

Visions in Leisure and Business

Volume 5 | Number 4

Article 8

1987

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Recommended Citation

Backman, Sheila J. (1987) "Activity Loyalty and Recreation Participation: A Conceptual Perspective," *Visions in Leisure and Business*: Vol. 5 : No. 4 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions/vol5/iss4/8>

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ACTIVITY LOYALTY AND RECREATION PARTICIPATION:
A CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Marketers have long had an interest in understanding consumers' purchasing/usage patterns. This paper proposes a conceptual definition of activity loyalty. This variable may be central to understanding why individuals develop different rates and frequency of participation.

ACTIVITY LOYALTY AND RECREATION PARTICIPATION:
A CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE

During the past decade attempts to uncover participants' underlying motivations for involvement in recreation have been reported by a number of investigators.(3,5,14) These studies have led researchers to conclude that individuals participate in recreation activities for a myriad of reasons. This line of inquiry was preceded by investigations which were interested primarily in counting the number of visits and/or in discovering variables which correlated with rates of participation.(4) These traditional studies were successful in distinguishing between participants and non participants and in supporting the notion that individuals do have different rates and styles of participation.

Although the results recreation and parks researchers studies have shown that individual rates of and intensity of participation do vary, the implications of these findings to recreation and parks marketing has not been discussed. Marketers have long been interested in consumers' purchasing/usage patterns. Results of consumer buying pattern studies have revealed that many consumers have a propensity to concentrate their purchases on a few brands and that these preferences are stable over time.(6) In the same vein, some in the recreation and parks field have suggested that participants can be categorized fringe or core users.(7) If it is important to understand how user or purchasing patterns develop then the factors which influence the development of recreation purchasing patterns are essential prerequisites to understanding the phenomenon.

The propensity to concentrate purchases on one or a few brands within a product class is believed to be influenced by a consumer's loyalty to the brands.(1) Little work has been reported in this area in the recreation and parks field. Identifying the degree to which a participant is loyal to an activity is important, for it may influence which service attributes are salient, which promotional messages are influential, which pricing strategies may be most appropriate, and which factors may impact withdrawal from participation in the activity.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ACTIVITY LOYALTY

Behavioristic Measures

Early studies of brand loyalty were primarily concerned with identification; (1) of brand choice sequences, (2) brand preferences over time period or, (3) the proportion of purchases concentrated on a specific brand (purchasing patterns). However, substantial conceptual problems arose from using this behavior counting approach. For example, different researchers used a wide variety of operational definitions to describe the same concept. Because loyalty was operationalized in terms of purchase patterns, consumers were often classified as loyal in one study and as non-loyal in another, even though both studies used the same data base. This led to much confusion and debate among investigators on the issue of how to best operationalize loyalty.(10) Today it is generally agreed that brand loyal behavior encompasses more than simple repeat purchase.(1)

To be considered brand loyal, consumers must have had the opportunity to make a choice among viable alternatives and to select the specific brand. If there is no opportunity for choice, then repurchase may be a function of there being no other alternative available.

Measures of frequency of recreation participation do not reflect loyalty to an activity, but do provide an indication of participation patterns of participants engaged in the activity at a point in time. Traditional measures of participation include both loyal and simple repeat participants. These measures do not provide sufficient information to distinguish between the two. Number of visits or frequency of participation are necessary but not sufficient conditions for defining loyalty.

Composite Measures of Loyalty

Responding to a similar challenge, marketing researchers proposed that consumers who were truly loyal to a brand would possess a psychological attachment to it, in addition to exhibiting repeat purchase behavior.(10)

The addition of the attitudinal component to the behavioristic measures provided researchers with the link necessary to separate genuinely loyal consumers from those who were merely consumers.

Like brand loyalty, activity loyalty should be considered a two-dimensional concept, comprised of both behavioral and attitudinal components. (see Figure 1) Activity loyal behavior is defined as repeat participation in an activity. Activity loyal attitudes are the underlying psychological processes which predispose individuals to behave in a selective manner.

Loyalty is not limited to one activity, individuals may be multi-activity loyal. Many who are active in recreation have a wide repertoire of activities (activity sets). (12) The concept of activity loyalty describes a relationship between behavior and attitudes which influences decisions made by consumers of park and recreation services.

