particular has neglected older Internet users and their travel related decision-making and information search behaviour. This thesis aims to fill this gap in the literature.

## **1.2 Terms and definitions**

This thesis concentrates on a particular market segment within the wider market of potential travellers, the so-called 'grey market'. This 'grey market' is defined as people over the age of 50 in this thesis. The author decided to use the minimum age of 50 for various reasons. First of all, it was of interest to include working as well as retired senior travellers and by lowering the age to 50 this was much easier to achieve. Secondly, the author experimented by setting the minimum age limit as low as 45 in order to work in accordance with the national census data. National Statistics divides people into categories of 45-54 and 55-64 years old (National Statistics, 2001). The pilot questionnaire went ahead by including people as young as 45 years old; however, since the author chose to employ a snowballing sample technique the sample included too many people in the younger categories (this happened due to people forwarding it to friends their own age). It became apparent that in order to reach the older end of the 'grey market' that a slightly older set of 'silver surfers' needed to be reached and therefore the age limit was raised to 50 years.

Within this 'grey market' there is a sub group, the 'silver surfers'. 'Silver surfers' are people over the age of 50 who are active Internet users. They may not have necessarily bought anything online but use the Internet as an information source or for certain activities e.g. banking.

The Internet is a worldwide, publicly accessible network of interconnected computer networks which transmit data. There are several parts of the Internet, the two best known being the World Wide Web (WWW) and Electronic Mail (e-mail). The author would like to state that even though the Internet and WWW are essentially not the same, within the context of this thesis the terms are used inter-changeably as they are in everyday language. The Internet is also an ICT, an Information & Communication Technology, which refers to technology in general that is utilised for gathering information and communication. In the earlier years of ICT research (pre 2000) it is often referred to as simply IT – Information Technologies. There is no clear distinction and most authors use both terms interchangeably.

### **1.3 Literature review outlined**

The literature review of this thesis (Chapter 2) examines a wide range of academic literature incorporating Information society/age theories with more tourism specific motivational and decision-making process core theories, as well as the emergence of ICTs, particularly in the tourism industry and outlines several issues that are of great significance. Additionally, the literature review includes an evaluation of ‘grey market’ theory establishing the argument that this market segment in particular, due to its experience, plays an important role in the information society, too. When it comes to linking consumer behaviour theory to ICTs, the author made a conscious decision not to include any aspects of so-called ‘aided online decision-making devices’ where recommender systems on the Internet analyse inputted data and then recommend a destination for the user. The author believes that individuals are able to make their own decisions utilising new technologies but not letting the machines make all the decisions for them. While this sounds similar to a regular online information search, it is in actual fact very different. When utilising search engines, e.g. Google, people are given suggestions on where to go to find the information they are looking for, whereas recommender systems

take the actual decision-making out of the individual's hand by suggesting an end product. A consideration of these topics has led to the research questions outlined below.

#### **1.4 Research questions**

This thesis investigates an aspect of how the Internet fits into our everyday lives and how it aids one of our favourite pastimes, travelling, by researching travel and tourism related information online. It aims to examine the way in which a certain segment of the market, the so-called 'silver surfers' search for travel and tourism related information online and how it influences their overall decision-making behaviour.

For the purpose of this research three aims were identified that furthermore each supported by a research question (RQ).

**1.**

**Aim:** To identify experiences and processes of decision-making amongst potential 'grey' leisure travellers who use the Internet as an information source.

**RQ:** How do intending 'grey' leisure travellers use the Internet in searching for information as part of the tourist decision-making process?

**2.**

**Aim:** To analyse the impact of the use of the Internet as an information source on the grey market's decision-making process?

**RQ:** How is the Internet changing the buyer behaviour of this particular market segment?

**3.**

**Aim:** To evaluate the effectiveness of the Internet in providing an information service that meets consumer requirements.

**RQ:** Does the information provided meet 'grey' leisure travellers' requirements?

## 1.5 Statement of Originality

It is required for any doctoral research to have an original aspect. This thesis has three characteristics that can be seen as a contribution to original knowledge, one relating to sampling and one to data collection, as well as the research findings.

Firstly, the niche market that is being investigated, the so-called 'grey market' – which is defined as senior citizens over the age of 50 – offers a new look at online information search behaviour, focusing on a group that has not as yet been discussed in depth within the literature.

The initial idea of using this particular market stems from the author's own experiences within her family. Early thoughts were supported by newspaper articles (Baldinger *et al*, 2001 and 2002) and general 'grey market' research e.g. Gunter (1998). A search through tourism related literature has shown that there is a definite lack of research about this market segment, especially when it comes to relating them to (new) technology as most authors tended to concentrate on coach tours or similar. Muller and O'Cass (2001) have put it best in their paper about the 'grey market' – senior travellers do not see themselves as old as such. For them older age is something that they have not achieved yet. 'Young at heart' definitely and very much motivated to travel as long as they physically can.

When it comes to ICT related research, various studies have looked at online decision-making and information search behaviour; however, most of them focus on a particular group of younger travellers, students (e.g. Zins and Bauernfeind, 2005). The author believes that these research projects do not give an accurate picture of how other market segments search for information or utilise information sources, since students have a lot of characteristics that are not shared by other market segments e.g. low disposable income, relative freedom, and long summer holidays. Yet they are often used as an example and people accept these findings as a general rule that can be applied when it comes to Internet usage. Although older travellers share the characteristic of longer free time, they do have

big advantages; a high disposable income as well as life experience (Mintel, 2000). Evidently, not all older people have the advantage of a higher disposable income; however, it has been well documented that older Internet users in the UK are generally well educated and therefore also enjoy a rather well paid retirement (Mintel, 2000). Experience and knowledge build-up play an important role in this thesis. Prior knowledge and life experience have a significant impact on people's decision-making, especially when the potential travellers have gained as much familiarity with the topic as senior travellers. A new technology can open up new possibilities at this time and help to improve the decision-making process.

As mentioned above, a study in the UK has revealed that people of retirement age are particularly heavy Internet users. Additionally, from experience, the author can argue that older people who did not grow up with the Information & Communication Technologies revolution can be roughly divided into two groups. Firstly, according to adoption/diffusion theory (Rogers, 1995), there are the ones who embrace technology and learn how to use it – so-called 'early adopters', followed by the 'early majority' (Moore, 1991), and secondly, the ones who do not adopt new technology and prefer to stick to more traditional information sources. This study concentrates on the first group and does not include the second one since they are of little interest to this particular problem definition. Another reason is that a sample representative of the entire 'grey market' in the UK would have included more non-users than users, even though the 'silver surfers' are one of the fastest growing market segments (ICM Research, 2002) and therefore the usable results would have been minimal.

Gunter (1998) has quoted the work of Loudon and Della Bitta (1993) who have listed known marketing misconceptions about the 'grey market'. They managed to challenge all mentioned misconceptions with general market research data (for details see 2.5) and within the context of this thesis the author has suggested alternative tourism related opposing arguments within the findings and analysis chapter (see 4.4). This thesis also

identifies misconceptions about 'silver surfers' travel behaviour and creates new knowledge about their information search behaviour.

The second original aspect of this thesis concerns the aspect of data collection. Not satisfied with utilising traditional paper questionnaires, considering the context of this thesis and for the purpose of underlining the aspect of using the Internet for several activities as shown in this research, it was decided to put to test a research method called 'e-surveying'. This method was suggested and evaluated as a possible researcher's fantasy by Litvin and Kar (2001). When the initial idea for this thesis came about, it was not yet common to use the World Wide Web, or any other aspect of the Internet for that matter, e.g. e-mail, for data collection. People still used more traditional forms of distribution rather than utilising the new technology and, therefore it was decided to make use of this method of distributing surveys and collecting data in order to add on another original facet to this thesis. Additionally, the aspect of collecting data over the Internet seemed to fit better within the context and general idea of the thesis. 'Silver surfers' who are active Internet users are the target market for this research so it seemed fitting to actually use the Internet for the distribution of surveys and data collection. Employing 'e-surveying', the author was hoping to reach a wider audience, particularly by using an online method of data collection but also in order to reach the 'right' group of people. This also led to a choice of interesting sampling techniques which will be outlined below and further explained in Chapter III. Overall, it has to be said that this originality aspect made data collection more complicated and significantly contributed to the delay of the data collection and data analysis in general. The main reason for that was that most people did not lend themselves to the given time restrictions and it took much longer than anticipated to receive a satisfactory amount of responses. Due to the nature of the method used, the author had to decide to stop accepting surveys at a certain point as well as disregarding those that were filled out by people who were not relevant to this research i.e. non users.

A possible reason for these difficulties is the fact that many users were not too familiar with the method used, whereas during the last few years since this data collection the

usability of technology has been enhanced and it is fairly common now to use a web based survey. This issue highlights the rapidity of change within Internet technology. In general it can be said that 'e-surveying' is a viable research method and useful for data collection but not when used in connection with e-mail.

## **1.6 Methodology outlined**

The problem statement and research questions mentioned above are situated in a positivist framework, seeing the world as an external one where human behaviour is determined by experiences (Finn *et al*, 2000). Experience plays a very important role in this thesis, laying a basis for how people search for information on the Internet. The Literature Review as well as Findings and Analysis chapters will demonstrate how an information search can be seen as a process through which knowledge is built up over time and decisions are not always made immediately.

Even though a positivist paradigm was chosen (consumer behaviour studies are traditionally rooted in positivist theory), a more post-positivist and inductive approach was selected. The author decided to rely on existing theory but test out new research methods and look for more than 'just' testing hypotheses. Therefore, qualitative data collection was conducted after the initial pilot surveys which then helped to build the final questionnaire. The interview findings were crucial to the construction of the survey and helped define answers for multiple choice questions, as well as providing supporting argument for the survey findings in general. The evolution of the survey started out with a very loosely structured pilot study which then informed the interviews (semi structured) and then, as mentioned above, informed the finding version of the questionnaire as such. The results and the methods of data collection are therefore closely intertwined. Sampling methods were already confined by age (50+) and geographic location (United Kingdom), other than that the user had to be an active Internet user. The decision was made to use both a convenience as well as a snowball sample (see 3.3 for details). Overall, the author feels

that the most appropriate methods of sampling were chosen. The quantitative data was analysed with the help of SPSS - Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), qualitative data was analysed manually using content analysis.

### **1.7 Limitations outlined**

Every research project has its limitations and the ones of this thesis are briefly outlined below.

Sampling is the most important limitation of this research. Respondents were limited to a particular geographic location, the United Kingdom. The research project started out with an attempt to focus on the entire European Union but it was soon realised that this market would be too big to tackle even for this thesis. The author recommends follow up studies in other European or even non-European countries, if possible research studies that are representative of the entire population. Even though the method of data collection, 'e-surveying', is an original aspect of this thesis, it can also be seen as a limitation. Data collection was very difficult and took a long time. The questionnaires were sent out via e-mail to a convenience sample of 'silver surfers' and they were asked to (i). send back a filled out questionnaire to the author and (ii). to forward the questionnaire to friends and family that fitted the general sample requirements (age/location/Internet usage). Therefore, the author cannot establish a response rate since the number of people that actually received the questionnaire is unknown.

The author acknowledges these limitations of this thesis and recommends further research to incorporate these aspects.

## **1.8 Findings outlined**

The general findings of this thesis are as follows:

One of the pre-conceived notions that even the author of this thesis believed in before starting this research was that the older market segment discussed in this research project, the 'grey market', is in fact substantially different from other Internet users. The results, however, have shown that although there are some differences or rather distinct behavioural patterns within the 'grey market', overall they are not as different from other Internet users as one would assume. 'Silver surfers' search for all kinds of tourism related information on the Internet, in particular flights, accommodation and issues linked to price. One particular topic, destinations, was not as well researched as the author had assumed beforehand. In addition, the author drafted a model of chronological decision-making in the 'grey market' which shows in what particular order 'silver surfers' make their decisions. Overall, the results have shown that even though the 'silver surfers' utilise the Internet, they do not let technology take over their lives.

## **1.9 General outline**

The outline of this thesis is as follows:

Chapter 2, the Literature Review looks at a wide range of academic literature ranging from motivational and tourism decision-making theory to ICTs specific and 'grey market' theory establishing the argument that experiences play an important role within the online information search.

Chapter 3, the Methodology outlines the research design, philosophy and methods used to set the conceptual framework for this thesis. Explanations and validations for choices will be given as well as a detailed justification on the evolution of methods.

Chapter 4, the first part of the findings, the Information Search Behaviour analysis will look at the results of the online information search examining it by comparing it to similar research projects and theory.

Chapter 5, the second part of the findings, the Decision-Making Process analysis will look at the decision-making process in more detail and analyse the different stages according to age, gender and occupation.

Chapter 6, the conclusions will sum up the most important results of these thesis and, if appropriate, advise selected recommendations for online information providers.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The literature reviewed for this thesis draws on various aspects of theory from different disciplines. It was important for this study to highlight a wide range of theories that will illustrate the complexity of this topic. The aim of this literature review is to show a wide range of fields of study, how they relate to each other and how they can all be related to tourism, in particular to information search behaviour of tourists.

A need for information is one thing that all tourists have in common (Sheldon 1993a), even though it varies from country to country and even from individual to individual. A look at the Information age and society, as well as the role culture plays in decision-making, offers an important building block that will allow the author to show a different aspect of this topic. Most Information & Communications Technology based research relies heavily on technologies that claim to make our lives easier and take away all worries about making decisions and let the 'machine' take over, e.g. studies on recommender systems where the potential traveller inputs all their data and the programme recommends a holiday for them (see e.g Berka & Ploessnig, 2004). It was important that this thesis took a different approach by employing both cognitive and personal consumer behaviour theories (Decrop, 1999). Decrop (1999) also argued that common sense tells us that (tourists') behaviour is much more than the product of cognitive information processing. The traveller is a person who deserves to be considered as a human being with motivations, emotions, and lifestyle, who is also very capable of making a decision by themselves, however, choosing to look for additional help in Information & Communications Technology, in this particular case the Internet. For that reason, it is significant to point out the influence which culture and consumption have on our everyday lives, as Decrop (1999) points out that the context of external – environmental or

situational, social and cultural influences – variables need to be considered in order to gain a complete understanding of tourist decision-making processes. A look into the information society is significant because these aspects of information and culture shape our attitude towards technology and the validity of information from various sources and provides us with the cultural capital and education required which characterise these early adoptions.

When looking into these topics it becomes evident that our society is becoming an information rich society, therefore consumption in certain societies/cultures links these issues to identities and postmodern life and hence enables a look at the role of information in a postmodern life.

This literature review explores a wide range of topics from Information age to the ‘grey market’ and highlight the most important issues within these subject matters. The initial discussion on the Information society and Information age leads the literature review towards the core theories on Information & Communications Technologies, Internet, and consumer behaviour in tourism. The final section of the theoretical part examines the niche market segment that is the main focus of this thesis, the ‘grey market’.

Figure 2.1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the literature review of this research study.

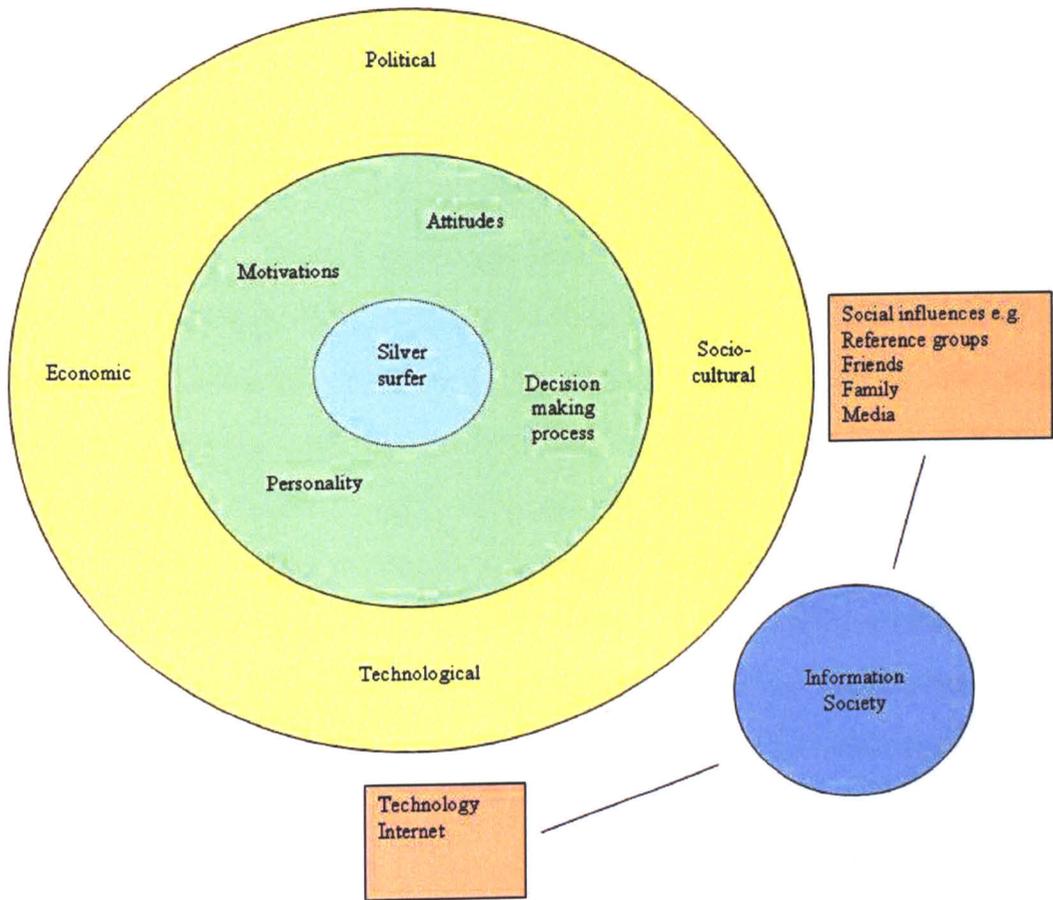


Figure 2.1: Conceptual framework of the literature review

## **2.2 The Information Society in the Information Age**

The concept of the information society and its roots are quite difficult to examine as both the USA and Japan claim it to be their 'invention' (Duff, 2000). While the Americans rest their arguments on Machlup's work (*The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States*, 1962 from Duff, 2000), the term itself can only be traced back to the ASIS (American Society for Information Science) conference in 1970. On the other side, the Japanese claim that the term 'information society' was invented in Japan, deriving from the concept of 'joho shakai'. However this term does not only mean 'information society' but also 'information-oriented society', 'information-conscious society' and 'information-centred society'. Another account of this definition can be found in the writings of Youichi Ito who links the origination of the term 'information society' to 'information industries'. Ito also identified Masuda's usage of the term in his 1968 book '*Joho Shakai Nyumon*' (*Introduction to an Information Society*). A few years later (1970) Ito credits Masuda with the first English-language usage of the term 'information society' (all information taken from Duff, 2000). Duff concludes that the introduction of the term 'information society' itself can be found in Japan, whereas the first English-language usage of the term (1970) can be shared between the two countries.

### **2.2.1 Information and culture**

If the information society was described as a society where the majority of people spend their time doing tasks that relate to information (Lyon, 1988), it is almost impossible to deny that we live in an information society. Information has become part of our daily lives and without it we would not be able to cope with the stress of daily life. However, on the other hand it is mainly information itself, or the so-called information overload, that is responsible for causing stress. This issue will be dealt with specifically in the next section.

As the emergence of writing revolutionised the lives of people centuries ago, it is argued that ICTs will bring about a similar change for the better (Lyon, 1988). Writing has helped people to become more self-aware, and made them feel more individual. ICT possesses the ability to take these changes further. Lyon (1988) argues that ICT seems to have an impact on social and cultural categories, as it helps to diminish the boundaries between home, work and public culture. This is illustrated by 'homeworking', movable work and the increasing invasion of the domestic sphere by the public market place via advertising.

On a more theoretical basis, Lyon (1988) distinguishes between two different kinds of information society theories each of them making two kinds of claims. Findings of social science emphasise the major social changes for the better that follow in the wake of ICTs. This is the view that is also mainly stressed in the media and policy accounts. On the other hand, there is a more cautious and open-ended use of the information society concept which is more problematic than descriptive. In conclusion, these two images of the information society overlap. Both of these theories try to forecast the sorts of social change that can be expected as ICT is scattered through various economic, political and cultural spheres. They also provide strong suggestions as to whether such social changes are desirable at all, (Lyon, 1988).

Ultimately, the question that remains is whether the information society concept should be transferred to the waste bin of redundant ideas, or held as a tool for social analysis. Lyon (1988: 143) questions whether it might 'have a future as an illuminating concept, as it points out one of the most significant aspects of contemporary social change, namely that associated with the diffusion of information technology'. On the other hand, it is questionable whether it should be abandoned, particularly because it achieves credibility more through the daily appearance of yet another technological gadget than because of its power to explain social realities.

It has to be briefly mentioned that the information society idea has both utopian and ideological aspects. Lyon (1988) argues that there are primarily four reasons for that.

Firstly, the information society raises questions about new social circumstances. Expectations are usually based on the highly vague economic arguments about the influence of a new 'information sector'. The supposed social dimension is provided by the widening dependence on technology and the growing cadre of 'information workers' in the information sector. Secondly, the technological convergence of ICT is socially as well as technically important. Thirdly, it must be remembered within the information society discussion that technological potential is not social destiny. Fourthly, the problem of the information society is a political as well as an analytical one as social analysis has a role within ICTs policy, (Lyon, 1988).

In summary, information or rather an overload of information is at the centre of our information society.

### **2.2.2 The Power of Information – Information overdose?**

At the moment our society is overloaded with information. We are becoming so information rich that we take a considerable amount of what we have for granted. When information was not as easily acquired as it is now, the actual act of finding something had value. However, where there is no journey, the information itself is debased, devalued and dehumanised (Shenk, 1997). Until recently more information was nearly always a good thing. Information helped us to develop and sustain our culture; information and communication have made us constantly wealthier, healthier and more tolerant. It is because of information that we understand how to overcome the basic challenges of life (Shenk, 1997; Melgoza *et al*, 2002).

Obviously, because of the above reasons, our society can be described as an information society, one that truly relies on the provision of information of any kind but also one that produces so much information that it is nearly impossible for us to process it anymore (Shenk, 1997; Melgoza *et al*, 2002).

Another important issue raised by Lyon (1988) is that of so-called 'garbage information', i.e. information about socially undesirable products and electronic trivia, e.g. computer and video games with a violent or war theme, as well as abusive sexually related information.

The development of the World Wide Web (WWW) facilitated a unique opportunity for distribution of multimedia information and interactivity between suppliers and consumers, nevertheless, the information available on the Internet is chaotic and loosely structured, mainly due to its immaturity and the lack of any type of standardisation (Cooper *et al*, 1998). The main obstacle for making effective use of the Internet is that people are often faced with too much information. As there is a vast amount of information available, users can get easily confused and frustrated when they do not immediately find what they were searching for.

Figure 2.2 illustrates the rather complicated pathway for a PC user to the information he/she is looking for.

Figure 2.2: Pathways to tourism information on the WWW (adapted from Sheldon, 1997: 91)

KPMG (1998) stated that there were 320 million pages available on the WWW in 1998. This number has snowballed during the last seven years and a simple search for 'and' on google.com gives you 5.5 billion results, a search for the word 'tourism' about 136 million results. The development of search engines has helped to ease the use of the WWW; however, it is still easy to get distracted or lost during a search (O'Connor, 1999). Therefore, it is absolutely necessary for companies, tourism offices, destinations etc. to make their Uniform Resource Locator (URL) address known to the public in order to ease accessibility. The best way to do this is through brochures and print advertisements (Hyung-Soo and Baler, 1998).

Melgoza *et al* (2002) state that unlimited access to the Internet and extensive availability of electronic resources offers almost unrestricted access for users for their research. Nevertheless, the overwhelming ease of use and supply of information forces users to sort and filter through the wealth of information and even forces them sometimes to make an educated guess regarding their reliability and validity. Melgoza *et al* (2002) argue that accessibility ranked as the most influential factor considered when people search for information (their study focused on students and faculty in the aspect of library resources). Part of the information overload issue is the high demand for information to be available 24/7. We live in the computer age and people perceive the Internet to possess higher accessibility, as well as it being more convenient and easier to use than traditional sources of information.

Although one of the most used and most visible Information Technologies, the Internet is not the only IT used within the tourism industry. The next section gives an insight into ITs and their usage within the tourism industry.

### **2.3 Information Technology and its use within the tourism industry**

Information has been referred to as the lifeblood of the tourism industry (Sheldon, 1993a), and there is a general agreement within the literature that the tourism industry is a very information intensive one. The tourist requires information before going on a trip (planning and destination choice) and during the trip (especially for independent travellers) (O'Connor, 1999). Goodall and Ashworth (1998) also mentioned that tourists need information about destinations in order to make an informed decision. While the process of the tourism information search will be dealt with later on in this literature review, the importance (and role) of Information Technologies (ITs) within the tourism industry will be outlined below. As briefly outlined above, the exchange of information is an important part in the sales cycle of the tourism product (Pollock, 1995a). It is essential that information is able to flow fast and efficiently between customers, intermediaries and suppliers. This is one of the reasons why Information Technology has become a major global feature of the tourism industry (Bennett, 1993).

According to Buhalis (2000) Information Technologies have revolutionised the tourism industry and therefore changed the competitiveness within the tourism industry (organisations and destinations) during the last decade. In particular the Internet and World Wide Web have reformed communications between the supply and demand side. Organisations and/or destinations are now able to present their products and/or services on a global level using multimedia interfaces. As a consequence, most organisations within the tourism industry had to rethink their operational and marketing strategies and rearrange their practices in order to benefit from the newly introduced tools, (Buhalis, 2000). Buhalis (1998: 409) furthermore states that 'only creative and innovative suppliers will be able to survive the competition in the new millennium'. The most apparent example of re-modelling is the booking process, which enables consumers (and the industry) to save considerable time in identifying, mixing, reserving and purchasing tourism products. Finally, consumers will be able to browse through the Internet and identify a diversity of products and/or services in order to make an informed decision regarding their travelling

preferences. The focus is shifting towards individual travel and flexible packages, targeting mini-segments, (Buhalis, 1998). He also suggests that the organisations and/or destinations neglecting the significance of Information Technology will ultimately risk their competitiveness within the tourism industry. He furthermore argues that 'the future success of tourism organisations and destinations will be determined by a combination of innovative management and marketing, intellect and vision, as well as strategic use of advanced Information Technologies' (Buhalis, 1998: 420).

Frew (2000) argues that the growth and development of the tourism industry is probably only reflected by one other growth curve, that of the Information and Communications Technologies (ICT). The increasing interaction between the two industries has brought fundamental changes on the tourism industry (Frew, 2000). Frew (2000) furthermore argues that if the past two decades have seen an emphasis on Information Technology as such, then the past five years have witnessed the truly transformational effect of the communications technologies. The next two decades will see whether or not ICTs will bring a transformation to the tourism industry (Frew, 2000). Interestingly, Frew does not outline the difference between Information Technology (IT) and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) within his article. It is therefore just an assumption that while IT only incorporates technological applications, only ICT recognises the significance of means of communication within technological appliances. However, Bennett (1993) has defined IT as a combination of computing, communications and electronics. Therefore it is assumed that Frew (2000) created the term ICT in order to stress the increasing importance of communication for not only the tourism industry the future.

How IT and tourism work together was documented by Chaudhary (2000) taking India as an example. Her findings outline that, although India does not lag behind in IT developments from the rest of the world, the acceptance of IT within India's tourism industry is very low. Managers and entrepreneurs are aware of the facilities available, yet they are reluctant to use them as they are unclear about the appropriateness of certain

systems for their purposes, (Chaudhary, 2000). Chaudhary furthermore identified certain barriers that are not only related to IT in India but worldwide. The high cost of installation is a main barrier and lack of trained staff, ineffectiveness of communication, tight control of information system companies being the most important ones (Chaudhary, 2000). Chaudhary concludes that company-specific information systems (IS) are becoming increasingly important in big companies; for smaller companies it is difficult to justify the cost of creating an IS using computer technology and, finally, lack of trained staff (Chaudhary, 2000). This research has shown that although IT may be widespread and well known; however, that does not mean that companies will make use of it no matter what.

Bennett (1995) has adopted a more marketing related perspective when researching the impact of IT on tourism. Bennett stresses the importance of new opportunities for communicating with the consumer. Due to the unique characteristics of the tourism product, it offers itself for new channels of distribution, e.g. interactive television, PC-activated online networks and multimedia kiosks to mention just a few ways in which information can be directed directly to the consumer (Bennett, 1995). However, she hesitates calling it a 'revolution' and rather sticks to the less controversial term 'development'. Bennett (1995) states that when examining the ways in which IT is extending consumer access to tourist information, the key component is communication. The impact of IT on tourism is reflected in the characteristics of the tourism product. It cannot be looked at prior to consumption and the main means of distribution of information is text-based materials (brochures, websites) and travel agents. Therefore the scope for extending communication channels directly into people's homes is immense. A very important issue is that direct communication with the consumer is not only possible but long overdue. (Bennett, 1995). IT is having and will continue to have a key role in the distribution of tourism related information. The scope for broadening the means by which consumers access information is increased. Finally, Bennett (1995) suggests that 'evolution' may be a better term than 'revolution' when talking about the development of IT in tourism.

The Internet has changed the way consumers make choices. Once, the consumer was the king. The corner bakery knew your weekly order, doctors made house calls and fresh dairy products were delivered to your door – and it seems that this era is returning as consumers lay down the web rules on the Internet (Murphy, 2000). Murphy furthermore states that this was a time when the consumers had power, they expected to be treated well, top quality goods, best possible prices, they were kings and queens and they were always right – and a merchant who did not respect those rules, he wasn't a merchant very long (Murphy, 2000). Nowadays, millions of people go on the Internet, do research, play games and buy online and that is only the beginning. Information is power, and the power is being transferred from producers to consumers (Murphy, 2000).

The Internet is the most visible IT for consumer and has impacted on the tourism industry in a very particular way. One could argue that the Internet and the tourism industry complement each other, as the next section outlines below.

### **2.3.1 The Internet and Tourism – a match made in heaven?**

Research about tourism and the Internet tends to mostly cover the areas of selling (e-commerce), marketing and the effects on travel agents. Little research is done on the more important aspect of information provision and building relationship with consumers. The following section briefly outlines aspects of the relationships between tourism and the Internet from early beginnings to the future and Virtual Reality.

Law (2000: 67) states that 'the WWW has changed the traditional way people go about searching for information'. More people getting connected will increase this number in the future. Furthermore, a search for travel and tourism information on the Internet is clearly more beneficial than doing it the traditional way (e.g. in the library). The main advantage for the consumer is that the desired information can be accessed anywhere (as long as there

is a computer connected to the Internet) at anytime and for as long as needed. Likewise, suppliers have the possibility to offer and sell their tourism products online, (Law, 2000).

One of the first articles on tourism and the Internet is by Smith and Jenner (1998). They outline that, although it is well recognised that the use of the Internet is growing, it is still unclear and difficult to predict exactly how it will change the way business is done. Smith and Jenner (1998) point out that although the selling of tourism products is still very limited, the potential for the tourism industry seems excellent. Furthermore they state that the main ways the Internet influences our society are the following: the Internet changes the way companies do business with each other, the way people search for information of all kinds, the way people communicate, the way people make decisions (which will be further discussed) and the way people purchase goods and services (Smith and Jenner, 1998). Reading this one might think, ‘how did we do it before the Internet came along?’ However, the authors remain sceptical whether or not the Internet will live up to these expectations.

“With the development of new interactive media, consumers have acquired even more power. By using the Internet and intelligent search agents, consumers can obtain considerable information on the various prices and qualities of products. Markets become more transparent to them. With new interactive media, consumers can take the initiative to communicate, retrieve the information they want when and where they want it, and then, if they choose, order various products and services” (Antonides and van Raaij, 1998: 2). This quote outlines how new media, and especially the Internet, has helped the consumers to become more powerful. These days you do not have to buy what the suppliers tell you, but due to large amounts of information being available, it is possible for consumers to make their own choices. They are the ones dictating the market rather than the suppliers.

Legohérel *et al* (2000) have examined the balance of power between seller and consumer when purchasing a tourism product on the Internet. They argue that the tourism product itself corresponds to a complex purchase which involves the consumer and a search for

information before the final choice is made. In order to make a justified decision, the consumer tries to materialise the desired product or rather service. Its characteristics and secondary information help the consumer making a decision. Legohérel *et al* (2000) also state that within their study the consumers' behaviour differs according to the communication situation (e.g. computer-mediated on the Internet or face-to-face). Interestingly, communication via a computer network is more direct and more intense, which leads to a reduced listening capacity of the purchaser as they remain focused on their own concerns. Consumers are more critical; however they perceive the information just as valuable as if it was delivered face-to-face. Finally, it is important to mention that the influence of the seller is stronger during a face-to-face contact and it is often possible to direct the consumer's final purchasing decision, (Legohérel *et al*, 2000).

There still remains the question whether certain aspects of the Internet will pose a threat to tourism. While Virtual Reality could prove to jeopardise tourism destinations in the future, gambling on the Internet could easily replace gambling tourism because of limited numbers of legalised gambling and gaming destinations. Au and Perry Hobson (1997) analysed the impact that gambling on the Internet could have on the tourism industry. Eventually, Internet casinos will be able to pose a threat to traditional casinos, as the number of Internet users is still growing. Casinos are already in competition with 'traditional' tourist attractions for the tourist's disposable income and the Internet could easily become an alternative or substitute. Au and Perry Hobson (1997) conclude that there will be few effects on casinos due to different target markets. Internet casinos will basically change the contemporary nature of gambling as the casino will come to the gambler and not the other way around; finally, casinos will benefit as home access to gambling will probably widen the interest for gambling. What can be seen from this research is that something that seems to be a threat to tourism can be used in order to benefit traditional travelling.

The most extreme case of the relationship between tourism and the Internet is Virtual Reality. As already mentioned, it has been suggested that Virtual Reality could actually

replace tourism, which will probably not happen as 'real' destinations are still much more desirable than 'virtual' ones.

'Virtual Reality is an interactive computer-generated medium that allows participants to create simulated experiences of both real and unreal situations' (Perry Hobson and Williams, 1994: 125). Perry Hobson and Williams (1994) suggest that, as the technology of Virtual Reality quickly develops, it will have the potential to not only revolutionise the tourism industry, but also to redefine it. Therefore, Virtual Reality will have wide-ranging impacts on the future development of the tourism industry as it provides a new channel of distribution, redefines theme parks and eventually leads to the creation of artificial travel (Perry Hobson and Williams, 1994). Although Virtual Reality will definitely not be able to replace traditional tourism, it might be able to offer a new world of virtual travelling for disabled persons or help the conservation of highly fragile environments (e.g. the rainforests). Virtual Reality is also able to offer consumers a 'holiday in the past', something that can clearly not be offered otherwise. There is a whole range of alternative tourism; however, there remains the threat that the virtual experience or holiday might not live up to the tourists' expectations, (Perry Hobson and Williams, 1994). Finally, it has to be said that Virtual Reality is standing at the dawn of its impact on our society and the tourism industry is certainly only one small factor in the impact of this technology in the coming decades. Unquestionably, there will be advantages and drawbacks as well as opportunities and threats for the tourism industry, however, Virtual Reality will never be able to replace a 'real' tourist experience even the experience was negative one, (Perry Hobson and Williams, 1994).

Information Technology has had an enormous impact on the tourism industry; however, the ultimate decision on holidays will be made by consumers. Therefore, it is important to take a closer look at consumer behaviour in tourism.

## 2.4 Consumer behaviour

Consumer behaviour has been defined by various authors (either marketing- or tourism-related); however, their definitions often vary and highlight different aspects within the process of choosing a product or service and purchasing it.

One of the simplest definitions is from Horner and Swarbrooke (1996) who define consumer behaviour as the study of why people buy the products they do, and how they make their decisions (Horner and Swarbrooke, 1996). Although this interpretation contains all the key actions (decision and purchase), it lacks certain depth and detail as consumer behaviour in general, and specifically the decision-making process, are rather complicated concepts. This is especially evident in tourism where the product/service is rather intangible and often high risk; the decision-making process involves the consideration of a lot of different questions that need to be answered in order for people to make decisions. Additionally, the definition itself is only concerned with the core of the decision-making process and how the decision is finally made. Other authors (also cited within this chapter) suggest that the consumption and/or disposition of the goods and services are also a (significant) part of consumer behaviour.

In agreement with the previous definition, Engel *et al* (1995) have enhanced the basic aspects of the previous quote and state that 'consumer behaviour is those activities directly involved in obtaining, consuming, and disposing of products and services including the decision processes that precedes and follows these actions' (Engel *et al*, 1995: 4). This interpretation highlights the psychological process in which the consumer engages during the pre- and post-purchase stages of the consumer behaviour process. Also emphasised is the fact that the process is not completed once the product has been consumed once, rather that it goes on, e.g. re-purchase or an alternative purchase.

Within his definition of consumer behaviour, Solomon (1999) distinguishes between group and individual decisions, including several consumption possibilities in order to fulfil ones

needs and desires. It suggests that consumers make decisions to satisfy deficiencies. His definition reads as follows: 'It [consumer behaviour] is the study of the process involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires' (Solomon, 1999: 7). However, it is important to understand tourists' needs and desires, as they are often shaped by tour operators who constantly keep trying to influence the consumers in terms of buying decisions. Still, the question of what kinds of needs and desires tourism fulfils or, better to say, tries to fulfil remains. Edwards (1996) has argued that it is identification of self that is the key role of desire. An argument that is also underpinned by Desforges (2000) is that the complete process of anticipation of holidays, the travelling, and the telling of holiday stories after returning are all tied into an imagination and performance that enables tourists to think of themselves as particular sorts of persons (Desforges, 2000). Edwards (1996) argues that the central motivating structures in the tourism process itself are conspiring to create and sustain tourist desire and fantasy. In other words, Edwards suggests that tourism is based on creating myths and selling them to consumers.

As consumer behaviour is seen as a process that usually starts with problem recognition (Swarbrooke and Horner, 1999), the argument that consumer behaviour is best understood as problem-solving behaviour is fully valid (Huffman *et al*, 2000). On the other hand, do consumers really feel that something is missing in their life until they engage in certain activities (e.g. looking at brochures or websites) that make them sense a problem and believe that they are not completely satisfied with their lives and it would be more fulfilled if they went on a holiday. People try to use holidays to shape their lives, to give their lives more or a better meaning, however, they are highly influenced by the media, which has the power to convince the consumers that a particular product reflects who they are or rather who they want to be (Cohen and Taylor, 1998).

Wilkie (1994) highlighted the importance of consumer behaviour being an activity that engages the consumer mentally, emotionally and physically. He also chose to not only incorporate the words 'select, purchase and use' but also 'dispose of products/services' in

order to 'satisfy needs and desires'. Again, the intention is contentment with the product/service in order to make life more pleasant. Hence, for Wilkie, consumer behaviour is 'the mental, emotional, and physical activities that people engage in when selecting, purchasing, using, and disposing of products and services so as to satisfy needs and desires' (Wilkie, 1994:14). More specific is the following interpretation of consumer behaviour by Schiffman and Kanuk (1997) who do not only consider the way in which people make decisions but also stress the importance that various resources are spent. For them, 'the study of consumer behaviour is the study of how individuals make decisions to spend their available resources (time, money, effort) on consumption-related items. It includes the study of what they buy, why they buy it, when they buy it, where they buy it, how often they buy it, and how often they use it' (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1997: 6).

Another definition by Loudon and Della Bitta (1993) emphasises the fact that consumer behaviour is a decision process. Interestingly, it is mentioned that consumer behaviour is a physical activity rather than a mental activity (decisions are usually made by considering various alternatives). Loudon and Della Bitta define consumer behaviour as 'the decision process and physical activity individuals engage in when evaluating, acquiring, using, or disposing of goods and services' (Loudon and Della Bitta, 1993: 5).

Hawkins *et al* (1998) mention in their definition of consumer behaviour that not only individuals or groups but also organisations engage in this process of dealing with products/services, experiences and ideas, again in order to satisfy needs. However, this interpretation also highlights the importance of the impact that consumer behaviour processes have on the consumer him/herself, other consumers and the society he/she lives in. Therefore, 'the field of consumer behaviour is the study of individuals, groups, or organisations and the processes they use to select, secure, use, and dispose of products, services, experiences, or ideas to satisfy needs and the impacts that these processes have on the consumer and society' (Hawkins *et al*, 1998: 7).

Moutinho's (1987; 2000) interpretation of consumer behaviour is partly written for consumer behaviour in tourism and, therefore, of greater use within this thesis. It also highlights the fact that consumer behaviour is a process starting with the search for information and usually ending with a purchase of a certain product or service and its evaluation. The definition reads as follows: 'Consumer behaviour refers to the process of acquiring and organising information in the direction of a purchase decision and of using and evaluating products and services. This process encompasses the stages of searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services' (Moutinho, 1987:5 and 2000: 41). The significance of this definition for this thesis lies in the phrase 'process of acquiring and organising information'. Moutinho is the only author that mentions information search as a vital part of the consumer behaviour (decision-making) process. Moutinho describes the decision-making process as a very business-like activity whereas, in real life, this process is often much more chaotic as people are less organised as expressed. Although this process helps with carrying out a major decision it should also involve fun, as it is not a research exercise. Therefore a huge responsibility lies within the producers to make the information search both interesting and fun by having organised but playful websites (or brochures).

