ABSTRACT

The present study investigates tourists’ communicative action and its relationship with their loyalty towards destinations. Founded on the concept of communicative action in problem solving proposed by Kim, Grunig and Ni (2010) and drawn on the syntheses of literature about information behavior and tourism, the study suggests a conceptual model of loyalty-based communicative action in tourism. Three dimensions of communicative action are identified: acquisition, selection, and transmission of information. Tourists’ loyalty and its relationship with each dimension of communicative action are examined. This study proposes that the degree of these dimensions increase with higher levels of loyalty. The model further indicates that different patterns of communicative action would be observable among individuals with different levels of behavioral and attitudinal loyalty.

Keywords: communicative action, information acquisition, information behavior, information selection, information transmission, tourism loyalty.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism involves a mixture of attitude and behavior of individuals. People form a certain mindset towards destinations and are engaged with direct (e.g., actual visit) or indirect (e.g., referral) behavior. Tourism destination marketers have made efforts to capture the consumers who visibly show direct behavior. Accordingly, actual frequent visitation, which academia identifies as a sign of high behavioral loyalty, has been focused on in tourism literature. The attitudinal aspect of loyalty has been examined as a factor explaining tourists’ thinking and behavior. Emotional attachment, positive attitude, and preference have been suggested to capture this dimension.

Yet, such a dichotomy underestimates an important aspect about understanding tourists—information behavior. Because of the information-extensive nature of tourism (Bieger & Laesser, 2004), information behavior is widely observed among individuals (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998). Lack of clarity, however, in the delineation of the information behavior dimensions causes
researchers to arbitrarily use this concept in capturing either behavioral or attitudinal characteristics of tourists. Furthermore, the relationship between emotional attachment or real visitation of individuals and their information behavior has not been revealed clearly.

More important, all types of tourism information behavior need to be understood comprehensively. What researchers focus on have been usually limited to information acquisition during the pre-trip stage (e.g., Fodness & Murray, 1999) and information sharing after trip (e.g., Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). In fact, information acquisition and sharing can be done without any significant time gaps. In particular, the virtual environment enables integration of diverse forms of communicative behaviors (Rioux, 2004). Furthermore, other types of information behavior such as information selection have not been clearly delineated in tourism. More comprehensive scopes of information behavior including information acquisition, selection, and transmission need to be examined.

Previous studies in tourism have segmented information users to see how communicative behavior appears differently by various groups of people. Demographic, geographic, and behavioral variables are among the factors (Chen & Gursoy, 2000; Fodness & Murray, 1999; D.-Y. Kim, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007; Lehto, Kim, & Morrison, 2006). To extend this inquiry, the present study uses loyalty as an antecedent of information behavior. Comprehensive understanding of information behavior by loyalty groups would enable marketers not only to track the flow of information but also to manage the types of information that are generated, distributed or ignored, and stimulate communicative reactions by consumers with different levels of loyalty.

The purpose of the study is to revisit tourism loyalty from the information behavior approach. To achieve that goal, a loyalty-based communicative action in tourism model is proposed in order to address the role of loyalty and to associate each loyalty group with each dimension of information behavior in tourism.

INFORMATION BEHAVIOR AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTION IN TOURISM

Information and information behavior

Case (2006) defines information as the difference towards the external or internal environment perceived by individuals and information behavior includes all information-related activities. As he explains, information is divided into external, internal, and sense-making information. External information denotes objective information from outer sources. Internal information shows what is immanent in oneself. Sense-making involves the process by which external information is internalized. Studies in consumer behavior (e.g., Bettman & Park, 1980) and tourism (e.g., Crotts, 1999) have adopted this categorization. Crotts (1999), for example, divided the sources of information into two types—internal and external. Internal sources are categorized as actively acquired information such as first-hand experience and information actively searched. External information sources are classified into personal, neutral, marketer-dominated, and experiential sources such as word-of-mouth. He suggests some prerequisites of information in communication—truthfulness, usefulness, representation as a form, and intentionality.
There is a notion that individuals are affected differently by the same external information. Information behavior includes passive as well as active communicative actions such as information selection and avoiding (Case, 2006). Despite such a concept, internalization of information as a process has not been seriously considered in information behavior.

