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Why Do People Travel to Nature Based Tourism Destinations?

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ABSTRACT

Nature-based tourism destinations provide tourists low density tourism experience. Evidence shows that perceptions of crowding are one of the determinators for visitors to nature-based tourism areas. Also, marketing factors, such as perceptions of service quality, are important to influence visitors' subsequent behaviors. The perceptions of crowding and service quality are supposed to affect visitors' behavioral intentions. On the other hand, taking from the perspectives of cultural anthropology and service marketing, I argue that behavioral intentions are also influenced by values. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to test a behavioral intentions model of nature-based tourism visitors that include three constructs: values (cultural anthropology factor), perceptions of service quality (service marketing factors), and perceptions of crowding (natural resource tourism factor). In 2007-2008, the visitors to Taroko National Park in Taiwan were surveyed. I used an on-site sampling approach. Overall, I obtained 1080 usable questionnaires. The results showed that values and service quality dimensions as well as crowding and behavioral intentions indices demonstrated acceptable reliability of measures. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the predictive power of values dimensions, service quality dimensions and crowding index on behavioral intentions index. The result showed that the multiple regression model was significant at the 0.001 level, and the adjusted R-square equaled 0.50. The findings provide implications for visitor management and research in nature-based tourism.

INTRODUCTION

In the year of 2007, there were over 903 million international tourist arrivals, worldwide, with a growth of 6.6% as compared to the year of 2006. International travelers are projected to nearly double in size by 2020, lead by China and destinations in South-East Asia. (UNWTO, 2008). Among various tourism destinations, nature based tourism areas around the world increasingly serve as international tourist attractions and play an important role in the international tourism industry. Given the increasingly culturally diverse visitors, changes in racial and ethnic composition have confronted the management of nature based tourism areas. The globally diverse visitors also bring various values visiting nature based tourism destinations. Since values are presumably central to cultural differences that may exist among cultural and national groups and allegedly influence perceptions and behaviors (Chick, 1997, 2000; Clark, 1990; Hofstede, 2001; Inglehart, 1997; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1975; Torelli & Kaikati, 2009), I argue that this is true with respect to nature based tourism visitation behavior and engaging in outdoor recreation (Brubaker, 2006; Chick, Li, Zinn, Absher, & Graefe, 2007; Gobster, 2007; Lee, Petrick, & Crompton, 2007; Li, 2006; Li, Absher, Graefe, & Hsu, 2008; Li,

Absher, Hsu, & Graefe, 2008; Li, Chick, Zinn, Absher, & Graefe, 2007; Li, Zinn, Barro, & Manfredo, 2003; Li, Zinn, Chick, Absher, Graefe, & Hsu, 2007; Petrick, 2004; Tanner, Freimund, Borrie, & Moisey, 2008). Research on factors contributing to a better understanding of visitor behavior among diverse clienteles will help improve the tourism and recreation management on the one hand and promote a positive cultural understanding on the other (Li, Lai, Chick, Zinn, & Graefe, 2007; Reisinger & Turner, 1999).

Since nature based tourism is a sort of low density recreation and tourism, evidences show that perceptions of crowding are one of the determinators for visitors to nature based tourism or backcountry recreation areas (Manning, 1999; Shelby, Vaske, & Donnelly, 1996). Also, marketing factor, such as perceptions of service quality, is important to influence visitors' subsequent behaviors (Absher, 1998; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). The perceptions of crowding and service quality are supposed to affect visitors' behavioral intentions. On the other hand, taking from the perspectives of cultural anthropology and service marketing, I argue that behavioral intentions are also influenced by values (Li, Absher, Graefe, & Hsu, 2008; Li, Lai, Chick, Zinn, & Graefe, 2007). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to test the utility of values combining perceptions of crowding and service quality to explain visitors' behavioral intentions in a nature based tourism setting in Taiwan.

I propose to test a behavioral intentions model for nature based tourism visitors that include three constructs: values (cultural anthropology factor), perceptions of service quality and behavioral intentions (service marketing factors), perceptions of crowding (natural resource tourism factor). The modeling method will be used to test the proposed behavioral intentions model, i.e., behavioral intentions = values + service quality + crowding. The results will be allowed to explaining the relationships between behavioral intentions and values, service quality, and crowding and provide implications to visitor management.

RESEARCH METHODS

In 2007-2008, the visitors to Taroko National Park in Taiwan were surveyed. Because I intended to examine the relationship between behavioral intentions, values, service quality, and crowding for culturally diverse subjects, a simple random sample of all visitors would not efficiently yield adequate respondents from specific cultural groups. Hence, I used a convenient purposive on-site sampling approach, at sites known to be heavily used by visitors with diverse cultural backgrounds (Weisberg, Krosnick, & Bowen, 1996). The sampling sites were chosen in consultation with park officers, on-site rangers and volunteers. I mainly focused on Taiwan residents, Japanese visitors, Mainland Chinese visitors and Westerns in the sample, because these were major cultural groups to Taroko National Park. Overall, the usable questionnaires equaled 1080.