Having identified some of the general consumer behaviour definitions, some authors suggest interpretations of tourist behaviour. Seaton's (1999) definition of tourist consumer behaviour is built on the words 'choose' and 'goals and satisfactions'. It emphasises the importance of free will to decide to travel and that this happens in pursuit with one's needs and desires. Seaton defines tourist behaviour therefore 'as the study of the ways in which people choose to engage in, negotiate and experience travel away from their normal place of residence in pursuit of particular goals and satisfactions' (Seaton in Pender, 1999: 60).

On the other hand, Gilbert (1991) offers a more critical view of tourist behaviour and how it is seen within the literature: 'The simplistic view of tourist behaviour should be rejected and replaced with a new understanding of the tourist as a consumer who demonstrates particular actions of behaviour' (Gilbert, 1991 in Hudson and Gilbert in Woodside *et al*,

2000:138). Hudson and Gilbert (2000) therefore suggest that 'these actions involve the needs, motivation, attitudes, values, personality and perceptions which all lead to specific preferences for tourism-related activities. To carry this argument further, the study of tourist consumer behaviour should not only seek to understand the choice process of tourists, but should endeavour to comprehend the range of constraints preventing non-tourists from becoming tourists' (Hudson and Gilbert in Woodside *et al*, 2000: 138). This critical statement of what tourist consumer behaviour is and what its study should comprise opens up a new range of research possibilities within the field of consumer behaviour research, especially the study of why some people do not travel. It may be true that most people who do not travel simply cannot afford it or that their jobs are just too demanding; however, it must also be taken into consideration that some people might not even want to travel as they are absolutely happy and satisfied by being at home and do not wish to 'get away' or 'escape'.

Although some definitions vary in terms of words and depth, the general message is the same: consumer behaviour is seen as a process in which individuals or sometimes groups decide which product or service they will purchase, and after usage decide whether or not it is worth buying again or start looking for alternatives.

Within tourism, this process is usually more complex, as tourism products and services differ greatly from 'normal' products, e.g. books or food. Hence, the travel decision-making process will be dealt with in the next section, starting with tourist motivation.

#### 2.4.1 Tourist Motivation – Escape vs. Self Discovery

*'The shortest way to oneself leads around the globe.'*

Hermann Graf Keyserling (quoted in Krippendorf, 1999)

Before going into details and explanations between the escape and self discovery theory, it is important to show that tourism can be significant, especially if consumed in order to achieve a certain identity. Consumption leads to building of identity and tourism plays an important role in it. Escape and self discovery can be seen as part of our identity: if I do not like my life I can escape to a different destination (on holiday) to find myself again. However, escape can also be seen as stepping out of one's identity into another, one that is more like we want to be, therefore escape can be seen as a step towards self discovery.

Tourist motivation theory often revolves around the issues of self-discovery and escape from the everyday life as the main, primary motives for going on holiday. However, Rojek states that 'curiosity was one of the strongest motives behind travel for pleasure' (1993: 199).

Desforges (2000) studied the experiences of tourists who had just been to Peru on (mainly) trekking holidays, in order to determine the issue of self-discovery as a motivation for travelling. The issues of tourism and concepts of 'personhood' can be divided in several aspects. Within the relationship between tourism and identity, tourism can be seen as caught up in an ongoing and never-ending process of identification (Abram *et al*, 1997). Urry (1995), on the other hand, argues that tourism is producing new identities e.g. 'the European'. Additionally, there is MacCannell's argument, the search for the authentic (MacCannell, 1999) that was already mentioned and explained earlier. Cone (1995) identified that tourism practices and the ways in which they are imagined and enacted, become central to the construction of the self. Various other authors have stated different concepts of combining tourism and self-discovery, however, most tourism studies focusing

on personhood indicate different viewpoints. Some have a tendency towards tourist identity (what kind of person the tourist wants to become). The complete process of anticipation of holidays, the travelling, and the telling of holiday stories after returning are all tied into an imagination and performance that enables tourists to think of themselves as particular sorts of persons (Desforges, 2000). Different focuses become apparent within the study of personhood: connections between the individual and a wider social group as well as a more individualistic sense of personhood concentrating on the kind of person one is rather than his/her class status (Desforges, 2000). Giddens (1991) points out the importance of a production of an ongoing story about the self so that the individual can provide her/himself with a sense of continuity in their identity. The construction of self-identity happens through a reflexive biography in order to decide among possible future lifestyles, a future that is constructed as a terrain of opportunities and risks. Giddens (1991) refers to this process as 'self actualisation', an idea of what it means to live life to the full.

Within Desforges' study, the decision to start travelling was mostly linked to moments when self identity is open to question.

The issues raised included: experiences that contrast with experiences at home, giving a feeling of moving onwards; construction of a new sense of oneself and ones self-worth for the next period in life; homecoming, storytelling and sharing moments; going away is associated with independence, experience, authority, and a separate and self-sufficient self. All these issues contribute to the (tourism) motive of self-discovery. The other main tourist motivation often referred to is escape.

Cohen and Taylor (1992) argue that people can be at home in the working world but feel the need to 'get out of themselves'. They can cope with the daily routine but every now and then 'things can get on top of you'. The familiarity of the regime can be endured, but sometimes 'you simply have to get away from it all'. Self-discipline is tolerable, but sometimes you have to 'let your hair down'. (Cohen and Taylor, 1992). This paragraph highlights the argument for tourism being an escape-aid, an attempt to escape from the

daily routine of the working world and dive into a more exciting and interesting, somehow strange and maybe even dangerous world. Cohen and Taylor (1992) furthermore state that the most conventionalised way that our society provides from all these above mentioned impulses is the holiday, which is a setting where constraints can be relaxed if not rejected, identities slip if not disappear, a place where lives are rejuvenated if not changed. They argue that like any other everyday escape, the holiday is a small scale replica of the great escape messages of our culture, (Cohen and Taylor, 1992). These are all very strong arguments and may even contribute to the building of the illusion that a holiday can change one's life completely. People can be influenced to buy a certain holiday that could change their lives; however, they may be highly disappointed when this does not happen.

As well as escape, Cohen and Taylor (1992) also briefly mention that one goes on a holiday, on a voyage of self-discovery. However, escape remains their main tourism motive, arguing that escape is the definite message behind the packaging, selling and arranging of holidays as travel brochures and advertisements are highly saturated with escape messages, e.g. get away from it all, relax, be yourself, leave your worries at home, enter a new and exciting world etc. Some people want more from their holidays than just relaxation; they want to relive and have an authentic experience, and they want to see life as it really is and to be with the natives. However, for those tourists certain staged back regions are created: a space for outsiders to view the inner operations of various commercial or domestic institutions (Cohen and Taylor, 1992). Certainly, these experiences may not be authentic and probably can be quite disappointing for the tourists.

Holidays have become a commodity, they follow patterns and rituals; however, this does not strip it of its escape functions. Even when tourists are searching for an authentic experience and they see through the staged authenticity of the tourist setting, they laugh about it. They can comment ironically on their disappointment in not finding it (Cohen and Taylor, 1992).

Very rarely can holidays really change our mode of being in the world, mostly holidays are just excursions from the domains of the paramount reality (where people find themselves in their lives) (Cohen and Taylor, 1992).

Both self-discovery and escape can be identified as main motivations for travelling, however, certain important distinctions have to be made. Whereas the issue of escape often can be connected with relaxation and rejuvenating, e.g. by lying on the beach for a couple of weeks, a holiday in order to discover oneself usually involves a certain amount of adventure and danger, e.g. trekking in the Andes. Tourist motivation is a very personal thing – different people like different things and different holidays are right for them.

Whereas many authors seem to have multiple, mostly quite complex, explanations of why people travel, no-one seems to consider that some people may only travel because they like it, i.e. because it lifts them out of their everyday lives. They may have an interest in getting to know different cultures and seeing different countries prior to relaxing, getting away from something or discovering oneself. This is probably why everyone likes to go on holidays; it gives them a better sense of being alive. This furthermore overlaps with some of the arguments mentioned above. However, travel itself in the sense of learning and seeing something new rather than the act of travel (i.e. the mode of transport) is very rarely considered as a motive and mostly as a secondary rather than a primary.

It is indisputable that there is a lack of authenticity in our lives and that is probably the main reason that tourism has become over-important in our lives; it is, in one way or another, the only thing that gives us meaning. Tourism producers use this to compose their advertising messages and images in order to sell their products.

#### **2.4.2 Decision-making process models**

Within decision-making, there are two different types of models that have to be distinguished. Firstly, there are models of destination choice, e.g. Um and Crompton's (1990) Model of the Pleasure Travel Destination Choice Process and Woodside and Lysonski's (1989) General Model of Traveller Leisure Destination Awareness and Choice. Um and Crompton's (1990) model conceptualised destination choice as having two phases – a generic phase which addresses the essential issue of whether or not to have a holiday at all, and a second phase which is concerned with the actual destination choice of where to go, (Hudson, 1999). Um and Crompton (1990) made use of concepts that were described as external inputs, internal inputs, or cognitive constructs. External inputs are all social interactions and marketing communications to which the traveller is exposed; internal inputs includes personal characteristics, motives, values, and attitudes; cognitive constructs correspond to the combination of the internal and external inputs into the awareness as well as the evoked set of destinations. The authors used a two stage approach to destination choice, the evolution of an evoked set from the awareness set and then the destination selection from the evoked set. Um and Crompton's (1990) results showed that attitude was important in determining whether a potential destination was selected as part of the evoked set and in selecting a final destination (Hudson, 1999).

Figure 2.3: Um and Crompton's Model of the Pleasure Travel Destination Choice Process (adapted from Hudson, 1999)

Woodside and Lysonski (1989) also presented a model on destination choice, however, their work was built on findings from cognitive and behavioural psychology, marketing and travel and tourism (Hudson, 1999). Their research findings showed that a consumer who transfers the service or product from long-term memory into working memory in response to awareness is likely to choose this service/product for purchase.

Figure 2.4: Woodside and Lysonski's General Model of Traveller Leisure Destination Awareness and Choice (adapted from Hudson, 1999)

Secondly and more importantly, there are the actual models of consumer behaviour in tourism. They are plentiful (Nicosia, 1966; Howard and Sheth, 1969; Wahab *et al*, 1976; Schmöll, 1977; Mayo and Jarvis, 1981; Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Moutinho, 1987; Middleton, 1988; etc.) and range from very simple to very complex models that aim to explain the process in which a tourist makes decisions.

Hudson (1999) refers to the traditional models of consumer behaviour as the 'grand models' and states that they have been used or even transformed by authors interested in this topic area. Two of the earliest models of consumer behaviour are the Andreason (1965) and Nicosia (1966) models (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007).

The most commonly quoted of all consumer behaviour models is the Howard-Sheth model of buyer behaviour which was presented in 1969 (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007). The model is significant as it 'highlights the importance of inputs to the consumer buying process and suggests ways in which the consumer orders these inputs before making a final decision' (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007: 42). Even though the Howard-Sheth model has its limitations and does not explain all purchasing behaviour, it was a thorough theory of buyer behaviour that was developed as a result of empirical research (Horton, 1984 in Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007) which is something that cannot be said about all decision-making process models.

Figure 2.5: Howard-Sheth model of buyer behaviour (adapted from Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007)

Another early model was the Wahab, Crampon, and Rothfield Model of Consumer Behaviour (Wahab *et al.*, 1976). The model itself is rather simple and linear and acknowledges that the holiday purchase is unique in that there is no tangible return on investment, considerable expenditure in relation to earned income, a purchase is not spontaneous, and an expenditure that involves saving and preplanning (Hudson, 1999). All this makes the tourist even more sensitive to disappointment. Even a simple thing that goes wrong can ruin the entire holiday experience.

Figure 2.6: Wahab, Crampon, and Rothfield Model of Consumer Behaviour (adapted from Hudson, 1999)

Schmöll (1977) built a model based on two of the earliest consumer behaviour models, the Howard and Sheth (1969) model and the Nicosia (1966) model. The model was built on the following premises:

- Influence of four sets of variables: customer goals, travel opportunities, communications effort, intervening/independent variables
- Identification of these sets of variables and their individual components
- Decision is the result of a distinct process involving several consecutive stages or phases.

(Hudson, 1999).

Schmöll's (1977) is composed of four fields (please see below):

- Field 1: external stimuli
- Field 2: travel needs and desires determined by personality, socio-economic factors, attitudes, values.
- Field 3: External variables, e.g. destination image, confidence in travel intermediaries, previous experience, cost and time constraints.

- **Field 4: Destination/service-related characteristics that influence the decision process and outcome, e.g. attractions at the destination.**

(Hudson, 1999; Swarbrooke and Horner, 1999)

**Figure 2.7: Schmöll's model of the Travel Decision Process (adapted from Hudson, 1999)**

Even though Schmöll's model has been utilised in tourism research, it has several limitations, according to Hudson (1999). Firstly, the model is descriptive and even though it shows the relevant variables and their interrelationships, it cannot be quantified. Secondly, the model is not a tool for prediction and it cannot be used as a basis for the forecasting of demand for a destination or service. On a positive side, it has to be acknowledged that Schmöll's (1977) model is the only one that pays attention to constraints and their impact on the decision-making process. An important issue since

every age group has particular constraints that will not allow them to go travelling at one time or another.

Mayo and Jarvis' (1981) work is for the context of this study. They believe that the travel behaviour of individuals can be explained by the length of the decision-making process and by the influence of psychological factors on a person's choice. They also highlight the importance of culture and subculture as well as social class within one of their models.

Mayo and Jarvis' (1981) Decision-Making Continuum (see below) distinguishes between routine decision-making and extensive decision-making. Within routine decision-making the traveller decides quickly and with very little mental effort (Hudson, 1999). An example could be a tourist responding to a special offer of a short break that is only available for a limited amount of time. On the other end of the continuum, extensive decision-making involves a considerable amount of time and effort searching for information and evaluating the choices available to them (Hudson, 1999), and an example could be a traveller planning a 'once in a lifetime' trip to a far away destination.

Furthermore Mayo and Jarvis (1981) emphasise the importance of internal and external influences i.e. psychological and social factors that shape the travellers' choices. The model on the next page illustrates how the traveller is influenced by internal factors – personality, learning, motives, attitude, perception – as well as external factors – role and family influence, social classes, culture and subculture, reference groups (Hudson, 1999; Wall and Mathieson, 2006).

'Perception is the process by which an individual selects, organises, and interprets information to create a meaningful picture of the world. Learning refers to changes in an individual's behaviour based on experiences. Personality is associated with the patterns of behaviour and the mental structures that related behaviour and experience in an orderly way. Motives are thought of as internal energising forces that direct a person's behaviour toward the achievement of personal goals. Attitudes consist of knowledge and positive or negative feelings about an object, an event, or another person' (Hudson, 1999: 21). Even

though these psychological factors are of great importance, they do not operate within a vacuum so it is important to acknowledge the social factors as well. As stressed previously in this literature review, culture and social class play an important role in people's behaviour. Despite mentioning these external influences, Mayo and Jarvis' (1981) model does not consider external stimuli important in other models, such as market variables in Woodside and Lysonski (1989) or travel stimuli and external variables in Schmöll (1977) (Hudson, 1999) but despite that, the model offers a range of factors that are important to this particular study but have not been included in other models.

Figure 2.8: Mayo and Jarvis' Decision-Making Continuum (adapted from Hudson, 1999)

Figure 2.9: Major influences on Individual Travel Behaviour (Mayo and Jarvis, 1981 adapted from Hudson, 1999)

Swarbrooke and Horner (1999) offer a look at a very basic version of Mathieson and Wall's (1982) model which illustrates the decision-making process as involving five principal phases:

Figure 2.10: Mathieson and Wall's Decision-Making Process Model (simple form; adapted from Swarbrooke and Horner, 1999)

In its complex form, the model also offers a tourist profile, trip features, destination resources and characteristics (Hudson, 1999).

Figure 2.11: Mathieson and Wall's Decision-Making Process Model (complex form; adapted from Hudson, 1999)

Various authors (e.g. Gilbert, 1991) have criticised Mathieson and Wall's model for passing over important aspects such as perception, memory, personality, information processing etc. which are considered the basis of traditional models, however, it has to be noted that Mathieson and Wall's (1982) model was designed only to indicate that the impacts of tourism are the consequence of tourist decisions and that the impacts are dynamic, changing and dependent on destination features, trip characteristics as well as personal and behavioural attributes of the tourist (Hudson, 1999).

One of the more recently presented models is Moutinho's (1987) Vacation Tourist Behaviour Model. Moutinho's efforts to create a model of tourist decision-making started out in 1982 with a three page long model that was then simplified in 1987. The model itself is divided into three parts based on the common distinction between pre- and post-purchase parts in consumer decision-making processes.

Moutinho's (1987) three stages are as follows:

- (1) Predecision and Decision Processes involve the stages from stimuli to making an actual purchase decision. The three areas are included – preference structured, decision and purchase. Moutinho points out that the total tourist product is often purchased in a sequence and not as a tour package. Preferences are based on a set of factors including internal influences (culture, values, class, etc.) and individual determinants (personality, lifestyle, motives). Hence the decision to purchase is heavily influenced by culture
- (2) Postpurchase Evaluation is labelled as 'satisfaction/dissatisfaction' in Moutinho's model. It relates to a quality/price ratio that the tourist evaluates in his mind and will return to when it comes to the third stage.
- (3) Future Decision Making considers repeat buying probabilities of tourist products and services. Three occurrences are possible: straight rebuy, future rebuy and modified rebuy or alternatively, the tourist could go and buy a product/service from a competitor which is a result of hesitation or refusal to buy the product/service again.

One thing that is rather unique about Moutinho's model is that he considers destination choice as a compulsory sub-decision among other travel decisions, e.g. travel mode, timing, budget, intermediaries that come as a third step once the need for travel has been established, information has been reflected about and before travel preparation, (Moutinho, 1987).

Figure 2.12: Moutinho's Vacation Tourist Behaviour Model (adapted from Decrop, 1999)

A year after Moutinho's (simplified) model was released, Middleton (1988) presented a less comprehensive model of tourist-buyer behaviour, the so-called 'Stimulus Response' Model of Buyer Behaviour. Middleton's model consists of four interactive components

with the focal component identified as 'buyer characteristics and decision process' which also incorporates motivation. The first two parts are inputs (stimulus input, communication channels) which can be manipulated by advertising, while the final component represents the purchase output. The importance of friends/family/reference groups has also been acknowledged. Middleton (1988) puts particular emphasis on motivation, which he sees 'as the dynamic process in buyer behaviour, bridging the gap between the felt need and the decision to act or purchase' (Hudson, 1999: 27). Actions on purchase are linked directly to motivations, which consecutively are linked to the buyers' characteristics defined earlier in the model. Furthermore, product satisfaction is seen as the most powerful means of influencing future purchasing behaviour and provides a link between post-purchase and the decision process in this particular model. Similarly to Middleton, Mouthinho has also provided this specific link in his model, (Hudson, 1999).

Figure 2.13: A Stimulus Response Model of Buyer Behaviour (adapted from Middleton, 1988)

Middleton and Clark presented an 'updated' version of Middleton's model in 2001; however, the actual model was not changed at all.

#### **2.4.2.1 Critique**

Numerous authors (too many to mention) have critiqued the above models for their lack of accuracy. Common weaknesses highlighted are that the models limit their significance in explaining the complex way in which purchase decisions are made in tourism and make it challenging for tourism marketers to employ them when developing marketing strategies (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007).

Some of the most popular critiques are that the models themselves are based on little or no empirical research and there is indeed little evidence that the decision-making process actually happens that way. Additionally, most models assume that a tourist will always follow the same process when making a decision; one exception is Mayo and Jarvis' (1981) model that acknowledges the difference between routine and extensive decision-making. Swarbrooke and Horner (1999, 2007) also acknowledge this by stating that it is questionable whether or not the decision-making process remains constant regardless of the nature of the holiday being purchased. Another argument is that most of these traditional models are around 15 years old (as mentioned previously the most quoted one is actually over 35 years old) and they do not acknowledge what is of great importance for this particular study, the evolution of Information & Communications Technologies within the tourism industry (as well as other recent developments such as low cost airlines, all inclusive resorts, growth of direct marketing and last-minute spontaneous holiday purchasing). Furthermore, in an industry that constantly claims that their consumers are evolving and becoming more sophisticated, one cannot believe that models, which are that old can be of high significance, (Swarbrooke and Horner, 1999; Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007). Another major issue is that these models are inclined to see travellers as a homogenous group and this is clearly not the case. Every tourist is different; however, it is

possible to segment the tourists according to certain characteristics or a range of factors that will influence their own individual process of decision-making. Swarbrooke and Horner (2007) state the following characteristics as examples: tourists travelling alone or in groups (family/friends); the level of experience of tourists; the tourists' personalities as, for example, some make spontaneous last-minute decisions while others plan their holidays for months in advance. An additional aspect that is not of high significance for this study, but more on a grand scale is the fact that these models tend to be very much focused on the Western world and do not consider customs of the other parts of the world. Several models also fail to acknowledge the importance of motivators and determinants and their influence on decision-making. Motivators and determinants can be very powerful and dominate the purchase decision so far that all other factors will have to be excluded, (Swarbrooke and Horner, 1999; Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007). Moreover, most models also assume a high level of rationality which is not always present. 'Rational decision-making in tourism is limited both by the imperfect information which is available to most tourists and the fact that many consumers will be influenced by their own opinions and prejudices which may be irrational' (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007: 78).

It is important to realise that although there have been numerous studies in this area of research, the models all seem to be similar and present the decision-making process and the tourist's behaviour in a very rational and sequenced process. Decrop (1999), however, argues that the process is more than a formalised multistage process. Phillips *et al* (1995) maintain that traditional models are irrelevant for describing choices that are new to the consumer, i.e. they have little experience making a similar choice, where the problem is not well defined or where there is a high emotional involvement. It is, furthermore, argued by Woodside and MacDonald (1994) that while these models are partially useful, they do not capture the strong interactions of evaluations and behaviours and destination experienced by the travellers. A look at the way consumers come to have judgements, intentions, practices and post-purchase evaluations is necessary in order to come close to capture fantasies, feelings and fun which are essential to the tourism 'product'.

### **2.4.2.2 Towards a new framework**

After discussing and critiquing the traditional models, it is of great importance to have a look at a new framework that incorporates some of the aspects mentioned above. Woodside and MacDonald (1994) as well as Teare (1994) have attempted to fill these gaps with their new models.

Woodside and MacDonald's (1994) framework gives an insight into how decisions, interactions between travellers, activities or events occurring during the holiday are related to each other and/or lead to other activities or events. The authors make an important assumption within their model that activation of initial travel choices extends over time to related travel choices.

Figure 2.14: Woodside and MacDonald's General Systems Framework of Customer Choice Decisions of Tourism Services (adapted from Decrop, 1999)

Teare's (1994) model implies that prior product experience and product involvement lie at the core of the decision-making process. The belief that these two variables are interrelated is the starting point of Teare's summary of their potential explanatory value in six research

propositions as well as four further propositions concerning consumption and post-consumption. The most significant factor out of these is that prior experience is still an important factor as it influences the formation of expectations, assessment criteria as well as the tourist's personal rating system. (Teare, 1994; Decrop, 1999)

Figure 2.15: Teare's Consumer Framework for Assessing and Evaluating Hotels (adapted from Decrop, 1999)

A significant part of the decision-making process is the information search which is the subject of the next section.

### **2.4.3 Tourist Information Search**

The aspect of the tourist decision-making process that is of greatest importance for this thesis is the tourist information search and will be discussed in greater detail.

When writing about tourist information search behaviour it is nearly impossible to ignore the work of Fodness and Murray (1997; 1998, 1999, etc.) who have delivered some of the most revealing work about this topic so far.

To have an understanding of the information search behaviour of leisure tourists has long been recognised as vital to both tourism academics and practitioners. Within this rather competitive marketplace, it is absolutely vital to comprehend that consumer awareness, selection, and choice of tourism and hospitality products depends on the information available to and used by the tourist (Moutinho, 1987). Therefore, the tourist information search has always attracted considerable attention from tourism researchers who raised both conceptual and empirical questions to try and understand, predict and probably even influence the behaviour of leisure tourists (Fodness and Murray, 1997).

Tourists have been increasingly segmented based on their search behaviours. However, Haley (1985) stated that if the goal of the research is to predict tourist behaviour, then it is preferable to analyse from cause to effect. Fodness and Murray (1997) furthermore argue that possibly the determinants of information source choice, rather than the sources chosen, predict the true effects of information search on tourist behaviour. If that was the case, the determinants would best help researchers interested in segmenting leisure markets by information search behaviour.

Moutinho (1987) defined information search as an expressed need to refer to various sources prior to making a buying decision. Within this definition, three major factors of tourist information search literature were identified, those being motives, determinants, and sources. McIntosh and Goeldner (1990) argue that the individual's primary motivation

for undertaking an information search during travel planning is to improve the quality of the journey. Potential tourists have a need for information in order to evaluate the available options in terms of price, operator, accommodation, transportation, etc. (Raitz and Dakhil, 1989).

Information sources can be classified in several ways. One of the most used classifications is internal vs. external (Fodness and Murray, 1997). Initially, the search takes place internally, i.e. past experiences are used in order to plan a repeat visit to a destination, however, if internal resources are not sufficient enough to make a sound decision, an external search has to take place. Schul and Crompton (1983) stated that in the case of leisure travel, the search is often predominantly external, involving considerable effort and a variety of information sources. As tourists can choose from a wide range of information sources, Engel *et al* (1995) suggested a framework for classifying information sources.

Table 2.1: Classification of Tourism Information Sources (adapted from Fodness and Murray, 1997: 506).

Fodness and Murray conclude that ‘the information search has thus been conceptualised as the result of a dynamic process wherein individuals use various amounts and types of information sources in response to internal and external contingencies to facilitate travel planning’ (1997: 506).

Due to the nature of this thesis it is important to look at the differences between a traditional information search and a so-called online information search. It is argued in the literature (Jang, 2004; Luo *et al*, 2004) that there is a distinct difference between off- and online search behaviour. The following section takes a more in depth look at online search behaviour, particular in tourism.

#### **2.4.3.1 Online information search**

Information technology has through its rapid development, especially in the tourism industry, significantly influenced information search behaviour in travel and tourism decision-making (Jang, 2004). Jang (2004) identified the need for more research in this particular area because of its increasing importance in the tourism decision-making process. Luo *et al* (2004) stress the unique role the Internet plays within information provision and acquisition. The Internet population is growing at a phenomenal rate and has become a global medium. Internet users come from very diverse cultural and social backgrounds and geographical distances are no longer relevant. They also argue that destination marketers can gain a competitive edge from understanding the factors that influence the online information search behaviour or tourists in order to send the appropriate messages. (Luo *et al*, 2004).

There are distinct differences between the off- and online information search that are central to the issues raised in this thesis. These are outlined below.

Generally speaking, 'online information search usually refers to information search activity through the Internet' (Jang, 2004: 43). A distinct advantage of an online information search is that it allows prospective travellers to search and compare at the same time. The nature of the tourism 'product' has a big influence since the quality of the 'product' is not certain until it is experienced, therefore a more in-depth information search can reassure the prospective traveller in their decision, (Jang, 2004) This is one of many

reasons why the tourism industry has been greatly affected by the introduction of the Internet (Weber and Roehl, 1999).

The Internet offers a wide range of information and resources to travellers (Susskind *et al*, 2003), but it also offers suppliers the possibility of getting to know their prospective consumers better (using search and purchase records). Information intermediaries can help provide suppliers with profiles of travellers and their selection of products that they bought based on their needs (Palmer and McCole, 2000). Jang (2004) argues that the relationship between online search/purchase and online advertising/selling is like two sides of a coin (see Figure 2.16).

Figure 2.16: Online search/purchase and online advertising/selling  
(adapted from Jang, 2004)

Jang (2004) claims that from the supply side's point of view, a buyer's search and purchase means advertising selling. From the demand's side point of view, an online search/purchase is possible when online advertising and selling options are provided. Furthermore, it is argued that the consumer online information search is more directly connected with purchase, as opposed to other traditional sources, since most tourism related websites now offer online reservation/booking options, a feature that provides benefits to both travellers and marketers, (Jang, 2004). The online information search offers both benefits to travellers and marketers as well as concerns and opportunities. The most important ones will be explored below.

One of the biggest benefits is that websites are cost efficient for suppliers – a website is 'open' 24/7 and allows the consumer instant access to the information needed. It can also be used as a real-time communication tool, especially when considering new tools like live

chats, etc. Various authors (e.g. Hoffman and Novak, 1997; Wang, Head and Arthur, 2002) have pointed out the primary advantages of online search to travellers. They are relative low cost, customised information, ease of product comparisons, interactivity, virtual community formation and 24 hour accessibility [...]. According to Bellman *et al* (1999) online purchasers believe that the online search on the Internet has improved the overall productivity of their purchase process. From a suppliers' point of view, they can enhance the efficiency of their distribution, be it information, products or services due to cost-effectiveness and immediate interactivity (Connolly *et al*, 1998). Another benefit that is particularly relevant to the tourism industry is that the Internet freely reaches anywhere in the world (as long as you have access to it), which means that the potential market has no national or international boundary (Jang, 2004). Due to 'the distinctive high-price, high-involvement, and well-differentiated characteristics of the travel products and services', online marketing seems to be a well-suited approach for the tourism industry (Bonn *et al*, 1998). There seems to be an agreement amongst authors that the Internet provides advantages like global accessibility, convenience in updating, real-time information service, interactive communications features and unique customisation capabilities (Bender, 1997), as well as a general opinion that using the Internet can enable destinations to improve their competitiveness by increasing their visibility, reducing advertising costs, and assist local cooperation (Buhalis, 2000).

After outlining the benefits, it is also important to look at concerns and opportunities. Machlis (1997) pointed out that people visit travel websites mainly for information purposes and less than 5 percent actually buy travel or tourism products online. In the last decade these figures have not changed significantly; a recent comScore study for Google has shown the major importance of online searching in influencing offline buying on consumers' travel related purchases (comScore, 2006). Possible reasons for this behaviour are technical difficulties, credit card security, no assessment of product quality, and privacy issues (Szymanski and Hise, 2000; Weber and Roehl, 1999). It is of major importance that tourism marketers consider these concerns when building/designing a website and developing online marketing programmes (Jang, 2004). Jang (2004)

furthermore points out that his research has shown that various research studies have claimed that website features are a significant variable that relates online information search to actual purchase action, (Chu, 2001; Metha and Shah, 2001).

In order for a website to be competitive, it has been argued that providers should supply specified information, e.g. product perceptions, shopping experience, customer service and customer risks (Jarvenpaa and Todd, 1997). The aspect of what information should be offered is an extremely important factor in the tourism industry due to the nature of the product. Here are some examples of what kind of information should be provided; activities in the destination, destination information, sightseeing, maps, 'insider tips', accommodation, shopping, festival and events, and also reservations (Tierney, 2000).

Not surprisingly most research has shown that the 'average' online information user is young, male, well educated and has a well paid job (Bonn *et al*, 1999; Fram and Grady, 1995; Pitkow and Kehoe, 1996). Morrison *et al* (2001) support these findings by stating that the 26-34 years old age group and people with higher education were more likely buy travel online as opposed to offline. Additionally, Weber and Roehl (1999) also support this argument, stating that those who search for (and purchase) travel related products online are more likely to be young, to have higher incomes, to be employed in management jobs, and to have more online experience.

Although valid to a certain extent, these findings can be very misleading to researchers. Obviously, the younger age groups present a large proportion of the online market; however, they are by far not the only group that will use the Internet. The older age groups might have been slower to 'get on board' but the numbers of 'silver surfers' are growing.

Luo *et al* (2004) examined the relationships between tourists' use of the Internet vs. other information sources and their characteristics. They stressed the importance of the Internet as both a mass broadcaster and also its application as a one-to-one communications tool. While Luo *et al*'s (2004) findings correspond with earlier studies (e.g. Pitkow and Kehoe,

1996) that male tourists with higher household incomes are more likely to be Internet users, their study found no difference in information source preference among people with different demographics of age, education, and occupation and therefore such demographics are not barriers in keeping people from searching for information online. Their findings show that the use of the Internet and other information sources does not vary between senior and non-senior tourists. Luo *et al* (2004: 22) explicitly state that 'destination marketers could use the Internet as an efficient marketing tool to attract the senior segment.'

Mathwick and Rigdon (2004) provide an interesting look at online information search from a different perspective. Their research focused on how an online information search can be transformed into 'play', a highly positive experience that is able to deliver genuine value in the form of escapism and enjoyment. Their research is based on the four channel model of flow (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Mathwick and Rigdon (2004) argue that Internet search skill, navigational challenge, involvement, and perceived play constitute elements of the online information search experience. The significance of offering the customer a memorable, relevant and valued experience has been documented in both industry (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and academic literature (Mathwick *et al*, 2001). Pine and Gilmore (1999: 12-13 in Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004) point out that persuasive experiences are supposed to not only 'linger in the memory of an individual ... [but also] capture their dollars'. However, the question remains whether or not online search experiences can bestow value at a level that eventually influences customer attitudes and loyalty intentions. There is little evidence to show the impact of the online information search experience, nevertheless researchers working within the field of environmental psychology have long argued that consumer experience in general will affect attitudinal and behavioural responses in both retail (Ridgway *et al*, 1990 in Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004) and service (Bitner, 1992) situations, (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004). Furthermore, it is argued that whether discussing the shopping experience in general or the information search experience in particular, this literature suggests that the experience matters. 'Its influence is imprinted on value perceptions, attitudes, and loyalty outcomes therefore,

when online information search creates value in the form of play, that positive experience is hypothesised to transfer to attitudes toward the focal website, as well as toward the focal firm and its brands' (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004: 327). Mathwick and Rigdon's (2004) findings show that the online information search experience creates a noticeable source of value that is positively associated with web and brand attitudes. The more specific online information search experience results demonstrated that the attitudes of highly involved customers may only be nominally related to the information search experience while uninformed customers display a highly significant relationship between the search experience and secondary stimuli (visuals, sounds, frames etc) or the site's design characteristics as they form web attitudes (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004).

In conclusion, it can be said that although a significant amount of tourism research has concentrated on the information search behaviour of tourists, insufficient research attention has been paid to online information search behaviours of potential tourists (Jang, 2004). Jang (2004) furthermore recommends that future research should [amongst other issues] focus on potential travellers' concerns and difficulties and travellers' perceived risk; figuring out the underlying reasons why some travellers seek information but do not purchase products and services online; challenge the association of online search behaviours with more psychographic variables such as satisfaction, value, image, and loyalty; as well as cross-cultural impacts on tourists' online information search behaviour.

The following section of the literature review deals with the niche market segment that was chosen to be the main subject of this study.

## **2.5 The Grey market – the forgotten segment**

### **2.5.1 The older consumer – The grey market**

The overall population of the United Kingdom is 58.7 million people of whom 18.4 percent – 10.8 million people – were over the pensionable age; this number is projected to increase to 11.2 million in 2006 and to 11.9 million in 2011. In 2002 about 6 million people between the age of 50 and state pension age were still in employment – for men between 50 and 64 years this equals to an employment rate of 70 percent, for women between 50 and 59 years it is 65.5 percent. Most interesting is that in 2000, 25 percent of households with 2 adults aged 60 or over and 7 percent of single person households aged 60 or over owned a computer. Furthermore in July 2002, 44 percent of people aged 55 to 64, and 14 percent of people aged 65 and over had used the Internet.

(All information was provided by National statistics, 2002)

During the late 1990s and in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, changing demographic profiles especially in the modern, western world mean that an increasing proportion of the population will fall into older age bands, above the age of 50 (Gunter, 1998). Although older members of the society are often stigmatised with negative stereotypes regarding their mental and physical abilities, they represent a segment of the population which has increasing economic significance (Gunter, 1998). Long ignored and characterised as a politically and socially insignificant homogenous group, marketers have finally realised the negligible spending power of this market segment. Older consumers, the grey market, have partly been misrepresented in both the media and society and been shown as being incapable of many everyday occurrences. While the general tourism literature has ignored the older market segments, except for a few studies on the senior drive tour market or similar (e.g. Prideaux *et al*, 2001), the (tourism) marketing literature has begun to recognise the importance of the ‘grey market’ in recent years (e.g. Muller and O’Cass, 2001), however, overall this particular age segment still remains under-researched as a whole.

Several key theories of ageing have been published in literature, e.g. disengagement theory, activity theory, development theory, continuity theory, exchange theory and labelling theory. Each theory will be briefly explained here, further comments will be made throughout this chapter if necessary.

Disengagement theory, one the earliest theoretical approaches to ageing, states that ageing involves a gradual withdrawal of disengagement of the individual from certain roles in order to clear the way for younger people to come through. Disengagement implies a triple loss for the individual: a loss of roles, a restriction of social contacts and relationships, and a reduced commitment to social mores and values. Eventually, such a step may result in the removal of some of the most knowledgeable and experienced members of society. (Gunter, 1998)

Activity theory proposes that successful ageing is to be achieved through preserving the attitudes and activities of middle age for as long as possible (Havighurst, 1963). Basically, the individual maintains an outlook on life that is distinctly middle-aged rather than old aged, therefore the person can sustain a higher level of personal morale and general satisfaction with life (Gunter, 1998).

Development theory embodies a perspective that regards life as a continuous process of development, from birth to death. Erikson (1950) describes life as being composed of eight phases: early infancy, late infancy, early childhood, late childhood, adolescence, late adolescence, the productive years and later life. How an individual adapts to the final stage of life depends on the development process that occurred during earlier life phases. For example, each new life stage could have been seen as a challenge. This attitude could keep an older person more 'youthful' in many respects (Gunter, 1998).

Similarly, continuity theory regards ageing as a process of continuing development, and there is a growing tendency among people as they get older to try harder to maintain

stability in their lives. Individuals try to preserve activities, tastes and a preferred lifestyle acquired over time. (Gunter, 1998)

Exchange theory expresses the view that a person must strive to remain integrated as fully as possible with groups and events in the social environment, even when retired (Mauss, 1954; Simmons, 1945). As ageing takes place social interaction may decrease, or it becomes more selective and more targeted.

Finally labelling theory hypothesises that old age is socially defined and often labelled as a 'deviant' condition. Consequently, older people become stigmatised in a way that potentially places them at a disadvantage across a wide range of social relationships and interactions (Gunter, 1998).

Some of the above mentioned theories clearly contribute to negative stereotyping towards older age. Even worse, some older persons might even become convinced that what they hear about them is essentially true and believe their own inadequacies and may in turn live up or 'down' to them (Kuypers and Bengtson, 1973).

Recent studies (Mintel, 2000) have shown that contrary to popular belief, older consumers are not poor consumers, as they have reduced expenses on child rearing, paying off mortgages or car loans, and the maturation of insurance policies (Allan, 1984; Gelb, 1978 in Gunter, 1998). Not only do older consumers have greater spending power than other age-defined market segments, they are more willing to spend than ever before (Petre, 1986 in Gunter, 1998).

A person's age is a weak indicator of their capacity and worth as an individual. To tag a person with the word 'old' just because they have reached a certain chronological age has little meaning (Gunter, 1998). 'Ages' indicating stages of life may have more relevance in a consumer context. 'First Age' consists of childhood and socialisation, followed by 'Second Age' of end of paid work or the completion of family-raising. People enter their

'Third Age', independent and still active life beyond work and familial tasks, which may continue for a long period prior to the 'Fourth Age' of decline, dependence and death. (Gunter, 1998)

The beginning of the 'Third Age' can vary from one person to the other. For some it may begin at 50, while for others it may not start until the age of 70 or even later. Therefore, chronological age alone does not mean inactivity or that a person is 'old'.

As the older consumers' market is among the least intensively researched and understood market segments, disagreement exists about both the age brackets that comprise this market and the terms used to describe them. Sometimes, a classification of 65 and over is used (age of retirement), sometimes 60 and over (indicating the decline in physical and mental skills) and other times 55 and over (the pre-retirement years), (Gunter, 1998).

### **2.5.2 Marketing misconceptions**

The importance of the older consumer stems from the fact that there has been a growth in the market potential of the 'grey' population. This has happened because of increased numbers of people in this age bracket, an upward shift in income and wealth, and enhanced expectations of older people. Emergent 'grey' income has been emerging from occupational pensions, asset holding, capital gains on property, and windfalls (Johnson, 1990). Additionally, better health has resulted in a more active older population who wish to maximise the enjoyment they draw from their free time. With their children having left home and their loans paid off, empty nesters in modern western societies may have plenty of disposable income, particularly before retirement.

Loudoun and Della Bitta (1993) list eight of the most common misconceptions made about the grey market:

- (1) Older consumers are all the same. (The grey market is comprised of numerous segments.)
- (2) They think of themselves as old. ('Older age' is typically 15 years older than they are, and does not begin until well past 70.)
- (3) They are not an important consumer segment. (Those 50 and over possess almost half of all American discretionary income.)
- (4) They will not try something new. (A survey for Golding and Co found that in the preceding 12 months, 45 percent had tried a new brand of cereal, 30 percent a new brand of canned soup and soft drinks.)
- (5) They have impaired mental faculties. (Only about five percent have serious mental impairment; intelligence tests reveal little change from age 51 to 80.)
- (6) They are in poor health. (Most are not incapacitated and will remain healthy until their last years.)
- (7) They keep to themselves. (Many are involved as volunteers, and taking on new responsibilities.)
- (8) They are not physically active. (A poll by Gallup revealed that half of those over 65 regularly engage in exercise).

(1993:156)

All these misrepresentations can be disputed with statistical facts (shown in brackets above).