**Tourism information behavior and communicative action**

*Communicative action in problem solving (CAPS)* by J.-N. Kim et al. (2010), based on the critical development of *situational theory* (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), covers the input, throughput, and output in communicative information behavior at the passive and active levels. Although this model was originally suggested to identify the behavior of the public in coping with problematic situations, it also provides a useful tool in conceptualizing communicative action in general.

The extension of such a model, which is one of the purposes of the present study, would address the limitations found in the extant research on tourists’ information behavior. Such limitations include the following. First, one of the assumptions of tourism information behavior studies is that information behavior aims towards actual visitation, which is not necessarily true. Second, studies of tourism information behavior are fragmented. The information search is examined separately from other types of communicative action. Only information sharing, not other forms of communicative action, has been associated with consumer loyalty. In fact, diverse forms of communicative action are observed. For example, experienced travelers not only share information but continuously seek information at the same time (Choi, Lehto, & O'leary, 2007; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Such problems can be solved by considering a broader perspective of information behavior, as suggested by the proposed model.

Three dimensions of information use and six procedures are identified by the CAPS model. Communicative action consists of information acquisition, information selection, and information transmission. These three dimensions are divided further by the activeness or passiveness.

*Information Acquisition.* In the information acquisition stage, external data sources are scanned and selected. The theory of inquiry by Dewey (1933) shows that individuals’ recognition of incomplete or problematic situation initiates the problem-solving process, which involves the identification of information to seek. Information acquisition also is essential in tourism. Individuals are exposed to tourism-related information intentionally or unintentionally. They are also interested in the issues occurring with tourism service providers or destinations.

Two types of information acquisition were suggested—information seeking and attending. Johnson (2003) conceptualizes information seeking as a process of information acquisition with purpose. Seeking includes initiating the information search, expanding association, extending the search, selecting adequate information, retaining the interests, and finishing the search (Ellis, 1989, 1993; Kuhlthau, 1991). While information seeking includes active information acquisition, information attending denotes passive behavior without continuous information processing (J.-N. Kim et al., 2010). Information attending is found among individuals who become aware of natural disaster or political conflicts that occur at a tourism destination.
**Information Selection.** The way people interpret or process information is different, which leads to selective information processing. The information selection dimension is divided into information permitting and information forefending based on the degree of activeness in choosing appropriate information and denying irrelevant information. Information forefending involves more active communication of excluding data and knowledge which are not appropriate in problem solving.

In tourism, information selection is accomplished in particular when the destination to visit is decided. Itinerary is chosen and best choices are compared and selected. The selection of destination and other tourism experiences require justification of the choices. This fortification process involves not only information selection but also information forefending.

**Information Transmission.** Information transmission illuminates the external conveyance of digested information. This dimension is explained as people’s communicative action of “educating others on what would happen if something is not done and how close the problem is to these others” (J.-N. Kim et al., 2010, p. 138). It is classified into information sharing and forwarding by the levels of activeness. Information sharing is defined as passive information exchange: information also is shared when others ask the person to communicate prior to the experience. The model conceptualizes information forwarding as an active information transmission which is initiated without any external stimuli.

The underlying idea of information sharing and forwarding also can be applied to tourism. As actual visitation involves a lot of time and money spent, pre-visit information sharing to reduce risks is actively done. Experienced travelers are likely to share information to help others select the best choice.

