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Investigating the Role of Social Return on the Understanding of Craft Brewery Visitors in British Columbia, Canada

Introduction

Rapid growth within the craft brewery industry has occurred in many locations around the world in the last decade. In British Columbia, Canada, the number of craft breweries has nearly tripled from 54 in 2010 to over 150 in 2018 (BC Gov News, 2017; BC Ale Trail, 2018). In 2016, British Columbia (BC) developed a provincial tourism initiative named the BC Ale Trail in an effort to grow and foster craft beer tourism with the increasing number of breweries throughout the province. The BC Ale Trail currently has over 20 trails located in most parts of the province.

In the culinary tourism literature, increased focus on craft beer tourism has occurred in recent years examining concepts ranging from sustainability to economics to resilience (Alonso, Sakellarios, & Bressan, 2017; Murray & Kline, 2015; Dunn & Kregor, 2014; Eberts, 2014). However, a gap exists related to the social impacts of craft brewery visitation by both residents and tourists within a social media context.

In the craft beer industry, social media has become an important tool in the marketing and development of business. However, research has not examined the role of social media from visitor to visitor. Using the social return scale (SRS) developed by Boley, Jordan, Kline, and Knollenberg (2018), this research further validated the SRS and used social return as a measure to examine social involvement, memories, loyalty, place attachment, and authenticity.

Literature Review

Wine tourism research has been the primary focus of beverage-related tourism in the culinary literature (Croce & Perri, 2017). However, craft beer tourism is slowly appearing more frequently, and experiencing elements of local beer is one of the fastest growing areas of culinary tourism (Alonso et al., 2017). Breweries are not only attractive to tourists because of their experiential-based offerings (Murray & Kline, 2015), but they are also attractive to locals who are looking to craft breweries as a community gathering place (Fletchall, 2016; Usinger, 2017).

Donadini & Poretta (2017) argue that the growing popularity of craft breweries is due to microbreweries' innovation, creativity and authenticity that provides consumers with pleasurable, memorable, enjoyable experiences reinforcing a sense of belonging, self-fulfillment, and social recognition. Through that lens, very little research has been conducted concerning these impacts from the craft beer industry.

Within tourism and hospitality, the development of social media has changed the traditional connectivity regarding conspicuous consumption (Lo & McKercher, 2015). Instead of using word-of-mouth or the physical sharing of images and artifacts of an experience, social media has allowed people patronizing destinations and establishments, such as craft breweries, to instantly distribute and receive social feedback from their experiences. Conceptually, social return is the anticipated positive feedback that is expected through posting on social media (Deegan, 2015). Using social return as the conceptual foundation, this research developed a more comprehensive understanding of visitors to craft breweries in BC.

Methods

From July to September 2017, data was collected at eleven craft breweries across three regions in BC using a 55-item survey using protocol from Babbie (2016). The eleven breweries were selected in collaboration with the BC Craft Brewers Guild, a non-profit industry association tasked with the development and promotion of craft beer within BC. The breweries were selected to ensure a wide representation of location type, size, and age. Both resident and non-resident visitors to breweries were included in the research.

A total of 238 usable surveys were collected with a response rate of 50.1%. No significant differences were found in survey items across the three regions. The survey included questions regarding the SRS from Boley et al. (2018), memories (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013), loyalty (Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010), place attachment (adapted from Ram, Björk, & Weidenfeld, 2016), authenticity (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010), and tourism experience (Gross & Brown, 2006),

Findings/Results

Given that the SRS has only been used in one published study that reflects a different context from the present study (Boley et al., 2018), an exploratory factor analysis using Varimax rotation was conducted. The six items of the SRS loaded on only one factor with an Eigenvalue of 4.490 and variance explained of 74.838%. All six items loaded over .6 on the one factor, with five items loading greater than .850. Finally, a reliability analysis of the SRS was conducted and found very high reliability (Field, 2015) with a Cronbach's alpha of .920. Regarding the other four multi-item constructs used in this research for only tourist patrons (memories, loyalty, place attachment, authenticity), Cronbach's alphas were good to very good ranging from .808 to .950. For hypotheses that included both residents and non-residents, no significant difference was found regarding social return with $\chi^2(3, n=238) = 2.052, p = .562$.

Regarding Hypothesis 1 as to whether differences exist in social return based on social involvement, it was found that those with higher social involvement had higher expectations of social return with $F(3,234) = 4.022, p = .008$. A Tukey Post-hoc test showed a significant difference between 'zero' (mean=3.65) and 'high' (mean=4.38) social involvement.

Regarding Hypotheses 2a-2d testing if social return can predict memories, loyalty, place attachment, and authenticity for tourist patrons, social return was not significant in predicting memories (H2a) with $F(1,111) = .137, p = .712$, nor loyalty (H2b) with $F(1,111) = .414, p = .521$. However, social return was a significant predictor of both place attachment (H2c) with $F(1,111) = 7.045, p = .009, b = .334$, and authenticity (H2d) with $F(1,111) = 10.795, p = .001, b = .314$.

Conclusions

Findings indicate continued support for the use of the SRS in different tourism contexts. Results also confirm a connection between social involvement in social return (i.e. people who are more socially involved expect to get more out of their social involvement). Results indicate that significant differences only occur at the highest level of involvement. This may connect the social nature of tourism (i.e. social media) to the concept of serious leisure. More research is needed. Finally, the ability of social return to predict place attachment and authenticity indicates that craft breweries and destinations must consider the nature and quality of social involvement with tourist patrons if they are to create a strong sense of place and authenticity with visitors.

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