### **2.5.3 Longer life and its luxuries**

A resident of the world's rich countries who retires at the age of 65 can expect to live, on average, for another 15 or 20 years. A hundred years ago, you would typically already have been dead. The late twentieth century has brought to many the ultimate gift: the luxury of ageing. Not surprisingly, like any other luxury, ageing is expensive. Over the next 30-40 years, the demographic changes of longer lives and fewer births will impose on most countries a necessary re-consideration of arrangements for paying for and looking

after older people (Gunter, 1998). Gunter (1998) furthermore states that the vast majority of these older people will be consumers and not producers and that mass survival will not only be confined to rich countries.

The capacity to consume depends significantly on disposable rather than gross income. Depending on their total incomes, basic outgoings and expenses, some households may have less spending power than others. Most people are able to compensate the slightly lower income after retirement through a marked reduction in such expenses as mortgages, raising children, and other home-related bills and might actually see their disposable income increase (Gunter, 1998).

Among people aged 50 and over, a wide-ranging spread of gross and disposable income levels may be found. This relates directly as a contradiction to one of the earlier mentioned misconceptions that 'all old consumers are the same'. The grey market does not comprise a homogeneous mass of individuals. Older consumers represent a significant market, which has, to date, largely been underestimated, inadequately catered for or simply ignore in many marketing circles. The growth in size of this population segment and increased spending power to be found among certain sections of it, mean that for many kinds of products and services the over 50s represent a significant buying force (Gunter, 1998) and it will be argued in this thesis that one of these services is indeed tourism and travel. However, Gunter (1998) firmly states that the increasing market potential and spending propensity of the older, better-off sector does not mean that the over 50s age group is a universally affluent market segment. So it is important to keep in mind that these recent developments in the relative incomes of retired people should not be interpreted to mean that all older people are better off (Walker, 1993). Despite criticism, there is clear evidence emerging to support the view that older people are better off. Indeed, for some older people, there has been a noticeable increase in wealth – giving rise to market segment concept of the 'Woopie', the well off older person (Gunter, 1998).

#### **2.5.4 Leisure behaviour patterns**

If not referenced otherwise, all information was taken from Mintel (2000). The relevant groups for this thesis addressed within Mintel's study are as follows:

(1) Empty nesters/no family – adults aged between 35 and 54 with no dependents (no children aged under 16 or no children at all)

- Single, living alone (un-partnered)
- Single living with others (un-partnered)
- Couples (i.e. married or cohabiting)
- Younger, 35-44
- Older, 45-54
- ABC1 (middle class)
- C2DE (working class)

(2) Post-family – those aged 55 and over

- Single, living alone (un-partnered)
- Single living with others (un-partnered)
- Couples (i.e. married or cohabiting)
- Younger, 55-64
- Older, 65+
- ABC1 (middle class)
- C2DE (working class)

Due to the particular make-up of each lifestage, there exist very distinct behavioural patterns. The various choices that members in each lifestage make are as much to do with their individual structures as it is to do with the market factors by which they are overseen. However, as consumers progress from one lifestage into another, the question must be asked how much of the market is predisposed by the requirements of these consumers and how much is dependent on the holiday packages that are created for them by leading

companies in the sector. There is a trend, a tendency towards sophisticated personalised holidays; this then means that companies have acknowledged a certain degree of demand push by consumers who are becoming more knowledgeable. Technologies such as the Internet have meant that consumers now have fast access to information, which raises their anticipations in terms of the holidays that they are either able to secure via direct booking or via packages that they then request from travel agents.

Empty nester and post families: having time, money and freedom from responsibilities of looking after children, these lifestages tend to go on several holidays a year (often mixing short breaks in the UK and/or Europe with long-haul holidays). Because of their higher disposable income, both of these lifestages are an important segment for the industry.

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the holiday options available to them. The reason for this development is due to the 'invasion' of specific information technologies, e.g. the Internet, etc. Thus, both leading tour operators and travel agents have reacted by developing their websites to provide for those who require information on destinations, flights and accommodation. The accessibility of these websites and increased consumer sophistication has fuelled the increase in consumers booking their holidays independently or direct with tour operators and airlines.

Consumer research illustrates that one of the key driving forces for the industry in the next few years will continue to be the different requirements of the main lifestage groups. More and more consumers have access to better information and as consumers become more familiar with using some of the new technologies, such as the Internet, their holiday requirements will continue to be more sophisticated. For the industry, this means that they need to continuously invest in e-commerce and use a combination of media by which to communicate and target their consumers.

### **2.5.5 'Silver surfers' – Older people and the Internet**

Eastman and Iyer (2004) support this thesis' argument that, although the Internet has grown during the last years, there is a distinctive lack of research in the area of Internet usage in the older market segments. The rapid growth of this particular segment as well as the potential held by the Internet are both subjects worth of consideration. Studies in the USA have shown that elderly consumers have positive intentions towards using the Internet and their willingness of learning how to use it. In addition education and income levels have both had a favourable impact on Internet usage. (Eastman and Iyer, 2004).

O'Leary (2000) has argued that the Web is becoming more of a mass medium and 'seniors are now one of the fastest growing groups of new Web users' (O'Leary, 2000: 80). This quote states the need for more consideration of the senior citizens as a viable possible market. Marketers need to realise that they are actually losing a feasible segment that could mean more profits in the long run. Apart from the argument of an ageing population (especially with baby boomers reaching the age of 65 from 2011 onwards) and therefore the sheer number of older people, it is also important not to forget that seniors usually have more disposable income and buying power than other market segments (Eastman and Iyer, 2004). Polyak (2000) argued that seniors have approximately twice the discretionary income. That would make them particularly interesting for the tourism industry, especially when adding that they also have more free time (particularly when they are already retired). Trocchia and Janda (2000: 605) have put it best when saying that 'older consumers comprise a growing but under-represented segment of Internet users'. Schofield (1999) called senior citizens the fastest growing groups on the Internet because they have the time to be active and pursue their interests due to better healthcare and medical advances. Many of today's senior citizens want an active retirement learning new skills (Gardyn, 2000).

The increasing technological society has to address the barriers and means necessary to allow older individuals to join the information age. It is not only important to realise the

economic benefit that can arise from targeting older consumers but also the potential improvement in the quality of their life which may be gained through online communication by a person who may otherwise not be able to (McMellon and Schiffman, 2000). This takes the argument even further as this thesis concentrates on the proportion of the grey market that is still able to travel and enjoy their lives by being active and being able to physically visit places.

It is a common misconception that older people are not interested in technological advances. It is valid to say that not all of them have or will embrace Information Technology but it is very rare that something actually works for everyone. Zeithaml and Gilly (1987) have looked at how senior citizens have adopted past technological advances and found that, for example retail technologies were accepted when a clear advantage is offered and communicated. The more affluent and avid readers of print media seem to be the ones most open to try new technologies. Even pre-Internet research indicates that older people will use new technologies as long as there is a clear benefit. The perceived technophobia of older people has decreased during the last years, and more seniors have become PC users at home. Ownership alone has increased from 29 to 40 percent between 1995 and 1998 in the USA (Portland State University, 2000). Avalos (1998) stated that 70 percent of US citizens ages 55 and above have Internet access at home.

The 'grey market' is both a growing and under-represented segment of Internet users. In comparison to younger users, these people possess more time and income, which makes them a very important sector of the market. This presents a significant opportunity for the providers of Internet related products and services. Trocchia & Janda (2000) conducted interviews with six Internet users and six non-users (six men and six women between 57 and 87 years old) in order to better understand the attitudes and motivations of the 'grey market'. Their research came up with six leading themes that will show similarity with the author's own research: reference group affiliation, technology schema, resistance to change, nature of social relations, perception of reality, and physical dexterity.

In 2000 the estimate for Internet users in 2003 was 350 million (E-Commerce Times, 2000), however, NUA (2002) already counted 650 million users in September 2002. Growth has been unbelievably fast and is still ongoing. The number of European Internet users was 190 million in September 2002 (NUA, 2002). Although the number of over 50s using the Internet is still increasing, the rest of the population is still more likely to use the Internet and therefore the 'grey market' is still under-represented as part of the Internet using community. As older individuals possess more free time and have a higher discretionary income it makes them the perfect target market for Internet marketers.

Trocchia and Janda's (2000) research aimed to identify important motivation and attitudinal considerations differentiating users from non-users. As this study concentrates on users rather than non-users it is important to understand certain issues of why people do not want to use the Internet. Their findings focus on six themes, all of which will be briefly examined below (all Trocchia and Janda, 2000 unless stated differently):

#### (1) Reference group affiliation

Reference groups, i.e. friends and acquaintances and their perception of the Internet, can have a high influence on an individual's choice of Internet usage. It brings in the notion of reward and punishment; rewards for using the Internet where peers can tell you about websites that might be useful for yourself and social contact by e-mail whereas punishment comes in as one non-user stated that all her Internet using friends forgot about her when arranging meetings via e-mail. Another form of reward comes up by stating that they can get in touch with their children and grandchildren and 'talk' with them without ending up with a horrendous phone bill. Lastly, users admitted that if they were non-users people might look down on them, by stating that they did not want their colleagues to think that they could not keep up with technology.

#### (2) Technology schema

Not very surprising was the finding that Internet users had well-developed technology schema, i.e. a reflections of one's inclination or aversion to technology and/or its

applications. Mostly, these differences in technology schemata derived from positive experiences with technology and/or Internet related technologies. Several users stated that they knew that computers got easier to use, and that adapting to new technologies is not that difficult, just going over the instructions. On the other hand, non-users were more likely to have less-developed technology schemata, which often led to misperceptions and biases regarding the Internet. For example, one person stated that a friend spends hours to log on and it seemed like such a waste of time; others stated that they just do not get along with computers or that they would not know what to do on the Internet.

### (3) Resistance to change

The tendency of a person's acceptance or rejection of change seems an important tool for distinguishing users and non-users. Internet users seem to possess a stronger and more positive metascript for change than non-users. Internet users in Trocchia & Janda's (2000) research expressed comfort with change and it was something to look forward to. Also, acceptance of change and innovation in their lives allowed them to better themselves. Generally, the difference between users and non-users can also be found in negative experiences. One non-user stated their frustration with technology as they attended a seminar to learn the newest application, which was outdated just a couple of months later. This can create an unwillingness to even attempt using the Internet. Non-users characteristically expressed distrust in transactions occurring on the Internet because they felt uneasy interacting with an unknown exchange partner.

### (4) Nature of social relations

People who view the Internet as a tool for strengthening social bonds and providing social support were more likely to be users than those who saw little value in using the Internet. Users do not only highlight the fact that they can contact family and friends but also meet new people with similar interests. Usually e-mail is used to keep in touch and be kept in touch with others. The Internet gives people a possibility to enjoy a variety of new social experiences, e.g. chat-rooms (although they are not popular with all users). Non-users see

little value in the Internet as a tool for social contact explaining that if their friends do not have e-mail to whom would they send messages anyway?

#### (5) Perception of reality

Generally, Internet activities are often considered impersonal in contrast to 'offline' activities such as department store shopping, face-to-face communication, personal banking, etc. While some people value personal contact, others do not necessarily need it and therefore are more likely to shop online. Internet users typically expressed little concern with the virtual environment and being in actual physical touch with the product was not a prerequisite to accepting its realness. They trusted that the pictures were actual representation of the products featured. Additionally, Internet users differentiated little between phone conversations and online communication.

#### (6) Physical dexterity

Basically, there are two different kinds of physical dexterity: those that affect people's Internet usage and those that do not. Physical dexterity like, for example visual degeneration or arthritis are very likely to influence Internet usage patterns in a negative way as the person affected is physically not able to either see the screen very well or write on the keyboard. However, a wheelchair-bound person may still be an Internet user, maybe even more than they would with healthy legs, as it restrains them from leaving the house but not entering the virtual world. People with such physical disabilities have admitted using the Internet even more especially for getting in contact with other people, e.g. in chat rooms.

Age Concern and Barclays (ICM Research, 2002) conducted a research survey about the Internet and older people. This research consisted of 501 interviews of people aged 55 and over and is representative of the general population – the results are outlined as follows.

66 percent of Internet users (aged 55 years or older) agreed that the Internet had a positive impact on their lives, only 2 percent stated that it had a negative impact; furthermore, 66 percent of non-users say that they have no intention of taking part in the IT revolution.

The Internet is used for a wide range of activities.

Most common activities are (each bullet point represents a percentage):

- Contact family and friends in the UK (28)
- Websites about hobbies and contact family and friends abroad (15)
- Manage bank account and research flights/holidays (11)
- Check the news (5)
- Financial issues, local information and research family history (2)

Activities that were completed but not necessarily repeated:

- Contact family and friends in the UK (82)
- Websites about hobbies (72)
- Research flights/holidays (67)
- Contact friends and family abroad (66)
- Local information (45)
- Check the news (41)
- Financial issues (39)
- Manage bank account (34)
- Research family history (26)

Of most interest for this study is the mentioning of 'research flights/holidays' within the range of activities. It is interesting to see that, as a common activity, researching for travel information is only mentioned by 11 percent of the population but 67 percent actually searched for this kind of information at one time. It would be vital to know why 56 percent of people aged 55 and over do not necessarily repeatedly search for travel information on the Internet. As this is a very high percentage, it indicates that they may not be satisfied with this specific experience. Furthermore, it indicates poor service from the providers.

A question on gender differences shows that women are more likely to use IT for researching holidays/flights (72 percent) and communicating with friends and family in the UK (86 percent), whereas men are more likely to use the Internet for information and research purposes (e.g. hobbies, local information, checking the news and financial matters).

Eighty-seven percent of respondents tend to access the Internet in their own home, for those aged between 55 and 64 years the percentage falls to 82 percent, while for those aged 65 and over it is about 94 percent. The second most common point of Internet access is at work with 24 percent; with those aged between 55 and 64 years the percentage rises to 35, while with those aged 65 or older it falls to 9 percent. This result is not surprising as it is clear that those aged 65 or older are most likely retired. Additionally, some use a friend's or family member's computer (14 percent), 7 percent use an Internet café and again 7 percent use a library to access the Internet.

As this research is representative of the general UK population, the survey also contains some information on non-computer users, which is also of interest for this report, although this thesis will focus on the people who are actually using the Internet.

The main reason for not using the Internet was lack of interest (41 percent). Most of these 41 percent did not own a computer and stated that they did not see how a computer could enhance their lives (34 percent). Non-users also articulated both a fear of modern technology and said they lacked the confidence to use IT in the first place. Interestingly, all IT users and non-users show an initial feeling of fear and lack of confidence regardless of their level of progress. Two thirds of all non-users stated that they would never use the Internet. Furthermore, of the older people who were most open to the idea of help with learning IT, the most accepted suggestions for learning were special learning facilities (17 percent) and public Internet access centres (e.g. libraries with 7 percent).

Computer users tend to use other technologies (e.g. mobile phones, digital television, etc.) more than non-users, which implies that they have a greater level of confidence in technology.

When asked about their favourite means of communication, the survey distinguished between contacting friends and family or business partners.

The results were as follows:

Friends/family (percentages):

- Telephone (79)
- Varies (9)
- E-mail (7)
- Letter (4)
- Face to face (1)

Business (percentages):

- Telephone (40)
- Face to face (29)
- Varies (14)
- Letter (10)
- E-mail (7)

Clearly, the telephone is by far the favourite communication tool used for contacting both friends/family and business contacts. It is interesting to see that communicating with friends/family face to face is the least favourite method, however, more popular for business contacts. E-mail shows the same number of percentages with both friends/family and business contacts, however, with friends/family it takes third place while with business contacts it takes last place.

Lastly, it is important to look at the perceptions of importance of computers for people aged 50 and over. Fifty-eight percent (6 out of 10) believe that it is important for people

over 50 years old to have access to a computer and/or the Internet. In detail, 61 percent of male respondents and 56 percent of female respondents believe in the importance of Internet usage. The younger segment of the grey market is also more convinced of the significance of being online – 67 percent of those aged between 55 and 64 and 53 percent of those aged 65 and older. Furthermore, 77 percent of computer users and 47 percent of non-computer users agree with that statement. Computer users gave the following reasons for their argumentation:

- Speed of communication and ability to access information quickly (25 percent)
- Ability to keep up with the times (24 percent)
- Aiding elderly or housebound people to remain in contact (15 percent).

Negative feelings associated with computer and the Internet included the following:

- Technology is too difficult to understand (7 percent)
- More traditional forms of communication are available (7 percent)

To answer the question of whether or not there is a digital divide is still fairly open. Half of the respondents (51 percent) stated that they felt a part of the changes and half (49 percent) stated that they did not. Not surprisingly, computer users have a stronger sense of being a part of the changes (87 percent) compared to non-computer users (31 percent).

## **2.6 Summary and Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be said that this literature review has shown the importance of information for the tourism industry and how Information and Communication Technologies, in particular the Internet, can influence information provision and acquisition. This literature review built on Information age and society theory to look behind consumer behaviour and attitudes in order to get an insight into the most relevant topics for this thesis.

The key findings are:

- Our society is an Information society in an Information age. Almost everything is dominated and shaped by the information that we are provided with. Without information we would not be comfortable with our day-to-day lives.
- Information and Communications Technologies have had an enormous influence on the tourism industry. In fact, after the computer industry the tourism industry has benefited most from the ICT revolution. The Internet in particular has risen to the status of an extremely significant tool for information provision for businesses and information acquisition for consumers.
- Consumer behaviour in general and the decision-making process (including the information search) in particular, is one of the most important aspects of this thesis. The literature has shown that several aspects, e.g. motivation and the offline information search, have been well researched; however the online information search remains an under-researched topic. Decision-making models show a range of possible ways of how people make decisions but their critiques are as numerous as the number of models in existence. The main points of critique are that most models do not build on empirical research, they are developed for the western world, and they do not acknowledge recent developments such as the Internet. The online information search falls into a similar category – not well researched, however, extremely important for this study. Key points are that people use the

Internet for an information search because they have access 24/7 and they can search and compare. At the same time, there are still numerous security concerns that need to be addressed.

- The 'grey market' is a viable market segment that has been ignored by tourism researchers while marketing researchers have slowly started to see this group's potential in the last few years. Nevertheless, there is need for more research into this niche group's behaviour and attitudes in particular when it comes to Internet and tourism related purposes.

Through a thorough literature review, several gaps in the existing literature have been found.

Firstly, most ICT based research puts too much focus on the technology itself and does not consider individuals as cognitive and personal potential tourists who make conscious decisions based on information they have processed and personal influences that impact upon them. This study aims to provide a foundation for other research by showing that technology does not always have to take centre stage but can be a useful tool, aiding rather than guiding people's decisions.

Secondly, there is a distinct lack of literature when it comes to the online information search. Many researchers talk around the topic but not much actual research has been conducted. This thesis aims to contribute to this particular field of research by showing how 'silver surfers' search for information online. Hopefully, this information will be useful as a foundation for both general studies and studies looking at a different age segment, too.

Thirdly, most decision-making models are too general and are not based on empirical research. There is a distinct lack of models that can actually be traced back to research and are not just tested with research. This study aims to use the findings and transform it into a model of chronological decision-making that will be of use for future research into

decision-making processes. It should be noted that this model will in no way compete with the likes of Schmöll or Moutinho but simply aims to provide an example of the decision-making process in the 'grey market'.

Finally, there is a distinct gap when it comes to literature on the 'grey market', senior travellers and 'silver surfers' in particular. Within this particular area, the study aims to help fill this gap by showing the huge potential that research in this specific market segment has. The contribution towards filling these gaps should also be considered being a contribution towards original knowledge.

The literature review also serves as a base for the findings and analysis presented in Chapters IV and V. Aspects of this literature review will be used to compare and discuss results from this study. In order to support or oppose arguments, the author will make use of previous research discussed in this chapter.

In addition, the review of similar research and existing literature has helped the author to decide on an appropriate research design and methodology. Existing literature was used as an example on how to build a research design for this thesis. In particular, the gaps in current tourism literature have helped to decide which research philosophy and methods should be used in order to help fill them and contribute to original knowledge. Therefore a consideration of the topics discussed in this chapter has led to the following methodology.

### **III. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Problem definition, Philosophy/Paradigm and Approach**

Even though a variety of topics was discussed in the literature review of this thesis, in essence, this research is a study of consumer behaviour that is very much focused on a specific part of tourist behaviour, the decision-making process. However, in contrast to most studies, this thesis perceives the decision-making process as a process where knowledge is acquired through an active information search until an informed decision can be made. Unlike decision-making processes for shopping goods, the leisure travel decision-making process is usually not one with an immediate purchase intention as for such an intangible, and in most cases, quite expensive 'good'; more information needs to be acquired.

Traditionally, consumer behaviour theories are rooted in a positivist philosophy (Solomon, 1999), which considers the world to be external and objective and aims to explain human behaviour through cause and effect (Finn *et al*, 2000). According to Finn *et al* (2000) a positivist paradigm strives for explanation, prediction and control as well as processes for explaining human behaviour. This study aims to identify and examine experiences and processes of 'grey' leisure travel decision-making without an immediate purchase intention on the Internet. A careful consideration of both existing literature and the aims and research questions has led to the following explained methodology, however, before the methods are outlined, it is necessary to review the aims and research questions of this thesis again.

Consideration of the issues raised in the literature as well as deliberations of various research designs have lead to the following problem definition:

**Aim 1:** To identify experiences and processes of decision-making amongst potential 'grey' leisure travellers who use the Internet as an information source.

**RQ 1:** How do intending 'grey' leisure travellers use the Internet in searching for information as part of the tourist decision-making process?

**Aim 2:** To analyse the impact of the use of the Internet as an information source on the grey market's decision-making process.

**RQ 2:** How is the Internet changing the buyer behaviour of this particular market segment?

**Aim 3:** To evaluate the effectiveness of the Internet in providing an information service that meets consumer requirements.

**RQ 3:** Does the information provided meet grey consumers' requirements?

The above stated problem definition is based on people's experiences and knowledge, which they have obtained from the material world. Consequently, the research builds on a Physical Construction of Reality (PCR). O'Leary (2004) states that for positivists, the aim of research is illustrating what we experience through observation and measurement in order to forecast and control the forces surrounding us. The society is seen as an object, which can be studied 'scientifically'. In essence that means that positivism assumes that social phenomena can be approached with scientific method and theorises about the world and the nature of research (O'Leary, 2004). Positivists share the belief that the world is a fixed entity and its mysteries are not beyond human comprehension, but that the world is knowable, predictable and singular. Knowable refers to the fact that what we do not know will be uncovered in the future as technology improves and science evolves. Predictable refers to the fact that there are laws, theories, and maxims that regulate the world, e.g. law of gravity and theory of relativity. Finally, the world is singular in truth and reality meaning that there is a truth out there that is applicable to all (O'Leary, 2004). Regarding the nature of research, positivists see social research as a purely scientific attempt; therefore, it needs to follow set rules and procedures. It is also empirical, meaning that it

involves exploration of things that cannot be seen, felt, heard, tasted and smelled as the base for all scientific knowledge. Often, the nature of research is also reductionist, involving the study of separate parts of a system rather than the whole system itself (O'Leary, 2004). When it comes to the researcher, a positivist philosophy believes that research is a specialist activity that needs to be undertaken by trained and qualified 'scientists'. Researchers should be experts (i.e. having the appropriate experience and qualifications) and always objective – a researcher's personal biases have no part in the research study. The overall purpose of research is to produce knowledge not reliant on the researcher's beliefs, desires, or biases. (O'Leary, 2004). When it comes to methods, positivists define methods as a set of procedures that need to be carried out with exacting detail. Positivist researchers usually rely on the following methodologies: deductive (testing of a theory and looking for confirmation through observations); hypothesis-driven (an attempt to prove/disprove a proposed exploratory statement); reliable (use of methods that will give the same results under repeated testing); and reproducible (methods can be repeated by other scientists who will assemble similar findings) (O'Leary, 2004). Finally, the findings of positivist research are generally quantitative (represented through numeric data), statistically significant (results are shown to be true beyond plain chance) and generalisable (applicable to a general population) (O'Leary, 2004), although not all quantitative research data is representative of the general population.

The last few decades have shown changes in the positivist world and a move towards 'post-positivism' that looks at possibilities for the construction of knowledge beyond positivist assumptions and are therefore questioning the core of scientific endeavour (O'Leary, 2004).

Figure 3.1: The assumptions – Positivist vs. Post-positivist (adapted from O’Leary, 2004).

Post-positivists share the belief that the world might not be knowable as it is infinitely complex and open to interpretation. They see the world as ambiguous, variable and multiple. Ambiguous, because science may help us to explain what we do not know in future, however, there are so many things that we have got wrong in the past and many things that we may never really understand. Variable, because the world is not fixed, ‘truth’ can depend upon the limits of our ability to define shifting phenomena. The world is multiple in its realities, what might be ‘truth’ for one person or cultural group, might not be ‘truth’ for another (O’Leary, 2004). Regarding the nature of research, for post-positivists, reflexive research demands that understanding of the scientific endeavour begins to shift, i.e. while research can be based on the senses it can also be intuitive, and holistic. Intuitive meaning that hunches, metaphorical understandings, and the creative are all legitimised as appropriate ways of knowing and exploring the world. Additionally, holistic means that research needs to explore systems because the whole is often seen as

more than the sum of the parts. (O’Leary, 2004). Post-positivist researchers believe that the traditional gap between the researcher and the researched is one that can (and should be) reduced. The researcher can either act participatory and collaborative – rather than focusing exclusively on a particular group, the researchers can also work both for and with participants; and subjective – researchers recognise being value-bound, i.e. they admit to biases that can affect their studies. Therefore, the question for post-positivist researchers is how to recognise, manage and sometimes even value and use subjectivities prevalent to the research process (O’Leary, 2004). When it comes to methods, post-positivist researchers often reject or expand upon the rules of scientific method. They are often inductive – moving from specific observations to broader generalisations and theories; dependable – even though reliability in method might not be possible, the researchers attempt to use systematic and rigorous approaches to research; and auditable - the context-specific nature of researching may not lend itself to reproducibility, but research should be verifiable through full and transparent explanation of method (O’Leary, 2004). Finally, in the findings of post-positivist studies, the researchers recognise the uniqueness of situations and/or cultural groups (or specific market segments), but they can still seek broader value in their findings. The researchers seek findings that are ideographic – unique and may not be able to be generalised, yet have their own inherent worth – or are transferable – the lessons learned from one context are applicable to other contexts; valuable – to produce social knowledge and contributions to change; and qualitative – findings are often presented through imagery and words (O’Leary, 2004).

This research draws from both, positivist and post-positivist philosophies. While the essence of this study is seen as positivist, the methods and approach are regarded as of post-positivist nature.

Before going into detail about the chosen methods, it is necessary to address the chosen approach to this study. It is important to acknowledge the chosen approach in order to understand how the theory is related to the expected results, i.e. the link between theory, method and evidence (Finn *et al*, 2000).

One of the leading philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Popper, symbolises scientists as ‘problem solvers’; for him all life is problem solving (Popper, 2001). Furthermore, since scientists begin problems rather than with observations or bare facts, Popper (2001) argues that the only logical technique is that of deductive testing of theories. In this deductive procedure, conclusions are concluded from a temporary or working hypothesis. These conclusions are then compared with one another and with other applicable statements to determine whether or not they falsify or confirm the hypothesis (Thornton, 1997). Other representatives of this paradigm and related philosophies are Locke, Berkeley and Hume.

The author acknowledges that in any research project, there is always an element of deduction present as one could not collect data without having some basic idea or explanatory model in mind (Veal, 1997). However, despite the rather positivist nature of this thesis, a more post-positivist and inductive approach was preferred. The design of the study chosen is emergent, inductive (Silverman, 2001) to the issues of information search needs amongst the ‘grey market’. Remaining acquainted with the existing theory of consumer behaviour, however testing question styles and approaches to targeting and selection of participants which will be outlined in more details later on in this chapter.

O’Leary (2004) emphasises that the distinction between deductive (hypothesis verification/theory testing) and inductive (to derive theory from specific instances) is not so clear-cut. In fact, analysis is often dependent on inductive and deductive cycles of reasoning. For example, this study is designed so that theory can emerge through an inductive process, but as those theories begin to emerge from the data, it is likely that there will be a move towards a process of confirmation therefore theory generation depends on progressive verification (O’Leary, 2004). Figure 3.2 outlines the cycles of inductive and deductive reasoning according to O’Leary (2004).

**Figure 3.2: Cycles of inductive and deductive reasoning (adapted from O’Leary, 2004)**

**The consideration of the above philosophies, paradigms and approaches has led the author to choose the following research methods.**

### 3.2 Methods

There are numerous arguments in favour of and against qualitative research methods and it is exactly the same with regard to quantitative methods. However, it is now widely accepted that the two approaches complement each other (Veal, 1997; Finn *et al*, 2000), and that they are moving closer together since computers can now be used to analyse both data sets (Veal, 1997).

Multiple methods approaches have become quite common in research. The way in which methods can be combined varies. Silverman (2001) proposes that in qualitative research you can mix, e.g. observation with interviews. However, combining methods is not constricted to methods within one approach, i.e. one can also ‘triangulate’ methods from both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Silverman (2001) also outlines the dangers of incorrect triangulation when it comes to data analysis and points out Fielding and Fielding’s (1986, cited in Silverman, 2001) suggestions that triangulation should always follow certain ground rules:

- “Always begin from a theoretical perspective [...]
- Choose methods and data which will give you an account of structure and meaning from within that perspective [...]

(Fielding and Fielding, 1986 cited in Silverman, 2001: 99)

Another misconception concerning multiple methods is the belief that their use will reveal ‘the whole picture’ (Silverman, 2001). Silverman (1993: 9) gives an example of how four methods can be used differently within the research context.

Table 3.1: Different uses for four methods (adapted from Silverman, 1993)

A critical evaluation of both the literature, existing data and input from other academics, as well as valuable input from the results of the pilot study, have helped to define the methods chosen for this thesis.

### **3.2.1 Secondary data**

The search for secondary data was rather time consuming as many topics had to be covered. Literature from a wide range of sources – books, journals, e-journals, Internet statistics, etc. – was collected in order to comprise an in-depth analysis of the theory. As the research area is still not amongst the most researched fields within tourism, the author decided to concentrate on relevant subject matters from a variety of themes. Topics researched ranged from general culture, consumption and Internet literature to the very specific aspects of tourism decision-making, information search as well as Information and Communication Technologies and their use within the tourism industry. Another aspect was the matter of the ‘grey market’ which is even less documented in literature especially when it comes to tourism specific topics. The main concern of the literature review in this thesis was to establish a link between these components of research.

### **3.2.2 Primary data**

The main research data of this thesis – the consumer study – was gathered with the help of a survey strategy utilising a questionnaire because it allows the collection of a large amount of data from a considerable sample in a rather economical way (Saunders *et al*, 1997), and because it fulfils the requirements to know why, how and who (McDaniel and Gates, 1996). Data was gathered from the age group of over 50 years old (details of sampling to be addressed later) with the help of a rather new tool in research, e-surveying. In essence, e-surveying is data collection with questionnaires via e-mail or other parts of the Internet (e.g. WWW or IRC) (Litvin and Kar, 2001). Questions were mainly closed questions, a consequence of the pilot study where respondents were reluctant to answer open questions and therefore resulted in a lot of missing results. Answers from the pilot study can be used to design pre-determined answers for closed questions.

### **3.2.3 E-surveying – testing of a new method**

One of the main issues of this thesis was the aspect of testing out a new method for data collection, e-surveying, which is based on a journal article by Litvin and Kar (2001).

The Internet has emerged as the fastest-growing technology adoption in history. Before the turn of the century, the UK alone registered more than 10,000 new Internet subscribers daily (Reed, 1999). The Internet does not only offer more options for travellers themselves but also for those research tourism. Traditional methods of data collection, e.g. mail or telephone surveys, and on the street interviews all have their respective advantages and disadvantages. The emergence of electronic communications offered up a whole new way of data collection that can be referred to as ‘e-surveying’. Litvin and Kar (2001: 308) explain e-surveying as an “obvious extension of traditional data collection methods, offering researchers the potential to reach mass numbers of respondents in a potentially efficient and cost-effective matter.”

The authors are by no means the first to mention using the Internet for sampling purposes (e.g. Oppermann, 1995; Schaefer and Dillman, 1998; Bradley, 1999 etc.). Some of the advantages identified are removal of paper surveys as well as the immediate delivery and potentially equal quick return therefore it has become much easier to reach people overseas. On the other hand, certain disadvantages have to be considered: e-surveying potentially limits the research to Internet users as well as the lack of structure of the medium itself. Another disadvantage is the issue of 'spam e-mail'. People can see unsolicited e-mail as an intrusion into privacy (even more so than receiving something via post; Mehta and Sivadas, 1995) and may be reluctant to respond.

Litvin and Kar (2001) point out that general tourism research based on primary data collected via an electronic survey technique could be seen as suspect, however, the method has potential to grow and become more popular in future. Litvin and Kar (2001) stated that for this method to become a reliable one, further research is needed to explore the nature of e-surveying and its application within tourism research. This was one the aims for this particular study.

There are definite downfalls of this new method and these constitute a limitation of this thesis (and are outlined later on in this chapter).

#### **3.2.4 Pilot Study**

Pilot surveys or studies are small-scale trial runs of a larger survey. They relate predominantly to questionnaire surveys but can in fact be used to try out any type of research procedure (Veal, 1997). A pilot study was conducted during Easter 2002. The empirical purpose of this pilot study was to test the issues mentioned in the literature review and to start making contact with the target market. Furthermore, it was used to test surveys and their response rate when distributed via e-mail (e-surveying based on Litvin and Kar, 2001).

A very loosely structured questionnaire, rather a set of relevant questions was sent out to a sample frame of 50. The response rate cannot be measured since the method of e-surveying does not allow you to count how many questionnaires were sent out. The questionnaire was sent out as an e-mail attachment to known 'silver surfers' who were asked to forward the e-mail to their friends and family in the same age range.

The questions asked were divided in three main sections – information search, decision-making process and the Internet as an information source. Information search questions related to information sources used and their importance for the information search in general. The questions in the decision-making process section were linked to destination choice, decision-makers, and booking arrangements. Finally, the questions regarding the Internet as an information source were both general and specific and asked about search preferences, usability of websites as well as the online provider – customer relationship. Respondents were asked to answer the questions according to the last leisure holiday they took. This was considered an easier approach than asking the set questions on a more general basis. It is acknowledged that the information search and decision-making process is unique and never done the same way twice (Fodness and Murray, 1998).

It was a conscious decision of the researcher to send out this pilot questionnaire with a very loose structure. Previous research experience has led to the knowledge that often more loosely structured surveys can help with the re-design of the main survey. The questionnaire consisted of both open and closed questions. Answer options for the closed questions were taken from various basic tourism textbooks (e.g. Cooper *et al*, 2000).

The exact outcomes of the pilot study are only interesting when looking at general themes and issues arising; in addition close attention was also paid to how well questions worked.

Emerging themes of the pilot study included that a majority of people do look for information prior to visiting the destination, even repeat visitors in most cases. Most respondents already stated that they mainly use the Internet as an information source

nowadays, travel guidebooks and travel brochures were the next popular choices. The main reason for using the Internet was easy accessibility. Results on when the respondents started their information search yielded disappointing results. The answers were very broad – from six months to one week beforehand – and most respondents did not even answer the question. Regarding the decision-making process, most respondents stated that their partner made the final decision. A big majority arrange their holidays independently, with half of them even booking online either through online travel agents or directly with the accommodation providers. Convenience and information availability play an important role in choosing the Internet as an information source. Almost half of the pilot study respondents also believe that one can make an informed decision with just the Internet as an information source. The question regarding rating tourism related websites produced little or no useful results since most of the respondents either did not answer or simply were inclined to tick the ‘box in the middle’. The intended result to get an insight into people’s perception of tourism related websites and whether they cater for their needs was not achieved. When it came to assessing the relationship between provider and consumer, almost all thought that an online relationship is indeed different from an offline one; however, another third of the respondents did not agree with that and see the relationship as the same. The preference is equally distributed, no clear favourite can be chosen.

Pilot study respondents were all Austrian (since the author was on Easter holiday and used her father’s contacts for this purpose; it was also at a point in the study before the focus on the United Kingdom was decided upon), 92 percent male, 8 percent female, all between 45 and 65 years old. The majority are employed and married.

Partly helpful, the pilot helped redefine the research outlined for this thesis. It helped to identify which questions have potential for the main research and which are better left out. More specifically the pilot helped to define which questions would provide useful results. Generally the pilot study is a small-scale exploratory study that was used to explore issues and tested which and how questions could be used.

Essentially, the questions remained similar to those used in the pilot questionnaire, addressing key issues of this thesis – information search, decision-making process and the Internet as an information source. Generally, the questions will help identify group tendencies in searching for information, how decisions are made and why people over 50 years use the Internet as an information source. Results will allow an insight into the grey market and their ways of decision-making especially about the process of information search, knowledge build-up, making a decision and finalising it through booking either on- or offline. In order to make the questionnaire design as suitable as possible, several interviews with individuals of the sample population were conducted.

The questions used in the main survey were not only informed by the pilot study results but also by findings of six interviews that were held prior to finalising the survey design (see questionnaire design for details). As the pilot study informed the interview questions and the interview results informed the questionnaire, there is an obvious connection between the methods chosen.

### **3.2.5 Interviews**

Invitations for interviews were sent out via e-mail to known ‘silver surfers’ in the researcher’s surroundings. Several answers were received and all together six interviews were set up. Similar to the pilot study, the structure of the interviews was rather loose. The researcher made use of a semi-structured approach where the initial question was used to gently introduce the interviewee to the theme of the interview. The questions followed the main issues, Internet usage, online information search and decision-making process.

One reason why it was important for this study to make use of qualitative research is that interviews are relatively unstructured and ‘open-ended’ and claim to understand ‘experiences’ (Silverman, 2001). It was necessary for the author to understand these experiences ‘silver surfers’ have had in order to design an appropriate questionnaire. Scott

and Godbey (1994) also stress that qualitative methods present beneficial insight into the social and contextual circumstances surrounding leisure involvement. The authors furthermore argue that qualitative research can be used to study leisure behaviour in various ways:

- Leisure as experience – leisure on subjective terms as a state of mind, experience or feeling (and not as a fixed measurement)
- Leisure behaviour as a formative process – form and meaning of leisure involvement changes over time as new situations and circumstances arise
- Leisure behaviour as a group phenomenon – the individual can be analysed in the context of a group as leisure involvement is embedded in social interaction. (Scott and Godbey, 1994).

The issues stated by the two authors are relevant to this particular study as they related to the use of qualitative research and interviews in particular.

Silverman (2001) states that there are three versions of interview data; they are outlined in the table below.

Table 3.2: Three versions of interview data (adapted from Silverman, 2001)

The interviews conducted for this particular thesis combined the suggested methodologies for positivism and emotionalism as it was important to learn about behaviour and attitudes as well as authentic experiences. A combination of the methods proposed resulted in the use of a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews are the most common form of interviews utilised in research. They allow the researcher to ask specified questions but also permit elaboration should sudden questions arise. On the positive side, semi-structured interviews offer the combination of flexibility of the unstructured interview with

comparability of key questions. Nevertheless, bias may increase as the interviewer selects questions to explore and that may inhibit the comparability of responses. (Finn *et al*, 2000). 'In order to find out about another person's feelings, thoughts, or experiences we typically believe that we merely have to ask the right questions and the other's reality will be ours' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004: 143). Furthermore, it is stressed that interviewing is an active process. The interview used to be seen as a one-way pipeline for transporting knowledge but, in recent years, there has been ongoing recognition of the interview as meaning-making conversation, more like a two-way informational street than a one-way data pipeline. Since it is a two-way conversation, the interview is always inevitably interactive and constructive; in a word, the interview is active. (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004).

The structure of the interviews utilised in this research project was as follows:

After a short introduction and explanation of the purpose of the interview, gender and age of the interviewee were noted; the interviewer engaged them in a casual conversation about their Internet related behaviour. Questions concentrated on similar topics as the pilot study – general Internet usage, leisure versus work use, tourism related use and information search related use. The interviews concluded with questions relating to the appropriateness of the Internet for older age groups, and trust.

Similar to the pilot study, although the results were not used to give exact findings they were very useful when it came to finalising the main survey of the research project as well as recognising overlying themes and issues. Quotes from the interviews were used throughout the findings and analysis chapters in order to illustrate and support particular themes/issues and arguments.

### **3.2.6 Main survey – final questionnaire/survey design**

The original research design was subject to some necessary changes. The main reasons were that, due to further reading, the thinking and perception of certain issues needed to be adjusted and the importance of specific issues was identified as well as the pilot study and interviews, which have helped to put the research into perspective. The following section gives a detailed explanation of the changes made.

The first draft of the questionnaire was a basic cluster of questions from three main themes that have emerged from the interviews – travel planning, issues of travel experience, risk/trust issues. It soon became clear that the questionnaire was too general and the questions needed to be expanded in order for the survey to answer the research objectives. Additionally, several questions were too difficult (structure) and deemed not suitable. Overall, the whole survey was too general and would not have answered the research objectives.

The second version of the questionnaire was a more detailed version of the first one and included more specific questions. However, this version relied on too many open questions that would have made the answering of the question inconvenient and long for respondents. Additionally, it would have made the process of analysing the answers rather complicated, as SPSS is easier to use if the answers are pre-set.

Consequently the third version of the questionnaire was basically an adaptation from the second one, mainly transforming the open questions into closed questions with multiple answer possibilities. Furthermore, in the third version, the themes of the questionnaire were rearranged according to past experience, present activities and usual behaviour as well as future intentions.