**LOYALTY AND COMMUNICATIVE ACTION**

Factors affecting communicative action have been examined in previous studies in tourism. Variables such as demographic characteristics, types of tourism, behavior, expenditure, and prior experience have been identified (Fodness & Murray, 1997; Lehto et al., 2006). In identifying the factors, loyalty in tourism can provide meaningful ideas about information behavior. Already established, people with different levels of loyalty show commitment and revisit intentions differently. Loyalty would be an important predictor in clarifying the groups of people with different communicative patterns. Particularly, loyalty would be one of the criteria in demarcating active information processors and selectors. Therefore, the present study suggests loyalty, defined as a deep commitment of repurchase and favor without hesitation (Oliver, 1999), as an additional factor affecting individuals’ communicative action.

A new model named **loyalty-based communicative action in tourism** (Figure 1), which is an extension of CAPS to address the above-mentioned points, is proposed in the present study. The model suggests that tourism loyalty leads to different levels of information acquisition, selection, and transmission.
First, people with higher levels of tourism loyalty are likely to retain their interests to the destination and continuously collect information after the experience. They are likely to have a long-term relationship with the destination and be engaged in tourism-related issues. The proposed model shows that tourists with higher levels of loyalty, who build strong relationships with the destination, are likely to pay attention to destination-related information and actively seek information for the further relations. Gaps in the amount of information acquired would appear greater in the active dimension than the passive dimension.

Second, the present study suggests that loyal people who are deeply involved with the problem control information and show high selectivity. The proposed model represents that people with higher tourism loyalty are more likely to seek information actively, selecting information to reinforce the emotional attachment to the destination. They are likely to select information that fortifies their relationship with the destination. On the other hand, people with low tourism loyalty lack the ability to set the standards of accepting or blocking information for processing. This type of group does not need to consider the relevancy or usefulness of information, which leads to lower levels of information selection. Gaps in the amount of information selected by the tourists with different levels of loyalty would be greater in information forefending than in information permitting.
Finally, people who have intimate travel experience and high commitment to the destination tend to have higher behavioral and attitudinal involvement and relationship with the destination. The proposed model suggests that that they not only seek more related information and have more active personal involvement in information processing but also transmit information about the destination to others, which, in consumer science, is explained partly by word-of-mouth (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008).

Classifying loyalty groups

Sub-dimensions of loyalty have been examined in consumer science in general and in tourism in particular. Oliver (1999) classified this concept into cognitive, affective, and conative loyalty. Dick and Basu (1994) suggested the dichotomy of it into attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. This two-dimensional conceptualization of loyalty also has been adopted in tourism studies (Baloglu, 2002; Pritchard & Howard, 1997). The combination of the two methods of classification has been attempted in tourism. For example, Li and Petrick (2008) tested the categorization of attitudinal loyalty into three dimensions—cognitive, affective, and conative loyalty—which leads to behavioral loyalty.

Among various ways to define the sub-dimensions of loyalty, the present study adopts the dichotomization of Dick and Basu (1994) of it into attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, which has been widely used in tourism as well (Baloglu, 2002; Pritchard & Howard, 1997). According to the two-factorial classification, true loyalty, spurious loyalty, latent loyalty, and no loyalty have been identified. In the context of tourism destination, true loyalty indicates high levels of emotional attachment and willingness to support the destination. Spurious loyalty identifies consumers who visit the destination frequently as a habitual outcome. Latent loyalty shows that there are groups of people who have high levels of emotional involvement with the destination but rarely visit because of constraints such as distance, financial pressure, or lack of time. No loyalty indicates people with low attitudinal loyalty and low behavioral loyalty.

Communicative action by loyalty groups

True Loyalty and Communicative Action. People with high loyalty, behaviorally or attitudinally, are likely to have high possibilities of active and passive communication. As frequent visits indicate high levels of involvement with the destination, the high loyalty group would continue information seeking and acquiring regardless of their stage of tourism experience. The group’s activeness of behavior and high awareness of destination also would cause significant information selectivity. Tourists in this group strengthen the relationship with the destination by selective exposure and the processing of information to reinforce their beliefs. This group would show the highest activeness in information transmission.

