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Examining how time flies at destinations based on visitors' perceived consistency of destination experiences

Introduction

Researchers and practitioners often measure visitors' satisfaction and subsequent loyalty (e.g., WOM, revisit intentions) post-visit to gauge marketing and management success (e.g., Žabkar, Brenčič, & Dmitrović, 2010). This study extends this thinking and focuses on visitors' on-site experience through the lens of their perceived absorption experiences during visits at destinations (i.e., the sense of immersion and feeling time flies) (Patterson, Yu, & Ruyter, 2006; So, King, & Sparks, 2014). Recent studies have supported the importance of this consideration under the visitor/customer engagement umbrella and suggested high visitor engagement contributes to their overall destination satisfaction and loyalty (e.g., So et al., 2014; Su et al., 2020). However, the examination of how destination markers can enhance visitors' feeling of absorption is lacking. In the context of a small destination in rural China, we suggest two antecedents to visitors' absorption experiences at destination based on the theories of flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikzentmihaly, 1990; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), individuals' need for uniqueness (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001), and confirmation-disconfirmation (Parasuraman et al., 1994). These include visitors' positive attitude toward dialect and perceived destination distinctiveness. Specifically, we suggest that visitors are more likely to experience absorption when they have a positive attitude toward the local dialect of the destination as well as perceive the destination to be distinct. In addition, both of these effects can be moderated by visitors' evaluation of their experiences compared to their expectations (perceived consistency of destination of experiences). When the visitors' experiences are consistent with their expectations, the effect of positive attitude toward dialect on absorption is enhanced. However, when perceived consistency is high, the effect of perceived destination distinctiveness on absorption is weakened. These propositions are supported with a sample of 352 visitors to a rural destination in China.

Literature Review

The concept of visitor absorption is drawn from the well-established customer engagement and employee engagement constructs (So et al., 2014). So and colleagues (2014, p309) state that "Absorption represents effortless concentration, loss of self-consciousness, distortion of time, and intrinsic enjoyment". Thus, in the context destinations, a visitor experiencing absorption may feel full concentration, forgetting of self, immersion, and the sense that time passes quickly. Thus, absorption is closely tied to the "flow" experience described by Csikszentmihalyi and Csikzentmihalyi (1990). Based on flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikzentmihalyi, 1990; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), the experience of flow depends on two factors: the challenges existing in the situation and an individual's abilities to solve those challenges. When these factors are at matching levels, the individual is more likely to experience flow. When individuals feel they are inadequate to solve the challenges, they may experience frustration. When the challenges are perceived to be too easy, they may experience boredom.

Building upon these theoretical insights, we suggest that visitors are more likely to experience absorption when they are capable of solving challenges during their visits. One typical challenge for domestic Chinese tourists visiting rural destinations in China is the language. Local residents of rural areas tend to speak Chinese dialects that are difficult to understand by visitors (Lu et al.,

2019). The effect of this difficulty on the tourist experience depends upon the tourists willingness and ability to overcome challenges caused by this language issue. Using the dialect of Cantonese as an example, Lu and colleagues (2019) demonstrated that when visitors have a positive attitude toward the local dialect of the destination they are more likely to develop destination satisfaction and intentions to revisit that destination. They suggested that visitors with a positive attitude toward dealing with the different dialect are more likely to gain deeper understanding of the local culture and history. Building on this insight, we further suggest that when visitors possess a positive attitude toward dialects at destinations, they are more likely to solve challenges brought by language barriers and experience absorption (H1).

In addition, we suggest that the perceptions visitors have about the distinctiveness of the destination is another contributing factor to their experience of absorption at the destination. Based on Nam et al. (2016) and Qu et al. (2011), customers are more likely to develop positive attitude (e.g., loyalty) toward a brand if it is perceived as distinctive. This is because customers tend to find such brands more attractive, difficult to replace, and aiding their psychological need to be unique (Nam et al., 2016; Tian et al., 2001). As brand attachment and performance perceptions are considered as antecedents of customer engagement (So et al., 2014; van Doorn et al., 2010), it is likely that visitors' perceived brand distinctness contributes to their absorption as well. This potential link is supported by the contributing role of tourists' need for uniqueness for perceived authenticity of destinations (Karagöz & Uysal, 2020), which is shown to promote tourist engagement (Bryce et al., 2015). Drawing upon these studies, it is suggested that when visitors perceive the destination to be distinctive, they are more likely to experience absorption (H2). Along the same line, it is likely that when visitors possess a positive attitude toward dialects at destinations, this recognition and awareness that dialects are an integral part of the destination characteristics should also contribute to their perceived destination distinctiveness (H3).