Arranging the questions in a temporal order also helped to determine the significance or insignificance of several questions. Therefore, numerous questions were reformulated,

replaced or disregarded, which was particularly important for the draft of the final version of the survey. Additionally, for the final version of the survey, several multiple-choice answers were added to the already existing ones in order to make the results of this survey as accurate as possible. That is also the main reason why all the 'other' choices were taken out of the survey. The final version of the survey used for the main data collection can be found in Appendix I.

A justification and discussion of the final survey follows below:

The final version of the questionnaire included a so-called 'filter question', which asks whether or not the respondent has ever used the Internet for any travel related planning. This question was moved from the middle part of the questionnaire to first position after it became clear that people who were to answer this question with 'no' would not be relevant for the study. Therefore people, who would not be able to help with this specific research are automatically excluded from filling out this survey. The filter question is followed by a preamble that will further help the respondent understand the purpose of this research, explaining that the following questions ask about how they use the Internet in general.

The first big part of the questionnaire asks the respondents about their general Internet behaviour. Questions inquire about length of Internet usage, reason for starting using the Internet, learning process, places of Internet access and two questions on information provision on the Internet; one about whether they are able to find what they want on the Internet and the other one asks to what extent they agree with the statement that the Internet is too youth orientated. The interviewees did not agree at all with this statement, however, looking at the WWW and its information provision in general it has to be said that it is clearly aimed at a younger market.

These basic questions are important, as they will be used to cross-reference certain 'key' questions such as information search strategies, decision-making and travel planning in general. Particularly interesting will be the relationship between length of usage and the

decision-making process i.e. in what chronological order the respondents made their decisions.

The next part of the questionnaire concentrates on questions on information search experiences and behaviour. The first question in this section follows up the filter question by asking for what particular information the respondents were looking for.

It was a conscious decision to differentiate between flights and other means of transportation, as it is more likely that respondents have had to look up information on flights due to the evolution of the low-cost airline market, which almost entirely concentrates its information and product distribution on the Internet. It would, therefore, be interesting to see how many respondents have actively searched for information on other means of transportation.

The multitude of choices is justified by the fact that the research is concentrating on information provision on the Internet and therefore the more detailed the findings, the more the data can tell us what respondents were looking for.

The various choices available for answering these questions were chosen due to several factors. Some (rather obvious) options were the results of both the pilot study and the qualitative research. Furthermore, a big effort was put into providing sufficient choice possibilities and by surfing the Internet for tourism/travel-related websites and what information they provide, e.g. popular travel guides like Lonely Planet, the World Travel Guide online etc. Again, there is no possibility to answer this question with 'other' in the hope that sufficient choice has been provided.

The most comprehensive answer possibility is definitely 'destination information' as it can include a multitude of information, e.g. when to go, events, money and costs, attractions, off the beaten track, activities, history, culture, environment, getting around, getting there and away (all examples were taken from Lonely Planet's website, Lonely Planet, 2004).

As one of the main objectives of this research is to investigate the tourism decision-making process, the next question asks people whether they have planned a leisure holiday during the last 12 months. If yes, they are asked to directly answer the decision-making process question; if no, they are asked whether they are currently planning a leisure holiday. Again if the answer is yes, they are asked to answer the decision-making process question; if no, they are not required to answer this particular question as their mind will not be fresh enough to remember every aspect of travel planning.

The question on decision-making is one of the most important questions in the survey and will not accurately reflect the process if the respondents are not able to think back and correctly state in what chronological order they have made their decisions. It has to be emphasised that this has nothing to do with age, but with the fact that usually this information is stored in short term memory. The question on the decision-making process can be seen as the key question of this research. Respondents are asked to arrange the general attributes of every leisure holiday (destination choice, mode of travel, accommodation, length of stay, time of year and package holiday/independent travel) according to the chronological order in which they have made these decisions. In contrast to the question on the information search, these choices are rather general and should reflect the overall decision made rather than give detailed answers.

The survey results show an inclination of how and in what order senior travellers make decisions for their leisure holidays. Furthermore when compared to length of Internet usage, the research demonstrates different patterns of behaviour between experienced and less-experienced Internet users.

Following this key question is a question on what other information sources senior travellers' use. The options available are the most common information sources for tourism and travel-related issues. It will be interesting to see how many senior travellers rely on family and/or friends for travel related information, probably recommendations for a particular destination, airline or hotel. External social influences have been well

documented in the literature (Moutinho, 1987; Gitelson & Kerstetter, 1994), however, it was always a fair assumption that older people are a big part of this as they might have already visited a destination. Accordingly, results will show if senior travellers rely on recommendations from family and/or friends as much as other travellers do. Equally important will be the results on TV/iTV as it might show a pattern of technology use.

However much information there is available on the Internet, it does not mean that people trust it. The next two questions emerged from the interview results where respondents stated that the information on the Internet is not very trustworthy and they usually back-up their search with information from other information sources (see previous question). Therefore, it seemed important to include these two questions in this survey, asking the respondents to state to what extent they actually trust the information they find on the Internet (five options) and if they always, often or never back up their travel related information search.

The penultimate part of the main questionnaire inquires about the respondents' general travel behaviour. Firstly, the question of how many leisure holidays were taken during the last six months is asked. Literature (Intel, 2000) always states that because they have more free time (retired, no more children) and more disposable income, senior travellers are more likely to take more holidays than any other age group. Options range from none to six or more holidays, which would indicate a leisure trip once a month or even more often.

Following up the question on other important information sources, the next question inquires about the biggest external influences on travel decision-making. As already stated earlier, it was interesting to see these results especially because this question distinguishes between family and friends and makes it clear that we are not talking about people who are joint decision-makers but external influences.

The following questions are important to see in relation with length of usage. The questions inquire about online confidence, not only when searching for information but also when making a travel-related online purchase. The section includes the only questions on online booking, as it is not of major relevance for this study. This research concentrates on the information search and decision-making process that could result in an online booking.

The first of these four questions asks the respondents to rank their own confidence when searching for travel related information; confident meaning that they feel confident about finding the information they are looking for or need. Categories include options taken from the interview results where respondents admitted to various degrees of confidence in their own searching abilities.

The next question is a simple closed question that asks respondents to state whether they have ever booked anything online. A simple Yes/No will suffice to analyse and cross-reference the other information collected from this survey.

Following on from the previous question, the next one asks respondents to state how much or little they trust secure means of online booking. They are asked to rank their answer somewhere from completely to Not at all (five options) and state whether or not they always, sometimes or never back up their Internet searches with offline information.

Finally, the last question in the main section of the questionnaire asks respondents to state what kind of service would make online booking more comfortable or trustworthy for them. The options available are all things that were mentioned during the interviews in the qualitative part of this research project. This is also the only question where respondents still have the option of ticking 'other' and expand on their answer, so that any ideas could then be recommended to the tourism industry and its information providers on the Internet.

The personal profile rounds up the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to indicate their age group, gender, occupation and education.

### **3.3 Sampling procedure**

The relevant sample population for the research consists first of all of individuals, as it is the individuals' behaviour and experiences that the investigation aims to identify. The only restrictions to the sample are age – the sample consists of people over 50 years of age – and that the person must be an active Internet user and geographic location. The sample consisted of residents of the United Kingdom only. There are no restrictions concerning gender, occupation or geographic location within the United Kingdom.

There is a wide variety of sampling procedures e.g. Simple random, Stratified random, Cluster, Stage, Purposive, Quota, Snowball and Volunteer or accidental or convenience (Black, 1999). This thesis relied on a combination of sampling methods. To begin the author made use of a convenience sample which involves either asking for volunteers or a set of people who just happen to be available (Black, 1999), hence there is no way of ensuring that the sample is representative of the population (Churchill, 1995). In this particular case, the researcher started out with known 'silver surfers' in the realm of her acquaintances as well as by contacting websites that target 'silver surfers'. People were asked if they would be willing to participate in study about online behaviour in the 'grey market'. Once the convenience sample was put into place, it evolved into a snowball sample. A snowball sample happens when people with desired traits or characteristics give names of further appropriate subjects (Black, 1999). Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages, which will be outlined on the next page:

Table 3.3: Advantages/Disadvantages of Snowball and convenience sampling (Source: adapted from Black, 1999)

The rationale behind choosing a combination of the above mentioned samples is that a random sample within the chosen age group would consist of too many non-Internet users. Although Internet usage is increasing within the grey market segment, the majority of over 50-year-old people are still not connected to the Internet (Nielsen/Net Ratings, 2003). As the research focuses on the Internet users within this age group, so-called 'silver surfers', it would not be reasonable to build this research on a random sample. Furthermore, the combination of samples helped to reach more people since all respondents are asked to pass on the questionnaire to friends and family.

Concerning distribution, the questionnaire was distributed via e-mail, asking several websites catering for 'silver surfers' to send out the survey in their newsletters. Amongst the contacted sites were:

<http://www.wiredseniors.com>

<http://www.SeniorNet.org>

<http://www.senior.com>

<http://www.seniorsites.com>

<http://www.silversurfers.net>

Some websites were eager to cooperate, however, for confidentiality reasons, the researcher was asked not to mention how many responses were received from which specific website. The exact sample size could not be determined beforehand due to snowball sampling, however, the researcher was aiming for around 500 valid responses and 517 valid ones were received.

### 3.4 Personal profile of participants

#### 3.4.1 Interviews

The interviewees' profiles are as follows:

Interview 1: 58 year old male, academic

Interview 2: 55 year old female, researcher

Interview 3: 62 year old female, administrative (temp)

Interview 4: 62 year old male, academic

Interview 5: 55 year old male, academic

Interview 6: 55 year old female, administrative

#### 3.4.2 Questionnaires

This section outlines the demographics and characteristics of the respondents of the questionnaires.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	50-54 years	217	42.0	42.0	42.0
	55-59 years	158	30.6	30.6	72.5
	60-64 years	55	10.6	10.6	83.2
	65-74 years	69	13.3	13.3	96.5
	75 years +	18	3.5	3.5	100.0
	Total	517	100.0	100.0	

Table 3.4: Age distribution amongst questionnaire participants (numbers)

### Age distribution

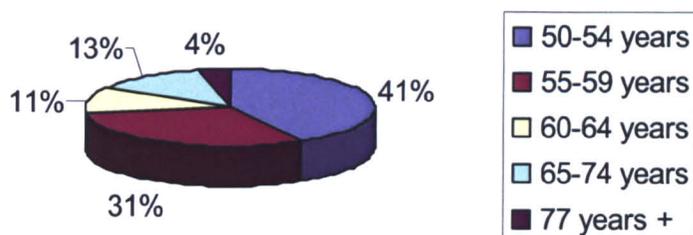


Figure 3.3: Age distribution amongst questionnaire respondents (percentages)

As already outlined in the methodology, age was one of the main constraints for this research. The results show that each age group is represented, with the most responses from people aged between 50-54 years, followed by those aged 55-59 years. The third biggest group is the one of those aged 65-74 years, followed by those between 60-64 years and finally those 75 years or older.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	261	50.5	50.5	50.5
	Male	256	49.5	49.5	100.0
	Total	517	100.0	100.0	

Table 3.5: Gender distribution amongst questionnaire respondents (numbers)

### Gender distribution



Figure 3.4: Gender distribution amongst questionnaire respondents (percentages)

The distribution of gender amongst participants is almost balanced out with 50.5% (261) female and 49.5% (256) male respondents.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	employed	352	68.1	68.1	68.1
	retired	165	31.9	31.9	100.0
	Total	517	100.0	100.0	

Table 3.6: Occupation distribution amongst questionnaire respondents (percentages)

When looking at occupational status of the respondents, it can be said that the majority – 68.1 percent – is still employed (that relates back to the majority being part of the younger age groups within the grey market) and the rest – 31.9 percent – already retired. The author would have personally preferred to include more retired individuals in this research project but that fact that about one third of all respondents are indeed retired should suffice.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	GCSE/O-levels	100	19.3	19.3	19.3
	A/AS levels	101	19.5	19.5	38.9
	HND	33	6.4	6.4	45.3
	Degree	116	22.4	22.4	67.7
	Postgraduate degree	67	13.0	13.0	80.7
	Doctorate	67	13.0	13.0	93.6
	not stated	33	6.4	6.4	100.0
	Total	517	100.0	100.0	

Table 3.7: Occupation distribution amongst questionnaire respondents (percentages)

It was of interest to ask respondents for their highest level of education achieved as there seems to be a notion that the higher the level of education is the more people travel and/or use the Internet. It might also be a sign whether people at a certain age want to learn how to use new technology.

The findings of this research are in some ways contradictory to these arguments. Forty-five percent of all respondents stated that their highest form of education achieved is below degree level. Twenty-two percent have earned a degree and another 26 percent have a type of postgraduate qualification (13 percent hold postgraduate degrees, 13 percent hold Doctorates). Unfortunately, 6.4 percent of all respondents (33 people) did not answer this question. As this is a sensitive question, it has to be accepted if participants do not want to share that type of information.

### **3.5 Methods of data analysis**

The data collected by the above explained methods was both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data was analysed with the help of SPSS, a specialised computer programme for analysing quantitative data. First the questions were encoded, then the answers inserted and finally results were analysed with the help of a wide range of exploratory and descriptive statistics, which summarise or display quantitative data and usually take the form of charts, tables, percentages and averages as well as means. SPSS offers a wide range of tools for statistical analysis such as case summaries, frequencies, crosstabs etc., which help develop an understanding of the data and relationship between variables. Combined, these tools permit a comprehensive analysis of the collected data. Expected results identify tendencies in information search techniques, experiences and processes of decision-making in leisure travel and how the Internet is used as an information source by the 'grey market'. All these issues can be further analysed and interpreted with the help of SPSS in order to get the best possible results.

Qualitative data that was gathered by semi-structured interviews will be analysed by utilising content analysis. As there are not many interviews planned, the use of a computer programme is not required. Silverman (2001: 304) states that content analysis "involves establishing categories, and systematic linkages between them, and then counting the number of instances when those categories are used in a particular item of text". In this particular case, the author looked for recurring themes and issues as well as commonalities.

### **3.6 Limitations of research**

Even though the approach and methods outlined above were chosen to be the most appropriate for this particular thesis, they are not without limitations, which will be outlined now.

Sampling is the most important limitation of this research. First of all, the respondents were limited to a specific geographic location, the United Kingdom. The research project started out ambitiously without a particular focus of geographic location. It became soon apparent that this would weaken the research as the sample would have been too wide. Another attempt was made to include all European Union countries in the study, however, due to the specific sampling methods used, it would not have been feasible as the bigger the potential sample size gets, the less representative the results actually are. Having said that, the author acknowledges that her research is by no means representative of the UK population either. A random sample would not have been efficient in this case since it would have included too many non Internet users.

Another limitation concerns the method of how the survey was distributed. The author mentioned earlier that a new method – e-surveying (Litvin and Kar, 2001) – was tested in this thesis. Although it added on a unique aspect of research, the method used was definitely not easy to implement. Due to technical difficulties, it was decided to make use of e-mail and attach the questionnaire in a Microsoft Word file, which is easy for people to open plus they should know how to ‘fill’ it out. Respondents were asked to use either the highlight option or simply change the colour of the answer they selected.

As briefly stated previously, the use of e-surveying as a method could be seen as suspect, i.e. not yielding ‘real’ results. The author made sure to avoid this situation and carefully implemented the chosen method throughout the process of data collection, keeping an on-going check on the development. Either way, data collection was very difficult and took quite a long time. The author would not consider using the method in the exact same way

again but rather make use of a web-based survey the next time. E-mail might be convenient for general communication but it did not prove itself as a reliable data collection method in this particular case.

Besides sampling and the methods used, the survey itself poses a limitation, too. The questions asked were all closed and therefore did not allow for elaboration on the part of the respondents. Even though interviews allowed respondents to elaborate, the majority of results came from the surveys.

The author acknowledges these limitations and recommends further research in this particular field of study.

## **IV. Online Information Search in the ‘Grey Market’**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The last three chapters have outlined purpose, theoretical background of and methods used in this thesis. This chapter will outline and analyse the findings regarding the information search data of the research. It will examine both qualitative and quantitative results derived from the main data collected by presenting both quotes and tables/figures from the research results. The data is then analysed and compared to existing literature in the relevant field (which has been previously discussed in the literature review). The data collection has yielded interesting results and new findings that will be of benefit for both future tourism research as well as the tourism industry.

Sheldon (1993a) has stated that information is the life-blood of the tourism industry, hence the information search is a vital part of the tourism related decision-making process and will be highlighted within this chapter. It is important to remember that within the context of this research, the information search has to be seen as a lead up to the decision-making process as well as a knowledge acquiring process that is not immediately followed up by a purchasing decision.

### **4.2 General Internet usage and behaviour**

This section contains all information containing general Internet behaviour and facts. It describes the participants’ general Internet behaviour – starting up, learning influences, access, etc. It will examine the respondents’ general online activities and set the scene for the tourism related findings.

		Age					Total
		50-54 years	55-59 years	60-64 years	65-74 years	75 years +	
Length of Internet usage	7-12 months	17	8	3	3	2	33
	1-3 years	33	17	0	16	0	66
	4-6 years	101	49	18	50	0	218
	7-10 years	66	33	0	0	16	115
	longer than 10 years	0	51	34	0	0	85
Total		217	158	55	69	18	517

Table 4.1: Length of Internet usage according to age

This table clearly indicates that length of Internet usage is definitely not related to the age of the respondents. Most people have been using the Internet for 4-6 years; however a higher number of people have been using the Internet for longer than 6 or less than 4 years. That would indicate that most respondents started using the Internet between 1998 and 2000 or earlier. There are no general statistics that outline the length of Internet usage in the UK population; even the ICM research project for Age Concern did not ask their respondents this question. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the average length of Internet usage within this thesis is very much representative of the general UK population. In 2000, the UK had 15,400,000 Internet users, that is 26.2 percent of the general population. By September 2006 this number had grown to 38,512,837 users which equals to 63.8 percent of the general British population (ITU/Nielsen Net, 2006). The turn of the century can be seen as a stepping stone for general Internet usage. Broadband became affordable and available to the general public and more and more people used that opportunity. The 'grey market' is no different than the other market segments as the result of this data collection has shown.

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
Length of Internet usage	7-12 months	17	16	33
	1-3 years	17	49	66
	4-6 years	135	83	218
	7-10 years	50	65	115
	longer than 10 years	42	43	85
<b>Total</b>		<b>261</b>	<b>256</b>	<b>517</b>

Table 4.2: Length of Internet usage according to gender

As with age, the above table shows us that most female respondents have been using the Internet for 4-6 years, whereas the length of Internet usage is more evenly distributed among male respondents, with a slight emphasis on the 4-6 years option. It is interesting to note that so many respondents started using the Internet between 1998 and 2000 and leads to consideration if the change to the new millennium had something to do with it. Similar to age, there are no general statistics relating gender to length of Internet usage; however, research has shown that, overall, females still have a slightly more negative attitude towards technology in general and ICTs in particular (e-Living Consortium, 2003). The e-Living consortium (2003) has also shown that there was an 11 percent gap between males and females using the Internet in the UK. Within Europe, this makes the UK one of the countries with quite a low gap between genders; in comparison both Italy and Germany have gaps of around 35 percent indicating the dominance of the male users in the Internet market (e-Living Consortium, 2003). The same research has collected data that indicates that in between 1992 and 2000 more men than women have signed up for Internet usage. For the first time female users overtook the male ones in 2001, however, they are in a narrow lead (e-Living Consortium, 2003).

During the interviews, participants were asked to talk about how and when they started using the Internet. Interviewees have been using the Internet for at least three years, some even since the early days of its existence, as one interviewee pointed out:

“I have used it ever since it came online.”

(Interviewee 5)

However, in the 1980s the Internet was merely a form of means of quick(er) communication and cannot be compared to its current state which we owe to Berners-Lee who developed HyperText Mark-up Language (HTML) in 1994 (Buhalis, 2003).

Interestingly, one interviewee particularly states that he began using the Internet for a specific travel related purpose.

“My wife, our friends and I were looking into booking a holiday together and ended up doing it all online.”

(Interviewee 1)

However, he also stated that since then he has not used the Internet for the same purpose. Not because of any problems that occurred, just simply because he prefers to use the Internet as an information source and rather book travel arrangement offline. For booking he prefers a travel agent, followed by phone bookings and online booking ranking third. This statement underlines the author’s argument that the Internet is still mainly an information tool and used as a general information source for different topics including tourism. This case is not a typical one – usually people do not jump into the deep end straight away and then go back to where they started. Most respondents were much more likely to start off slowly when the Internet is concerned. Eastman and Iyer (2004) have pointed out that the ‘silver surfers’ might be slower to take up the Internet habit but once they have embraced it, they will remain loyal online users.

Generally, interviewees pointed out that a reason for starting using the Internet was the extensive amount of information it offers.

“We just knew that there was so much information available and we had to get online in order to access it. We also realised that there is a lot more information available than we ever thought possible.”

(Interviewee 1)

This awareness of the Internet can be traced back to the late 1990s when the Internet received a lot of media attention and people started being curious. The development of the World Wide Web (WWW – as an interface for ‘commoners’) facilitated a unique opportunity for distribution of multimedia information and interactivity between suppliers and consumers; nevertheless, the information available on the Internet is chaotic and loosely structured, mainly due to its immaturity and the lack of any type of standardisation (Cooper *et al*, 1998). Although Cooper made this statement almost a decade ago, in parts it can still be applied to the current Internet. The main obstacle for making effective use of the Internet is that people are often faced with too much information. As there is a vast amount of information available, users can get easily confused and frustrated when they do not immediately find what they were searching for. Search engines are not always accurate either and may overlook the page if you do not use the right keywords.

Questionnaire respondents were asked if they started to use the Internet for work or leisure purposes. The results did not offer a clear answer with 54.9 percent stating that they started using it for work purposes and 45.1 percent for leisure purposes.

		Occupation		Total
		employed	retired	
Start of Internet usage	work	201	83	284
	leisure	151	82	233
Total		352	165	517

Table 4.3: Start of Internet usage according to occupation

It is important to make a distinction between respondents who are already retired and those who still work. Interestingly, half of those who are retired stated that they started using the

Internet for work purposes – 50.3 percent versus 49.7 percent – most likely back in the days when they were not yet retired. Out of the employed respondents those that started using it for work purposes are slightly in the lead – 57.1 percent versus 42.9 percent. Even if more respondents started the Internet for work purposes, the difference between the two numbers is only 51 answers so a definite trend cannot be established. Interest in new technologies and a desire to keep up to date with new gadgets can certainly be considered an important influence. Zeithaml and Gilly (1987) have pointed out that older consumers have been known to embrace technology when an advantage is offered and communicated.

		Start of Internet usage		Total
		work	leisure	
Length of Internet usage	7-12 months	17	16	33
	1-3 years	33	33	66
	4-6 years	150	68	218
	7-10 years	33	82	115
	longer than 10 years	51	34	85
Total		284	233	517

Table 4.4: Length of Internet usage compared to start of Internet usage

When looking at length of Internet usage in comparison to start of Internet usage in the table above, a trend towards work starters is evident; however, in the 7-10 years group, the leisure starters are clearly in the lead. Even the argument that the earlier people started using the Internet, the more likely it is that they started for work purposes is proved incorrect. The results offer some insight into smaller trends in groups according to length of Internet usage but no clear indication of an overall finding that can be generalised to an extent.

		Education							Total
		GCSE/O-levels	A/AS levels	HND	Degree	PG degree	Doctorate	not stated	
Start of Internet usage	work	50	34	17	66	67	50	0	284
	leisure	50	67	16	50	0	17	33	233
Total		100	101	33	116	67	67	33	517

Table 4.5: Start of Internet usage according to education

Overall the reasons why respondents started using the Internet and their educational backgrounds are evenly distributed. However, when looking at the sub-degree educated participants, a slight trend towards leisure starters is evident, in contrast the rest of the respondents from degree onwards but mainly with either a postgraduate degree or a doctorate, show a trend towards work. All respondents who did not state their education have stated that they started using the Internet for leisure purposes. One of the reasons why more educated people tend to be work starters could be that people below degree level might not have to work with computers at work at all so if they wanted to use the Internet they had to do it in their free time. Overall, there are obviously professions that do not allow for much time spent on the computer or those that would not necessarily benefit from using the Internet directly, e.g. a doctor or retail manager. Unfortunately, the author cannot provide any qualitative evidence to support this, so it remains mainly an assumption.

Most interviewees started using the Internet for work related purposes; some of them even stated that the reasons for the decision to get Internet access at home was not only because they needed it for when working at home but also because their children required it.

“Our children started to use the Internet at school and it was expected that they used it for their homework, so we had no choice and got Internet access at home. In the end it worked out fine since I could then work from home when necessary and obviously it also came in handy for looking up information for leisure purposes.”

(Interviewee 6)

They also stated that, although unusual in the beginning, it has become part of their everyday lives. As mentioned previously, one respondent actually started using the Internet for a travel related purpose.

		Occupation		Total
		employed	retired	
Place of Internet access	Home	200	116	316
	Work	152	33	185
	Internet cafe, public places paid access	0	16	16
Total		352	165	517

Table 4.6: Place of Internet access according to occupation

When it comes to places of Internet access, the majority of employed respondents use the Internet at home, closely followed by work. Retired respondents also access the Internet mainly at home, some at work – which is a bit odd, considering they are retired and the number is unusually high – it has to be assumed that several respondents misunderstood this question and therefore it cannot be seen as reliable or it can be assumed that some retirees still have associations with their former workplaces and might drop in to consult etc. and use the computer then – and some make use of public places where you have to pay to access the Internet, e.g. Internet cafes or similar. The question asked the participants to state where they *usually* access the Internet which does not exempt them from using it at various locations. ICM Research (2002) has looked at place of access within their research and, since their data is representative of the general population, it is ideal for comparison purposes. Overall, the results are similar with 87 percent accessing the Internet at home (compared to 61.1 percent of respondents), the second most common point of access is work with 24 percent (compared to 35.8 percent). Although the numbers are a bit different, a trend can be identified when comparing these results even when looking at other places of access like friends' homes and Internet cafes which come in third and fourth place respectively.

		Method of learning				Total
		computer course	help from colleague	help from family	learning by doing	
Length of Internet usage	7-12 months	0	17	16	0	33
	1-3 years	34	0	16	16	66
	4-6 years	67	17	0	134	218
	7-10 years	0	17	33	65	115
	longer than 10 years	0	17	0	68	85
Total		101	68	65	283	517

Table 4.7: Length of Internet usage according to method of learning

When we look at length of Internet usage, it was apparent that most respondents started using the Internet 4-6 years ago. The table above indicates that most of them taught themselves, followed by taking a computer course. One aspect that was evident throughout both interviews and questionnaire results was that most respondents indicated that they have followed a ‘learning by doing’ approach when it came to the Internet. These results can be related to Eastman and Iyer (2004) who also found out in their research that most ‘silver surfers’ prefer to learn how to use the Internet on their own. Most of the respondents of this research explicitly stated (in the interviews) that it was important for them to familiarise themselves with the medium and learn how to utilise it by using it straightaway. About a fifth of the respondents (19.5 percent) took advantage of computer courses, something that is also mentioned by Eastman and Iyer (2004), who stated that additional education was preferred in the form of computer courses if they were offered at convenient locations. Another 13.2 percent asked for help from their colleagues and families and 12.6 percent asked for help from their friends. When comparing that to the fact that most participants started using the Internet at work, it would seem unusual that the employer did not provide employees with a starter course. Additionally, it is also acknowledged that since technologies change constantly, the learning process is an on-going one.

		Method of learning				Total
		computer course	help from colleague	help from family	learning by doing	
Gender	Female	67	51	17	126	261
	Male	34	17	48	157	256
Total		101	68	65	283	517

Table 4.8: Method of learning according to gender

Interestingly, more women than men took a computer course and more men than women taught themselves. It is also remarkable that women seemed more confident to ask their colleagues whereas men preferred to ask their families for help.

		Method of learning				Total
		computer course	help from colleague	help from family	learning by doing	
Age	50-54 years	33	34	17	133	217
	55-59 years	34	34	8	82	158
	60-64 years	0	0	3	52	55
	65-74 years	34	0	19	16	69
	75 years +	0	0	18	0	18
Total		101	68	65	283	517

Table 4.9: Method of learning according to age

When we look at method of learning according to age, it can be said that most of the younger respondents prefer the learning by doing approach; however, computer courses are not necessarily for the older members of society only. A relatively high number (in comparison to older respondents) of the younger respondents stated that they took advantage of computer courses. To ask for help from family members seems to be the only trait that runs through all age groups (probably the one that is least embarrassing or the easiest method to access after teaching yourself).

The issue of how participants felt when starting to use the Internet was used in the interviews. It is of great importance to find out about initial feelings of using advanced technology since it gives an understanding of how an older individual deals with ICTs. The answers to this question were very diverse; only two interviewees stated that they felt

comfortable with the Internet from the beginning, the majority considered it to be very time consuming, confusing and even disappointing.

“I expected so much more to be honest. For something to be so hyped up and then not that easy to use – there is no apparent structure – it was rather disappointing. I felt somehow cheated and decided to only use it for work purposes [which later on changed].”

(Interviewee 2)

There is still a digital divide, or so-called ‘grey gap’ (Eastman and Iyer, 2004) in place when it comes to senior citizens’ usage of the Internet, so these initial thoughts are of great significance. Negative thoughts like these can prevent members of the ‘grey market’ from starting to use the Internet and might cause first time users to change their minds about continuing to do so. It is vital for the information providers to realise how important the first impression is, even when it comes to using the Internet. Having said that, the ‘grey market’ needs to receive more targeted promotion on the benefits of using the Internet and that it is not only a marketplace but also an almost endless source of information.

Two interviewees took part in an Internet beginner course, which assisted them in finding their way around, especially with search techniques, and helped them to gain confidence. Generally, it can be said that most interviewees agreed that the Internet is best understood as a ‘learning by doing’ information tool. Its uniqueness in data access and the fact that it does not have an index makes it very different to previous information tools. One interviewee also pointed out that because his age group was brought up with using libraries and books, it makes it even harder for them as the difference of usage is quite extreme.

“There was no index that I could make use of. With a book, you know how to open it, you know how to find the index and read it, find what you are looking for and then check the page for the information you need. The Internet is not at all like that. I have to admit I expected it to be similar though, I thought that search engines might be like an index [which I admit, they are in a way] but easier to use.”

(Interviewee 4)

A book is straightforward; on the Internet, however, you have to find what you are looking for directly and even then it is still virtual information – if you want a hard copy you have to print it. Search engines are also a very different feature as they have taught us that ‘less is more’ especially when you are looking for something specific. The more keywords you use, the less likely you are to find the actual information, which is summed up very well by one of the interviewees:

“The Internet has taught me to be as vague as possible.”

(Interviewee 5)

As briefly mentioned before, it is also important to use the ‘right’ keywords for what you are looking for otherwise one could be stuck without finding anything for a long time. This really opens up questions about how capable technology really is. Although everything that you can find on the Internet has been inputted by a person, the people using the Internet have to be trained in a certain way so that they can find and access that information. As we all are individuals, it is not easy to teach people to think in the exact same way so that they can come up with and use the ‘right’ keywords that you are required to find the information needed. Using the right approach might also have a lot to do with the kind of attitude a person has toward ICTs. Some might treat it like an old friend, whereas some might treat it as a new acquaintance.

An aspect that came out of the interviews was where respondents actually access the Internet and therefore a question on place of Internet access was included in the questionnaires, with the following results:

		Age					Total
		50-54 years	55-59 years	60-64 years	65-74 years	75 years +	
Place of Internet access	Home	116	67	51	66	16	316
	Work	101	83	1	0	0	185
	Internet cafe, public places paid access	0	8	3	3	2	16
Total		217	158	55	69	18	517

Table 4.10: Place of Internet access according to age

When comparing age with places of Internet access it is apparent that the younger respondents are accessing the Internet at home or at work. The number of people accessing the Internet at work goes down with ascending age; this can be linked to the fact that the older respondents have already retired. Public access does not seem to be a popular option; however, some of the respondents do use it. Bear in mind that the question asked respondents to state their *usual* or *most used* place of Internet access.

It is interesting to look at these results in comparison to the findings of ICM Research (2002). The overall trends are similar but the results which are representative of the general population are more extreme. Eighty-seven percent of the general ‘grey market’ population access the Internet at home while 61.1 percent of questionnaire respondents of this research study have indicated this. ICM also states that with those aged between 55 - 64 years the percentage of at home access drops to 82 percent, whereas in the 65 years + age group, the number rises to 94 percent. A similar trend can be found within these research findings where the number of users who do not access the Internet at work drops to zero in the two oldest age groups (most likely because of retirement in older age). The respondents who access the Internet mainly at work are 35.8 percent of respondents in this research compared to a slightly lower number of 24 percent in the general population.

Again in the general population, the numbers rise slightly in the younger age group (to 33 percent) and then fall to 9 percent in the oldest group. There is a dramatic difference between the youngest age group of respondents of this research where 49 percent of the two younger age groups access the Internet predominantly at work, to only one respondent in the middle age group and none in the two eldest groups. Again, retirement is an obvious reason for why this occurs.

When it came to talking about details of what purposes the Internet is being used for, the main issue that was raised during the interviews is that, except for two people who have accessed Friends Re-united, none of them uses the Internet for social activities.

“I don’t really think the Internet is a proper social activity. I mean I like to e-mail friends and family and keep in touch with them but apart from that I’m not really interested in anything else. Chatting has no value to me at all.”

(Interviewee 6)

The reasons probably refer back to the fact that, in contrast to younger people who were raised on ‘chatting and playing games online, etc.’, older people do not tend to associate the Internet with social activities. Information search might be a leisure activity, however it rarely involves other people than the researcher themselves and maybe a spouse and children. The range of activities for everyday necessities that are done online goes from professional research to banking and paying bills and other activities in order to cut out paperwork. The Internet is an important information tool, also used for online shopping and in certain situations for online booking of travel and tourism related products and services. Furthermore, when asked what parts of the Internet they use, most interviewees responded that they use mainly the World Wide Web and E-mail (some of them not knowing that a. these are seen as different parts and b. that there exist other parts of the Internet).

The following are the mentioned activities the interviewees use the Internet for: research at home and at work, e-mail to keep in touch with friends, Friends Reunited, banking, booking, and shopping (travel related activities were not included in this list as they were a given because of the interview filtering process). These results are similar to those by ICM Research (2002) who stated that their respondents listed the following range of Internet related activities.

Most common activities are:

- Contact family and friends in the UK (28 percent)
- Websites about hobbies and contact family and friends abroad (15 percent)
- Manage bank account and research flights/holidays (11 percent)
- Check the news (5 percent)
- Financial issues, local information and research family history (2 percent )

Activities which were completed but not necessarily repeated:

- Contact family and friends in the UK (82 percent)
- Websites about hobbies (72 percent)
- Research flights/holidays (67 percent)
- Contact friends and family abroad (66 percent)
- Local information (45 percent)
- Check the news (41 percent)
- Financial issues (39 percent)
- Manage bank account (34 percent)
- Research family history (26 percent)

Both research studies show that 'silver surfers' use the Internet for a diverse range of activities involving mainly two parts of the Internet, E-mail and the World Wide Web. It is interesting to see how ICM has divided activities into two sections, common activities and activities which were completed but not necessarily repeated. As we can see above, the list of completed/not repeated activities is a lot longer, indicating that 'silver surfers' will try a range of activities but not automatically do them again and again. Gunter (1998)

mentioned that one of the common misconceptions about the 'grey market' is that they do not want to try new things. The above mentioned activities disagree with that statement showing that senior citizens are indeed not afraid to try out new things; however, just because they do it once does not mean they will keep on doing it. This again is an aspect that the information providers will have to improve on – the better the information and service provided, the more likely it is that 'silver surfers' will actually come back.

One of the most important activities when it comes to this particular research is certainly researching flights and/or holidays. Only 11 percent have stated that this is one of their most common activities while a much higher percentage, 67 percent to be exact, state that it is one activity that they have completed but not necessarily repeated. It would be important to find out why 56 percent chose not to repeat this particular activity; however, the reasons will remain uncertain, as the study does not give any explanations. This opens up a completely new range of possibilities for further research in this area since this thesis has not concentrated on answering this question. On the other hand, the activities mentioned in both research studies are similar, which is not surprising since there is a limited number of things people can actually do online. Considering the work – leisure balance, interview participants were asked for what purpose they mainly use the Internet. This is a very simple question with very interesting answers. Apparently, in the case of these particular interviewees, five out of six persons use the Internet mainly for work.

“I have to use it at work daily so I'm sure that that adds up to much more than my leisure Internet usage.”

(Interviewee 1)

Only two people mentioned that they use the Internet mainly or partly for leisure related purposes. In the case of this question, it is apparent that all of the interviewees are still employed and working, and therefore the question cannot be considered as a valuable pillar of this research. The issue of retirement has to be considered as an important factor, however, retired people would have only one way of answering this question as they

clearly do not work anymore. One interviewee stated that she used the Internet more for leisure related purposes; however, she did not expand on her reasons. Seeing that she works as an administrative assistant, it can be assumed that her work does not require her to use the World Wide Web a lot. Another interviewee stated that although he uses the Internet mainly for work, he still would consider leisure related activities an important part of his Internet routine, especially when it comes to looking for information on holidays.

“I enjoy looking up information on the Internet especially when it is travel related subjects. Somehow it makes you feel that your holiday has already begun and you can escape the everyday life by looking at pictures etc.”

(Interviewee 5)

This quote is a good example of how the online information search can be seen as a relaxing leisure activity.

There are not many academic studies that actually look at the work – leisure balance when it comes to online information search behaviour. It has to be said that there is a slight sense of clarity that retired people will use the Internet more for leisure purposes and employed respondents – if they use the Internet at work – will use the Internet predominantly at work.

The next section will take a more in-depth look at information search behaviour of the respondents of this questionnaire.

### **4.3 Information search behaviour**

Following the examination of the more general Internet behaviour of 'silver surfers', this section will concentrate on the actual information search behaviour and especially the online information search behaviour. This is one of the most vital parts of the analysis as it will illustrate what 'silver surfers' are in search of and how they make use of the Internet.

Generally speaking, 'online information search usually refers to information search activity through the Internet' (Jang, 2004: 43). A distinct advantage of an online information search is that it allows prospective travellers to search and compare at the same time. The nature of the tourism 'product' has a big influence since the quality of the 'product', or rather service, is not certain until it is experienced, therefore a more in-depth information search can reassure the prospective traveller in their decision (Jang, 2004). This is one of many reasons why the tourism industry has been greatly affected by the introduction of the Internet (Weber and Roehl, 1999). Indeed, besides the computer industry, the tourism industry is the main user and beneficiary of the Internet revolution (Buhalis, 2003). The reason is simple – the Internet offers a wide range of information and resources to travellers (Susskind *et al*, 2003), but it also offers suppliers the possibility of getting to know their prospective consumers better (using search and purchase records). Information intermediaries can help provide suppliers with profiles of travellers and the selection of products that they bought based on their needs (Palmer and McCole, 2000). Jang (2004) argues that the relationship between online search/purchase and online advertising/selling is like two sides of a coin; for a supplier a buyer's search and purchase means advertising and/or selling. From the demand's side point of view, an online search/purchase is possible when online advertising and selling options are provided. Furthermore, it is argued that the consumer online information search is more directly connected with purchase, as opposed to other traditional sources, since most tourism related websites now offer online reservation/booking options, a feature that provides benefits to both travellers and marketers (Jang, 2004). This is particularly relevant when it

comes to the sale of short breaks, special offers and last minute travel. Numerous interviewees have stated that although they are not that keen on booking online, they do make exceptions for:

“offers I simply cannot afford to miss. I would never miss out on a short break special just because I have to book it online. I might not be 100 percent happy about it but my wallet will be.”

(Interviewee 5)

The online information search offers both benefits to travellers and marketers as well as concerns and opportunities. The most important ones will be briefly outlined below.

One of the biggest benefits is that websites are cost efficient for suppliers – a website is ‘open’ 24/7 and allows the consumer instant access to the information needed. “Convenience” was a major factor for the decision to use the Internet for travel related information searches. The fact that one does not have to comply with store opening hours is still a reason for even retired people. They enjoy searching for information whenever they “feel like it” (all interviewees).

It can also be used as a real-time communication tool, especially when considering new tools like live chats, etc. Various authors (e.g. Hoffman and Novak, 1997; Wang, Head and Arthur, 2002) have pointed out the primary advantages of online search to travellers. They are relative low cost, customized information, ease of product comparisons, interactivity, virtual community formation and 24 hour accessibility [...].

Even though the researcher mentioned some of those tools (others were not available at the time of the interviews, e.g. live chats were only developed as a customer service tool in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century), they were not familiar with them, nor did they use them. It can be concluded that ‘silver surfers’ might be comfortable with a simple web search but not so

much with the more advanced features. None of them were familiar with other parts of the Internet such as IRC for example either.

Most research has shown that the 'average' online information user is young, male, well educated and has a well paid job (Bonn, Furr and Susskind, 1999; Fram and Grady, 1995; Pitkow and Kehoe, 1996). Morrison et al (2001) support these findings by stating that the 26-34 years old age group and people with higher education were more likely buy travel online as opposed to offline. Additionally, Weber and Roehl (1999) also support this argument, stating that those who search for (and purchase) travel related products online are more likely to be young, to have higher incomes, to be employed in management jobs, and to have more online experience. Although true to a certain extent, these findings can be very misleading to researchers. Obviously, the younger age groups represent a large proportion of the online market; however, they are by far not the only group that will use the Internet. The older age groups might have been slower to 'get on board' but the numbers of 'silver surfers' are growing. Additionally, the profile of participants of this research has shown several similarities, too. Most are well educated and probably had higher paying jobs; however, the gender were equally distributed (see Chapter III for more details).

