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Shan Ju Chi
Tamkang University

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The Tourist-based Formation of Destination Loyalty:
from the Perspective of Qualitative Research Approach

Abstract

This study aimed to understand how tourists develop their destination loyalty through traveling experiences over time by employing a qualitative research approach. With interpretive as its research paradigm, interviews generated information to fulfill the research aims by explaining the formation of destination loyalty under the exploratory-purposed research design. The data was analyzed by means of the thematic analysis technique. The gradation of destination loyalty served as the findings, which suggested that destination loyalty is a dynamic process. With the integration of self-realization, destination loyalty is more than habitual and occasional revisits and fulfillments of physiological needs. It proposed a tourists' perspective of explaining the formation of destination loyalty. The results recommended destination management and marketing practitioners that a tourism destination must utilize its characteristics to create more irreplaceable experiences for tourists, which enable them to build up profound emotional associations with the place along their life time.

Keywords: destination loyalty, tourist-based, qualitative research

The Context of Destination Loyalty

The conceptual definition proposed in early 70's and cited by Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) has been the widely-accepted definition in the loyalty literature across industries. Loyalty consists of both behaviors of repurchase and attitudinal recognition of that particular brand (Bodet, 2008). Loyalty is seen as a terminal status; studies are done to examine the relationship amongst revisit motivation, destination image, satisfaction, perceived value, and loyalty (Huang and Chiu, 2006, Chi and Qu, 2008, Yoon and Uysal, 2005, Chen and Tsai, 2007, Castro, Armario and Ruiz, 2007, Lee, Yoon and Lee, 2007, Gallarza and Saura, 2006, Alcaniz, Garcia, and Blas, 2009, Hutchinson, Lai, and Wang, 2009).

The literature review indicates that revisit intention is used as the construct of behavioral loyalty whereas word-of-mouth is for attitudinal loyalty. However, a holiday destination is a complex compound of tourism facilities, services, and products (Buhalis, 2000 and Pike, 2005). Furthermore, multi-attribute theory established by Fishbein (1963 and 1967) commands the marketing research. The literature suggests that a tourist chooses to revisit a destination and form their emotional bonds towards the destinations mainly based on their evaluation of the destination attributes. This study argues that the domination of attribute-based survey and quantitative research set up the boundary of destination loyalty research and aims at understanding destination loyalty from the perspective of qualitative research approach.

The Methodological Contribution

The study employed interpretivism as its research philosophy whereas positivism adopting quantitative research designs dominates the way brand loyalty has been perceived.

Behavioral intentions, referring to intention to revisit and recommend, are used as constructs of behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. However, intentions are not actuality, which is a compromise in a cross-sectional survey-based research design. The domination of survey-based research designs and causal analysis research reminds the researcher of taking a step back and thinking out of the box. Thus, this study aims at understanding how tourists develop their loyalty towards destinations through traveling experiences by employing a qualitative research approach. The research questions of this study include:

- a. What are the aspects which make tourists feel connected with the destination apart from satisfaction and trust triggered by destination attributes?
- b. What are the consequences of destination loyalty apart from feeling reluctant to switch to another destination and word-of-mouth?
- c. What will the behavioral loyalty topology be if actual revisit patterns are analyzed and examined rather than revisit intention?

The Methodology

The aims of this study made this study an exploratory study with the employment of interviews as its data collection strategy. Qualitative research methods do not stress the development and design of measures of concepts. Rather, it concentrates on the comprehension of the concepts themselves (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Qualitative research is interpretive (Rossman and Rallis, 2003). Besides, researchers' role of "self" may significantly impact the way in which research questions are formed and qualitative data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted (Denscombe, 2005).

Interviews were the technique of data collection in this study. Using convenience sampling and snowballing sampling strategies, this study successfully conducted 33 face-to-face taped interviews with Scottish citizens living in the region of Greater Glasgow, Scotland, who are aged between 50 and 79 and who have regular overseas holiday-taking hobby until "data saturation" (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2009, p. 235) was reached.

Raw data was transcribed into text; the thematic analysis technique was employed to analyze the data. This study chose the route of manual coding. During the processes of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, dimensions, sub-categories, categories, and themes are sorted out (Rossman and Rallis, 2003). Then, a table of activities was produced. Table 1 shown on page 9 is a part of table of main ideas generated from the first 8 transcripts of interviews. Gradually, a framework, which is shown as the figure 2 appended on page 10

was developed, which serves as the findings of this study.

Key Findings

A model of gradation of destination loyalty serves as the major finding of this study, which is shown in the figure 2 appended on page 10.

The gradation of destination loyalty model consists of three stages, the initial stage, incubation stage, and reflection stage, and it enhances and moves forward along with the timeline. The timeline refers to the chronological order and the accumulation of travel experiences gained over time. The initial stage refers to the very first visit paid to the destinations and the formation of attitudinal perspectives. Incubation stage starts with the realization of revisits. Enhancement of attitudinal perspectives is generated; circulation between the behavioral revisit and attitudinal enhancement may occur numerous times. With practical situations and reasons, revisits disconnect. Facilitating factors, such as shared memory, strengthens emotional attachment towards destinations. “Feeling like home” is one of the emotional responses tourists for destinations. Then, it moves forward to the reflection stage, when the accumulation of travel experiences leads tourists to self-reflection and self-development, which are more spiritual and philosophical-oriented. Feeling sorry for the destinations losing their authenticity and enhancement of identity are two examples of attitudinal introspection during these stage. Those philosophical feelings trigger another circulation of revisits, which makes destination loyalty a dynamic status.

