A Psychosocial Assessment of Agritourism Associations

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ABSTRACT

Agritourism, among other types of on-farm enterprises, has steadily grown since the eighties mainly to increase farm revenues. Such entrepreneurial emergence required farmers to attain a new set of business competencies to successfully pursue their goals. In response, membership-based associations have spurred to expand farmers’ business knowledge and support their needs. Recently though, many associations, including those serving agritourism farmers, are struggling to survive because of high members’ inactivity and decreasing membership. Given the many benefits agritourism brings to farmers, the entrepreneurial needs agritourism farmers have, and the role associations have in supporting entrepreneurial farmers, it is critical to understand the factors affecting associations’ performance. Therefore, we designed a study to investigate agritourism associations’ performance from a psychosocial perspective that includes three integrated constructs: membership motivations, psychological commitment, and social capital. We present the study theoretical background and research design, including survey methods and instrument.

Keywords: Agritourism; association; membership; performance; psychosocial assessment
INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Agritourism, defined as a type of on-farm entrepreneurial endeavor with the purpose of attracting visitors to the farm (Tew and Barbieri 2012), has steadily grown worldwide since the eighties seeking to increase farm revenues (Wilson et al. 2001). In the United States of America (USA), agritourism-related activities generated over $704 million income in 2012, representing an increase of nearly 20% as compared to 2007; in the same time span, the number of agritourism farms increased nearly 30% (USDA 2007, 2012). However, the emergence of farm entrepreneurship posits challenges to novel entrepreneurial farmers. They are faced with the need to acquire a set of business competencies (e.g., marketing, financial) as well as individual (e.g., innovation, risk-taking) and interpersonal (e.g., interacting with others) skills (Mishra et al. 2002) to stimulate innovation and business success (Phelan and Sharpley 2012). Given that many of these entrepreneurial skills are not innate but stem from internal (e.g., marketing knowledge) and external (e.g., social capital) factors (Evans and Illbery 1989; Lee et al. 2005), farmers sought social networks (e.g., associations) for support and advise (Greve 1995).

To respond to this need, a variety of business membership-based associations (hereafter “associations”) emerged to provide support and advisory opportunities to entrepreneurial farmers. Associations have the capacity to enhance members’ economic gains and social capital (Benda 2013), provide access to credit and other sources of income (Matchaya and Perotin 2013), and advance members’ career development (Thomas et al. 2013). Associations are also essential to emerging entrepreneurs in terms of network opportunities, collective power for a variety of services, and opportunities for business capacity building (Knippels 2008). Such range of benefits can facilitate economic growth and network vigor among their members (Newbery et al. 2013; Phillipson et al. 2006).

Despite the aforementioned benefits, evidence suggests that many associations are
struggling to remain in business because of high levels of inactive members and overall
decreasing membership (Newbery et al. 2013). As a result, associations are failing to deliver
significant benefits and services to their members (Phillipson et al. 2006). Agritourism-
related associations are experiencing similar struggles, being especially affected by a
significant decrease of their membership (C. Touchette, personal communication, February
28, 2013).

According to Bennett (1998), high levels of opting out and overall inactivity in
business associations are likely related to the number and quality of the services delivered
and the disparity of services across associations, which induced performance variation from
one association to another. The extant literature indicates two perspectives to assess
associations’ performance. Given the voluntary nature of membership, the Institutional
perspective emphasizes associations’ ability to maintain members’ retention and involvement
based on a set of structural (e.g., association size) and agency-related (e.g., leadership,
resources) factors (Bennett 1998; 1999; Newbery et al. 2013). The Relational (thereafter
psychosocial) perspective states that associations’ performance is influenced by a set of
attributes related to their members, which include three major attributes: the mix of
motivations driving their desire to join an association, their psychological commitment to
affiliated associations, and the social capital and social network attained within associations
(Newby et al. 2013; Tschirhart 2006; Gahwiler and Havitz 1998; Iwasaki and Havitz 1998;
Pritchard et al. 1999; Wang and Ashcraft 2014; Okoli and Oh 2007).