When looking at questionnaire responses, the first issue that will be addressed is the very important notion of finding information. Looking back at the 'play' aspect of the online information search, Mathwick and Rigdon (2004) argue that Internet search skill, navigational challenge, involvement, and perceived play constitute elements of the online information search experience. In particular it is the search skill element that plays a significant role in information search behaviour. As stated earlier, it is assumed that people in general are at times not able to find the information on the Internet for whatever reason. It was important to put that to the test and the results are presented in relation of age and gender.

		Age					Total
		50-54 years	55-59 years	60-64 years	65-74 years	75 years +	
Finding information	Yes	100	100	35	50	16	301
	To a certain extent	67	33	17	16	0	133
	If I search long enough	50	17	0	0	0	67
	No	0	8	3	3	2	16
Total		217	158	55	69	18	517

Table 4.11: Finding information according to age

One of the most important issues in this thesis is to find out how different age groups use the Internet. If they actually find the information they were looking for is a big part of this. The literature (Eastman and Iyer, 2004; Trocchia and Janda, 2000) has argued that with ascending age, travellers or persons in general might find it harder to navigate on the Internet. The respondents of this study have shown that to a great extent they always find what they are looking for.

Several respondents (38.7 percent) stated that they only find parts of the information or it takes them longer to search, however, they do tend to find what they want – interestingly these issues seem more prominent in the younger age groups. The numbers of people who do not find what they are looking for are very low, and can surely be improved by some effort from the providers. It is also important to remember that this question was not asked in relation to tourism but in a general ‘Can you find information on the Internet?’ way. To make it even more apparent, the following graph shows the percentages to what extent people are confident in finding information on the Internet. The overwhelming majority is definitely confident, even when admitting that they cannot always find it. The actual percentage of people claiming they cannot find any information online is 3 percent. In a sample of 517 people over the age of 50, the author expected a higher percentage than the result presented here.

## Finding information (percentages)

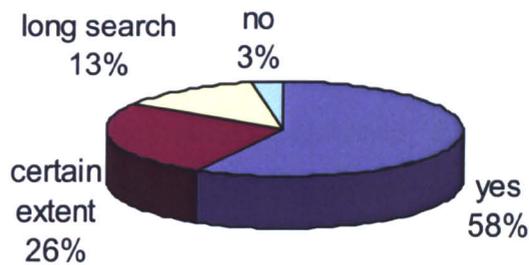


Figure 4.1: Finding information (percentages)

When asked whether they always find the information they need, the responses were balanced with half of the interviewees being quite confident and stating they would find anything on the Internet if they set their mind to it and the other half admitting that it looks a lot easier than it actually is.

“If I need information, I will not stop looking for it till I have found it. I just have to make sure that I use the correct keywords in the search engine.”

(Interviewee 2)

“Again, I have to say that I thought the Internet would be easier to use. The lack of index is still a problem for me. I know how to use search engines but somehow it’s not the same.”

(Interviewee 4)

The author pointed out to the latter interviewee that search engines like Google do provide something similar to an index – a directory – however, it does not offer the same amount of information as a general information search does. The interviewee was not aware of that feature and promised that he would look at it in future. Additionally, the significance of

offering the customer a memorable, relevant as well as valued experience has been documented in both industry (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and academic literature (Mathwick *et al*, 2001). If the site is memorable as well as useful, the consumer will come back to use it. Pine and Gilmore (1999: 12-13 in Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004) point out that persuasive experiences are supposed to not only ‘linger in the memory of an individual ... [but also] capture their dollars’. However, the question remains whether or not online search experiences can bestow value at a level that eventually influences customer attitudes and loyalty intentions. This study did not ask loyalty or repeat site visit questions; however, it is an issue that should be followed up with further research. One thing that the literature has pointed out clearly is that experience matters, in particular the online information search experience which creates a noticeable source of value that is positively associated with web and brand attitudes (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004). It became apparent during the interviews that the more experienced ‘silver surfers’ found it easier to find information online.

		Length of Internet usage					Total
		7-12 months	1-3 years	4-6 years	7-10 years	longer than 10 years	
Finding information	Yes	17	0	134	65	85	301
	To a certain extent	0	33	67	33	0	133
	If I search long enough	0	33	17	17	0	67
	No	16	0	0	0	0	16
Total		33	66	218	115	85	517

Table 4.12: Finding information according to length of Internet usage

This table shows the relation of finding information according to length of Internet usage by ‘silver surfers’.

Firstly, the relatively new users are extremely split between a clear yes or no with an almost equal number of respondents in those two columns. However, the users who have been using the Internet for 1-3 years (who can still be counted as beginners) stood clear of extremes and split up themselves in the two middle categories. The longer they have used

the Internet, the more likely they are to find what they have been looking for. This is particularly evident in the advanced user group of those who have used the Internet for ten years or longer, where all users have indicated that they always find what they are looking for.

Another relevant issue is the confidence of ‘silver surfers’. The table below illustrates how confidence of Internet search relates to length of usage.

		Length of Internet usage					Total
		7-12 months	1-3 years	4-6 years	7-10 years	longer than 10 years	
Confidence of Internet search	very confident	0	0	67	0	51	118
	confident	17	33	135	98	34	317
	moderately confident	0	33	16	17	0	66
	not confident at all	16	0	0	0	0	16
Total		33	66	218	115	85	517

Table 4.13: Confidence of Internet search according to length of Internet usage

The very confident Internet searchers are divided up between users of 4-6 years and those who have been users for longer than 10 years. Most of the confident searchers are in the 4-6 year category. Respondents who have been using the Internet for a year or less are either confident or not confident at all, which illustrates an interesting division. Those who have been using the Internet for 10 years or longer are either in the very confident or confident group, which demonstrates a tendency towards a connection of confidence and length of Internet usage.

The literature review has touched upon the fact that our present society, an information society, is completely overloaded with information (Shenk, 1997 amongst others). The author has mentioned several times how important information is for the tourism industry, which is illustrated by a quote by Sheldon (1993a) who stated that information is the lifeblood of the industry. Shenk (1997) has argued that we have come to a point where we take information for granted since it so easily accessible. The Internet definitely plays a

very significant role in this scenario which is reflected in the findings. The number of people who use the Internet for research purposes is high, even in such a specialised market segment as the ‘grey market’ and the results mentioned above have shown that the majority of ‘silver surfers’ do indeed find the information they are looking for. Previous results have shown that some interviewees found the Internet is not structured enough and that it is not as easy to use as they expected it to be; however, this argument can lead back to the fact that these users grew up using books rather than virtual data. In the near future, these attitudes and experiences will have changed significantly as the older members of Generation Y (1997-2003) are ch the last generation that did not grow up using computers from an early age.

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
Finding information	Yes	144	157	301
	To a certain extent	83	50	133
	If I search long enough	34	33	67
	No	0	16	16
Total		261	256	517

Table 4.14: Finding information according to gender

When looking at the same issue according to gender, it becomes apparent that a high number of women and men are able to find the information they are looking for. Overall slightly more women (50.5 percent) than men (49.5 percent) answered this question positively. More women than men find only part of the information but the number of respondents who need to search longer is evenly distributed within gender. Surprisingly, only men (3 percent of the entire sample) commented that they do not find the information they look for.

One interviewee mentioned that, for him, the search on the Internet is like a process of knowledge build-up. You learn where to go to find information and experience (knowledge build-up) teaches you to comprehend which ones [websites, search engines, etc.] to use. This blends in perfectly with the argument the author has built up in the

literature chapter. The information search is not just a means to an end in one particular case but what you experience will be remembered for future purposes. Kerstetter and Cho (2004) have established a connection between prior knowledge and its influence on the travel or tourism related information search. This argument plays an important part throughout this discussion.

When it comes to not finding information on the Internet, it was important for the study to explore some of the reasons why respondents were unable to complete their information search successfully. This was one of the issues that were brought up during the interviews of the research process.

		Age				Total
		55-59 years	60-64 years	65-74 years	75 years +	
Main problem when not finding information	Too much information available	5	1	2	2	10
	Not structured enough	1	1	1	0	3
	Search engines are not specific enough	2	1	0	0	3
Total		8	3	3	2	16

Table 4.15: Main problem when not finding information according to age

The respondents who answered ‘no’ to the previous question about whether or not they find the information they are looking for (3 percent of all respondents) were asked to answer an additional question concerning what they consider to be the main problem with the Internet. When looking at these reasons according to age, it can be said that most of them feel that there is just too much information available (62.4 percent). An equal number of respondents (18.8 percent each) think either that the Internet is not structured enough or that search engines are not specific enough. Following is a graph which outlines percentages of problems when not finding information according to the specific age groups within the ‘grey market’.

## Problems according to age (percentages)

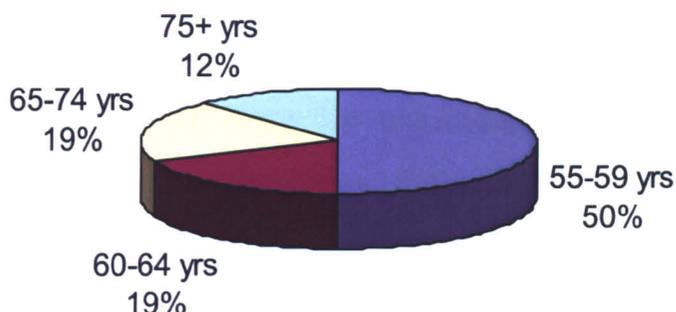


Figure 4.2: Problems according to age (percentages)

As stated earlier, all respondents who had problems finding information were male and most of them (62.4 percent) stated the availability of too much information as their main problem. The reasons why interviewees stated that they could not find what they look for were impatience with search engines, and that it obviously depends on the topic that you are researching.

“Even though I have plenty of leisure time I don’t want to sit in front of the computer for hours. If I can find it quickly I will look at it, if not I will go somewhere else.”

(Interviewee 3)

One interviewee stated that she could not always find what she is looking for, however referred to her research for work rather than her travel related searches.

According to Fodness and Murray’s (1997) classification of tourism information sources (see Table 2.1), the Internet is classified both as a non- as well as commercial impersonal source of information. The Internet is in the unique position to offer commercial as well as non-commercial information, which could be problematic. The fact that the Internet offers

a lot of information is not only a good thing. As mentioned previously this can lead to a situation where the user finds themselves overwhelmed with all the information that is on offer and does not know where to start and what to use. The participants have hinted that this happened to them as well, especially when they were rather new users and not yet familiar with the structure and inner working of the Internet. The issue of information overload (Shenk, 1997) is one that runs throughout this discussion, being brought up by respondents during the interviews and further explored during questionnaires.

#### **4.3.1 Information searched for**

As mentioned previously, within this rather competitive marketplace it is absolutely vital to comprehend that consumer awareness, selection, and choice of tourism and hospitality products depends on the information available to and used by the tourist (Moutinho, 1987). The tourist information search has always attracted considerable attention from researchers in general and tourism researchers in particular. They raised both conceptual and empirical questions to try and understand, predict and influence the behaviour of leisure tourists (Fodness and Murray, 1997). Tourists have been increasingly segmented based on their search behaviours, which are an extension from the other obvious segmentations like age, gender, other demographics etc. Though Haley (1985) stated that if the goal of the research is to predict tourist behaviour, then it is preferable to analyse from cause to effect. Fodness and Murray (1997) argue that possibly the determinants of information source choice, rather than the sources chosen, predict the true effects of information search on tourist behaviour. If that were the case, the determinants would best help researchers interested in segmenting leisure markets by information search behaviour. Following on from this argument, the results and findings presented in this thesis can give us an clear insight into 'silver surfers' information search and decision-making behaviour, due to the fact that they have already chosen to use the Internet as an information source. The results will not present a comparison of actual cause and effect since the respondents to both qualitative and quantitative research have been chosen because they are Internet users.

Moutinho (1987) defined information search as an expressed need to refer to various sources prior to making a buying decision. Potential tourists have a need for information in order to evaluate the available options in terms of price, operator, accommodation, transportation, etc. (Raitz and Dakhil, 1989).

During the literature review, this study outlined the differences between a traditional information search and a so-called online information search. It is argued in the literature (Jang, 2004; Luo *et al*, 2004) that there is a distinct difference between off- and online search behaviour. It is important to compare the results of this thesis to the traditional and online information search. Jang (2004) has argued that Information Technology has, through its rapid development, especially in the tourism industry, significantly influenced information search behaviour in travel and tourism decision-making.

One of the most important issues that this thesis explored is what kind of tourism related information 'silver surfers' search for. The table below outlines the various choices the respondents had and how many within each age group ticked a certain box. As this question allowed respondents to answer multiple times, it is not feasible to provide a graph that shows percentages, however, the results will give us an insight into 'silver surfers' information search behaviour.

	Age					Total
	50-54 years	55-59 years	60-64 years	65-74 years	75 years +	
Flights	200	150	52	49	16	467
Accommodation info	184	116	52	66	16	434
Price	183	133	35	33	16	400
Other transport	184	116	35	17	16	368
Climate, weather	151	118	34	33	16	352
Country entry requirements	149	126	54	3	18	350
Destinations, visitor attractions	167	118	34	0	16	335
Independent travellers	67	68	34	16	0	185
Tour operators	67	68	17	16	0	168
Package holidays	84	51	17	0	0	152
Special interest tourism	67	51	17	0	0	135
Information on animal welfare	0	17	0	0	0	17

Table 4.16: Information searched for

Most respondents have searched for information on flights, followed by accommodation information and price.

When looking at the most researched topics in the various age groups, the findings are as follows:

- The most researched topic in any age group was flights in the 50-54 years segment;
- in the 50-54 years segment it was flights;
- in the 55-59 years segment it was flights;
- in the 60-64 years segment it was country entry requirements;
- in the 65-74 years segment it was accommodation information;
- in the 75 years or older segment it was country entry requirements.

One of the most important questions in the interviews was the one regarding usage of the Internet for leisure holidays. Generally, the interviewees engaged in a typical information search for leisure and holiday related matters, e.g. checking on flight times, airport parking and particularly destination information, which was mentioned by the majority.

“I can check flight times so much easier online. I can try out different days and nobody is annoyed [like a travel agent] if I want to check five different days. Plus I don’t feel bad for taking up somebody else’s time.”

(Interviewee 5)

One of the surprising results in the survey was that destination information is only ranked 7<sup>th</sup> among 12 subjects. More than a fifth of all respondents (see Table 4.16 for specifics) have used additional sources during their information search so an assumption can be made that destination information is one of the subjects (as it is also one of the first decisions made) where respondents rely on more traditional data sources. An educated guess would be that most people rely on well known guidebooks and only check for up to date information (e.g. museum opening hours and entrance fees) online. These results are also slightly contradictory to interview findings where interviewees stated that one of their main topics searched for on the Internet is destination information. Destination information was one of the main topics that was researched on the Internet according to the interviewees, either before deciding on a holiday or to back up a decision and after the decision was made in order to gain a better knowledge of the destination chosen.

“The reason why I used the Internet to look up destination information is simple. I can find a lot of information for free and that’s important when I haven’t decided yet where to go. I can always buy a [Lonely Planet] travel guide book once I’ve made a specific decision.”

(Interviewee 1)

Additionally, specific travel information like package holidays etc. does not seem to be relevant for this market segment. The least researched topic was information on animal welfare, followed by special interest tourism and package holidays. It has to be acknowledged that information on animal welfare is definitely a much specialised topic that is only relevant to a certain sub group of people (obviously those who own pets and have to leave them during their holidays). However, the number on special interest tourism could have been higher, particularly as people are getting more sophisticated and

meticulous when it comes to deciding on a holiday. One could have assumed that highly specialised information would be high on their list, but then again the assumption can be made that respondents used different forms of information sources for the acquirement of this data.

The fact that price is ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> can lead to the assumption that the Internet is still seen as a cheap alternative as well as a tool to compare prices between competitors anonymously, efficiently and fast.

Finally, the reason why flights is ranked as the most searched for topic can be traced back to the emergence of low cost airlines, which are mainly booked online (most are bookable via the phone but offer an additional discount when booked online). These airlines are of great importance for any traveller planning their holidays as they might prove to be the cheapest means of transportation, especially for domestic or European short breaks and/or holidays.

In general, the interviewees stated that the topics researched are basic issues that would otherwise have been addressed either with the travel agent or by buying a travel guide or asking friends for experience.

Unfortunately, ICM Research (2002) did not specify clearly in their report what kind of tourism related information the senior citizens were researching (their results only mentioned researching flights/holidays). It would have been beneficial for this study to find out more details on what the general 'grey market' population looks up when it comes to tourism related information.

To sum up, it can be said that flights, accommodation information and price are the clear winners in this category, as four out of five 'silver surfers' mentioned them. Other transport still plays an important role in the online information search. Climate/weather, country entry requirements, and destination information/visitor attraction are equal to other

transport data with a mention by three out of five respondents. Independent travel information, tour operator information package holidays, and special interest tourism are less researched, mainly due to the fact that these are niche topics that are not essential to most travellers; they were mentioned by only 1.5 out of 5 respondents. The least researched topic was information on animal welfare.

#### **4.4 Different segment, different information?**

Due to the particular make up of each lifestage there are very distinct behavioural patterns. The various choices that members in each lifestage make are as much to do with their individual structures as they are to do with the market factors by which they are overseen. However, as consumers progress from one lifestage into another, the question must be asked how much of the market is predisposed by the requirements of these consumers and how much is dependent on the holiday packages that are created for them by leading companies in the sector. There is a trend, a tendency towards sophisticated or personalised holidays, this then means that companies have acknowledged a certain degree of demand push by consumers who are becoming more knowledgeable.

Technologies such as the Internet have meant that consumers now have fast access to information, which raises their anticipation in terms of the holidays that they are either able to secure via direct booking or via packages which they then request from travel agents. Empty nester and post families, having time, money and freedom from responsibilities of looking after children, tend to go on several holidays a year (often mixing short breaks in the UK and/or Europe with long haul holidays). Because of their higher disposable income, both of these lifestages are an important segment for the industry. Results of this study have shown that this is indeed the case.

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the holiday options available to them. The reason for this development is due to the 'invasion' of specific information technologies e.g. the Internet, etc. Leading tour operators and travel agents have reacted by developing their websites to provide for those who require information on destinations, flights and accommodation. The accessibility of these websites and increased consumer sophistication has fuelled the increase in consumers booking their holidays independently or direct with tour operators and airlines – again, the results of this study have proved this to be accurate. Consumer research illustrates that one of the key driving forces for the industry in the next

few years will continue to be the different requirements of the main lifestage groups. More and more consumers have access to better information and as consumers become more familiar with using some of the new technologies such as the Internet, their holiday requirements will continue to be more sophisticated. For the industry this means that they need to continuously invest in e-commerce and use a combination of media by which to communicate and target their consumers.

#### **4.4.1 Information needs of the 'grey market'**

In order for a website to be competitive, it has been argued that providers should supply specified information, e.g. product perceptions, shopping experience, customer service and customer risks (Jarvenpaa and Todd, 1997). The aspect of what information should be offered is an extremely important factor in the tourism industry due to the nature of the product. Some examples of the kind of information that should be provided are activities in the destination, destination information, sightseeing, maps, 'insider tips', accommodation, shopping, festival and events, and also reservations (Tierney, 2000). Another issue is also that, besides providing the right information, the providers have to make sure that the information is targeted at the right market, especially when the information provided is strictly niche market.

National Statistics (2002) stated that the overall population of the UK was 58.7 million people of whom 18.4 percent – 10.8 million people – were over the pensionable age; this number is projected to increase to 11.2 million in 2006 and to 11.9 million in 2011. In 2002, about 6 million people between the age of 50 and state pension age were still in employment – for men between 50 and 64 years this equates to an employment rate of 70 percent, for women between 50 and 59 years it is 65.5 percent. Most interesting is that in 2000, 25 percent of households with two adults aged 60 or over and 7 percent of single person households aged 60 or over owned a computer. Furthermore in July 2002, 44 percent of people aged 55 to 64, and 14 percent of people aged 65 and over had used the

Internet. This data gives an accurate picture of how large the potential 'grey market' actually is. (All information was provided by National Statistics, 2002).

During the late 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, changing demographic profiles especially in the modern, western world, mean that an increasing proportion of the population will fall into older age bands, above the age of 50 (Gunter, 1998). Although older members of the society are often stigmatised with negative stereotypes regarding their mental and physical abilities, they represent a segment of the population which has increasing economic significance (Gunter, 1998). Long ignored and characterised as a politically and socially insignificant homogenous group, marketers have finally realised the negligible spending power of this market segment. Older consumers, the grey market, have partly been misrepresented in both the media and society and been shown as being incapable of many everyday occurrences.

The literature reviewed the key theories of ageing – disengagement theory, activity theory, development theory, continuity theory, exchange theory and labelling theory – and it is right to assume that some of the mentioned theories clearly contribute to negative stereotyping towards older age. Even worse, some older persons might even become convinced that what they hear about them is essentially true and believe their own inadequacies and may in turn live up or 'down' to them (Kuypers and Bengtson, 1973). The 'silver surfers' of this study have shown that they do not believe these general assumptions about their abilities. The interviewees talked about how they enjoyed life now that the children have moved out and how they travelled more frequently.

“It has its advantages to be an 'empty nester', for sure. I mean we enjoyed travelling with our children when they were younger but it is nice to just do it on our own now. There are so many places we still want to visit and that would not have been possible before. [Remark from the author: due to financial or other reasons]”

(Interviewee 4)

Recent studies (Mintel 2000; National Statistics, 2002) have shown, that contrary to popular belief, older consumers are not poor consumers. They have reduced expenses on child rearing, paying off mortgages or car loans, and the maturation of insurance policies (Gunter 1998). Not only do older consumers have greater spending power than other age-defined market segments, they are even more willing to spend than ever before (Gunter 1998). A person's age is a weak indicator of their capacity and worth as an individual. To tag a person with the word 'old' just because they have reached a certain chronological age has little meaning (Gunter, 1998). 'Ages' indicating stages of life may have more relevance in a consumer context. 'First Age' consists of childhood and socialisation, followed by 'Second Age' of end of paid work or the completion of family-raising. People enter their 'Third Age', independent and still active life beyond work and familial tasks, which may continue for a long period prior to the 'Fourth Age' of decline, dependence and death. (Gunter, 1998). The beginning of the 'Third Age' can vary from one person to the other. For some it may begin at 50, while for others it may not start until the age of 70 or even later. Therefore, chronological age alone does not mean inactivity or that a person is 'old'.

As the older consumers' market is among the least intensively researched and understood market segments, disagreement exists about both the age brackets that comprise this market and the terms used to describe them. Sometimes, a classification of 65 and over is used (age of retirement), sometimes 60 and over (indicating the decline in physical and mental skills) and other times 55 and over (the pre-retirement years), (Gunter, 1998). Within this research, most respondents are in their 'Third Age' which has been defined here as 50+ years old.

One of the aspects that became apparent during the secondary research and again during the pilot study was that it seemed the Internet was mainly aimed at the younger online population and this was explored during the interviews and questionnaire stage of this research. Respondents were simply asked to rank how much they agreed with the statement that 'the Internet is too youth orientated' on a 5-stage Likert scale.

		Age					Total
		50-54 years	55-59 years	60-64 years	65-74 years	75 years +	
Internet too youth orientated?	Strongly agree	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Agree	33	33	0	16	0	82
	Neutral	34	0	0	16	16	66
	Disagree	99	59	20	3	2	183
	Strongly disagree	51	66	35	34	0	186
Total		217	158	55	69	18	517

Table 4.17: Internet too youth orientated?

The outcome of this question answers Research Question 3 as it shows that the Internet does provide the information that is required by this particular market segment and ‘silver surfers’ do not consider the information provided on the Internet as too youth orientated.

Both interviewees and questionnaire respondents stated that they do think the Internet caters for their age groups. Only 82 out of a possible 517 respondents (15.9 percent) agree with the statement that the information provided on the Internet is too youth orientated, and none of them strongly agreed. The respondents stated that there is information for all age groups out there; ‘you just have to find it’ to put it in the words of one interviewee (Interviewee 5). Even more people stated that they strongly disagree (36 percent) than ‘just’ disagree (35.4 percent).

## Internet too youth orientated? (percentages)

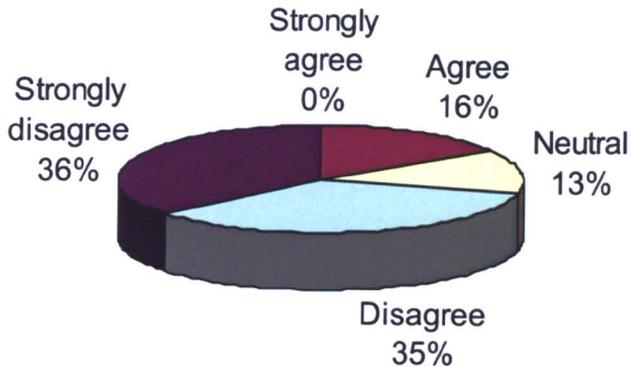


Figure 4.3: Internet too youth orientated (percentages)?

These results were highly unexpected as the author assumed that the general consensus in the 'grey market' would be that the information provided on the Internet is not directly aimed at them and/or provided for them. However, an assumption can be made that there has to be an important distinction between information that is directly aimed at the 'grey market' – e.g. special senior traveller websites or online communities for older people – and information that is simply not aimed at any market in particular – e.g. general information that can either be travel/tourism related or not. The author acknowledges that these results are in no way representative of the entire 'grey market' population, however, there is a clear trend within this group of respondents that they do not feel neglected by the online information providers.

There is a danger here that the opinion of this small sample group is mistaken for a general consensus of the 'silver surfers' by the providers which can lead to the provision of highly generalised information. Just because this group of respondents does not feel neglected by the information providers, does not mean that there is no need for more specialised information.

Overall, there does not seem to be a particular trend within different age segments. The majority of the 50-74 year olds state that they disagree or strongly disagree. The majority of the oldest age segment sees themselves as neutral. Not one respondent strongly agreed with the statement and only 15.9 percent agreed, another 12.8 percent consider themselves neutral. Interestingly, the respondents who do see the Internet as too youth orientated (strongly agree or agree) can be found in the youngest two age segments.

Generally, when referring to specific information needs of an older person, the interviewees agreed that the information provided does meet their needs, an answer that is coherent with the survey results. A few exceptions occurred but mainly where specific personal preferences were sought, e.g. pictures on hotel websites that can be viewed 360°. Basically, they all agreed that there is information out there for everyone and that you just need the skills to find it. The more experience you have, the better you get at finding what you really need (knowledge build-up). These results relate back to the question that was asked previously on whether respondents were able to find information online.

“It took me some time but now I really think that I can find all the information I need on the Internet.”

(Interviewee 2)

Overall, the interviewees agreed on the fact that the information is not too youth orientated and that they usually look for information at different places than the younger generations.

“I can see why people think the Internet is too youth orientated but the truth is that there is information on there for everyone. It might take some time till you find it but there are websites that are especially made for older people. They even post links so you know where you have to go to find the specific things you want or need.”

(Interviewee 5)

One interviewee stated that there are special sites for older people and that one should make use of these websites and generally be more selective. Another one stated that sometimes when it comes to looking up information on travel related sites, you cannot find what you are looking for but you have to go and visit other websites – e.g. the interviewee was looking into horse-riding in Florida. Again, no matter how good the information is, it is usually backed up by other information sources.

While respondents agreed upon the fact that the Internet is not too youth orientated, the author decided to ask another, more direct, question on whether they think people of different age groups need specific information. All but one interviewee agreed that they do. They all concur that the younger generations are more interested in social aspects of the Internet and information about social events, too. It was also stated that they believe that younger people spend a considerable amount of time on the Internet whereas they like to finish up their searches etc. as quickly as possible and sometimes even get tired of looking at the computer screen.

“I don’t want to spend all day looking for information on the Internet. I mainly use it when I know what I need, look it up and shut it down again.”

(Interviewee 3)

There are certainly specific issues that seem to be more interesting to older generations, e.g. health issues and probably more culture and historical information. Again, it is mentioned that experience plays an important part regarding knowledge build-up and knowing where to find the information that you are looking for. A problem that was also mentioned is that sometimes the specific information that someone requires is out of date and therefore useless.

“Once I looked up restaurant opening hours on the Internet and when we arrived at the location, they had changed their designated non-trading day of the week and haven’t

updated it on their website so we had to go and find another place to eat. [And obviously didn't go back at another time either.]”

(Interviewee 5)

*Different age groups require different information, however, the providers should always make sure that the specific information required is always up to date.*

Although the Internet has become a very popular information source, one cannot assume that people use it as their only research tool. The next section will look at what types of additional information sources are used by ‘silver surfers’.

#### **4.4.2 Additional information sources**

Generally speaking, information sources can be classified in several ways. One of the most used classifications is internal vs. external (Fodness and Murray, 1997). Initially, the search takes place internally, i.e. past experiences are used in order to plan a repeat visit to a destination; however, if internal resources are not sufficient enough to make a sound decision, an external search has to take place. Schul and Crompton (1983) stated that in the case of leisure travel, the search is often predominantly external, involving considerable effort and a variety of information sources. As tourists can choose from a wide range of information sources, Engel *et al* (1995) suggested a framework for classifying information sources.

Table 4.18: Classification of Tourism Information Sources (adapted from Fodness and Murray, 1997: 506).

Fodness and Murray conclude that 'the information search has thus been conceptualised as the result of a dynamic process wherein individuals use various amounts and types of information sources in response to internal and external contingencies to facilitate travel planning' (1997: 506).

The results from this research study have shown that respondents do not rely on the Internet as their only information source. Most 'silver surfers' use a wide variety of different sources; the source usually depends on what information they are looking for.

	Age					Total
	50-54	55-59	60-64	65-74	75 +	
No additional sources	50	49	1	0	0	100
Friends and family	67	51	17	0	0	135
Travel guidebooks	101	93	54	53	18	319
Newspapers, magazines	67	34	0	34	0	135
Brochures	84	84	17	33	16	234
TV programmes, iTV	67	25	3	20	2	117

Table 4.19: Additional information sources according to age

The table above outlines if and what types of additional information sources have been used by 'silver surfers'. The answers range from respondents not using any additional sources to those who used a wide variety of different resources. Not surprisingly, the

majority of respondents not using any additional information sources are to be found in the younger age groups. These are mostly people who have been using the Internet a bit longer and were introduced to it at work. They adapted it to leisure use and are now utilising it for travel related purposes.

It was surprising to see that the older age groups do not seem to rely on family and friends as a valuable source of information. The author expected this number to grow as respondents get older as it would seem that the older people get, the more they would have heard from family and friends and their travel experiences.

As expected, travel guidebooks are a significant source of information for respondents of all age groups (61.7 percent), by far in first position; brochures (45.3 percent) came in 2<sup>nd</sup> place. Newspapers and magazines (26.1 percent) again, seem to be more used by the younger age groups and the same goes for television (22.6 percent) as an information source.

Overall, the results were as expected with the travel guidebooks in a clear lead. This is a trend that has become apparent throughout all parts of the data collection. Guidebooks are definitely the most important offline information source for senior travellers.

	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
No additional sources	67	33	100
Friends and family	85	50	135
Travel guidebooks	161	158	319
Newspapers, magazines	68	67	135
Brochures	152	82	234
TV programmes, iTV	34	83	117

Table 4.20: Additional information sources according to gender

Although these results do not dramatically influence the major findings of this thesis, it is interesting to see how the usage of additional information sources varies between female

and male respondents. In all but one case, the females listed more sources indicating a higher usage of supplementary information sources. However, it was also the female respondents who are more likely to use only the Internet and not look up further information. The male respondents are the ones paying more attention to travel programmes on television or interactive TV (iTV). This leads to an important factor – how much is the Internet trusted by respondents of this questionnaire?

#### 4.4.3 Trust of travel related information

Trust in general plays a very important role within this research study. Online information search and booking have always been related to issues of trust; trust in the information that has been provided and trust in the information providers that their means of booking etc. is secure. The latter will be discussed later in this chapter, for now the issue of how well the travel related information provided on the Internet is trusted will be analysed below.

		Trust of travel related information				Total
		complete trust	to a certain extent	depends on info provider	very cautious	
Age	50-54 years	34	50	100	33	217
	55-59 years	49	33	59	17	158
	60-64 years	1	0	37	17	55
	65-74 years	17	49	3	0	69
	75 years +	16	0	2	0	18
Total		117	132	201	67	517

Table 4.21: Trust of travel related information

Overall, it can be said that the respondents of this questionnaire do generally trust the travel related information they find and/or have found on the Internet as 48.2 percent stated that their trust is either complete or to a certain extent. However, a high number of respondents, 38.9 percent, state that the decision whether or not they trust travel related information depends on the provider of such information; this became very apparent during the interviews when respondents made it very clear that there is no such thing as

blind trust for them. The remaining 12.9 percent are rather hesitant and stated that they are very cautious when it comes to trusting online information. The fact that more of the younger respondents stated that they are very cautious of the information provided is rather surprising when, compared to previous results that they are the ones who use less additional information sources. These results are rather contradictory. The author expected the results to reflect that the older age groups are more suspicious of the information made available.

		Trust of travel related information				Total
		complete trust	to a certain extent	depends on info provider	very cautious	
Gender	Female	85	66	110	0	261
	Male	32	66	91	67	256
Total		117	132	201	67	517

Table 4.22: Trust of travel related information according to age

In comparison to the results according the age, the table above shows that in general female respondents seem to trust the information provided on the Internet a lot more than the male respondents. Out of 261 female respondents not one stated that she was very cautious of the information provided, while 26.2 percent of men affirmed they were. Overall, 32.6 percent of female respondents show complete trust in online information, while a rather lower percentage of men – 12.5 percent – stated the same. Both genders show the highest percentages (42.2 percent for women and 35.6 percent for men) in the option that trust depends on the information provider. Trust is an important issue in the online information search. Participants were asked to what extent they actually trust the information they find. Generally, the Internet is quite well trusted with several issues, mostly about financial security and reliability of the information found.

“One of my first ever Internet bookings was a hotel in Paris but when I arrived at the destination the hotel said they never got it. It would have been a real pain but thankfully the hotel offered to help me with alternative accommodation. I still book everything online, something like that can happen anywhere and anytime.”

(Interviewee 2)

Almost certainly, most people would not react similarly, especially in this age group. It is more likely that a person would say, ‘I knew that modern thing would not work’ and go back to a more traditional form of booking. Most interviewees admit to being a bit cautious about giving away their financial details, and some would prefer to book over the phone. Again, different information sources are used to back up the information and booking information. They also stated that they look for a secure online booking system. One interviewee mentioned that he would prefer a personal booking confirmation to the automatic ones the company usually sends out, as it would make him feel more secure about his booking.

“It would be nice if company’s sent a more personal booking note that addressed me by name and provides a bit more detail. I mean I know the automatic ones are usually quite secure but I’d rather have a more detailed one.”

(Interviewee 4)

Although, they have risk issues and would sometimes rather book with a travel agent, it is not always possible, e.g. low cost flights, most of which have to be booked online. Not only the money issues cause considerations, but also the validity and reliability of data found, as stated before, the information is sometimes a bit out of date.

Another important aspect is so-called ‘garbage information’ that users need to filter through to get to the actual information they are looking for (Lyon, 1998). This issue is also touched upon by Melgoza *et al* (2002) stating that filtering through these massive amounts of information means that the user needs to make an educated guess concerning validity and reliability

#### 4.4.4 Back-up of Internet searches

		Age					Total
		50-54 years	55-59 years	60-64 years	65-74 years	75 +	
Back-up of Internet searches	always	67	76	37	52	2	234
	often	100	50	17	17	0	184
	never	50	32	1	0	16	99
Total		217	158	55	69	18	517

Table 4.23: Back-up or Internet searches according to age

When looking at numbers of how many respondents back up the information they found on the Internet, the results were ambiguous. It is very interesting that the overwhelming majority of the oldest age group have enough trust in online information and do not choose to back-up their search. Surprisingly, it seems that the younger the respondents get, the more often they choose to confirm the information found online. In general, the majority of respondents, 45.3 percent, stated that they always back up their online information searches. It has to be said that there are some contradictory statements emerging here since the results of the additional information sources used are quite different. According to the results above, respondents should have made much more use of supplementary information sources.

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
Back-up of Internet searches	always	127	107	234
	often	83	101	184
	never	51	48	99
Total		261	256	517

Table 4.24: Back-up of Internet searches according to gender

These results were not as unexpected as women are often held as the more thorough gender and therefore it is not unexpected that overall, they chose to back-up their searches more often. Generally speaking, the results are fairly close, especially when counting in the fact that slightly more women than men responded to the questionnaire. Although there

is no clear majority, it is visible that most respondents always back up their searches, followed by those who often do it and a minority that never does it. All interviewees maintained that although they think the Internet is a good information source, they always back up their information search with other information sources, e.g. travel guide books and brochures.

“Even though I know that I can find all the information on the Internet, I will still buy a [Lonely Planet] guide book. Not only so that I can take it on holiday but also because it helps to back up my online information searches.”

(Interviewee 1)

## **4.5 General consumer behaviour**

As previously mentioned, Moutinho's (1987; 2000) interpretation of consumer behaviour is partly written for consumer behaviour in tourism and, therefore, of greater use within this thesis. It also highlights the fact that consumer behaviour is a process starting with the search for information and usually ending with a purchase of a certain product or service and its evaluation. The definition reads as follows: 'Consumer behaviour refers to the process of acquiring and organising information in the direction of a purchase decision and of using and evaluating products and services. This process encompasses the stages of searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services' (Moutinho, 1987:5 and 2000: 41). The significance of this definition for this thesis lies in the phrase 'process of acquiring and organising information'. Moutinho (1987; 2000) is the only author who mentions information search as a vital part of the consumer behaviour (decision-making) process. Moutinho (1987; 2000) describes the decision-making process as a very businesslike activity whereas, in real life, this process is often much more chaotic as people are less organised. However, the reality is probably that the decision-making process is neither too casually nor too seriously seen by consumers. Although this process helps with carrying out a major decision it should also involve fun as it is not a research exercise. Therefore a huge responsibility lies within the producers to make the information search both interesting and fun by having organised but playful websites (or brochures).

Due to the significance of the information search in his definition, Moutinho's (1987; 2000) work was taken as a reference when considering the information search and wider decision-making process within this thesis. Important is also his mention of '[...] in the direction of purchase decision. [...]' (Moutinho, 1987:5).

This study has put an emphasis on the fact that the information search and the decision-making process in general are not an action that is put to rest after just one attempt at research. These occurrences do happen, e.g. when the respondents referred to taking

advantage of special short break or last minute offers, but are not the norm. Interviewees stated that their tourism information search is a thorough one.

“Yes, I have booked a special offer once or twice but usually I spend a longer time looking for particular information when it comes to deciding on where to go on holiday. Sometimes I just sit there and look for general travel information, too.”

(Interviewee 3)

In literature, there is still a distinction between general consumer behaviour and tourist behaviour. The literature review has outlined some of the distinct features in Chapter II. Seaton's (1999) definition of tourist consumer behaviour is built on the words 'choose' and 'goals and satisfactions'. It emphasises the importance of free will to decide to travel and that this happens in pursuit with ones needs and desires. Seaton defines tourist behaviour therefore 'as the study of the ways in which people choose to engage in, negotiate and experience travel away from their normal place of residence in pursuit of particular goals and satisfactions' (Seaton in Pender, 1999: 60).

Seaton (1999) has clearly pointed out that, to him, tourists behave in a particular way in order to achieve certain goals. They have to choose certain entities (e.g. destination, transportation, accommodation, etc.) and aim to be satisfied. Due to the longer nature of the information search process, a 'silver surfer' could have a goal for several years during which he chooses the appropriate elements and achieves satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) once the holidays have been 'consumed'. Most importantly though, Seaton also refers to the word 'experience', which plays a significant role within this research. The 'silver surfers' themselves have pointed out numerous times how important experience is when it comes to using the Internet (and travel).

On the other hand, Gilbert (1991) offers a more critical view of tourist behaviour and how it is seen within the literature: 'The simplistic view of tourist behaviour should be rejected and replaced with a new understanding of the tourist as a consumer who demonstrates

particular actions of behaviour' (Gilbert, 1991 in Hudson and Gilbert, 2000 in Woodside *et al*, 2000:138). Hudson and Gilbert (2000) suggest that 'these actions involve the needs, motivation, attitudes, values, personality and perceptions which all lead to specific preferences for tourism-related activities. To carry this argument further, the study of tourist consumer behaviour should not only seek to understand the choice process of tourists, but should endeavour to comprehend the range of constraints preventing non-tourists from becoming tourists' (Hudson and Gilbert in Woodside *et al*, 2000: 138). This critical statement of what tourist consumer behaviour is and what its study should comprise opens up a new range of research possibilities within the field of consumer behaviour research, especially the study of why some people do not travel. It may be true that most people who do not travel simply cannot afford it or that their jobs are just too demanding; however, it must also be taken into consideration that some people might not even want to travel as they are absolutely happy and satisfied by being at home and do not wish to 'get away' or 'escape'.

This argument of the non-travellers could also be used to describe one group that was not covered in this research and that is the one of the 'silver surfers' who do not travel. The filter question was particularly designed to filter out Internet users who do not use the Internet for travel planning. One could argue that there are senior travellers who are Internet users but do not engage in an online information search. Either way, both of these groups, which definitely exist, were not of any interest for this research. It is important to acknowledge this, as overall consumer behaviour is relevant to the entire market segment, whereas tourism related behaviour is much more specific and is the focus of this study.