The measured instruments employed a Likert response scale and included four constructs, i.e., values, service quality, crowing, and behavioral intentions. The List of Values (LOV) developed by Kahle (1983) was adopted to measure possible cross-cultural differences on a nine-point response scale. LOV includes 9 items which is parsimonious in its approach and easy to administer. Cronbach's alphas of the four dimensions (harmony, respect, achievement, and hedonism) ranged from 0.75 to 0.92,

and the composite reliability of the four dimensions was 0.83. To measure service quality, 21 service quality items developed by Burns, Graefe, and Absher (2003) were customized to fit the situation of Taiwan on a five-point response scale. The four service quality dimensions including facility, service, information and management, were relatively valid and reliable across different outdoor recreation settings. The Cronbach's alphas of the four dimensions ranged from 0.71 to 0.88, and the composite reliability of the four dimensions was 0.85. Five items were used to operationalize behavioral intentions, including passive, active, private, and self recommendations on a five-point scale (Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). The Cronbach's alpha value of the five items was 0.80. Three crowding variables formatted on a standard nine-point scale were used to direct comparison about crowding conditions across studies, areas, and time (Manning, 1999; Shelby, 1980). The Cronbach's alpha value of the three crowding items was 0.95.

FINDINGS

Respondents were more likely to be male (54 %, $n = 492$) than female (46 %, $n = 425$). They were largely young adults (mean age = 33), with only 8 % 50-years or older. The level of education was fairly high; 87 % ($n = 511$) of the participants had formal education beyond high school, 44 % ($n = 254$) had a college degree, and 17 % ($n = 99$) had a graduate degree. There were 38 % ($n = 203$) of the participants having household incomes over NTD\$ 600,000, and 19 % ($n = 246$) over NTD\$ 800,000 (average 1 USD = 32 NTD, during the survey period). More than 61 % ($n = 326$) were employed outside the home, 16 % ($n = 84$) were full-time students, and 23 % ($n = 122$) were full-time homemakers, retired, and others.

Before testing the relationships among constructs, I examine the dimension/index reliability. The Cronbach's alpha values of the LOV four dimensions, four service quality dimensions, crowding index, and behavioral intentions index were all beyond 0.70 (the rule of thumb for acceptable alpha values is 0.70). This indicated reliable measures of the dimension/index (Groves, Fowler, Couper, Lepkowski, Singer, & Tourangeau, 2004). I then used multiple regression analysis to test the predictive power of the LOV's four dimensions on behavioral intentions indices. Prior to undertaking the multiple regression analysis, all the dimensions/indices were standardized into Z-scores with a mean value of zero and a standard deviation value of one. The results of the multiple regression model were significant at the 0.001 level, and the adjusted R-square values equaled 0.45. Lastly, when service quality dimensions and crowding index joining LOV dimensions to predict behavioral intentions, the adjusted R-square value reached 0.50 (Table 1). In other words, the combined effects of LOV dimensions, service quality dimensions and crowding index accounted for 50 percent of variance in explaining behavioral intentions. I concluded that combination of the LOV dimensions along with service quality and crowding were useful to predict visitors' behavioral intentions such as positive words of mouth and repeat visits.

The testing of the LOV suggests that the values measures as employed in the context of nature based tourism were reliable. The combined effects of LOV dimensions of values predicting behavioral intentions showed adjusted R-square 0.45, suggested that, there were, in fact, something there and the measurement method of values dimensions was accounting for it appropriately. The LOV can be used as a valid measurement of

values in nature based tourism for the variances to be explained. I found hedonism values dimension tended to be more important than the other three values dimensions, according to the beta values in the model. I, therefore, concluded that in terms of a set of broad values measures to understand the patterns of visitor behavior, the values such as “fun and enjoyment” and “excitement” were key components to explain visitors’ behavioral intentions in nature based tourism.

Table 1 Multiple regression model of values (respect, harmony, achievement, hedonism), service quality (facility, service, information, management) and crowding on behavioral intentions

Dependent variables ^b	Behavioral intentions index ^a				
	Beta	P-value	F-value	Model P-value	Adjusted R-square
Respect ^c	0.078	0.023			
Harmony	-0.157	<0.001			
Achievement	0.163	<0.001			
Hedonism	0.392	<0.001			
Facility	0.026	0.389	111.11	<0.001	0.50
Service	0.136	<0.001			
Information	0.098	0.003			
Management	0.001	0.976			
Crowding	-0.132	<0.001			

Note:

^a Behavioral intentions index served as the independent variables.