When it comes to the typology of revisit patterns, 3 types are categorized; they are purposeful revisits, joyful revisits, and sequencing revisits. Purposeful revisits refer that tourists are motivated to pay revisits by their local connections, their travel mates, or occasions. In addition, joyful revisits indicate that tourists are fascinated by what the destinations can offer to them and choose to pay revisits. On the other hand, tourists who have sequencing revisits to the same holiday destination are then compared to ‘modern nomads.’ They tend to revisit the destination intensively within a period of time and then move on to somewhere new.

Table 3 appended on page 11 briefly illustrates its meanings and sub-types of revisit behavioral patterns. In general, behavioral loyalty in the context of holiday destinations can not compared to that in the context of retailing products by counting each patronage.

Implications to Destination Management and Marketing

This study suggests that a destination must use its distinctiveness to create remarkable and unforgettable experiences for tourists. What differentiates a destination to the tourists is long-lasting memory not excitement or satisfaction gained from attributes and services.

Memory makes the tourists feel connected with the destination, which also motivates revisits.

Considering building up life-long relationship with tourists, destinations must convince tourists with consolidated value and memory-making uniqueness.

Table 1: Table of Main Ideas from the First 8 Interviews (partial)

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Dimensions
Involvement	communication	Interactions with locals	Small talks or chatting with just-met locals
		network	Friendship; regular contact
			Relatives
			Interactions with 'neighbors'
	cooperation	Church connection	Funding for Croatia (E18)
			Volunteer work
	Hospitality scheme	Mutual home-stay and visit	Group-based (organization-based) visits
	observations	To experience	knowledge confirmed (to see what they have read)
			Stereotype amendment; real experience to form self perspective
			How things are done differently
		To smell	Distinguishing fragrance (flowers and spices; some unfamiliar or novel smells)
	Future plans	Next visit	With certainty
			In long distant future/maybe
			Lengthen holiday stays
			Shorten intermission between revisits
		Personal conditions	Health consideration
			Age consideration
			Financial concerns
		Big move	Buying property
			Immigration (might/still uncertain)

Figure 1: The Gradation of Destination Loyalty

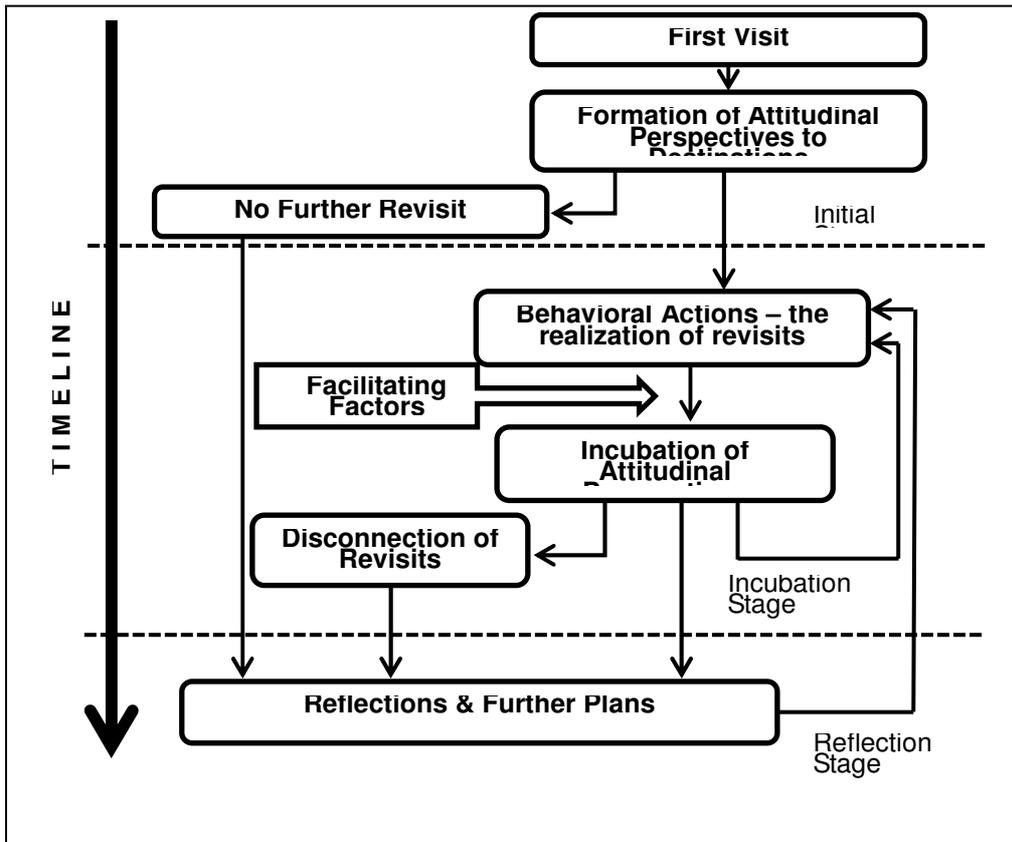


Table 3: Typology of Revisit Patterns

Revisit Patterns	Sub-types	Descriptions
Purposeful Revisits	Social network visitations	People who might have been working or residing in that particular destination before or those whose family have moved to that destination go back there to visit friends and relatives on social basis.
	Family holidays	People returned to a destination regularly to enjoy being together with all the family members.
	Meaningfulness and celebration	People choose to go back to the same destination because they find the destination is meaningful for them or they go there for anniversary celebration.
Joyful revisits	Jigsaw mapping	People find the destination full of variety and diversity; they continually go back to the same destination for holidays but visit different parts of the destination each time.
	Lifestyle enjoyment	The lifestyle of the destination attracts them; therefore, people choose to return year after year simply for enjoyment.
	Activity-oriented	People return to the same destination for holidays to enjoy certain activities, such as skiing, camping, cycling or painting.
Sequencing revisits		People tend to revisit the destination intensively for several years and then move on to somewhere new.

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