Although some definitions vary in terms of words and depth, the general message is the same: consumer behaviour is seen as a process in which individuals, or sometimes groups, decide which product or service they will purchase, and after usage decide whether or not it is worth buying again or start looking for alternatives. During data collection and especially during the interviews, it was interesting to see how people described their tourist

behaviour and particularly their decision-making process; but first it is necessary to look at the 'silver surfers' and their general Internet usage and behaviour.

#### **4.5.1 'Silver surfers' – Older people and the Internet**

Eastman and Iyer (2004) support this thesis' argument that, although the Internet has grown during the last years, there is a distinctive lack of research in the area of Internet usage in the older market segments. The rapid growth of this particular segment and the potential held by the Internet are both subjects worthy of consideration. Studies in the USA have shown that elderly consumers have positive intentions towards using the Internet and their willingness of learning how to use it. Education and income levels have both had a favourable impact on Internet usage, too. (Eastman and Iyer, 2004).

O'Leary (2000) has argued that the Web is becoming more of a mass medium and 'seniors are now one of the fastest growing groups of new Web users' (O'Leary, 2000: 80). This quote states the need for more consideration of the senior citizens as a viable possible market. Marketers need to realise that they are actually losing a feasible segment that could mean more profits in the long run. National Statistics (2002) state that 44 percent of people aged 55-64, and 14 percent of people aged 65 and over, had used the Internet in July 2002. It is not possible to compare their findings with the findings of this study as non-Internet users were not included in this research. However, these numbers are an indicator of how much Internet usage amongst the older market segment is set to grow. In 2006, 49 percent of households with two adults, one or both aged 60 or over, and 16 percent of single person households aged 60 or over owned a home computer. In 2006, it was estimated that 28 percent of people aged 65 or over, had access to the Internet at home. (Ibid and The Consumer Experience, taken from Age Concern, 2007).

The 'grey market' is both a growing and under-represented segment of Internet users. In comparison to younger users, these people possess more time and income, which makes

them a very important sector of the market. This presents a significant opportunity for the providers of Internet related products and services. Trocchia & Janda (2000) conducted interviews with six Internet users and six non-users (six men and six women between 57 and 87 years old) in order to better understand the attitudes and motivations of the 'grey market'. Their findings resulted in six leading themes that will show similarity with the author's own research: reference group affiliation, technology schema, resistance to change, nature of social relations, perception of reality, and physical dexterity. Trocchia and Janda's (2000) research aimed to identify important motivation and attitudinal considerations differentiating users from non-users. As this study concentrates on users rather than non-users, it is important to understand certain issues of why people do not want to use the Internet. Their findings focus on six themes, all of which will be briefly examined below (all Trocchia and Janda, 2000 unless stated differently):

(1) Reference group affiliation

Reference groups i.e. friends and acquaintances and their perception of the Internet can have a high influence on an individual's choice of Internet usage. It brings in the notion of reward and punishment. Rewards for using the Internet where peers can tell you about websites that might be useful for yourself and social contact by e-mail whereas punishment comes in as one non-user stated that all her Internet using friends forgot about her when arranging meetings via email. Another form of reward comes up by stating that they can get in touch with their children and grandchildren and 'talk' with them without ending up with a horrendous phone bill. Lastly, users admitted that if they were non-users people might look down on them, by stating that they did not want their colleagues to think that they could not keep up with technology.

This issue was not centrefold to this research but several interviewees did mention aspects of how they used the Internet because their friends use it. They do not necessarily like the idea of using it as a social platform but e-mail has become an important form of communication.

## (2) Technology schema

Not very surprising was the finding that Internet users had well-developed technology schema i.e. a reflections of one's inclination or aversion to technology and/or its applications. Mostly, these differences in technology schemata derived from positive experiences with technology and/or Internet related technologies. Several users stated that they knew that computers got easier to use, and that adapting to new technologies is not that difficult, just going over the instructions. On the other hand, non-users were more likely to have less-developed technology schemata, which often led to misperceptions and biases regarding the Internet. For example, one person stated that a friend spends hours to log on and it seemed like such a waste of time; others stated that they just do not get along with computers or that they would not know what to do on the Internet.

A direct comparison to the findings of this research cannot be made since it only include Internet users, however, it can be said that especially those people who started using the Internet because of personal choice had a much more positive attitude than those who 'had' to start using (for one reason or the other).

## (3) Resistance to change

The tendency of a person's acceptance or rejection of change seems an important tool of distinguishing users and non-users. Internet users seem to possess a stronger and more positive metascript for change than non-users. Internet users in Trocchia & Janda's (2000) research expressed comfort with change and it was something to look forward. Also, acceptance of change and innovation in their lives allowed them to better themselves. Generally, the difference between users and non-users can also be found in negative experiences. One non-user stated his frustration with technology as we attended a seminar to learn the newest application, which was outdated just a couple of months later. This can create an unwillingness to even attempt using the Internet. Non-users characteristically expressed distrust in transactions occurring on the Internet because they felt uneasy interacting with an unknown exchange partner.

Trust has become one of the important issues in this thesis. It has to be present, not just for an actual purchase, but also when it comes to information provision and use. Several interviewees stated their curiosity prior to using the Internet, claiming that they have heard a great deal about how much information was made available online.

#### (4) Nature of social relations

People who view the Internet as a tool for strengthening social bonds and providing social support were more likely to be users than those who saw little value in using the Internet. Users do not only highlight the fact that they can contact family and friends but also meet new people with similar interests. Usually e-mail is used to keep in touch and be kept in touch with others. The Internet gives people a possibility to enjoy a variety of new social experiences, e.g. chat-rooms (although they are not popular with all users). Non-users see little value in the Internet as a tool for social contact explaining that if their friends do not have e-mail so whom would they send messages anyway?

Interestingly, this is an issue that none of the interviewees agreed with. They do not want to use the Internet for social activities at all. Some mentioned to look at FriendsReunited once or twice but nothing beyond that. E-mail is the only form of social interaction they stated of using.

#### (5) Perception of reality

Generally, Internet activities are often considered impersonal in contrast to 'offline' activities such as department store shopping, face-to-face communication, personal banking, etc. While some people value personal contact, others do not necessarily need it and therefore are more likely to shop online. Internet users typically expressed little concern with the virtual environment and being in actual physical touch with the product was not a prerequisite to accepting its realness. They trusted the pictures that they were actual representation of the products featured.

Additionally, Internet users differentiated little between phone conversations and online communication.

There was some concern on one interviewee's side regarding the booking and how it has become almost too impersonal. He did state that it would be nice to receive a personal rather than an automated confirmation but it was not enough to make him stop using the Internet all together.

#### (6) Physical dexterity

Basically, there are two different kinds of physical dexterity: those that affects people's Internet usage and those that do not. Physical dexterity like e.g. visual degeneration or arthritis are very likely to influence Internet usage patterns in a negative way as the person affected is physically not able to either see the screen very well or write on the keyboard. However, a wheelchair-bound person may still be an Internet user, maybe even more than people who are not wheelchair-bound, as it restrains them from leaving the house but not enter the virtual world. People with such physical disabilities have admitted of using the Internet even more especially for getting in contact with other people e.g. in chat rooms.

With regards to this issue, none of the respondents of this study have expressed any health issues.

Trocchia and Janda's (2000) research touched upon important issues, but it is necessary to look at it from a more UK and tourism point of view.

Mintel (2000) refers to the relevant age groups by lifestage as empty nesters or post-family. Their definitions are as follows:

**Empty nesters** – For empty nesters the priorities are similar to that of the post-family. Lower commitments, coupled with more disposable income enable this group to value the buying of holidays as a relatively high priority. More often than not, consumers in this group consist of those couples or singles whose children have left the family home and are eager to take holidays as they no longer have other financial constraints.

**Post-family** – For the post-family their spending priorities have shifted from the purchasing of durable goods to the attainment of leisure services. This group may have not only the time but also the financial means to go on several holidays during the year. Again there is a variance between the younger post-family and the older post-family. The younger post-family are more inclined to take holidays abroad and to partake in more active adventurous holidays. Among this group, many take several short-haul holidays within the UK as well as long-haul holidays abroad. (Mintel, 2000).

With regards to Information Technology and, in particular, the Internet, Mintel (2000) stresses the importance of new channels for distribution as well as information. Even though its significance is highlighted, Mintel (2000) does not touch upon Internet usage between different lifestages.

One company that is mentioned as noteworthy for these market segments is Saga. Founded in 1959, the Saga Group represents a company which from the very start has focused on providing holiday packages to a specific lifestage. From the late 1990s, Saga has been able to maintain a steady demand within its main consumer base, although it has recognised that, in order to sustain the steady growth achieved, it must widen its consumer base to include older empty nesters, and differentiate between the post-family group by enticing the younger 50-60-year-olds. Saga Holidays provide personalised holidays for the over-50s age group, with its key market being the over-70s age group. Specialising in coach tours and All Inclusive Tours, Saga has come to realise a changing attitude within its customer base. Traditionally, Saga consumers have required packages which include evening entertainment, bowling and dancing. More recently, members within this lifestage have expressed a requirement for more active holidays, preferring to visit long-haul destinations originally not ventured upon. This also fits very well with arguments of the consumers growing more experienced and more confident (Poon, 1993) and demanding more tailor-made holidays.

Mintel (2000) states that a large part of this change has been due to the progression from pre-family, to the family and then to the post-family lifestage. Those in the pre-family are staying longer in that lifestage, thereby affecting the attitudes of those in the post-family to becoming one of a relatively young mind set. Saga is hoping to capitalise on this by moving towards selling more long-haul holidays, pushing forward an element of freedom and adventure that allows for the more independent nature of the older holidaymaker, who no longer needs to be hand-held. In this way, Saga hopes to widen its customer base to include more frequently the younger 50-60s age group who it has been suggested, have made many enquiries to Saga, but as yet have not converted to being customers. Those in the post-family who can afford several holidays in a year are opting for a mixture of relaxing and activity based holidays. They may take single destination holidays within Europe which are relaxing, but they then may go on a long-haul holiday which involves more than one base and more activity. For instance, Saga provides holidays to South Africa, whereby the mature traveller can then move to different locations within the country or partake in Zulu lunches. The aim of the company is to encourage holidays which are “off the beaten track“. Again this is to appeal to younger clientele, with the effect of widening its consumer profile (Mintel, 2000).

The Saga Travel Shop - <http://www.saga.co.uk/travel> - now also offers online booking for the over 50s and even offers small discounts (around £15 per booking) to online bookers.

Overall, the products that are offered by Saga Holidays are very much aimed at the ‘silver surfers’ who participated in this research.

## 4.6 Online booking in the ‘grey market’

Machlis (1997) pointed out that people visit travel websites mainly for information purposes and less than 5 percent actually buy travel or tourism products online. These figures have not changed much; a recent comScore study for Google has shown the major importance of online searching in influencing offline buying on consumers’ travel related purchases (comScore, 2006).

Possible reasons for this behaviour are technical difficulties, credit card security, no assessment of product quality, and privacy issues (Szymanski and Hise, 2000; Weber and Roehl, 1999). It is of major importance that tourism marketers consider these concerns when building/designing a website and developing online marketing programmes (Jang, 2004). Jang (2004) furthermore points out that his research has shown that various research studies have claimed that website features are a significant variable that relates online information search to actual purchase action (Chu, 2001; Metha and Shah, 2001).

Even though this thesis deals with the information provision of the Internet it was of interest for the author to ask respondents for their experiences regarding online booking.

		Length of Internet usage					Total
		7-12 months	1-3 years	4-6 years	7-10 years	Over 10 years	
Ever booked online?	Yes	17	49	152	98	85	401
	No	16	17	66	17	0	116
Total		33	66	218	115	85	517

Table 4.25: Online booking according to length of usage

The most interesting results can be seen when looking at whether or not respondents have actually booked online, according to how long they have been using the Internet. One would make an assumption that someone who has not used the Internet for a long time

would not be inclined to start booking straight away; however, the results of this research study prove this hypothesis incorrect.

In the category of newest Internet users, the numbers are almost equally distributed – 51.5 percent answered with yes, 48.5 percent answered with no. The longer participants have been using the Internet the more they state that they have actually booked online, culminating in a 100 percent yes response from those who have been online for over ten years.

It is valid to say that there is a relationship between length of Internet usage and online booking in this particular case study. The number of online bookers has grown with the experience and duration of Internet usage. Five out of six interviewees stated that they book regularly on the Internet, which is a small contradiction to one of the hypotheses that implied that the Internet is still mainly used as an information source rather than a booking tool. However, such a small sample of people is not really representative of the general activities of the ‘grey market’. Nevertheless it is interesting to see that the majority of the interviewees do book online and not only for rail tickets and car hire but also for plane tickets (and not only for low-cost airlines, although those were emphasised because as one interviewee stated “you have no choice”) and even for independently arranged holidays.

“It is just so convenient. I can do it at home whenever I want. No need to go to the travel agency or call anyone. Just sit down, click and book.”

(Interviewee 3)

“I just prefer to arrange my own holidays. I can never really find the perfect package holiday so it’s much easier to just pick and choose and then book it right away.”

(Interviewee 5)

When it comes to looking at online booking, it is also important to consider whether or not people actually trust secure sites.

		Length of Internet usage					Total
		7-12 months	1-3 years	4-6 years	7-10 years	Over 10 years	
Trust of secure online means of booking	completely	17	16	84	32	51	200
	to a certain extent	0	33	101	17	0	151
	neutral	0	0	16	33	17	66
	very reluctant	16	17	17	17	17	84
	not at all	0	0	0	16	0	16
Total		33	66	218	115	85	517

Table 4.26: Trust of secure online means of booking according to length of Internet usage

Again, as in the previous table, it is most interesting to look at the results according to Internet usage. There are definitely commonalities e.g. in the newest user group, all bookers have answered that they have complete trust, whereas the non-bookers expressed that they are very reluctant. The results in the other groups are mostly spread out, except for a high majority of the 4-6 year long users stating that they trust secure online booking to a certain extent.

Looking at the special characteristics of the ‘grey market’, it is necessary to look back at the marketing misconceptions (Loudoun and Della Bitta, 1993) discussed in the literature review. A lot of these misconceptions need to be proven incorrectly when it comes to the information needs of the ‘grey market’. Results of this study that dispute these misconceptions are included below.

1. Older consumers are all the same
  - a. the results within the age groups of the ‘grey market’ segment are very diverse. Senior citizen does not equal senior citizen.
2. They think of themselves as old
  - a. all respondents clearly stated (especially in the interviews) that they do not think they are old at all. They consider themselves experienced and knowledgeable.
3. They aren’t an important consumer segment

- a. in the UK, the 'grey market' segment represents millions of people who have both a high disposable income and free time. They are not afraid to use the Internet either.
4. They won't try something new
  - a. respondents would not have started using the Internet if they were not interested in trying something new. Results have also shown that the 'silvers surfers' are not afraid of online booking.
5. They have impaired mental faculties
  - a. it is difficult to comment on this issue but as far as the author knows the respondents of this research study have not shown any signs of mental problems.
6. They are in poor health
  - a. again, respondents did not indicate any health issues.
7. They keep to themselves
  - a. during interaction with the interviewees, it became apparent that they have a very active social life.
8. They aren't physically active
  - a. especially on holidays, respondents like to do active things.

(Loudoun and Della Bitta, 1993:156; adapted with results from this research study)

These considerations conclude the chapter on the online information search. The next chapter will put an emphasis on the entire decision-making process.

## **V. Decision-making Process in the ‘Grey Market’**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter has outlined and analysed the information search behaviour of ‘silver surfers’ in detail. Generally, an information search is part of the wider decision-making process as information is essential so that an informed decision can be made. This chapter will outline and analyse the decision-making process of the participating ‘silver surfers’ in this research study by presenting results from both interviews and questionnaires. As in the previous chapter, the interview results will be shown as quotes whereas the questionnaire results will be in the form of tables and/or figures.

### **5.2 General decision-making process**

Within the context of this thesis, it was important to the author that the questionnaire respondents give an accurate (or as accurate as possible) account of their decision-making. Therefore, participants were asked whether or not they had planned a holiday during the last 12 months. This time period should allow the majority of respondents to answer this important question while still having all the details fresh in their mind.

Initially, it is interesting to look at whether or not the ‘silver surfers’ have planned a holiday within the last 12 months so that we can follow the assumption that the process was initiated by the need for a holiday. As mentioned before, this question acted as a filter question to ensure that the information on the decision-making process is as accurate as possible (it is more likely that people will remember the exact process of their holiday planning).

The next three tables look at holiday planning according to age, gender as well as occupation. A high number of respondents, 74.3 percent (384 out of a possible 517), have planned holidays during the last 12 months. This is a high enough number to look at the decision-making process more in depth.

		Age					Total
		50-54 years	55-59 years	60-64 years	65-74 years	75 +	
Holiday planning during last 12 months	Yes	183	110	37	36	18	384
	No	34	48	18	33	0	133
Total		217	158	55	69	18	517

Table 5.1: Holiday planning according to age

When looking at holiday planning according to age, it is apparent that the majority in all age groups has in fact taken a holiday during the last 12 months. The oldest age group (75+ years old) had a 100 percent positive response.

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
Holiday planning during last 12 months	Yes	194	190	384
	No	67	66	133
Total		261	256	517

Table 5.2: Holiday planning according to gender

The situation according to gender is similar. Again, the majority of both female and male respondents have planned a holiday during the last year.

		Occupation		Total
		employed	retired	
Holiday planning during last 12 months	Yes	302	82	384
	No	50	83	133
Total		352	165	517

Table 5.3: Holiday planning according to occupation

An overwhelming majority of the employed participants have planned a holiday during the last 12 months whereas the results of the retired participants do not give an indication of a trend in either direction. Contradicting the literature and statistics (e.g. Mintel, 2000) that older, retired people are more likely to take more holidays due to increased leisure time and disposable income, the results of this research show that far more employed (85.8 percent) than retired respondents (49.7 percent) have actually planned a holiday during the last year.

Before looking in-depth at the decision-making process as such, it is important to review and evaluate general consumer behaviour theory in relation to the findings of this thesis.

In the literature review, the author has stated that consumer behaviour has been defined by various authors (either marketing- or tourism-related); however, their definitions often vary and highlight different aspects within the process of choosing a product or service and purchasing it.

One of the simplest definitions is from Horner and Swarbrooke (1996) who define consumer behaviour as the study of why people buy the product they do, and how they make their decision. Although this interpretation contains all the key actions (decision and purchase), it can be argued that it lacks certain depth and detail as consumer behaviour in general and specifically the decision-making process are rather complicated concepts. On the other hand, it can be reasoned that the general nature of this definition is what makes it so good.

The interviews in particular have looked at consumer behaviour of 'silver surfers' in more detail. Whilst the questionnaire asked specific questions, the more conversational approach of the interviews have helped to gain a better insight into general behaviour.

Especially in tourism where the product/service is rather intangible and often high risk, the decision-making process involves the consideration of a lot of different questions that need to be answered in order for people to make decisions. Additionally the definition itself is

only concerned with the core of the decision-making process and how the decision is finally made. Other authors (also cited within this chapter) suggest that the consumption and/or disposition of the goods and services are also a (significant) part of consumer behaviour.

In agreement with the previously mentioned definition Engel *et al* (1995) have enhanced the basic aspects of the Horner and Swarbrooke's (1996) quote and state that 'consumer behaviour is those activities directly involved in obtaining, consuming, and disposing of products and services including the decision processes that precedes and follows these actions' (Engel *et al*, 1995: 4). This interpretation highlights the psychological process in which the consumer engages during the pre- and post-purchase stages of the consumer behaviour process. Also emphasised is the fact that the process is not completed once the product has been consumed once, rather that it goes on to, e.g. re-purchase. However, most travellers might see this differently especially when it comes to destinations that are either so far away or so expensive that they only visit them once. He offers an alternative purchase as another way of completing the process, which is probably the more common action when it comes to tourism.

Within his definition of consumer behaviour, Solomon (1999) distinguishes between group and individual decisions including several consumption possibilities in order to fulfil ones needs and desires. It suggests that consumers make decisions to satisfy deficiencies. His definition reads as follows: 'It [consumer behaviour] is the study of the process involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires' (Solomon, 1999: 7). However, it is important to understand tourists' needs and desires as they are often shaped by tour operators who constantly keep trying to influence the consumers in terms of buying decisions. Nowadays it is much more likely that companies try to influence their (potential) consumers with advertisements, banners and customised advertising on the Internet.

For the sake of this research, the author has decided to use a rather general definition of consumer behaviour, falling in line with Swarbrooke and Horner (1996; 2007) and Engel *et al* (1995). Those definitions were mentioned to interviewees to help them understand the clear reasoning behind their explanation of their behaviour.

The question what kind of needs and desires tourism fulfils or better to say tries to fulfil remains. Edwards (1996) has argued that it is identification of self that is the key role of desire. An argument that is also underpinned by Desforges (2000) is that the complete process of anticipation of holidays, the travelling, and the telling of holiday stories after returning are all tied into an imagination and performance that enables tourists to think of themselves as particular sorts of persons (Desforges, 2000). Edwards (1996) argues that the central motivating structures in the tourism process itself are conspiring to create and sustain tourist desire and fantasy. In other words, Edwards suggests that tourism is based on creating myths and selling them to consumers. Albeit not directly asked, the 'silver surfers' studied in this research seemed to fill their desire for travelling by going on more than just one trip a year, even the ones who are still employed.

As consumer behaviour is seen as a process that usually starts with problem recognition (Swarbrooke and Horner, 1999), the argument that consumer behaviour is best understood as problem-solving behaviour is fully valid (Huffman *et al*, 2000 in Ratneshwar *et al*, 2000). On the other hand, do consumers really feel that something is missing in their life until they engage in certain activities (e.g. looking at brochures or websites) that make them sense a problem and believe that they are not completely satisfied with their lives and it would be more fulfilled if they went on a holiday? People try to use holidays to shape their lives, to give their lives more or a better meaning; however, they are highly influenced by the media, which has the power to convince the consumers that a particular product reflects who they are or rather who they want to be (Cohen and Taylor, 1998). The 'silver surfers' have also acknowledged that they are swayed by special offers and promotions, especially when advertised on the Internet. This could be seen as an example where there is not necessarily a 'problem' at first but the 'good deal' is too good to pass

up. On the other hand, there is the more traditional approach of the 'silver surfer' realising that they want to go on a holiday because of a perceived problem, e.g. need for relaxation, or change of scenery. In this particular case, the 'silver surfer' will follow the path of problem solving and therefore engage in an information search that could be rather short or rather lengthy depending on the urgency of the problem itself.

Having looked back at the theory and how it related to the general consumer behaviour of 'silver surfers', the next section will concentrate on the actual decision-making process.

## **5.2 Decision-making process**

The results that are discussed in this section of the chapter are very significant for this thesis. The decision-making process of 'silver surfers' is examined in comparison to models reviewed in the literature. The author will also suggest a model that represents the decision-making process of the 'grey market' (see 5.4).

One thing that is unique about Moutinho's (1987) Vacation Tourist Behaviour Model, which has been mentioned in the literature review, is that Moutinho considers destination choice as a compulsory sub-decision among other travel decisions, e.g. travel mode, timing, budget, intermediaries that come as a third step once the need for travel has been established, information has been reflected upon and before travel preparation. This argument is essential to this thesis as the author has built the decision-making process question to this work. The external and internal influences on travellers during the decision-making process have been well researched and documented in the literature; however, the actual chronological order of when people make decisions has not been a significant factor in research so far.

Therefore, the core question posed to the respondents asked them to rank the process of their tourism related decision-making according to the last holiday they took. Although the questionnaire explicitly stated that only those who had planned a holiday during the last 12 months should answer this question, an additional 16 people have answered it. The following section will take an in-depth look at detailed findings that resulted from this particular question.

The following outcomes summarise the means and standard deviation and then look at the decision making process within all the age sub-groups, as well as according to gender. The findings will show differences and similarities between the different sub-groups.

Firstly, the overall results will be examined. These findings give an indication of the decision-making process and will, therefore, be used as a basis for further analysis when looking at differences according to age, gender and occupation.

	<b>Means</b>	<b>SD</b>
Destination choice	1.54	.819
Time of year	3.17	1.516
Length of stay	3.49	1.261
Type of accommodation	3.91	1.383
Mode of travel	4.38	1.345
Package holidays vs. Independent travel	4.52	1.823

Table 5.4: Means and Standard deviation

The above table shows the frequencies on how respondents do their decision-making in general. The results shown above have helped to create Figure 5.1. It summarises the decision-making process in the ‘grey market’ according to the results of this research. Due to the nature of sampling methods used, there is no way that the results can give an indication of these results representing the entire market; however, it can give an idea of trends and significant issues.

In particular, these results are significant as research has not looked at the chronological order of travel related decisions before. Most well known models do include all or some of the above mentioned components, but they are mostly ranked in a random or assumed order. For that reason, figure 5.1 shows the actual order that travel related decisions have been made by the ‘silver surfer’ respondents of this research. The consensus amongst ‘silver surfers’ was destination choice was the first decision made (this mean also shows the lowest standard deviation).

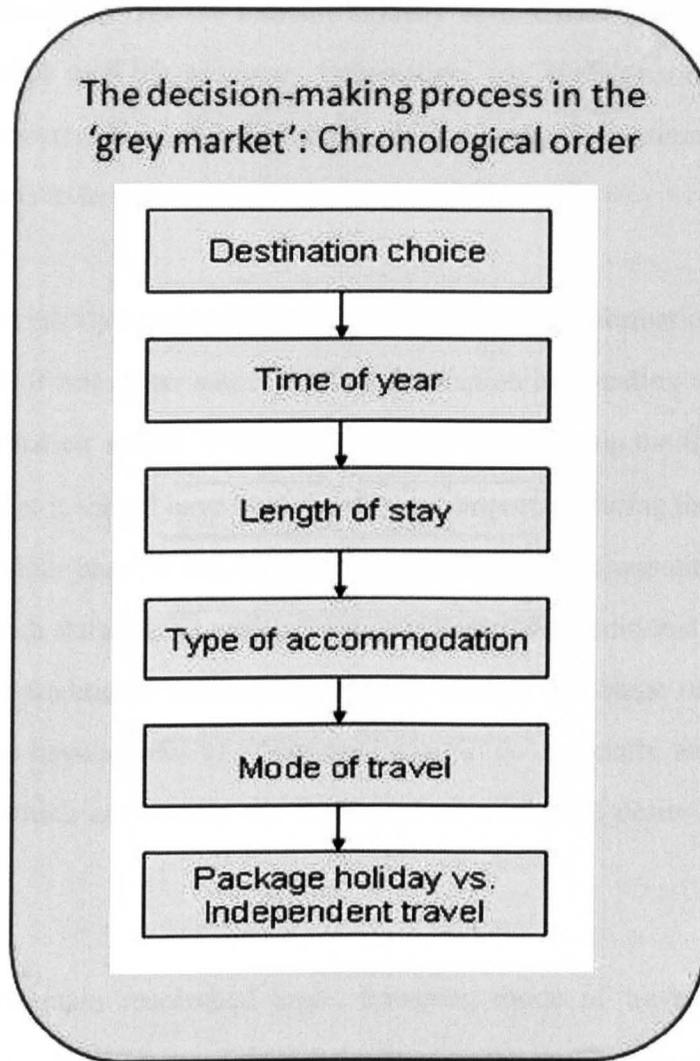


Figure 5.1: The decision-making process in the 'grey market': Chronological order

When looking at these results, one can argue that, on average, respondents chose their destination first, time of year second, length of stay third, type of accommodation fourth; followed by mode of travel in fifth place and the package holidays vs. independent travel choice, which comes in at sixth and last place in the decision-making process.

This model of an actual decision-making process is of importance in the wider sense of consumer behaviour theory because, generally speaking, behavioural models do not incorporate the chronological aspect of decision-making. They list and mention the decisions a potential tourist has to face but do not consider in what order these decisions are actually made. An insight into the actual order in which decisions are being made can

be potentially beneficial for the tourism industry as it shows when and how consumers should be targeted with the necessary information, e.g. if destination choice is the first decision a consumer makes, it would make sense that this is the topic on which the most information needs to be provided, off- as well as online.

Therefore, when briefly looking back at the findings of the information search question, it can be seen why it was rather surprising that destination information was ranked so low in the online information search. With the destination choice being the first decision made, it can be argued that it should have been much more important during the online information search. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the decision was either made before the information search started (and respondents only looked for additional information) or that they used more traditional information sources during this stage of the process. Most travellers tend to have an idea of where they want to go especially when it comes to long haul holidays, which are usually the fulfilment of a long(er) desire to visit a particular destination.

Flights were the main researched topic; however, mode of travel is the penultimate decision made. It can be assumed that, depending on the destination choice, there may not be a lot of choice between different modes of travel, e.g. a long haul holiday will almost certainly result in plane travel (unless it is a cruise and, even then, a flight to the port might be necessary). Type of accommodation at the destination is of similar importance in information search and decision-making process, underlining the significance of the choice of where to stay during the holidays. Package holidays (special interest, or package vs. independent travel) take last position showing that the respondents are not concerned with the actual type of travel and foremost deciding on destination, accommodation and length of stay as well as time of year.

Overall, what figure 5.1 tells us is that 'silver surfers' follow a particular order when making a travel related decision. Destination choice is the first decision made because it also is the most important decision a traveller has to make. Without knowing where to go,

subsequent decisions are impossible to make. The destination decision itself is usually also the most personal one. A person might have had a long desire to visit a particular destination or re-visit a destination where they have had a positive holiday experience before. The only exception to this rule is when potential travellers, in this case the 'silver surfers', book a special offer, e.g. a weekend in Paris. Destination might not be the most important thing in this case but the fact that a holiday was offered at a lower price and the basic need to 'get away' was fulfilled rather than the special need to go somewhere specific.

The second decision was time of year. This can be interpreted in two different ways. Firstly, if the traveller is still employed and depending on the job, they might only be available to go on holiday at certain times of the year, e.g. when you work in academia, you are usually only allowed to go on leave when it is not teaching time. Therefore, most travellers would pick a destination that has a pleasant climate during the time of their visit in order to make the holiday as comfortable as possible. Secondly, if the traveller is retired, the choice of when to go on holiday might very well be linked to destination choice that when, for example visiting New Zealand, one would rather fly between December and March than during the Northern Hemisphere summer, which is winter in the Southern Hemisphere. Retired travellers therefore, have a much wider choice of destinations available to them since they are not bound by work related issues. Since travellers need to get the holiday schedules out early in the year and it requires a lot of planning, it is not surprising that time of year is in second place of the decision-making process.

The length of stay could depend on various factors. Firstly, if the holiday is a long distance one, the traveller might have to think about staying longer to make sure to get enough time at the destination to get over the jet lag. Secondly, the length of stay also has to do with what kind of a holiday the traveller has decided to embark upon, e.g. a city sightseeing trip or a tour across an entire country. Thirdly, length of stay is ultimately also linked to the price of the holiday. A longer stay will obviously cost more money. Finally, the length of stay can also depend on airline schedules as for example charter flights only go once or

twice a week to certain destinations. For non-retired travellers, length of stay will also depend upon how much time they can get off work and therefore, it is not unexpected to see it in third place of the decision-making process.

Type of accommodation was only in fourth place in this research, although when looking at the significance of time and length of stay, it makes more sense. As with length of stay above, the accommodation choice may be directly in relation to the budget a traveller has set. On top of that, a multi-centred holiday will require more than just one accommodation in different locations around the destination. As with destination choice, the type of accommodation preferred is usually a rather personal decision with some people preferring more luxury accommodation while others might be comfortable sleeping in a tent or campervan (especially on touring holidays).

Mode of travel, which lies in fifth place, is probably one of the easiest decisions to make and that is why it comes in so late in the process. There are a lot of destinations where you do not really have a choice of which means of transportation to take, and the same goes for special offers which are usually bound to a certain airline (so that they can sell the rest of their empty seats). It is probably the decision on which travellers have the least influence on and just have to take what is provided.

Finally, the last decision 'silver surfers' make is package holiday vs. independent travel. The traveller might have already decided upon a certain type of accommodation and transportation but have not made a decision on the exact one to use yet, therefore they may look at available packages and if there is one that incorporates their idea of the perfect holiday they may book it. On the other hand, if there is nothing available that suits them, they might decide to go for independent travel and arrange all the components of their holiday themselves. The misconception that packages are always cheaper is slowly proven incorrect as the emergence of the Internet has made it easy for potential travellers to put together the perfect tailor-made holiday package themselves. In general, it can be said that

the result of the decision-making process question is logical and can be explained by applying some general knowledge about the tourism industry as demonstrated above.

Comparing the questionnaire results to the interviewee findings is rather difficult, since the questions were asked in a very different manner. To show some similarities as well as differences, they are outlined below.

The question asked the participants to talk the interviewer through the process of their most recent information search on the Internet. The respondents however, talked more about their overall decision-making process. The answers of each respondent are outlined below.

Interviewee 1 mentioned that the Internet is mainly used for destination choice; the holiday itself is booked by brochure (phone or travel agent), and also in order to back up information. The last holiday decision-making process was as follows: destination choice at first, then he got a brochure from Saga to book, and extra information on culture and history was researched on the Internet. He also mentioned that he and his wife usually take two to three holidays a year.

Interviewee 2 alternates between short breaks and longer holidays. For short breaks she takes advantage of promotional offers found on the Internet (she mentioned lastminute.com as an example). When deciding on longer holidays, the destination choice comes first and then the entire travel features are booked online – everything from flights to accommodation and guidebooks; however, she did say that sometimes long-haul flights are booked offline.

The third interviewee talked about her last holiday when she was visiting friends in Nice. The destination choice came first, even though it was not really a choice, followed by looking for a low cost flight which was booked online. She did mention that she only

booked online because she really did not have a choice, since a phone booking would incur more costs.

For interviewee 4 the destination choice also came first. All aspects of the holiday were booked independently (not because of a particular dislikes of packages, but that is just the way of taking holidays that he has acquired over years). Everything that can be booked online was booked online; he mentioned booking online is only an extension of telephone booking (which is used when online booking is not available); however, the Internet is preferred since comparisons on the Internet are easier and faster.

For the last seven years, interviewee 5 has been making all holiday arrangements online, both information search and booking. Usually the destination choice comes first, sometimes special promotional offers are used; flights, car rental and accommodation arrangements are all booked online. He prefers to do it by himself whenever he wants to; it is much easier than going to the travel agent and making sure that they really book what you want.

Finally, interviewee 6 also decides on her destination first, either through advertisements or recommendations from friends and then the travel planning goes ahead. She also mentioned that she would like to take advantage of special offers but cannot seem to find them. She did not indicate that she books a lot online, her husband sometimes does but she not so much.

All of them stated that the destination choice is the first aspect of their holiday planning and, except for short breaks, special or promotional offers, usually do not influence the choice of a destination. More importantly, friends or a special interest for a certain destination determine where to go on holiday. The findings also show that although the Internet is an important tool for booking in this particular case it is still very much used as an information tool. The tendency to book online is particularly strong in this group with only one interviewee stating that he would rather book offline and another person saying

that sometimes he makes use of the telephone, and a third one stating that she sometimes books long-haul flights offline. Apparently, for them a new custom of booking online has been established. The results are very similar to the survey findings discussed previously. One interviewee also stated that she would very much like to take advantage of special offers provided online; however she is never able to find them (which again relates to information overload and the aspect of not finding what they are looking for).

**5.2.1 The decision-making process according to age**

Below, the author has laid out the six attributes of the decision-making process according to age of the respondents giving a different overall view of the results.

Age group		Destination choice	Mode of travel	Type of accommodation	Length of stay	Time of year	Package holiday independent travel
50-54 years	Mean	1.55	4.73	3.45	2.91	3.01	5.36
	SD	.998	.859	1.308	1.004	1.605	1.075

Table 5.5: Comparison of means according to age group 50-54 years

When looking at the youngest age group (50 -54 years old), the results are similar to the overall ones. Destination choice is first, followed by length of stay and time of year. Type of accommodation comes in fourth, with mode of travel and package holiday vs. independent travel being the ultimate decision. The only real difference between the overall result and this one is that length of stay and time of year are swapped. One can argue that, since this age group is without any exception still in employment, the length of a holiday is of great importance since they do not have unlimited travel time available to them. Time of year is a slightly easier decision for them to make but still significant, especially when considering what destination they have chosen.

Age group		Destination choice	Mode of travel	Type of accommodation	Length of stay	Time of year	Package holiday independent travel
55-59 years	Mean	1.46	4.60	3.86	3.85	3.14	4.09
	SD	.500	.956	1.463	1.502	1.452	1.956

Table 5.6: Comparison of means according to age group 55-59 years

The second youngest age group offers some interesting results. Destination choice comes first, followed by time of year, then length of stay only slightly before type of accommodation. The penultimate choice is package holiday vs. independent travel and mode of travel comes in last. The ratio of employed vs. retired within this age group is about 2:1 (63.9 percent vs. 36.1 percent), which does not have an apparent influence on the result. The most notable feature is that length of stay and type of accommodation are only 0.01 points apart from which one can assume that these two issues are of equal importance. In this age group, package holiday vs. independent travel does not take last place, but mode of travel does.

Age group		Destination choice	Mode of travel	Type of accommodation	Length of stay	Time of year	Package holiday independent travel
60-64 years	Mean	1.54	2.54	5.08	3.54	2.70	5.59
	SD	.505	1.464	.277	.505	.845	1.384

Table 5.7: Comparison of means according to age group 60-64 years

The third youngest or third oldest – depending on how you look at it – age group offers some interesting results. Destination choice takes first place, followed by mode of travel and time of year. Length of stay comes in fourth, with type of accommodation and package holiday vs. independent travel bringing up the rear. Within this particular group, the retired people are in the majority (69.1 percent vs. 30.9 percent). This is the first time that mode of travel has reached a more important place. It can be assumed that, within this age group, respondents tend to travel to destinations where you can actually decide which mode of transport is the most appropriate, e.g. a short break to Paris would offer various options – flight, train via the Channel Tunnel or car via Channel Tunnel/Ferry.

Age group		Destination choice	Mode of travel	Type of accommodation	Length of stay	Time of year	Package holiday independent travel
65-74 years	Mean	1.97	3.53	4.17	4.92	4.50	1.92
	SD	.971	2.432	.561	.280	1.464	.280

Table 5.8: Comparison of means according to age group 65-74 years

The penultimate age group yielded the following results. For the first time something other than destination choice came first. Package holiday vs. independent travel takes the first place before destination choice, followed by mode of travel and type of accommodation. Time of year and length of stay take the penultimate or the last place. This group comprises more retired (75.4 percent) than employed (24.6 percent) people and this becomes evident when looking at which decision were made last. Length of stay and time of year are not of great importance if you do not have to worry about work commitments. The most interesting result, however, was that destination choice did not come in first place but was replaced by package holiday vs. independent travel. This contradicts the overall results as a whole and it is the only time within certain age groups (even incorporating the results of the oldest age group) where destination choice was not number one.

Age group		Destination choice	Mode of travel	Type of accommodation	Length of stay	Time of year	Package holiday independent travel
75 years +	Mean	1.11	4.78	6.00	4.00	3.22	1.89
	SD	.323	.647	.000	.000	.647	.323

Table 5.9: Comparison of means according to age group 75 years +

The oldest age group also offered a few unexpected results. Destination choice was the first decision again, followed by package holiday vs. independent travel, then time of year. Length of stay comes in fourth, with mode of travel the penultimate choice and type of accommodation being the last. Interestingly, type of accommodation was unanimously placed as the last choice since the mean is 6.00. All respondents in this age group are already retired. They put a higher value on choosing between either a packaged or

independent holiday although destination choice is still the most important. Even though time should not be an issue for retired people, the respondents of this questionnaire do consider time of year and length of stay important decisions, at least more important than mode of travel and type of accommodation. It is out of the ordinary that ,for this particular age group, type of accommodation is that insignificant. One could have assumed that as these people are older in age, they would put comfort first and put an emphasis on where they wanted to stay; however, it could also mean that when it comes to decision-making, they wait till the end since they already know what kind of place they want to stay.

### 5.2.2 The decision-making process according to gender

After looking at the decision-making process according to age, it is also of interest to look at the differences or similarities when comparing to gender.

Gender		Destination choice	Mode of travel	Type of accommodation	Length of stay	Time of year	Package holiday independent travel
Female	Mean	1.48	4.72	3.48	3.48	3.21	4.64
	SD	.860	.831	1.338	1.415	1.629	1.652
Male	Mean	1.61	4.01	4.38	3.51	3.12	4.38
	SD	.768	1.670	1.274	1.068	1.383	1.990

Table 5.10: Comparison of means according to gender

There are some similarities, but also major differences, between the ways in which female and male respondents go through the decision-making process. Female respondents placed destination choice in the first position, followed by time of year. Length of stay and type of accommodation are tied in third place, both with a mean of 3.48. Package holiday vs. independent travel takes penultimate place and mode of travel takes last position. Comparing the female respondents results to the overall ones, it can be said that they are very similar even when considering that length of stay and type of accommodation are

ried. The only difference is that mode of travel and package holiday vs. independent travel changed places.

The male respondents, on the other hand, show other differences to the overall results. For them, destination choice comes first, the time of year, followed by length of stay and mode of travel. Package holiday vs. independent travel and type of accommodation are tied in last place, both with a mean of 4.38. There are some commonalities, however, mode of travel and type of accommodation have switched places.

It was very interesting to see that in both cases, female and male respondents, two of the answer options were tied with the exact same mean.