Latent Loyalty and Communicative Action. As people in the latent loyalty group are similar to the true loyalty group in that they show high levels of emotional involvement with tourism-related issues, they are likely to be active in the information seeking and acquiring process. Although their chances and resources of acquiring first-hand experience are limited, this group is likely to retain interests in the destination and continuously collect information after the experience. High levels of attitudinal loyalty lead to continuous information acquisition, both in information attending and information seeking. A significant difference in information seeking
would be observed between the two different levels of attitudinal loyalty groups while the difference in information attending would not be significant. Similarly, there would be more difference in the amount of information selected by the tourists with different levels of attitudinal loyalty in information forefending than in information permitting because the former involves much more activeness in the reinforcing process than the latter.

**Spurious Loyalty and Communicative Action.** The spurious loyalty group would not actively seek information as much as those with emotional involvement with the destination. This group would not show as much activeness of information acquisition and information selection as the groups with higher attitudinal loyalty. The lack of involvement implies that there is less information for them to reinforce their beliefs.

However, information transmission can be actively found among this group of people. Because of their rich first-hand destination experience, they would be asked to share their experience. They may share positive travel experiences with people who seek advice. This group would show relatively active information transmission. However, the difference between the two different levels of behavioral loyalty groups would be clearly seen in the active dimension of information transmission—information forwarding. High attitudinal loyalty group would show more active ways of information delivery.

**No Loyalty and Communicative Action.** People with no tourism loyalty lack interest in information acquisition and transmission. In addition, they lack abilities to set the standards of accepting or blocking information for processing. This group does not need to consider the relevancy or usefulness of information, which leads to lower levels of information selection. Communicative activeness by each loyalty group is visually summarized in Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4.

![Graph showing communicative activeness by tourism loyalty groups]

**Figure 2**

Information Acquisition by Tourism Loyalty Groups
Figure 3
Information Selection by Tourism Loyalty Groups

Figure 4
Information Transmission by Tourism Loyalty Groups
IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The present study shows the spectrum of communicative action, which is affected by tourism loyalty. As previous studies focused more on the actual behavior, the study attempts to broaden views for understanding tourist behavior by examining tourism-related information communication.

The implications of the study are twofold. First, from the academic perspective, the study adopts and extends theories in communication and broadens the perspectives in understanding consumer behavior in tourism. It not only applies communication theories to tourism settings but also contributes to the extant tourism literature by focusing on information behavior, which has been under-researched. The present study also extends the communicative action in problem solving model by identifying consumer loyalty as a condition of it. It provides better ideas in understanding the consequences of loyalty by capturing people’s communicative behavior. Although the study focuses on the tourism context, this extended model also provides room for its application to other fields of study such as consumer behavior in general.

Second, the study provides practical implications. From the tourism management perspectives, understanding the public’s communicative action enables the establishment of long-term relationships and reduces risks by having broader perspectives in understanding tourist behavior. The study addresses that information behavior is the underlying realm of tourists’ actual visit and that it captures latent behavior regarding tourism, which eventually affects actual visitation. This study also helps to find groups who are involved with active communication and suggests its relation to loyalty. The study helps practitioners identify active communicators in different aspects for the purpose of selecting target markets for promotion or consumer groups to focus on in risk management.

The study further provides better ideas about classifying consumers in tourism, by loyalty dimensions, from communication-based perspectives. Although communicative action in problem solving, which this study was based on, focused more on the public’s situational factors that lead to collective actions in problem solving, it did not confine the individuals as public and their communicative behavior as the process of problem-solving. The present study further explored individuals’ internal conditions such as personal experiential history and emotional state as antecedents of communicative behavior. Yet integrated consideration of situational factors and personal factors in predicting communicative action will be required in future studies. Also further scrutiny about the application of the proposed model to problem-solving situations in tourism would provide valuable implications for researchers and practitioners in identifying active and activist public segments that arise concerning tourism issues.

REFERENCES