Determinants of Activity Loyalty

Activity loyalty is developed as a result of learning over time and it is seldom evident after a user's first introduction to an activity. Social judgment theory (12) suggests that if an activity is integrated with an individual's values, it is more likely that genuine loyalty will develop. There is some evidence to suggest that as perceived importance and commitment increases, loyalty to an activity will increase. (15) Because some activities are more personally important than others, individuals will develop a higher degree of commitment to those which have the most meaning. Individuals may have a recreation activity set which is arranged in a hierarchy according to the degree of loyalty to the activities. This set of activities may be comprised of both activities to which participants are genuinely loyal or spuriously loyal. An activity may be dropped from the set of genuinely loyal activities, if the activity is no longer perceived as personally important.

Degree of commitment to the activity may also influence the development of loyalty. Commitment to an activity may result from an individual's desire to reduce perceived risk associated with activity selection. Experience with an activity serves to reduce the risks associated with participation as participants become more familiar with the activity. Participation risks may be perceived in terms of financial loss, mediocre performance, embarrassment, psychological costs or time costs. (2)

IMPLICATIONS FOR RECREATION AND PARKS

Activity loyalty is a two-dimensional concept encompassing both behavioral and attitudinal components, which enables a distinction to be made between genuinely loyal and spuriously loyal participants. This concept moves beyond fringe and core participants because it includes an attitudinal component, whereas fringe and core are distinguished by

participation rates only.

Marketing, and more recently recreation and parks, have been concerned with market share.(8) Although percentage of the market held by an activity is important, it is a necessary but not sufficient distinction. Market share is an aggregate number which reflects the number of individuals engaged in an activity, but does not shed light on the composition of the share. It is illogical to assume that all individuals in the share have the same degree of loyalty to recreation activities.

Recognizing that market share has limitations, recreation and park managers should be interested in the quality of the share. For example, the percentage of genuinely loyal and spuriously loyal customers in relation to the total number in the market share would assist with the development of marketing strategies. An activity with a large percentage of loyal participants is more likely not to lose users to a competitive activity, than an activity with a low percentage of loyal users. Because spuriously loyal participants lack psychological commitment to an activity, they may be more sensitive to competitors' attempts to attract new customers. There is a higher probability that spuriously loyal participants will switch activities if another activity at a lower price becomes available, or that they will withdraw from an activity even if they had been satisfied with the quality of the service. Genuinely loyal participants, because of their psychological attachment, may not be as sensitive to competitors' inducements but may cease to participate or switch activities because of poor service quality. It may be appropriate to segment activity participation by using activity loyalty as the descriptor variable rather than frequency of participation, because those who are loyal to an activity are likely to have different motives from non loyal participants. Parks and recreation marketers should be concerned not only with market share, but also with the quality and composition of the share.

Parks and recreation marketers have concentrated on customer attraction and almost ignored user retention. Considerable resources are expended to attract new users each year. It seems that there is an assumption that once attracted, the user will be retained. However, the benefit bundles which once attracted users may no longer be sufficient to retain participants. The relationship between users and providers requires cultivation if both are to prosper. While an agency may have realized its goal by attracting the user, it is essential to remember that the user is just beginning to move towards his or her goal. By understanding the factors which influence the development of activity loyalty, this relationship should prosper.

SUMMARY

This paper has proposed a conceptual definition of activity loyalty. This concept may provide an alternative variable to be used in the study of recreation participation. Activity loyalty is a potentially valuable concept because it describes a relationship between attitudes and

behavior, forcing the recognition that behavioristic measures alone are inadequate for defining the notion of loyalty.

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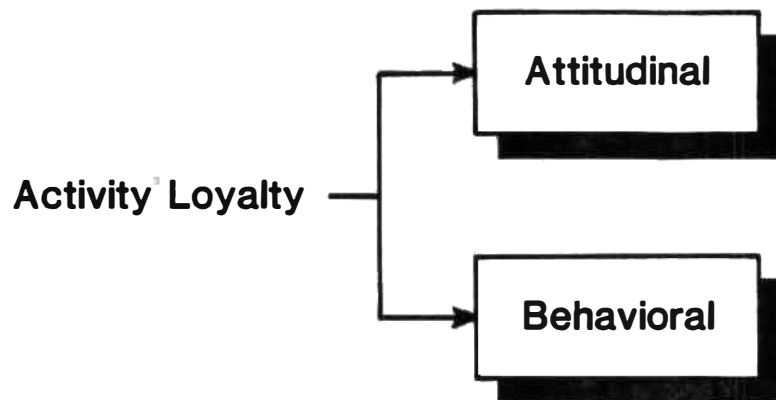


Figure 1