### 5.2.3 The decision-making process according to occupation

Occupation		Destination choice	Mode of travel	Type of accommodation	Length of stay	Time of year	Package holiday independent travel
employed	Mean	1.47	4.74	3.74	3.36	2.90	4.79
	SD	.824	.909	1.295	1.348	1.486	1.616
retired	Mean	1.79	3.00	4.57	3.99	4.18	3.46
	SD	.749	1.805	1.516	.638	1.167	2.178

Table 5.11: Comparison of means according to occupation

The results according to occupation are most interesting as there are a number of differences between employed and retired people.

Employed respondents placed destination choice first, then time of year and length of stay followed by type of accommodation and mode of travel with package holiday vs. independent travel taking the last position.

On the other hand, the retired participants ranked destination choice in first place, followed by mode of travel and package holiday vs. independent travel. Length of stay was ranked fourth, then time of year, with type of accommodation taking last place.

Most of the differences can be explained by simple lifestyle changes that a person goes through when they retire. Time of year or length of stay are less important when you have free time at your disposal.

The only commonality is destination choice, which is ranked first within both occupational groups. Time of year and mode of travel are interchanged; time of year took second place in the employed group and fifth in the retired group; similarly with mode of travel which was ranked second with retired participants but fifth with the employed. Length of stay is ranked third in the employed group and fourth in the retired group respectively. Type of accommodation jumped from third place in the employed group to sixth and last place in the retired group. Likewise for package holiday vs. independent travel, which is ranked third in the retired group but last amongst employed respondents.

### **5.3 Decision-making process models and ‘silver surfers’**

The decision-making process has been well documented throughout academic tourism literature and reviewed in the literature chapter of this thesis. However, there are many models that all seem to concentrate on different features and the scope of most models is rather limited, therefore general models that truly manage to explain the very individual decision-making process are fairly non-existent. The literature review has shown a general critique of the models discussed. Some of the most famous models will be compared to the findings of this research.

The first model to be discussed is Um and Crompton’s (1990) model of ‘Model of the Pleasure Travel Destination Choice Process’. Crompton first looked at this topic in 1977 (Decrop, 1999) when he presented a system model in two steps. At first, there is the generic decision of whether or not to go on holiday. If the answer is yes, a second decision is necessary, where to go? This basic model was further developed by Um and Crompton (1990) to a more complete framework and considered three sets of variables. As mentioned in the literature review, this model belongs to models of destination choice.

(1) External inputs – these represent influences from both the social and marketing environment. They are further classified into *significant* (destination attributes), *symbolic* (promotional messages), and *social stimuli*. In this particular case, the senior travellers are influenced by their personal surroundings and the promotional activities of tourism related companies. Destination attributes have a significant influence on the ‘silver surfers’ as the overwhelming majority makes the destination decision first. In addition to the actual destination attributes that are either attractive or not attractive to the traveller, promotional messages from destinations with attractive attributes are also of importance. Finally, *social stimuli* come into play. In the previous chapter, the author has outlined what additional sources the ‘silver surfers’ have used in their online information search; family and friends were listed as an option and 26.1 percent have used the people closest to them as an additional resource. These social stimuli are not to be underestimated; people can have a

far bigger influence on people than promotional messages, since the traveller can actually interact with them.

(2) Internal inputs – these derive from the vacationer's socio-psychological characteristics (personality, motives, values, and attitudes). This is when the individual's cultural background plays an important part. Um and Crompton (1991) have recognised the importance of cultural factors by including the so-called internal inputs into their model. Respondents of this research study have shown that their own socio-psychological characteristics are essential to their online information search. This became apparent, especially in the interviews where respondents from different backgrounds talked about how they make decisions.

(3) Cognitive constructs – these represent the integration of the internal as well as external inputs, into the awareness and evoked set of destinations (Um and Crompton, 1990). Respondents put together a set of destinations that they are aware of, which will then be narrowed down to a list of considered destinations from which one will be chosen.

Furthermore, Um and Crompton (1990) argue that there are five sets of processes, a cognitive evolution which indicates that the model works like this:

- (1) The formation of beliefs about destination attributes based on either incidental or accidental learning – the traveller forms general opinions about destinations.
- (2) The initiation of the destination choice process after the generic decision to go on a holiday has been made – the traveller starts their online information search and is influenced actively and passively.
- (3) The evolution of an evoked set from the awareness set of destinations – based on their online information search, the traveller puts destinations into two categories.
- (4) The formation of beliefs about evoked destinations attributes based on an active information search – the traveller looks more in-depth at the considered destinations to make an informed decision.

(5) The selection of a specific travel destination from the evoked set – the traveller makes a decision from the considered destinations based on all the information gathered.

Um and Crompton's (1990) model is a lead-up to the first choice that 'silver surfers' make in their decision-making process (according to the results of this study), the destination choice. While this study has now thoroughly examined how respondents actually arrive at their decision, it is acknowledged that Um and Crompton's (1990) five sets of processes (see above) can be used as a guideline for this course of action.

Another example of attempted general models that view the tourist as a rational decision-maker is Moutinho's (1987) Vacation Tourist Behaviour Model, which falls into the category of models of consumer behaviour in tourism. Moutinho's efforts to create a model of tourist decision-making started out in 1982 with a three page long model which was simplified in 1987. While Moutinho's definition of consumer behaviour has played a major role in this research, his tourist behaviour model is not applicable as such.

The model itself is divided into three parts, based on the common distinction between pre- and postpurchase parts in consumer decision-making processes. Moutinho's (1987) three stages are as follows:

(1) Predecision and Decision Processes involve the stages from stimuli to making an actual purchase decision. The three areas are included – preference structure, decision and purchase. Moutinho points out that the total tourist product is often purchased in a sequence and not as a tour package. Preferences are based on a set of factors including internal influences (culture, values, class, etc.) and individual determinants (personality, lifestyle, motives). Hence, the decision to purchase is heavily influenced by culture. Similar to Um and Crompton's (1991) model, the predecision/decision processes are significantly manipulated by the traveller's characteristics and surroundings. This aspect is one that is not covered in-depth in this research; however, the topic would be very valuable for follow up studies.

(2) Postpurchase Evaluation is labelled as 'satisfaction/dissatisfaction' in Moutinho's model. It relates to a quality/price ratio that the tourist evaluates in his mind and will return to when it comes to the third stage. Moutinho (1987) was one of the first to recognise the importance of the postpurchase evaluation and incorporated it into his model.

(3) Future Decision Making considers repeat buying probabilities of tourist products and services. Three occurrences are possible: straight rebuy, future rebuy and modified rebuy, or alternatively, the tourist could go and buy a product/service from a competitor, which is a result of hesitation or refusal to buy the product/service again. Within the context of this research, it can also be viewed as a repeat information search utilising the same sources as before.

As previously mentioned, even though Moutinho's model is one of the better models of tourist behaviour, it is not applicable in this particular case. He considers a wealth of surrounding factors that have not played an important role in this research.

Another 'traditional' decision-making model is Woodside and Lysonski's General Model of Traveller Leisure Destination Awareness and Choice (Woodside and Lysonski, 1989). Similar to the models discussed above, it is another general attempt at explaining traveller's destination choice. For the most part, this model is similar to Um and Crompton's (1990) model – marketing variables represent the external input, traveller variables the internal ones. Woodside and Lysonski offer a more detailed attempt as they look at destination awareness as a mental categorisation process between the consideration set (possible destination choices), inept set (rejected destinations), inert set (not vigorously considered destinations) and unavailable/aware set. They also add another set of variables that are not separated in Um and Crompton's model. These are: affective associations (feelings linked to a specific destination); traveller destination preference (a ranking of destinations that results from influences by both destination awareness categorisations and

affective associations); intentions to visit (perceived probability of visiting a specific destination within a specific time period and situational variables (Decrop, 1999)

Destination awareness and, specifically, the categorisation process in four sets is influenced by both marketing mix and the traveller's own (with an emphasis on experience) variables. Emotional associations play an important role once the destinations have entered the destination awareness set (usually positive for evoked and negative for inept). An important point is made by Woodside and Lysonski is that the typical size of the consideration set is rather small (around three to five destinations). Destination preferences are then ranked and an intention to visit leads to a final choice.

Woodside and Lysonski also argue that preferences are partially positively influenced by affective associations and some traveller's variables; additionally, choice is envisaged to be influenced by the interaction of intention to visit and situational variables (Decrop, 1999).

Since the destination choice is by far the first decision the 'silver surfers' make, it would be interesting to design a follow up study to this thesis that looks at the more specific and with emotions associated aspects of this model. Experience would play an important factor in this, especially when considering repeat visits to destinations the 'grey' travellers have not holidayed at in a number of years.

Numerous authors have critiqued the above models for their lack of accuracy. Some of the most popular critiques are that the models themselves are based on little research and there is little evidence that the decision-making process actually happens that way. Since this research is a study on decision-making, one aspect that is obvious is that these models are all extremely complicated. Obviously, the respondents of this research have simplified their answers in order to fit them into the interview or questionnaire structure, however, who is to say that a decision-making process always has to be so complex? A traveller (grey or not) might have a certain destination in mind and might not even know why they want to go on holiday there. A lot of these aspects are dealt with in the unconscious part of

the mind and one might not remember why this conscious decision was made. Additionally, there are more aspects or features that could relate to how and why we make a decision that have not yet been included in any models so far.

Another argument is that most of these traditional models are around 15 years old (the newest one discussed above was published in 1991 and they do not acknowledge what is of great importance for this particular thesis, the evolution of Information & Communications Technologies within the tourism industry (as well as other recent developments). The author has already outlined numerous times that ICTs, and the Internet in particular, have had a huge impact on the tourism industry. Jang (2004) and other authors have shown that the online information search does differ in various aspects from the offline one and is therefore to be seen as a separate entity. However, the Internet would complicate a model even more, especially since advertisements and banners can divert the users' eyes at any point of their research. The Internet has given the consumers the power back and now they are in charge again.

An additional aspect that is not of much significance for this study, but more on a grand scale, is the fact that these models tend to be very much focused on the Western world and do not consider customs of the other parts of the world (Horner and Swarbrooke, 1999). From a general tourism viewpoint this is significant, due the large emerging markets in Asia in particular. Again, the Internet has an important role to play since the geographic location of the visitor does not limit them from using a website e.g. a tourist from Asia could book a flight with a low cost airline between two European cities.

It is important to realise that although there have been numerous studies in this area of research, the models all seem to be similar and present the decision-making process and the tourist's behaviour in a very rational and sequenced process. Decrop (1999) argues that the process is more of than a formalised multistage process. Phillips *et al* (1995) maintain that traditional models are irrelevant for describing choices that are new to the consumer, i.e. they have little experience making a similar choice, where the problem is not well

defined or where there is a high emotional involvement. It is also argued by Woodside and MacDonald (1994) that while these models are partially useful, they do not capture the strong interactions of evaluations and behaviours and destination experienced by the travellers. A look at the way consumers come to have judgements, intentions, practices and post-purchase evaluations is necessary in order to come close to capture fantasies, feelings and fun which are essential to the tourism 'product'. The author of this research would agree with these arguments and, while there is little hope that one day there will be a simple model that will summarise this rather complex process, there is always the idea to simplify the nature of looking at the process itself.

To show a different aspect of decision-making models and leaving behind the more traditional ways of looking at the process, it is of great importance to glance at a new framework that incorporates some of the aspects mentioned above. Woodside and MacDonald (1994) as well as Teare (1994) have attempted to fill these gaps with their new models.

Woodside and MacDonald's (1994) framework gives an insight into how decisions, interactions between travellers, activities or events occurring during the holiday are related to each other and/or lead to other activities or events. The authors make an important assumption within their model that activation of initial travel choices extends over time to related travel choices.

Teare's (1994) model implies that prior product experience and product involvement lie at the core of the decision-making process. The belief that these two variables are inter-related is the starting point of Teare's summary of their potential explanatory value in six research propositions as well as four further propositions concerning consumption and post-consumption. The most significant factor out of these is that prior experience is still an important factor as it influences the formation of expectations, assessment criteria as well as the tourist's personal rating system (Teare, 1994; Decrop, 1999).

It is acknowledged that even though it is important to understand the background of decision-making processes, several aspects of the decision-making process models cannot be directly related to the results of this research study. The questionnaires and interviews concentrated on asking more about the simplified process of the chronological order in which the types of decisions were made rather than looking at the complex process in its entirety. In addition, the chronological order of the decision-making process is a under-researched area in the tourism literature, and by investigating this aspect, the author wanted to make a contribution to original knowledge.

In light of that, the next section of this chapter will illustrate an attempt of building a simplified model of decision-making in the 'grey market'.

#### **5.4 A proposed model of online information search and decision-making process of 'silver surfers'**

To conclude this chapter, the author offers a very basic framework that explains the process of information search and decision-making in the 'grey market'. It has to be noted that this model or framework in no way tries to compare itself to well established models of decision-making processes (e.g. Um and Crompton, 1991; Moutinho, 1987; Woodside and Lysonksi, 1989); however, it offers a summary of the results that have been presented within this thesis and highlights the most important issues put forward.

The research has shown that the online information search is an important aspect of the 'silver surfers' decision-making process. They are loyal users of the Internet and research all aspects of travelling, from the more common topics like flights, accommodation and attractions to more specific country issues like visas or even animal welfare for the time they are away. The majority of the 'silver surfers' featured in this research have been utilising the Internet for a longer time (between 4-6 or 7-10 years) so one can definitely argue that they are experienced Internet users.

Trust is a very significant factor since a high number of respondents stated that it depends on the information provider whether or not they actually trust the information made available to them. That means that they may go looking for certain providers directly rather than using a search engine to look up their actual question which could leave them with either very set answers or exactly what they wanted. An interesting follow-up question arising from this result would be to ask them what exactly makes them trust a specific information provider. The trust issue is one that is definitely interdependent and stretches itself through the entire decision-making process of the here researched 'grey' travellers. Respondents have also maintained that they prefer to use additional information sources in order to either add to or back up their online searches; a popular one is the guidebook. More or less a clear choice since a guidebook can be taken along on the

holidays. It is probably cheaper and less work to buy a guidebook than to print out all the information found on the Internet, that one would like to take along. 'Silver surfers' might not even use it until they get to the destination of their choice. Brochures are still an important information source for this age group. Various interviewees have stated that they use brochures for booking, even if they do not book with a tour operator. An assumption can be made that these brochures give the travellers ideas of what to do or where to stay once they arrive at the destination. As soon as they have made their decisions – which might take only a few minutes when finding special offer/promotion online, or weeks or even months of planning (for long haul holidays) – 'silver surfers' have shown that they are not afraid to book online, but once again, trust is an important factor. This time, however, it does not so much depend on the provider but on the secure means of online booking. 'Silver surfers' are well educated and seem to know that <https://> gives them access to a safe server, which is also indicated by the little lock on the bottom right of their screens. When not available, or in a few individual cases, they still book offline either independently or over the phone or with the help of a travel agent.

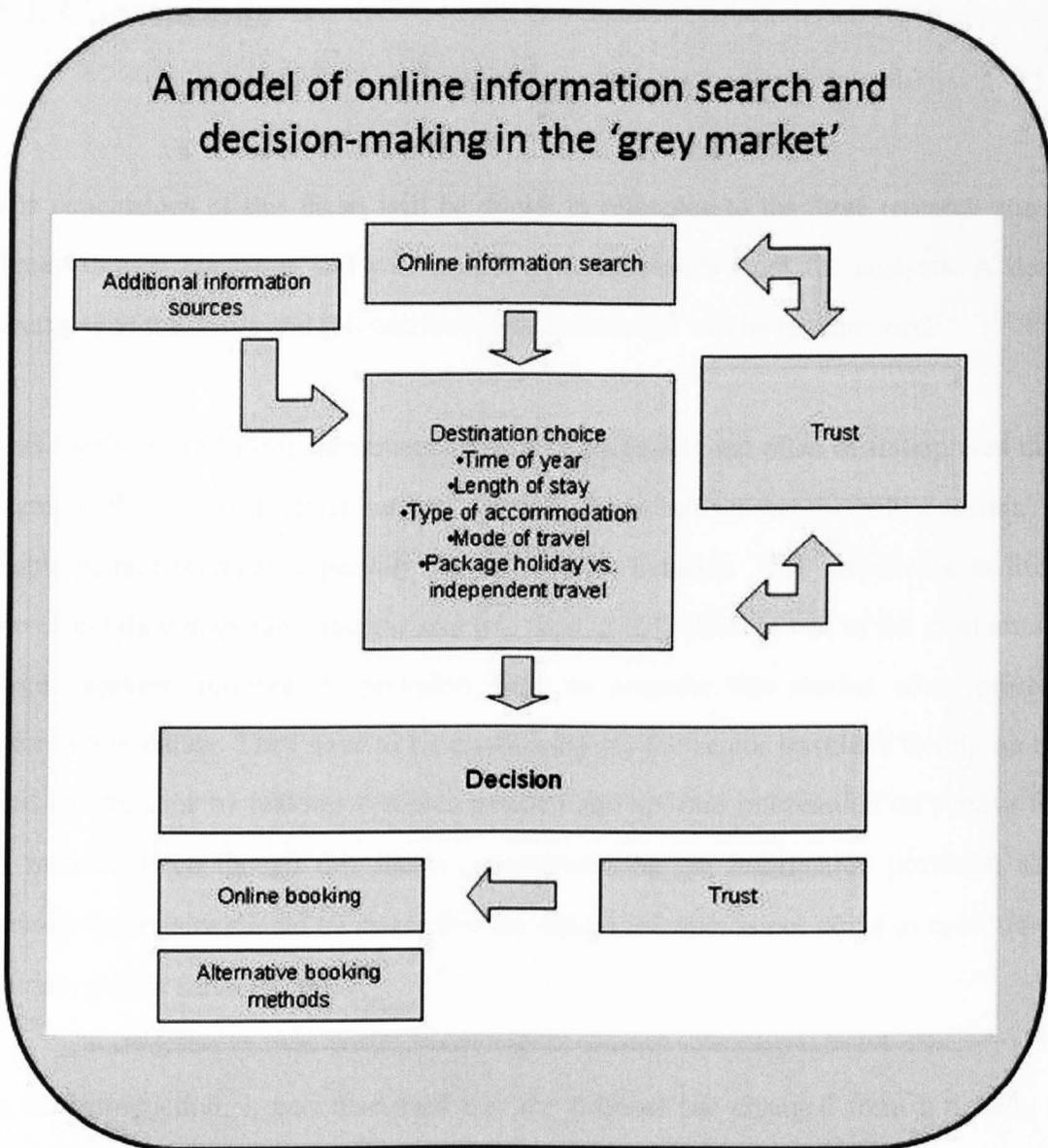


Figure 5.2: A model of online information search and decision-making process in the 'grey market'

There are various aspects of this research that are yet to be researched in-depth, however, respondents of this research study have shown that they do use the Internet for their travel related online information search. All surveyed and interviewed 'silver surfers' have shown a wide variety of topics researched and the level of depth is rather impressive.

After a thorough analysis of the findings the conclusions of this thesis are drawn.

## **VI. Conclusions**

The conclusions of this thesis will be drawn in reference to the three research aims and three research questions and will include specific results from the analysis. A detailed overview of the thesis and its contribution to knowledge will be re-examined.

This thesis aimed to bring awareness to a very particular and often misinterpreted market segment, the so-called 'silver surfers'. Overall, it can be said that the 'silver surfers' are a viable market segment, especially for the tourism industry. Their experience in life and travel and their disposable income and free time qualify them as one of the most attractive target markets. Information providers have to consider this market when presenting information online. They have to be trustworthy for the senior travellers to rely on them. This can be done by making available detailed and updated information on various topics of interest. Even though this thesis concentrated on the information provision aspect, tourism companies should be aware that the older consumer is not afraid to book travel or tourism related services online.

In the introduction, it was discussed that the Internet has changed from a novelty to a necessity within a relatively short amount of time. People have gone from using the Internet for special occasions to everyday use and have also started using this medium to plan their free time. Previous research has shown that a significant number of British Internet users are of retirement age, however, their existence is rarely acknowledged in literature and even less in tourism literature. In order to gain an insight into this market segment, it was decided to focus this research on studying online decision-making and online information search behaviour of 'silver surfers' in the United Kingdom.

Following on from the introduction, the literature review examined a wide range of academic literature with a particular focus on the more cognitive approach to decision-

making. Although important, ICTs do not play the main role, however, they are used as a tool in order to enhance one's information search and experience.

Key findings of the literature include:

- We live in an Information society in an Information/Digital age. Information provision and access dominates our everyday lives. Without this information we would not be comfortable with our day-to-day lives.
- Information and Communications Technologies have had an enormous influence on the tourism industry. After the computer industry the tourism industry has benefited most from the ICT revolution. The Internet in particular has risen to the status of an extremely significant tool for information provision for businesses and information acquisition for consumers.
- Consumer behaviour in general and the decision-making process (including the information search) in particular, is one of the most important aspects of this thesis. The literature has shown that several aspects, e.g. motivation and the offline information search have been well researched; however the online information search remains an under-researched topic. Decision-making models show a range of possible ways how people make decisions but their critiques are as numerous as the number of models in existence. The main points of critique are that most models do not build on empirical research; they are developed for the western world, and they do not acknowledge recent developments such as the Internet. The online information search falls into a similar category – not well researched, however, extremely important for this study. Also, there are no models or studies on chronological decision-making. Key points are that people use the Internet for an information search because they have access 24/7 and they can search and compare. At the same time, there are still numerous security concerns that need to be addressed, mainly by the information providers.
- The 'grey market' is a viable market segment that has been ignored or neglected by tourism researchers while marketing researchers have slowly started to see this group's potential in the last few years. Nevertheless, there is need for more

research into this niche group's behaviour and attitudes, in particular when it comes to Internet and tourism related purposes. This market segment will only continue to grow, as we live in an ageing society and, the needs of this market segment will change over time due to external influences. Therefore continuous research is vital.

The literature review has already identified several gaps in the existing literature:

- As briefly mentioned above, most ICT based research puts too much focus on the technology itself and does not consider individuals as cognitive and personal potential tourists who make conscious decisions based on information they have processed and personal influences that impact upon them.
- There is a distinct lack of literature when it comes to the online information search. Many researchers talk around the topic but not much actual research has been conducted.
- Most decision-making models are too general and are not based on empirical research. There is a distinct lack of models that can actually be traced back to research and are not just tested with research. In particular, there seems to be no model of chronological decision-making in the tourism literature.
- There is a distinct gap when it comes to literature on the 'grey market', senior travellers and 'silver surfers' in particular..

In the Methodology, the author appraised philosophies and paradigms, approaches and research methods.

The problem statement and research questions mentioned are situated in a positivist framework, seeing the world as an external one where human behaviour is determined by experiences (Finn *et al*, 2000). Experience plays a very important role in this thesis laying a basis for how (and how well) people search for information on the Internet. This study demonstrated how an information search can be seen as a process through which knowledge is built up over time and decisions are rarely made immediately.

Even though a positivist paradigm was chosen (consumer behaviour studies are traditionally rooted in positivist theory), a more post-positivist and inductive approach was chosen. The author decided to rely on existing theory but test out new research methods and look for more than 'just' testing hypotheses. Therefore, qualitative data collection was conducted after the initial pilot surveys, which then helped to build the final questionnaire. The interview findings were crucial to the construction of the survey and helped define answers for multiple choice questions, in addition to providing supporting arguments for the survey findings in general. The evolution of the survey started out with a very loosely structured pilot study which then informed the interviews (semi structured) and then, as mentioned above, informed the final version of the questionnaire. The results and the methods of data collection are therefore closely intertwined. Sampling methods were already confined by age (50+) and geographic location (United Kingdom), other than that the user had to be an active Internet user. It was decided to use a convenience and a snowball sample. Overall, the author feels that the most appropriate methods of sampling were chosen and even though data collection was time consuming and at times difficult, results gathered are more than satisfactory. The quantitative data was analysed with the help of SPSS - Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), qualitative data was analysed manually using content analysis.

The next two chapters of the thesis dealt with findings, analysis and discussion of the data collected. The major findings will be presented by answering the aims and research questions posed and include aspects of the analysis chapters.

**Aim 1: To identify experiences and processes of decision-making amongst potential 'grey' leisure travellers who use the Internet as an information source.**

Aim 1 focused on the identification of experiences and processes of decision-making amongst 'silver surfers'. The experiences of this market segment were especially highlighted during the qualitative part of data collection, the interviews. Respondents showed a high level of travelling as well as (in parts) online experience that has

contributed to their enjoying their free time. One interviewee even stated the importance of the enjoyment of looking up information online and how it can make you think that your holiday has already started.

Experience itself has been a major focus of this thesis with the emphasis lying on the fact that older travellers have more life and travel experience. On the other hand, it could be argued that their Internet experiences are fewer in comparison with people who grew up with ICTs. Nevertheless, the findings of this thesis have shown that not growing up with technology does not necessarily indicate that one will never use it. Early adaption and diffusion theory play an important role in this argument. There is a high level of determination amongst the 'silver surfers' of this research to utilise new technology for their convenience and to help in organising their life. Although many had to start using the Internet for work purposes, most of them continued usage at home after their retirement. Even though the work starters outranked the leisure starters, there were a few exceptions stating that they specifically started using the Internet for leisure or travel related purposes, for example, the knowledge that there was much travel related information available online and the realisation of the need to access it. One interviewee even used the Internet for the first time for booking a holiday; however, these examples are the exception rather than the norm.

Concerning the tourism related decision-making process of 'silver surfers', 74.3 percent of respondents have planned a holiday during the last 12 months and qualified for the question regarding the decision-making process; however, 77.4 percent of questionnaire respondents answered the question. The general results reflected a trend of how 'silver surfers' go through their travel related decision-making process and is shown in figure 6.1. The questionnaire asked the respondents to rank six components of the tourism decision-making process in chronological order, i.e. ranking them in the actual order in which the decisions were made.

The typical 'silver surfer' travel related decision-making process starts with destination choice, followed by what time of year the destination will be visited, then how long they will stay at the destination, what type of accommodation will be used, then mode of travel will be decided (if there are different choices) and finally, the 'silver surfers' decide between a package holiday or independent travel.

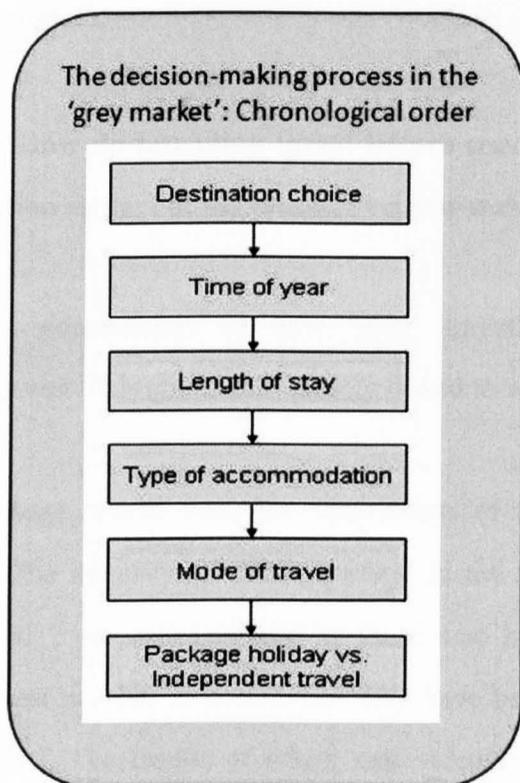


Figure 6.1: The decision-making process in the 'grey market': Chronological order

There are slight differences between age groups and gender but, generally speaking, the overall results give a good indication of how the 'silver surfers' go through the process. This research is unique in the way that it looked at the chronological order of decision making. Even though the time span between decisions was not surveyed, the results give a general idea of the order in which tourism related decisions are being made. However, it has to be noted that figure 6.1 above summarises the decision-making process in the 'grey market' according to the results of this research. Due to sampling methods used, these results do not represent the entire British 'grey market'; however, they can give an idea of

trends and significant issues. There is a significant trend towards choosing the destination first; however, destination information is not amongst the most researched issues as will be outlined below. The author argues that this is due to the fact that most people are likely to decide on their destination before they start the main part of their online information search. Additionally, a high percentage, 61.7 percent, of respondents use guidebooks as a supplementary information source meaning that they are likely to read the book instead of searching for more data online.

**Research Question 1: How do intending 'grey' leisure travellers use the Internet in searching for information as part of the tourist decision-making process?**

This research question concentrates on how 'grey' travellers use the Internet for information search purposes. This question is closely linked to what they are looking for.

General Internet and usage results from the respondents of this questionnaire give an insight into this topic. The majority of 'silver surfers' in the study have been using the Internet for 4-6 years (42.2 percent) followed by those who have used it for 7-10 years (22.2 percent). The lowest number indicated that they have been Internet users for 7-12 months only (6.4 percent). The results of where respondents started to use the Internet were ambiguous as an almost even number stated that they started using it for work purposes (54.9 percent) or leisure purposes (45.1 percent).

Additionally, methods of learning and general feelings when starting to use the Internet for the first time were an important issue during data collection. The majority of 'silver surfers' are self taught users (54.7 percent). During the interviews, the respondents have acknowledged that using the Internet for the first time was not at all what they expected, for example mentioning that it was not that impressive and lacking clear structure which made it difficult to navigate if you were not familiar with the set up.

Concerning the ‘what’, the respondents have shown that they use the Internet for a wide range of activities e.g. information searches, banking, etc.; however, they do not care for to use the Internet for social activities. Most interviewees stated that the Internet is not a social activity for them, except for staying in touch via e-mail and re-connecting with old acquaintances on Friends Reunited.

Finally, to fully answer this question it is important to look at what information ‘silver surfers’ search for in their travel related information search.

	Age					Total
	50-54 years	55-59 years	60-64 years	65-74 years	75 years +	
Flights	200	150	52	49	16	467
Accommodation info	184	116	52	66	16	434
Price	183	133	35	33	16	400
Other transport	184	116	35	17	16	368
Climate, weather	151	118	34	33	16	352
Country entry requirements	149	126	54	3	18	350
Destinations, visitor attractions	167	118	34	0	16	335
Independent travellers	67	68	34	16	0	185
Tour operators	67	68	17	16	0	168
Package holidays	84	51	17	0	0	152
Special interest tourism	67	51	17	0	0	135
Information on animal welfare	0	17	0	0	0	17

Table 6.1: Information searched for

Most respondents have searched for information on flights, followed by accommodation information and price. When looking at the most researched topics in the various age groups, the findings are as follows. The most researched topic in any age group was flights in the 50-54 years segment; in the 50-54 years segment it was flights; in the 55-59 years segment it was flights; in the 60-64 years segment it was country entry requirements; in the 65-74 years segment it was accommodation information; in the 75 years or older segment it was country entry requirements.

The most interesting aspect of these results was that destination choice was only ranked 7<sup>th</sup> out of 12 possible answers. During the qualitative part of the research, interviewees have expressed that the destination choice was the most important and usually the first choice they will make, however, this is not reflected in these results. As argued before, the author assumes that since destination choice is so important, the 'silver surfers' prefer to use alternate sources of information, e.g. travel guide books (61.7 percent). Flights, accommodation information and price are topics that can be related to the Internet phenomenon. Low cost airlines do not give customers a choice of where to book and accommodation providers have started to offer special online prices. The price topic shows that people are still looking for special deals on the Internet and consider it a channel for finding good holiday offers and cheaper travel.

**Aim 2: To analyse the impact of the use of the Internet as an information source on the grey market's decision-making process.**

The second aim of this study looks at analysing the impact of Internet usage on the decision-making process.

There are certain factors that impact on the 'silver surfers' decision-making process. Various respondents have stated that special promotions offered online do persuade them to take the odd short break holiday somewhere in the United Kingdom or mainland Europe. These special offers were not as well publicised, or not often offered, before the Internet came about. Organisations as well as consumers benefit from the advent of these promotions. Companies can sell last minute deals and still make some profit, whereas the consumers benefit by getting a bargain. The 'silver surfers' have also admitted that they are swayed by special offers and promotions especially when advertised on the Internet. This could be seen as an example where there is not necessarily a problem at first but the 'good deal' is too good to pass up.

Another positive aspect that had an impact on the decision-making process in the 'grey market' is how long they actually spend online. 'Silver surfers' have stated that they are

not in favour of spending hours and hours in front of the computer, contrary to younger Internet users who often spend hours, or even days, in front of the computer. Several interviewees stated that even though they like using the Internet, they do not want to spend all day looking for information. The 'grey' travellers have recognised the value of using the Internet for information search purposes, but they do not want to subject themselves too much to it. They see it mainly as a tool that helps them solve a problem rather than something they want to spend a lot of time on.

'Silver surfers' have stated that they predominantly use the Internet for their information search and decision-making process; 19.3 percent stated that they do not even make use of any additional information source. For a group that has not grown up with this technology, that is a rather high percentage. A fifth of all respondents rely on the Internet's power to provide all the information they need. That is an impact that will most likely further grow in future, especially with people getting older who have been using the Internet since their teens or earlier youth.

### **Research Question 2: How is the Internet changing the buyer behaviour of this particular market segment?**

Research Question 2 on how the Internet is changing buyer behaviour can be related to information search behaviour as well as online booking.

The online information search has distinct features and differs in various aspects from the traditional information search (Jang, 2004). Respondents mentioned that convenience and 24/7 access was one of the main reasons for going online, as was the fact that they knew that a wide range of information was available. One issue that came out of the interviewees was that people tend to make better use of their evenings when using the Internet as an information source. A travel agency is closed but with the World Wide Web they can do their own research in the comfort of their homes. Even at work, around lunchtime, one can spend some time looking for destination or attraction information.

While the Internet has an abundance of information available, that is not always seen as a good thing. It can be an advantage when one looks for specific information but can soon turn into a disadvantage when researching general issues on which a multitude of data is available. One can be easily overloaded with too many facts and figures.

The overwhelming majority of 'silver surfers' in this study are already online bookers who have booked at least one holiday on the Internet. However, such a small sample of people is not really representative of the general activities of the 'grey market'. Nevertheless it is interesting to see that the majority of the survey respondents as well as interviewees do book online and not only for rail tickets and car hire but also for plane tickets (and not only for low-cost airlines, although those were emphasised because, as one interviewee stated, "you have no choice") and even for independently arranged holidays. Convenience is one of the main advantages that were mentioned during the interviews. There is no need to go to a travel agency anymore, everything can be done from home and you can do it yourself, so that you are in charge of what you end up booking.

One issue that is often a problem when it comes to online booking is trust. The 'grey' travellers of this research study have shown that for them, the trust in secure online means of booking is definitely present. Almost 39 percent of survey respondents have stated that they have complete trust in secure means of online booking, followed by 29.2 percent who have trust to a certain extent. On the lower end of this group are the ones who do not have any trust at all and those are 3.1 percent of all respondents.

Even though these results are not representative of the general population, it has to be said that they give a clear indication and trend towards online booking in the 'grey market'. Although this thesis has concentrated on the information source aspects of the Internet, this fact cannot be ignored and should be attended to for the future.

**Aim 3: To evaluate the effectiveness of the Internet in providing an information service that meets consumer requirements.**

The third aim looks at the effectiveness of the Internet as an information provision tool that meets consumer requirements. Several aspects can be examined when answering this question. One assumption that has been made by the author was that the information provided on the Internet is not particularly aimed at the 'grey market'. Generally the provision of information lends itself to a younger audience. This fact is supported by the amount of research that has been done in this specific area of online information search or decision-making behaviour that focuses on the younger age groups such as students.

In general, the senior travellers of this research disagreed with the author that the Internet is too youth orientated. Both interviewees and questionnaire respondents stated that they do think the Internet caters for their age groups. Only 82 out of a possible 517 respondents (15.9 percent) agree with the statement that the information provided on the Internet is too youth orientated, and none of them strongly agreed. The respondents stated that there is information for all age groups out there; 'you just have to find it' to put it in the words of one interviewee (Interviewee 5). Even more people stated that they strongly disagree (36 percent) than 'just' disagree (35.4 percent). These results were highly unexpected as the author assumed that the general consensus in the 'grey market' would be that the information provided on the Internet is not directly aimed at them and/or provided for them. However, an assumption can be made that there has to be a distinction between information that is directly aimed at the 'grey market' – e.g. special senior websites – and information that is simply not aimed at any market in particular – e.g. general information that can either be travel or tourism related or not. These results are not representative of the entire British 'grey market' population; however, there is a clear trend within this group of respondents that they do not feel neglected by the online information providers. There is a danger here that the opinion of this small sample group is mistaken for a general consensus of the 'silver surfers' by the providers, which can lead to the provision of highly generalised information. Just because this group of respondents does not feel neglected by

the information providers, does not mean that there is no need for more specialised information.

Overall, there does not seem to be a particular trend within different age segments. The majority of the 50-74 year olds state that they disagree or strongly disagree. The majority of the oldest age segment sees themselves as neutral. Not one respondent strongly agreed with the statement and only 15.9 percent agreed, another 12.8 percent consider themselves neutral. The respondents who do see the Internet as too youth orientated (strongly agree or agree) can be found in the youngest two age segments.

In general, when referring to specific information needs of an older person, the interviewees agreed that the information provided does meet their needs, an answer that is coherent with the survey results. A few exceptions occurred but mainly where specific personal preferences were sought. Basically, they all agreed that there is information out there for everyone and that you just need the skills to find it. The more experience you have, the better you get at finding what you really need (again knowledge build-up).

Overall, the interviewees agreed upon the fact that the information is not too youth orientated and that they usually look for information in different places than the younger generations. They agreed upon the fact that the Internet can be mistaken for something that is strictly for younger people and with a little effort you can find information suitable for any age group. One interviewee stated that there are special sites for older people and that one should make use of these websites and generally be more selective. Another one stated that sometimes when it comes to looking up information on travel related sites, you cannot find what you are looking for but you have to go and visit other websites – e.g. the interviewee was looking into horse-riding in Florida. Again, no matter how good the information is, it is usually backed up by other information sources.

The respondents stated that they are satisfied with the effectiveness of the Internet as an information source. Although some providers could provide more detailed information at

times or more updates, overall the 'silver surfers' are very content with the Internet as an information source.

**Research Question 3: Does the information provided meet grey consumers' requirements?**

While respondents agreed upon the fact that the Internet is not too youth orientated, the author decided to ask another more direct question on whether they think people of different age groups need specific information. All but one interviewee agreed that they do. They all concur that the younger generations are more interested in social aspects of the Internet and information about social events. It was also stated that they believe that younger people spend a considerable amount of time on the Internet, whereas they like to finish up their searches etc. as quickly as possible and sometimes even get tired of looking at the computer screen.

There are specific issues that seem to be more interesting to older generations, e.g. health issues and probably more culture and historical information. Again, it is mentioned that experience plays an important part regarding knowledge build-up and knowing where to find the information that you are looking for. A problem that was also mentioned is that sometimes the specific information that someone requires is out of date and therefore useless. Different age groups require different information, however, the providers should always make sure that the specific information required is always up to date.

In summary the aims/research questions can be answered as follows:

**1.**

**Aim:** To identify experiences and processes of decision-making amongst potential 'grey' leisure travellers who use the Internet as an information source.

- 'Silver surfers' are experienced and enthusiastic Internet users.
- The more experienced the 'silver surfers' are, the more likely they are to find information online.

- The chronological order of their decision-making is: destination choice, time of year, length of stay, type of accommodation, mode of travel and package holiday vs. independent travel.

**RQ:** How do intending 'grey' leisure travellers use the Internet in searching for information as part of the tourist decision-making process?

- The majority of 'silvers surfers' have been online for 4-6 years; they use it for both work and leisure purposes equally; they have mainly taught themselves how to surf online; there were also some disappointments, several people expected more.
- 'Silver surfers' research a wide variety of topics, flights ahead of all others; accommodation information, price, other transport and climate are popular search topics, whereas destination information only came in at #7 out of 12.

## 2.

**Aim:** To analyse the impact of the use of the Internet as an information source on the grey market's decision-making process?

- Special online promotions are increasingly popular amongst 'silver surfers'.
- Spend less time researching online than younger people, however, they do a more targeted search and do not get distracted as easily.
- A tool to help them get the information they want.

**RQ:** How is the Internet changing the buyer behaviour of this particular market segment?

- Using evenings at home or lunchtimes at work rather than weekends at the travel agent to search for information.
- There is a danger of information overload on 'silver surfers', data needs to be processed correctly.
- The overwhelming majority are online bookers.

### 3.

**Aim:** To evaluate the effectiveness of the Internet in providing an information service that meets consumer requirements.

- The 'silver surfers' disagreed with the statement that the Internet is too youth orientated.
- There is information for everyone, you just need to find it.

**RQ:** Does the information provided meet 'grey' leisure travellers' requirements?

- There is need for some specialised information but overall, the 'silver surfers' are happy with the online information provision.

In conclusion, it is necessary to look back at the suggested contribution to original knowledge of this thesis and re-examine it, as well as having a look at suggested future research in this area.

This thesis has three characteristics that can be seen as a contribution to original knowledge, one relating to sampling and one to data collection and the research findings.

Firstly, the niche market that is being investigated, the so-called 'grey market' – which is defined as senior citizens over the age of 50 – offers a new look at online information search behaviour, focusing on a group that has not as yet been discussed in depth within the literature. The literature review has identified a clear gap in tourism literature regarding senior travellers in general, and their information search and online behaviour in particular. This study does not aim to fill this gap; however, the author hopes that it will encourage other researchers to further investigate this market segment.