Members’ motivations, defined as the psychological process to initiate or direct
deliberate actions towards a goal (Weinstein and DeHaan 2014), need to be in line with the
types of services associations provide (Hager 2014). Sustained membership is also
determined by members’ psychological commitment, expressed through indicators of
affection (favorability towards the association), continuance (perceived loss from leaving the
association), and normativity (moral obligations to the association) (Gruen et al. 2000; Meyer and Allen 1991). Social capital, defined as an aggregation of actual or potential resources embedded in a network or “membership in a group” (Bourdieu 1986; p. 21), is another key indicator of associations’ performance as it helps to create a trusted network that members seek (Woolcock and Narayan 2000).

**STUDY JUSTIFICATION AND PURPOSE**

Although aforementioned studies point out reasons behind successful associations in terms of members’ retention (Bennett and Robson 2011), reasons behind membership decline among entrepreneurial farm associations is not readily available. This lack of information is problematic taking into consideration the steady increase of agritourism and the stated contributions of associations to enhance the entrepreneurial capacity of farmers. Therefore, we designed a study to comprehensively evaluate agritourism association performance from their members’ psychosocial perspectives. Based on the extant literature, our holistic assessment aims at: 1) evaluating members’ motivations for joining agritourism associations; 2) measuring members’ level of psychological commitment with agritourism associations; and 3) identifying the types and levels of social capital within agritourism associations (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Psychosocial assessment of agritourism associations](image-url)
Each study aim, in turn, is driven by a set of specific goals. To examine *Members’ Motivations*, our study will: assess members’ motivations for joining agritourism associations; reduce motivations to fewer dimensions based on their underlying factors; cluster members based on their motivations; compare motivational clusters based on their business agricultural, farmer, and membership profiles; and compare motivational clusters based on the needs and satisfaction of services provided. *Members’ Psychological Commitment* will be examined by: assessing levels of members’ psychological commitment to agritourism associations; identifying whether business agricultural, farmer and membership profiles, and service distribution channel influence members’ levels of commitments; and evaluating whether levels of involvement contribute members’ level of commitments. The evaluation of *Social Capital* will include: assessing the levels of social capital among members of agritourism associations; comparing members’ levels of social capital participation involvement between agritourism associations; and identifying members’ number of network ties based on the type of information members received from other members.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

A web-based platform will be used to survey entrepreneurial farmers currently affiliated to two agritourism associations: 1) the North American Farmers’ Direct Marketing Association (NAFDMA), and 2) the Agritourism Network Association (ANA). These fee-based associations were purposely chosen because although both aim to serve entrepreneurial farmers, they differ on some distinct agency and structural attributes, such as their target audience, purpose, membership structure and geographic scope. We estimate surveying about 250 members from NAFDMA and 150 from ANA; based on similar studies, we expect a conservative 40% response rate (Barbieri 2010; 2013).
NAFDMA serves individuals who are somehow related to the farm direct marketing industry (e.g., entrepreneurial farmers, farmers’ market managers) with the purpose of growing the prosperity of their members and becoming the world’s leading association for farm direct marketers and agritourism operators (NAFDMA 2015). It is located in Southampton (MA), and hosts members from Canada, U.S., and Mexico. Their members are involved with agritourism (e.g., pick your own) and other types of entrepreneurial farming (e.g., value-added processes) and direct marketing (e.g., on-farm retail, farmers’ markets, consumer-supported agriculture). NAFDMA offers two levels of paid membership: Premium ($250 annually) which give members full access to all NAFDMA services and resources (e.g., email updates, annual convention, advance learning retreat, peer-to-peer library) and Associate ($50 annually) with limited access to those resources.

ANA serves agritourism farmers in North Carolina (NC), with the mission to facilitate easily accessible and affordable liability insurance and consistent zoning and planning regulations for NC agritourism development (ANA 2015). They also provide agritourism farmers with resources and information on a variety of topics including marketing, highway and site signage, safety issues, start-up funding sources, and partnering with other rural activities. ANA is hosted by the NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (Raleigh, NC). ANA has different levels of membership: Individual targeting agritourism farms, vineyards, direct market farms, on-farm markets ($75 annually), Corporate for businesses or for-profit agencies ($125 annually), Sponsors for individual non-farmers or non-profit organizations ($50 annually), and Junior for high school and college students ($25 annually).
Survey Instrument

Based on the study aim and the extant literature, the survey instrument will collect information on members’ motivations to join an association, socio-psychological commitment, social capital, and socio-demographics. The Professional Association Membership scale (Hager 2014) was revised and adopted to assess members’ motivations because of its comprehensiveness and inclusiveness. The revised scale will assess 16 motivational items, measured in a five point scale, representing four incentive dimensions: (1) public normative and lobbying (e.g., “Promote public awareness of agritourism”); (2) private relational (e.g., “Develop my agritourism network”, “Get updates about agritourism”); (3) private economic (e.g., “Increase the number of farm customers”), and (4) private occupational and informational (e.g., “Get updated information on licenses/permits”).