Further, it is well-supported that customers' satisfaction is based on the comparison of expectations and experiences based on confirmation-disconfirmation (Parasuraman et al., 1994). When the actual experiences match or exceed expectations, they are more likely to be satisfied with the product/service. Along this line of thinking, it is likely that when visitors perceive their actual experiences at destination as consistent with their prior expectations, they are more likely to experience the satisfying feeling of absorption as a result of their positive attitude to local dialects (H4). However, in this situation, the effect of perceived destination distinctiveness on absorption can be weakened because their need for uniqueness is weakened by their perception of high consistency between their expectations and experiences. That is, when experiences are predicted correctly, visitors may perceive the visit to be more ordinary, weakening their absorption into the unique destination. Therefore, it is proposed that when visitors perceive their actual experiences at destination are consistent with their prior expectations, they are less likely to experience the satisfying feeling of absorption as a result of their perceived destination distinctiveness (H5). The conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

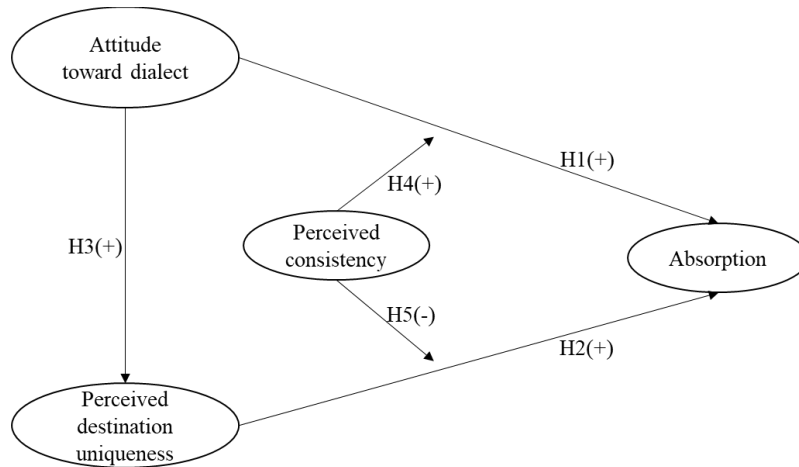


Fig. 1. Conceptual model and hypotheses

Methodology, analysis, and results

The measurement for positive attitude toward dialect is adopted from Lu et al. (2019). Perceived destination distinctiveness is measured using the scale from Nam et al. (2016). Absorption measurement is based on the customer engagement scale from So et al. (2014). The items used to measure perceived consistency of destination experiences were developed to describe the extent to which visitors perceive their actual visit experiences is consistent with their prior expectations. Questions were translated to Chinese through the back-translation approach recommended by Brislin (1970). Data were collected from visitors to a rural destination in China. Paper-based surveys were distributed to visitors in a random manner at the destination. 352 complete responses were collected and used for data analysis.

A two-step Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) was conducted using SPSS AMOS 26 with maximum likelihood estimation. The measurement model showed adequate fit with $\chi^2 = 357.84$ ($p < 0.001$, $df = 98$); $\chi^2/df = 3.65$; comparative fit index (CFI) = .95; Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .94; goodness-of-fit index (GFI) = .89; adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) = .85; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .034; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .08. All standardized factor loadings for each item were statistically significant ($p < .001$) and were in the .74 to .91 range, reflecting good reliability (Hair et al., 2006). Convergent validity was demonstrated as all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were above .7 and all composite reliability (CR) values were above .9. Discriminant validity was also achieved as the square roots of each AVE value were larger than their respective cross-correlations.

The structural model also achieved good fit with $\chi^2 = 559.97$ ($p < 0.001$, $df = 195$); $\chi^2/df = 2.87$; CFI = .95; TLI = .94; RMSEA = .073; SRMR = .032. All hypotheses were supported. Specifically, visitors' feeling of absorption was promoted by their positive attitude toward dialect ($\beta = .40$, $t = 6.537^{***}$) and perceived destination distinctiveness ($\beta = .35$, $t = 4.937^{***}$). Visitors' positive attitude toward dialect contributed to perceived destination distinctiveness as well ($\beta = .34$, $t = 5.466^{***}$).

Perceived consistency of destination experiences positively moderated the link of positive attitude toward dialect to absorption ($\beta = .20$, $t=2.485^*$) and negatively moderated the link of perceived destination distinctiveness to absorption ($\beta = -.23$, $t=-2.827^{**}$). Overall, this model explained 69.2 percent of perceived destination distinctiveness and 74.9 percent of variance of visitors' absorption experience at the destination.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study bridges several important destination marketing insights on how to create satisfying experiences for visitors, especially when locals at the destination speak a different dialect from visitors. By focusing on the pleasurable experience of absorption and drawing upon flow theory, this study suggested that visitors are more likely to feel absorption when they keep an open mind to the local dialect and recognize it as an integral part of the destination characteristics. Thus, destination marketers are encouraged to feature local dialect in their promotional materials and provide support to visitors to familiarize with the dialect (e.g., include links to tutorials in the booking confirmation email). Building and orchestrating elements at the destination to substantiate the distinctiveness of the destination is also encouraged to facilitate visitors' absorption experience. Although perceived consistency of destination experiences negatively moderated this destination distinctiveness to absorption link, it does not mean perceived inconsistency between expectations and experience advantageous. Rather, in the situation of high perceived consistency, visitors are more likely to develop absorption from their positive attitude to dialect and less from their perceived destination distinctiveness. Thus, it is suggested that in addition to helping develop visitors' positive attitude toward dialect at the destination at all times, they should also orchestrate elements of surprises or "golden moments" (Ryan, 2010) to still stimulate visitors' interest during their visits.

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