The second original aspect of this thesis concerns the aspect of data collection. Not satisfied with utilising traditional paper questionnaires, considering the context of this thesis, and for the purpose of underlining the aspect of using the Internet for several activities as shown in this research, the author decided to put to test a research method

called 'e-surveying' which was suggested and evaluated as a possible researcher's fantasy by Litvin and Kar (2001). Overall, it has to be said that this originality aspect made data collection but more complicated, and significantly contributed to the delay of the data collection and data analysis in general. The main reason for that was that most people did not lend themselves to the given time restrictions and it took much longer than anticipated to receive a satisfactory amount of responses. Due to the nature of the method used, the author had to decide to stop accepting surveys at a certain point and disregarding those that were filled out by people who are not relevant to this research, i.e. non users.

A possible reason for these difficulties is the fact that many users were not too familiar with the method used, whereas during the last few years since this data collection the usability of technology had been enhanced and it is fairly common now to use a web based survey. This issue highlights the rapidity of change within Internet technology. In general, it can be said that 'e-surveying' is a viable research method and useful for data collection but not when used in connection with e-mail.

Thirdly, the research findings which were already outlined in detail in Chapter IV and V and summarised earlier in this chapter have to be considered an original contribution to knowledge as well. In particular, the attempted model of a chronological decision-making process in the 'grey market' (Figure 5.1) has to be considered a vital contribution, as the tourism literature has not covered this particular topic until now. Even though the model does not give a complete picture of the entire decision-making process, it gives an insight into one market segment's tendency of chronological decision-making. This can be of use for the tourism industry, in particular to those who provide the much needed tourism related information online. Understanding in what order people look for information and make decisions could help making information provision more accurate and detailed and concentrate on the issues that potential travellers are looking for at a certain point of their information search.

Concerning future research, studies in different geographic markets and more in-depth studies into the actual online behaviour of 'silver surfers', which were not able to be covered in this thesis are recommended. In general, there is a need to investigate closely the online information search behaviour of various market segments in order to build a good basis for future research.

The aspect of the chronological order of the decision-making process is also one that should be further researched. The author gained a brief insight into tendencies; however, more in-depth research could benefit both academics as well as industry by understanding more about when certain decisions are made and how long it actually takes a consumer to make a choice. Alternatively, it would be interesting to compare online travel information search behaviour of younger and older consumers especially when it comes to looking at usage of search engines and websites, etc.

This thesis aimed to show travel and tourism related information search behaviour and decision-making in the 'grey market', focusing on 'silver surfers' and the Internet.

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## Appendix I

Hello, my name is Alice Graeupl and I am a PhD Research student at the University of Derby. I am researching experiences and behaviour of senior travellers when using the Internet for travel planning. My research is aiming to give the industry a better understanding of what mature customers want and how they do things, therefore I would ask you to answer this questionnaire. Thank you very much in advance!

Please tick/highlight or change the colour of the relevant answers, multiple answers are allowed wherever possible and some questions ask for further comments.

**1. Have you ever used the Internet for any aspect of travel planning for leisure holidays** (e.g. information search, destination search, visa and other country information, buying travel books)?

- Yes – Please proceed to Question 2
- No – Please fill out the personal profile on the last page only.

*The following questions ask about how you use the Internet in general*

**2. How long have you been using the Internet?**

- 0-6 months
- 7-12 months
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-10 years
- Longer than 10 years

**3. Why did you start using the Internet? Please tick only one.**

- For Work
- For Leisure

**4. How did you learn? Please tick only one.**

- Computer course
- Help from colleagues
- Help from family
- Learning by doing (on my own)

**5. Where do you usually access the Internet? Please tick only one.**

- Home
- Work
- Library or any other public place with free Internet access
- Internet café or any other public place with paid Internet access
- At a friend's and/or family member's place

## Appendix I

**6. Generally speaking, do you usually find the information that you are searching for?**

- Yes – please go to Q 7
- To a certain extent – please go to Q 7
- If I search long enough – please go to Q 7
- No – please answer Q 6a below

**6a. Which issue do you consider to be the main problem?**

- Too much information available in general
- Not structured enough, there is no index like in a book
- Search engines not specific enough

***The following questions ask about your information searches (about any kind of travel related information) on the Internet***

**7. What travel related information have you searched for on the Internet? Please tick all that apply.**

- Flights
- Other transport (Train, coach, ferry, etc.)
- Accommodation (hotels, motels, hostels, self-catering apartments, etc.)
- Tour operators
- Package holidays
- Specific information for Independent travellers
- Specific information on Special interest tourism
- Information about destinations or visitor attractions
- Weather, climate
- Country entry requirements, visa, travel warnings
- Price
- Information on Animal welfare (bring your pet along, or shelters while on holiday)

**8. Did you use the Internet to plan a leisure holidays during the last 12 months?**

- Yes – Please go to Question 9
- No – Please go to Question 10

**9. Thinking about planning your last leisure holidays, please tick/highlight the points next to each holiday segment in chronological order according to when you have made your decision; e.g. Destination Choice 1, Mode of travel 3, Type of accommodation 2, Length of stay 5, Time of year 4, Package holiday/Independent travel 6.**

**Please make sure that you use each number only once!**

Destination choice	1	2	3	4	5	6
Mode of travel	1	2	3	4	5	6
Type of accommodation	1	2	3	4	5	6
Length of stay	1	2	3	4	5	6
Time of year	1	2	3	4	5	6
Package holiday/Independent travel	1	2	3	4	5	6

## Appendix I

**10. In addition to the Internet, what other information sources (if any) did you use? Please tick all that apply.**

- None
- Friends/family
- Travel guidebooks
- Newspapers/magazines (advertisements/articles)
- Brochures
- TV programmes/iTV

**11. Please state to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement:**

'There is a wide range of information available on the Internet, however most of it is aimed at a younger generation. In general the information provided on the Internet is too youth orientated.'

Strongly agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly disagree

**12. To what extent do you trust the travel related information you find on the Internet? Please tick only one.**

- I trust all the information I find (The majority of information is accurate, sufficient & up to date)
- To a certain extent
- It depends on the information provider
- I am very cautious with the information I find on the Internet
- Not at all

**13. And do you**

- always,
- often or
- never back up your search with other information sources (e.g. travel guidebooks, newspaper/magazine articles, etc.)?

***The following questions ask about your general travel behaviour***

**14. How many leisure holidays did you take during the last 6 months?**

- none
- 1
- 2-3
- 4-5
- 6 or more

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**15. Who or what has the biggest external influence on your travel decision-making? Please tick only one!**

- Friends, acquaintances (people who do NOT accompany you on your trip)
- Family, relatives (people who do NOT accompany you on your trip)
- TV, iTV, Internet (any kind of advertisements, features or special offers)
- Printed mass media (newspapers, magazines)

**16. How confident are you when using the Internet to search for travel related information?**

- Very confident that I can find whatever I am looking for
- Confident – I usually manage to find the information I am looking for
- Moderately confident – I have problems finding things I need
- Not confident at all – I have major problems in finding things I need

**17. Have you ever booked online?**

- Yes
- No

**18. How much do you trust secure means of online booking?**

Completely    To a certain extent    Neutral    Very reluctant    Not at all

**19. What could website providers do, so that you would feel more secure?**

- Personal responses i.e. non-automated
- Follow-up calls
- Confirmation letter by snail mail
- Acceptance of payments by phone/fax
- Other, \_\_\_\_\_

# Appendix I

## Personal information

### Age

- 50-54 years
- 55-59 years
- 60-64 years
- 65-74 years
- 75 years or older

### Gender

- Female
- Male

### Occupation

- Employed
- Retired; please state your previous profession: \_\_\_\_\_
- Self-employed
- Unemployed

### Education (please tick only one box – highest level of education achieved)

- GCSE/O Levels
- A/AS level
- HND
- Degree
- Postgraduate degree
- Doctorate

Thank you very much for your help!

## Appendix II

### **Use of the Internet by 'silver surfers' for travel and tourism information use and decision-making: A conceptual review and discussion of findings**

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#### **Abstract**

*Information search is a recognised aspect of tourism decision-making process theory. However, there remains relatively little empirical research that demonstrates the complexity of information search in relation to the temporal sequence of decision-making. Further the literature fails to problematise the relationships between age, knowledge acquisition and information needs. This paper discusses these conceptual issues in relation to a small pilot study of 'silver surfers' (older members of society – the so-called 'grey market' - who actively use the Internet). It suggests tentatively that information needed and used is different, not connected to an immediate purchase and proposes further study into this crucial aspect of consumer theory and information use.*

**Keywords:** Tourism; Information Search; Internet; Grey Market

#### **1 Introduction**

The importance of information in the tourism decision-making process has been well documented in tourism literature. Furthermore it has been argued that the Internet can respond effectively in a particular way to the information preferences of the tourism market. However, the actual information-orientated search part of the decision-making process (i.e; not an immediate purchase intention) has received little attention from research so far. Although several papers (e.g. Beirne and Curry, 1999) touch upon the information-orientated search as a part of the broader decision-making process, the majority of papers concentrate on the Internet as a new distribution channel. It is argued that although selling via the Internet is on the increase (Cyber Atlas Statistics, 2002), the primary reason for the use of the Internet is still information retrieval in order to gain knowledge, the ultimate goal being to make an

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informed decision. Although the 'grey market' is one of the fastest growing segments online (Greenfield, 1999 and ISP -Planet, 2000), research has focused on the youth market. Information provided on the Internet should appeal to different market segments and therefore different market groups should be targeted with specialised information, knowledge and service. This paper addresses the information-orientated search as part of decision-making processes from the perspective of the 'grey market'.

### 2 Theoretical background and issues

As the world's largest industry (Page, Brunt *et al*, 2001), it was never more important for the tourism industry to adapt itself and its products to changing patterns of consumption. Consumers are changing, they are becoming more experienced at buying holidays and the industry is beginning to develop more targeted strategies to smaller groups or clusters of the market to create competitive advantages. Tailor made itineraries mean that travel companies need to have a better understanding of their consumers and the lifestage factor has become of supreme importance (Mintel, 2000). It has long been contended that individuals display different behavioural patterns at different life-stages (e.g. Rappoport and Rappoport, 1975). Different lifestyles, family and job situations as well as different market factors all contribute to these changing patterns. According to Mintel's report on U.K holidaymakers (the paper focuses mainly on the advanced economies of Europe), the empty nester and post-families life stages show similar holiday preferences. Having time, money and freedom they tend to go on several holidays a year, often mixing short breaks in the United Kingdom and/or Europe with longer long-haul holidays. Both of these groups are an important segment for the industry as they have a higher level of personal income available (Mintel, 2000).

The literature on consumer behaviour and in particular the explanatory frameworks for understanding buying behaviour recognises stage in the lifecycle as important factors (see for example East, 1997). Since buying behaviour patterns change over time, it is possible and common sense to suggest that the types of information sought about products and the types of products themselves will also change with time. This temporal dimension to information search in consumer behaviour is an overlooked issue. It is further possible to hypothesise that as people grow older, their knowledge of certain things in life becomes richer and so information needs may change. They may be, or more likely, perceive to be, more susceptible to 'risk' and therefore information needs may be of a different quality to those of other life-stage groups in society. In the context of tourism information search and decision-making, one may speculate that perhaps more detailed information on transportation, accommodation

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and (relevant to life-stage) facilities may be (sought or) required, together with issues such as security and health, etc.

So how does the Internet relate to different information needs of different life-stage groups? Due to the Internet and other Information Technologies (e.g. digital television), consumers are becoming more aware of the holiday options available to them. As a result, many tourism suppliers have responded by developing their websites to provide information on destinations, flights and accommodation. Increased access as well as consumer sophistication has added to an increase in consumers booking their holidays independently, however not necessarily on the Internet. This has led to a slight decrease in travel agent's bookings as well as lower commissions from transportation, accommodation and package providers (Mintel, 2000). Given that the traditional role of the travel agent was to provide guided and directed information and choice options to consumers, and also that the increase in experience of travel, booking holidays, Hotels, etc is driving a move to independent booking, the types of information required by consumers should change concomitantly.

Today's society is an 'Information Society', consumers are constantly surrounded and dominated by information (Shenk, 1997). Generally seen as business orientated, a decision-making process is influenced by our lives in an 'information-dependent' society and therefore should be seen as a process through which knowledge is acquired over a long period of time. In leisure and tourism decision-making, an immediate buying decision is rather uncommon as a lot of different types of information e.g. on destinations, means of transportation, accommodation and available packages as well as time and price issues need to be considered. Society, culture and consumption patterns play an important role in the tourist information search and decision-making process. Due to the relatively increasing importance life stage issues, the aspect of tourist information search and the decision-making processes of distinct market (life-stage) groups are neglected by research. Additionally, there are only few available studies that relate the grey market to the Internet [e.g. Trocchia and Janda (2000), Williams and Nicholas (1998)] in fields other than tourism. Furthermore, no studies could be found that investigated the types of information that are used by specific 'grey market' market segments.

It has been suggested in several newspaper articles (Salzburger Nachrichten, August 2001 and February 2002) that the 'grey market' receives more and more attention from advertising companies and that it has been identified as one of the most important 'online' market segments. Interestingly enough, the grey market gets a lot of attention in statistical reports (e.g. ISP and Greenfield) but when it comes to academic research there is little to be found about it, especially in relation to the Internet and especially in relation to leisure travel decision-making processes and

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experiences on the Internet. Furthermore, as the grey market incorporates people from 45 onwards, they tend to be better off financially, often without children and have more free time (especially when they are retired), they seem the obvious emerging market segment for tourism related research (Mintel, 2000).

Increased accessibility and availability of tourism websites and increased consumer sophistication has added to consumers booking their holidays independently or directly with suppliers but not exclusively on the Internet (Mintel, 2000). However, Mintel's report also indicates that one of the fundamental driving forces for the tourism industry in the next few years will continue to be different requirements of the main lifestage groups. Consumers will be more experienced and confident in using and booking over the Internet, therefore driving changing patterns of purchase with new technologies and therefore holiday requirements will continue to be more sophisticated. Since information search is recognised as a fundamental part of the decision-making process, and as experiences of independent booking develop, the need for independently accessed travel and tourism destination information will also grow. It is proposed that the Internet can be considered a major channel in this changing pattern of information needs. However, it is suggested that information search behaviour between life-stage groups will not be homogenous. Not only do people's information needs change with an increase in independent booking and a decrease in the role of travel agent, but also older groups in society may have different access (to IT) issues as well as information needs.

Further to these complex issues, most of the decision-making process theory models [e.g. Horner and Swarbrooke (1996), Gilbert (1991), Wahab, Crompton and Rothfield (1976), Schmöll (1993), Mathieson and Wall (1982) as well as Lumsdon (1997)] are based on conceptual work and there is little empirical evidence available within the information search aspects of the process. Most of the best-known models are at least 15 years old and they do not acknowledge recent developments as for example the impact of the Internet on changing patterns of consumption. Additionally, the decision-making process is usually seen as a process that concludes in a decision to buy something almost always in a direct and immediate relationship to the information search process.

However, it is proposed that the individual is engaged in a perpetual process of knowledge acquisition, a process of learning which has an impact on touristic decision-making in a more organic and problematic way. Given these theoretical problems and the challenges of the emerging changes in the nature of touristic consumption patterns by life-stage, this study aims to explore the issues through a discussion of pilot-study data undertaken as part of an ongoing investigation into information search practices by older members of society.

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### 3 Methods and preliminary results

An emergent, inductive study design (Silverman: 2001) to the issues of information search needs amongst the 'grey market' was taken. Remaining cognizant of the extant theory in consumer behaviour, yet wanting to test question styles and approaches to targeting and selection of participants.

This discussion is based around a small-scale email survey study, which is part of a wider research project. Results are preliminary and are not meant to be conclusive in any way. The main part is a consumer questionnaire aimed at the 'grey market', in this case persons over 45 years of age and active Internet users. A loosely structured questionnaire was sent by e-mail – e-surveying (Litvin and Kar, 2001). The questions asked were divided in three main sections – information search, decision-making process and the Internet as an information source. Although the respond rate was low, several inclinations seemed to show.

Respondents were asked to answer the questions according to the last leisure holiday they took. This was considered an easier approach than asking the set questions on a more general basis. It is acknowledged that the information search and decision-making process is unique and never done the same way twice (Fodness and Murray, 1998).

In general the results were as expected. Although only 42 percent of the respondents visited their destination for the first time, 67 percent did in fact search for information. People who did not search for information were – with only one exception – repeat visitors to their chosen destination. One respondent stated that he preferred the adventurous approach by not searching for information before his holiday. Interestingly, the most used information source was the Internet, closely followed by travel guidebooks (e.g. Lonely Planet) and brochures.

Table 1. Most used information sources

Information source	Number
Internet	64
Travel guidebooks	49
Brochures	47
TV programmes	11
Other	29

When asked to rank the used information sources, the Internet, travel guidebooks and friends were awarded equal first position. Respondents also stated that they used the Internet most – the main reason being its easy accessibility – followed by travel

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guidebooks. At this early stage, it seems that the Internet's main competitor are travel guidebooks. Although it was expected that the Internet is an important information source, it was rather a surprise that it led all categories. Rather disappointing was the response to the question asking participants when they started their information search. Answers ranged from six months to one week before the intended holiday was taking place. Most respondents failed to answer this question and therefore results are not useful.

The section on decision-making offered the most surprising results. The final decision was usually made by the partner, which is rather interesting if considered that 92 percent of the respondents were male.

**Table 2.** Main decision-maker

<b>Decision-maker</b>	<b>Number</b>
Partner/spouse	49
Family incl. children	28
Mutual decision	18
Friends	9
Missing	16

One of the surprising results was that 87 percent of the respondents arranged their holidays independently and only 13 percent booked a package holiday. Furthermore 50 percent even booked their holiday arrangements online e.g. with Expedia or directly with the hotel.

The reasons why respondents decided to use the Internet as an information source were mainly the range of information available and convenience, a rather predictable result. Seventy-five percent of respondents started their search with a search engine, the remaining 25 percent relied on a known website.

Respondents were asked if they believed that one could make an informed decision with the Internet as the only source of information. The result was quite close with 49 percent thinking that it is possible and 38 percent that it is not (13 percent missing). The main reason in favour of the Internet was that 'you can find everything that is necessary' and the main reason against the Internet was that 'you always need personal advice'. The most disappointing findings came from the question where respondents were asked to rate tourism related websites. Most people did not answer the question and those who did tended to tick the 'box in the middle' so that the result cannot be seen as valuable. The intended result was to get an insight into people's perception of tourism-related websites and if they cater for their needs.

The final two questions asked about the consumer – provider relationship more specific if respondents considered an online relationship the same as an offline one. Forty-two percent thought that the relationship was different, as 'there remains a need

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for personal contact' and 'providers take the relationship more seriously'. However, 29 percent (29 percent missing) considered the relationship to be the same because 'an offline relationship is usually anonymous at first too and more likely to be followed up by a phone call rather than a second personal visit'. Interestingly, 50 percent of the respondents prefer an online relationship as opposed to 50 percent who prefer an offline relationship.

Sample profile: Respondents were all Austrians, 92 percent male and 8 percent female, all between 45 and 65 years old. The majority is employed and married.

### 4 Discussion

At the beginning of this Millennium it is important for the tourism industry to become or to remain consumer focused. As stated earlier, consumers are becoming more sophisticated, more experienced and they are demanding more tailor-made products. As the industry is responding to these growing demands it is vital not to forget that different market segments have a need for different information and ultimately for different products. The Internet has created an easy marketing and selling place for the industry, however it must not be forgotten that not all information provided is suitable for all target markets. Although the Internet was one of the most used information tool within this study, the majority backed up their information search with travel guidebooks and/or asking friends and acquaintances for their opinions. Even though the Internet is easy accessible, convenient and has a wide range of information available, the 'silver surfer' respondents within this study are not all convinced that an informed decision can be made with the Internet as the only used information tool.

This paper has taken a different approach to the tourist information search, decision-making process, 'grey market' and Internet theory. It builds on a more culture-related approach, employing theory of society and culture rather than business literature to help understand the problematic relationship between users of the Internet by age group, differing information needs and the information provided. As already mentioned, the tourism decision-making process is conceptualised as a knowledge acquiring process rather than a structured business-like procedure, where the latter is usually followed by an immediate buying decision. It is proposed that culture and society have a major influence on the structure of the decision-making process (and particularly on the information search). One example from this study is that friends were mentioned as the most important information source in several cases.

The Internet, however, could respond even more effectively to the need of this particular market segment. Transportation, accommodation and package providers could establish a new link to their websites that holds a wider range of information

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that is more detailed and specifically focuses on the needs of the 'grey market'. Although it is noted that specific website information oriented to the needs of these groups is available, in general, the information needs, search processes and decision-making processes are not clearly understood. This ongoing study hopes to map out the uses of information of 'silver surfers' in much more fine detail with an expectation that a better understanding of these processes will enable organisations to deliver targeted communications in a coherent and profitable way. As the research has shown, they are not reluctant to book online, however in some cases more detailed information would be of advantage. Another issue to be raised is that of security and risk. Although older people usually possess a credit card or debit card, they might be hesitant to use it on the World Wide Web, as they might not be so confident about online security.

It was suggested in this paper that when consumer start looking for information on tourism related products and services they often do not know what they are looking for. Frequently, the decision 'where to go' and 'what to do' will be made during the search. That is one of the reasons why the 'silver surfer' respondents of this study largely started their information search with the help of a search engine. However, the research has not investigated which element of the holiday is researched first. The authors suggest that the search for a suitable holiday destination would probably be the first choice followed by transportation and accommodation availability.

This importance of information for the 'grey' market segment proves that the proposed suggestion that the decision-making process is usually not followed up by an immediate buying decision but more of a knowledge acquiring nature is true in this particular scenario.

### 5 Conclusions

As this paper is part of a wider research project, all findings to date are preliminary. However, certain conceptual frameworks have been proved right. The results of the 'silver surfer' questionnaires have shown some inclination towards statistical trends. The 'grey market' uses the Internet for tourism related decision-making, mainly for information search but they are not reluctant to book online. However, just a fragment of questionnaire respondents rely on the Internet fully, most of the 'silver surfers' prefer to back up their information search with other information sources. Although neglected by tourism literature up until now, the 'grey market' is a significant online market segment, even more interesting are its information needs as well as ways and experiences of dealing with knowledge acquisition and decision making.

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## Appendix III

### **‘Silver Surfers’ and their online information search behaviour**

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#### **Abstract**

Information search is a well recognised aspect of tourism decision-making process theory. However, little research concentrates on the issue that most people who search for information – especially online – do not necessarily make an immediate purchase decision. Additionally, the life stage or life cycle factor has been neglected therefore relatively little research concentrates on the older age groups in society, particularly when investigating the Internet. There is also a need to look at the complex relationships between age, knowledge acquisition and information needs. This paper looks at the issue of online information search in relation to a rather neglected segment of the market, the so-called ‘grey market’, also referred to as ‘silver surfers’ – older member of the society that are active Internet users. It proposes that information needs and usage vary according to age and life stage.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Internet, Online information search, ‘Grey Market’, ‘Silver Surfers’

#### **1 Introduction**

Within tourism decision-making literature, the significance of the information search has been relatively well documented. It has also been suggested that the Internet, as a powerful, relatively new information and distribution medium can respond effectively to the needs of the tourism market (Weber and Roehl, 1999). However, the actual information centred search part of the wider decision-making process (i.e. not followed by an immediate purchase intention) has not been given a lot of consideration. Beirne and Curry (1999) touch upon this topic, however, the majority of papers tend to focus on the Internet as a distribution channel. Information provided on the Internet should ultimately attract more than just one market segment and hence different (niche) groups should be targeted with specialised information, knowledge and service.

The goal of this research was to focus on the lesser researched aspects of the decision-making process and on the lesser researched market segments. Statistics have shown continuous increase of ‘silver surfers’ during the last years, however, they are rarely considered when researching Internet related topics. This paper addresses the

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information centred search from the perspective of the 'grey market', also referred to as 'silver surfers'.

### 2 Theoretical background and issues

Today's society is an information society; consumers are constantly surrounded and dominated by information (Shenk, 1997). In our information-dependent society, the information search within the decision-making process has become even more significant. Even more so, the rapid development of Information Technology especially in the tourism industry has significantly influenced information search behaviour in tourism decision-making (Jang, 2004). Jang (2004) has identified the need for more research in this particular area because of its increasing importance in the tourism decision-making process. Due to importance of information in the tourism industry (Sheldon, 1993a), it can be argued that the information search is *the* most significant part of the decision-making process. This significance can even be more emphasised when looking at an online information search. People look at the Internet as an 'all-knowing information source'; however no matter how much information is accessible through the Internet it is by no means all there is, therefore this false impression can lead to the misconception of 'what cannot be found on the Internet does not exist'. This can be particularly threatening for tourism as most travellers are planning to travel to (for them) still unknown locations.

Most literature on information search so far has only dealt with the traditional offline one; however, as the Internet becomes more and more important, several authors have focused on the particular study of the online information search and tourist behaviour. Generally speaking, there are distinct differences between the off- and online information search. These are briefly outlined below.

As a rule, 'online information search usually refers to information search activity through the Internet' (Jang, 2004, p. 43). A distinct advantage of an online information search is that it allows prospective travellers to search and compare at the same time. The nature of the tourism 'product' has a big influence since the quality of the 'product' is not certain until it is experienced, therefore a more in-depth information search can reassure the prospective traveller in their decision. (Jang, 2004) This is one of many reasons why the tourism industry has been greatly affected by the introduction of the Internet (Weber and Roehl, 1999).

The Internet offers a wide range of information and resources to travellers (Susskind *et al.*, 2003), but it also offers suppliers the possibility of getting to know their prospective consumers better. Information intermediaries can help provide suppliers with profiles of travellers and their selection of products that they bought based on their needs (Palmer and McCole, 2000).

Jang (2004) claims that from the supply side's point of view, a buyer's search and purchase means advertising selling. From the demand's side point of view, an online search/purchase is possible when online advertising and selling options are provided.

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The online information search offers both benefits to travellers and marketers as well as concerns. The most important ones will be explored below.

One of the biggest benefits is that websites are cost efficient for suppliers – a website is 'open' 24/7 and allows the consumer instant access to the information needed. It can also be used as a real-time communication tool, especially when considering new tools like live chats, etc. Various authors (e.g. Wang *et al*, 2002) have pointed out the primary advantages of online search to travellers. They are relative low cost, customised information, ease of product comparisons, interactivity, virtual community formation and 24 hour accessibility [...]. Another benefit that is particularly relevant to the tourism industry is, that the Internet freely reaches anywhere in the world (as long as you have access to it), which means that the potential market has no national or international boundary (Jang, 2004). There seems to be an agreement amongst authors that the Internet provides advantages like global accessibility, convenience in updating, real-time information service, interactive communications features and unique customisation capabilities (Bender, 1997) as well as a general opinion that using the Internet can enable destinations to improve their competitiveness by increasing their visibility, reducing advertising costs, and assist local cooperation (Buhalis, 2000).

It is also important to look at some concerns. Machlis (1997) pointed out that people visit travel websites mainly for information purposes and less than 5 percent actually buy tourism 'products' online. This is an important argument for this study as it builds on the hypotheses that although often seen as a distribution channel by the supply side, the Internet as such is still mainly used as an information tool by the demand side. Possible reasons for this behaviour are technical difficulties, credit card security, no assessment of product quality, and privacy issues (Weber and Roehl, 1999).

Another important aspect of this study is the so-called life stage factor. This research focuses on one of the more neglected market segments, the 'grey market', also sometimes referred to as 'silver surfers' or 'greynettters' (when mentioned in relation to the Internet). Gunter (1998) states that there are common misconceptions concerning older consumer that often make companies shy away from actually focusing on this particular segment.

Some of these misconceptions are:

- Older consumers are all the same. (The grey market is comprised of numerous segments.)
- They think of themselves as old. ('Older age' is typically 15 years older than they are, and doesn't begin until well past 70.)
- They aren't an important consumer segment. (Those 50 and over possess almost half of all American discretionary income.)

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- They won't try something new. (A survey for Golding and Co found that in the preceding 12 months 45 percent had tried a new brand of cereal, 30 percent a new brand of canned soup and soft drinks.)
- They aren't physically active. (A poll by Gallup revealed that half of those over 65 regularly engage in exercise).

(Adapted from Gunter, 1998)

If these misconceptions were true, it would be understandable that companies do not want to target the 'grey market' but all these misrepresentations can be disputed with statistical facts (shown in brackets above).

Times are changing, and so are consumers; they are becoming more experienced at buying holidays and the industry is beginning to develop more specific strategies to target smaller market segments or niche groups to create competitive advantages. However, tailor-made itineraries mean that tourism companies need to have a better understanding of their consumers and the life stage factor has become of supreme importance (Mintel, 2000).

It has long been argued that individuals display different behavioural patterns at different life stages (e.g. Rappoport & Rappoport, 1975). Different lifestyles, changing family and job situations as well as different market factors all contribute to these distinctive behavioural patterns. Empty nester and post-families life stages show similar holiday preferences. Possessing an abundance of time, money and freedom they tend to go on several holidays a year, often mixing domestic or European short breaks with longer holidays that lead them to destinations on different continents. As they have a higher level of personal income available both of these groups are an important segment for the tourism industry (Mintel, 2000).

There is recognition of life stages (respectively the life cycle) in the literature; particularly the explanatory frameworks for understanding buying behaviour acknowledge them as important factors (e.g. East, 1997). Since purchasing behaviour patterns change over time, it seems valid to propose that the types of information sought about products and the types of products themselves will also change with time. This temporal dimension to information search in consumer behaviour is an overlooked issue. It is further possible to hypothesise that as people grow older, their knowledge of certain things in life becomes more in-depth and so as a result information needs may change, too. They may be more vulnerable to 'risk' and subsequently information requirements may be of a different quality to those of other life-stage groups. In the context of tourism (online) information search (and decision-making), one may speculate that perhaps more detailed information on transportation, accommodation and (relevant to life-stage) facilities may be (sought or) required, together with issues such as security and health, etc.

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It is also proposed that the individual is engaged in a continuous process of knowledge acquisition, a process of learning which has an impact on tourism related decision-making in a purer and problematic way. Given these theoretical problems and the challenges of the emerging changes in the nature of tourism consumption patterns by life stage, this study aims to explore the issues through a discussion of pilot-study data undertaken as part of an ongoing investigation into information search practices by older members of society

### 3 Methods

The chosen research design was based on an emergent, inductive study design (Silverman, 2001) relating to the issues of information search needs amongst the 'grey market'. The overall approach was to test question styles, targeting methods and selection of participants while remaining aware of the existing consumer behaviour theories.

As this study is part of a wider research project, the chosen methods are briefly outlined and emphasis is put on the ones that were most important for this particular aspect of the research.

The overall approach for this research was triangulation using both qualitative and quantitative methods to achieve the best results. The findings of the pilot questionnaire that was loosely structured informed the qualitative part of the study, semi-structured interviews. These (rather informal) interviews were held with several 'silver surfers', and eventually produced findings that were vital for the finalisation of the questionnaire. The main questionnaire itself was re-structured several times and incorporates various findings from the previous research. It was used to explore questions raised during the pilot questionnaire and interviews and consisted of closed questions that were formed with the help of previous research.

The only restrictions to the sample were age (the sample consists of people aged 50 or older), geographic location (research was limited to the United Kingdom) and that the person must be an active Internet user. The age limit was set at 50 years as this allows the research to include both still employed and already retired individuals. Furthermore, this research relied on a non-probability sample as a probability sample within the chosen age group would consist of too many non-Internet users. Although Internet usage is increasing within the 'grey market' segment the majority of over 50-year-old persons is still not connected to the Internet (statistik.de, 2004).

Concerning distribution, the sample is a convenience sample, also called an accidental sample because the persons completing the questionnaire just happen to be where the information for the study is being gathered. The questionnaires were distributed via e-mail testing a tool called 'e-surveying' (Litvin and Kar, 2001) as well as distributed to several websites that cater for 'silver surfers' asking them to hand out (e-mail out) the questionnaire to their members and/or post it on their website. As there is no way of

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telling how many consumers were reached with the questionnaire, there is no way of calculating a response rate.

The data collected was both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data was analysed with the help of SPSS. The analysis was carried out with rather simple and descriptive statistical tools. Qualitative data that was gathered by semi-structured interviews was analysed by utilising content analysis (Silverman, 2001).

### 4 Results

During the course of this research, 6 interviews were conducted and 517 questionnaire responses were returned. The discussion will be built on relevant results obtained from these. When discussing interview findings the author consciously refrained from using percentages as the number of respondents is quite low and it would falsify the significance of some answers.

#### 4.1 Interviews

After a few introductory questions, interviewees were asked how they usually search for tourism information online. All of them stated that the destination choice is the first aspect of their holiday planning and except for short breaks; special/promotional offers usually do not influence the choice of a destination. More importantly friends or a special interest for a certain destination determine where to go on holiday. The findings also show that although the Internet is an important tool for booking in this particular case it is still very much used as an information tool.

When asked if they always find the information they need, the responses to this question were balanced with half of the interviewees being quite confident and stating they would find anything on the Internet if they set their mind to it and the other half admitting that it looks a lot easier than it actually is. Everybody maintained that although they think the Internet is a good information source, they always back up their information search with other information sources e.g. travel guide books and brochures. One interviewee mentioned that for him the search on the Internet is like a process of knowledge build-up. You learn where to go to find information and experience teaches you to comprehend which ones (websites, search engines, etc.) to use. This statement supports one of the main arguments of this study, that the information search is a process of knowledge acquisition and changes with the experience and age of the user.

When asked if the information met their individual needs, the overall was yes. They all agreed that there is information for everyone online and the more experience you have; the better you get at finding what you really need. So, although not directly targeted, most 'silver surfers' do not feel neglected by the information providers.

Then, they were asked if they thought that people of different age groups need specific information. All but one interviewee believe that different age groups have a need for different information. They like to finish up their searches etc. as quickly as possible

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and sometimes even get tired of/from looking at the computer screen. There are without doubt certain issues that seem to be more interesting to older generations e.g. health issues and probably more culture and historical information.

Generally, the Internet is quite well trusted with several personal concerns, mostly about financial security and reliability of the information found. Most interviewees admit to being a bit cautious about giving away their financial details, and some would prefer to book over the phone. They also stated that they look for a secure online booking system. One interviewee mentioned that he would prefer a personal booking confirmation to the automatic ones the company usually sends out, as it would make him feel more secure about his booking.

### 4.2 Questionnaires

Before discussing the specific information search related findings of the research, some general results will be reviewed.

First of all, length of Internet usage is definitely not related to the age of the respondents. Most people have been using the Internet for 4-6 years; however a higher number of people have been using the Internet for longer than 6 or less than 4 years. That would indicate that most respondents started using the Internet between 1998 and 2000 or earlier.

It is important to make a distinction between respondents who are already retired and those who still work. Interestingly, even half of those who are retired stated that they started using the Internet for work purposes (most likely back in the days when they were not yet retired). Out of those still employed those that started using it for work purposes are slightly in the lead. When it comes to places of Internet access, the majority of employed respondents use the Internet at home, closely followed by work. Retired respondents also access the Internet mainly at home, some at work (which seems a bit strange considering that they are retired) and some make use of public places where you have to pay to access the Internet. Overall most respondents indicated that they have learnt by doing, about a fifth of the respondents took advantage of computer courses and almost even numbers of respondents asked for help from their colleagues or families. When comparing age with places of Internet access it is apparent that the younger respondents are accessing the Internet at home or at work. The number of people accessing the Internet at work goes down with ascending age. Public access does not seem to be a popular option; however, some of the respondents do use it.

These were some of the more general research findings, the more specific online information search related ones follow below.

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**Table 1. Finding information**

		Age					Total
		50-54 years	55-59 years	60-64 years	65-74 years	75 years or older	
Finding information	Yes	100	100	35	50	16	301
	To a certain extent	67	33	17	16	0	133
	If I search long enough	50	17	0	0	0	67
	No	0	8	3	3	2	16
<b>Total</b>		<b>217</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>517</b>

One of the most important issues within this research was to find out how different age groups use the Internet. If they actually find the information they were looking for is a big part of this. It has been argued that with ascending age, travellers or persons in general might find it harder to navigate on the Internet. The respondents of this study have shown that to a great extent they always find what they are looking for as the majority (58 percent) answered affirmative. Some stated that they only find parts of the information or it takes them longer to search, however they do tend to find what they want – interestingly these issues seem more prominent in the younger age groups. The numbers of people who do not find what they are looking for are very low (3 percent) ... and can surely be improved by some effort from the providers as mentioned by Jang (2004).

When looking at the same issue according to gender it becomes apparent that a high percentage of women (55 percent) and men (61 percent) are able to find the information they are looking for. More women (31 percent) than men (20 percent) find only part of the information but the number of respondents who need to search longer is evenly distributed within gender (13 percent each). Surprisingly, only men commented that they do not find the information they look for (6 percent to be exact).

The respondents that answered no to the above mentioned question about whether or not they find the information they are looking for were asked to answer an additional question concerning what they consider to be the main problem with the Internet (please see Table 2). When looking at these reasons according to age, it can be said that most of them feel that there is just too much information available. Some think the Internet is not structured enough and some feel that search engines are not specific enough.

As stated earlier, all respondents who had problems finding information are male and most of them stated the availability of too much information as their main problem.

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**Table 2. Main problem when not finding information**

		Age				Total
		55-59 years	60-64 years	65-74 years	75 years or older	
Main problem	Too much information available	5	1	2	2	10
	Not structured enough	1	1	1	0	3
	Search engines are not specific enough	2	1	0	0	3
Total		8	3	3	2	16

Following on in the discussion, the respondents were asked to answer a question relating to what topics they researched on the Internet. The results were both, at times surprising and predictable. Most respondents have searched for information on flights, followed by accommodation information and price. These results were less remarkable as the reason why flights is ranked 1st can be traced back to the emergence of low cost airlines, which are mainly booked online. These airlines are of great importance for any traveller planning their holidays independently as they might prove to be the cheapest means of transportation (especially for domestic or European short breaks and/or holidays). The same goes for accommodation providers. It is often the fastest way to check hotel availability on the Internet. The fact that price is ranked 2nd shows that the Internet is still seen as a cheap alternative as well as a tool to compare prices between competitors as suggested by Wang *et al* (2002).

When you look at the specific age groups within the 'grey market' it becomes apparent that not all people in this segment search for the same information. So even within a certain market segment, there is a need for even more specific information. Overall, the most researched topic in any age group was flights in the 50-54 years segment. In both, the 50-54 and 55-59 age groups, the most researched topic was flights. In the older age groups, it was a combination of country entry requirements and accommodation information.

The most surprising aspect of the research itself was that destination information only ranked 7<sup>th</sup> (among 12 subjects) especially when considering that interviewees pointed out that the destination choice is the first one they make. This result can be interpreted in different ways. One can assume that destination information is one of the most important topics to be researched and the 'silver surfers' may rely on traditional, offline information sources.

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Furthermore, it appears that specific travel information like e.g. package holidays etc. do not seem to be relevant for this market segment and the least researched topic was by far Information on animal welfare, followed by special interest tourism and package holidays

**Table 3. Information searched for according to age groups**

	Age					Total
	50-54 years	55-59 years	60-64 years	65-74 years	75 years or older	
Flights	200	150	52	49	16	467
Accommodation info	184	116	52	66	16	434
Price	183	133	35	33	16	400
Other transport	184	116	35	17	16	368
Climate, weather	151	118	34	33	16	352
Country entry requirements	149	126	54	3	18	350
Destinations, visitor attractions	167	118	34	0	16	335
Independent travellers	67	68	34	16	0	185
Tour operators	67	68	17	16	0	168
Package holidays	84	51	17	0	0	152
Special interest tourism	67	51	17	0	0	135
Information on animal welfare	0	17	0	0	0	17

Although the following results do not dramatically influence the major findings of this research, it is interesting to see how the usage of additional information sources varies between the different age groups. Not surprisingly, the majority of respondents not using any additional information sources are to be found in the younger age groups. It was surprising to see that the older age groups do not seem to rely much on family and friends as a valuable source of information (26 percent). The author expected this number to grow as respondents get older as it would seem that the older people get the more they would have heard from family and friends and their travel experiences.

As expected, travel guidebooks are a significant source of information for respondents of all age groups (62 percent), by far beating off the competition with brochures in 2<sup>nd</sup> place (45 percent). Newspapers, magazines and television seem to be more used by the younger age groups.

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When researching online information search behaviour, it is important to investigate how much the Internet is trusted. Overall, it can be said that the respondents do generally trust the travel related information they find and/or have found on the Internet; 87 percent responded positively. However, most respondents (39 percent) state that the decision whether or not they trust travel related information depends on the provider of such information. Twenty-six percent said that they only trust the information to a certain extent.

The fact that about half of the respondents who stated they are very cautious of the information provided are in the youngest age group (about 6 percent) is rather surprising. It was expected that the older age groups are more suspicious of the information made available. Interestingly, the female respondents seem to trust the information provided on the Internet a lot more than the male respondents (50 percent vs. 36 percent), however, when looking at numbers of how many respondents back up the information they found on the Internet, the results were ambiguous. The overwhelming majority of the oldest age group (88 percent) has enough trust in online information and do not choose to back-up their search. Surprisingly, it seems that the younger the respondents get, the more often they choose to confirm the information found online.

### 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the 'grey market' is definitely a powerful market segment that should not be neglected by the tourism industry. Result of this study have shown that there are numerous active Internet users and most feel comfortable in trusting the World Wide Web as a information source for tourism related decision-making. 'Silver surfers' use the Internet to fulfil various information needs. There is definitely potential for more research in this particular area especially when looking at different countries or cultures and exploring the information needs and search techniques utilised more in-depth.

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