A combination of scales (Iwasaki and Havitz 2004, Meyer and Allen 1991, Wang and Ashcraft 2014) were modified to measure members’ socio-psychological commitment and involvement with their associations using a series of 5-point Likert scales. The study scale includes 28 socio-psychological commitment scale capturing four (socio) organizational and four psychological commitment dimensions. The (socio) organizational commitment included four dimensions: (1) Organizational (e.g., “I would recommend NAFDMA/ANA to other farmers); (2) Affective (e.g., “I feel a strong sense of belonging to NAFDMA/ANA); (3) Continuance (e.g., “My business would be disrupted if I leave NAFDMA/ANA”); and (4) Normative (e.g., “NAFDMA/ANA supports me and my business”). The psychological commitment included: (1) Resistance to Change (e.g., “My preference to participate in NAFDMA/ANA will not change”); (2) Cognition (e.g., “I consider myself to be an educated consumer regarding NAFDMA/ANA”); (3) Identity (e.g., “I prefer to join NAFDMA/ANA because their image comes closest to reflecting my business”); and (4) Volition (e.g., “My preference about NAFDMA/ANA was freely chosen from several alternatives”).
Jones’s (2005) scale was adapted to measure members’ social capital because its comprehensiveness. The modified scale measures altogether 15 items, also measured on 5-point Likert scales: (1) Structural (e.g., “I have close relationships with NAFDMA/ANA members”); (2) Relational (e.g., “NAFDMA/ANA members take decisions that best benefit the agritourism industry”), and (3) Cognitive (e.g., “I have common interests with NAFDMA/ANA members”). The survey will also query respondents about their demographic (e.g., age, gender, education) and membership (e.g., years being a member, type of membership) characteristics. Additionally, farm owners will be asked specific questions about their business (e.g., farm size, number of employees, farm gross income) and agritourism related operations if applicable (e.g., number of years receiving visitors, sales related to agritourism).

**Data Analysis**

To address the study objectives, data will be analyzed through a combination of descriptives and inferential tests using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptives will be used to identify members’ demographic, membership characteristics, farm portfolio, and agritourism related operations. Cronbach alpha reliability tests will be used to examine the internal reliability and validity of each construct measurements (members’ motivations, socio-psychological commitment, and social capital).

To address the goals related to the first study aim, principal component factor analysis will be applied to reduce examined motivations to their fewer dimensions; following, cluster analysis will be employed to identify different types of members based on their motivations. For comparison purposes (aims two and three), multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) (followed by post-hoc t-tests when applicable) will be conducted to identify differences on members’ demographic, membership characteristics, farm portfolio, and agritourism related operations across motivation-based clusters and types of associations. Finally, multiple liner
regressions will be used to identify what independent variables impact members’
psychological commitment to their associations.

**STUDY CONTRIBUTION**

Information obtained from this study will inform agritourism associations to enhance their performance by identifying better ways to serve their members. In doing so, study results can even help associations to redefine their mission according to the needs and motivations of their current members, which may have evolved over time. Associations’ enhanced services and more targeted mission can, in turn, strengthen the entrepreneurial skills and other services that agritourism farmers seek from their business associations. Additionally, this study will contribute to the scholarship of agritourism by identifying, in a comprehensive way, members’ motivations, levels of socio-psychological commitment, and social capital within agritourism associations.

Associations’ improved managerial intelligence and scholarly contribution emerging from this study are critical taking into consideration the role that agritourism associations have in strengthening the entrepreneurial skills and business knowledge of their members. By increasing the entrepreneurial and business capacity of farmers, this study will help to advance agritourism operations individually as well as stimulate agritourism development in a larger scope. This is important taking into consideration the array of socio-cultural, economic and environmental benefits agritourism is suggested to produce in the farm business, farm household and greater society.

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