^b Values dimensions (respect, harmony, achievement, hedonism), service quality dimensions (facility, service, information, management), and crowding index served as the dependent variable.

^c Behavioral intentions index were created by taking the mean of five behavioral intentions items; respect, harmony, achievement, and hedonism dimension created by taking the mean of values items within the same dimension; facility, service, information, and management index created by taking the mean of service quality items within the same dimension; crowding index created by taking the mean of three crowding items.

APPLICATION OF RESULTS

The findings have implications for management and research of diverse visitors in nature based tourism. The value dimensions found in this study are meaningful enough to offer managers, translating abstract values into actionable portraits on which to base service and product development, communication strategies, and other marketing actions to match different visitors’ value orientations.

For instance, the hedonism values are more salient than other types of values for the visitors to nature based tourism areas such as national parks. This implies visitors who tend to have fun, enjoyment or freedom values may tend to show positive behavioral intentions (e.g., positive words of mouth, repeat visit). Moreover, the achievement values such as self-fulfillment, sense of accomplishment positively affect visitors’ behavioral intentions to the national park. Managers can, for example, consider to accommodating more achievement or sprightly oriented programs such as adventure activities (e.g., rock climbing, high mountain climbing, white water rafting) in the national park for the enjoyment of visitors. Findings imply that adding ingredients of theme park ambience

such as Disney positively influence visitors' behavioral intentions. In other words, building the cheerful, joyful or challenging atmosphere but remain the conservation and preservation spirits on the natural and cultural resources is important on visitors' positive behavioral intentions to the national park. The "skywalk" project in the Grand Canyon West may provide a good example to demonstrate the aforementioned relationship. I also found that harmony values are negatively related to behavioral intentions. Visitors with values such as security or sense of belonging tend to show negative behavioral intentions to the national park. The finding might be because national parks are normally located at remote and primitive places. Visitors with more safety concerns or visitors being more social oriented tend not to choose national parks as their next visiting place or tend not to tell other people positive things about the national park.

In addition to the influences of values on behavioral intentions, whether the visitors perceive service quality and crowding adds predictive power to behavioral intentions, contributing additional details of service management to nature based tourism areas. Among the four service quality dimensions, visitors are likely to rate service dimensions more importantly. In other words, whether the national park staffs or rangers are available, courteous and willing to answer their questions or whether the national park staffs or rangers make them feel welcome are key factors in determining visitors' behavioral intentions. Consistent to my expectation, perceptions of crowding are significantly and negatively related to visitors' behavioral intentions. To provide the "solitude" recreation experience is critical to a nature based tourism destination such as national park. The crowding management, in particular, during the holidays and weekend are important to enhance visitors' positive behavioral intentions. Further understandings of the similarities and differences in visitors' values and services related factors may help to promote a harmonious and quality recreational experience.

DISCUSSION

Since increasingly culturally diverse visitations to nature based tourism destinations such as national parks, it is essential to better understand the culturally diverse customers and provide appropriate services. Visitors to national parks are not all alike and need to be treated in different ways in order to enhance their visiting experiences and positive behavioral intentions. This study provides an overview to research diverse visitors in a nature based tourism setting from a behavioral approach. Below three points are suggested for discussion.

First, I advocate to researching the segmentation of diverse visitors. Namely, researching on the individual cultural groups (e.g., Taiwan residents, Japanese, Mainland Chinese, Westerns) to obtain insights to different cultural visitors' behavioral intentions. Second, visitors' motivation (e.g., Iso-Ahola, 1989) and satisfaction (Oliver, 1980) are one of the most studies in nature based tourism. Future researches are suggested to adding these two important factors to the behavioral intentions model to further understand visitors' behavioral intentions. Third, I did not include the report actual behaviors measures (e.g., how many times and days respondents reported visiting national parks) to the proposed model in this study (Bernard, Killworth, Kronenfeld, & Sailer, 1984). Future researches are also suggested to discovering the relationships between behavioral intentions and report actual behaviors as well as to discover whether the combined effects of values, crowding, service quality, satisfaction, and behavioral

intentions predict report actual behaviors in the context of nature based tourism. In other words, I intend to extend the primary proposed model in this study and test the structural relationship of “report actual behaviors = values + motivation + crowding + service quality + satisfaction + behavioral intentions.” The new model will provide additional details for the investigation of customer services.

In order to ensure a culturally diverse sample, this study used a convenient purposive sampling procedure to collect data. This means the sample was not random and caution should be taken in extracting and generalizing population characteristics from the results. Future research employed probability and stratified sampling methods are needed. It is also necessary to develop a more comprehensive structure to better explain diverse visitors’ behavioral intentions and this will require additional research. I also advocate future research continuing to explore this line of investigation so as to provide niche services and maximize positive behavioral intentions.

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