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Agritourism and visitor loyalty: The role of experience, memories, positive emotion, perceived authenticity

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Title: Agritourism and visitor loyalty: The role of experience, memories, positive emotion, perceived authenticity.

Introduction

Agritourism, which features activities offered on farms to attract visitors (e.g., culinary activities, corn mazes, recreational harvesting, Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008), is an important segment of the rural tourism sector. Not only can it attract visitors to rural destinations, but it can also promote employment, income, and sustainable development for rural communities (Govindasamy & Kelley, 2014; Hall, Mitchell, & Roberts, 2003). Thus, understanding what attributes can increase agritourism success through visitors' loyalty (i.e. revisit, repurchase, and positive word of mouth) is imperative.

Customer loyalty, which is characterized as repeat business and positive word of mouth (Oliver, 1999; Prayag & Ryan, 2011), is an essential driving force for a sustained tourism and growth (Sun, Chi, & Xu, 2013). Past research has suggested a number of factors that can influence visitors' loyalty including travel motivation, satisfaction, destination image, and place attachment (Chi & Qu, 2008; Gursoy, Chen, & Chi, 2014; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). However, to increase repeat visitation or positive recommendation, merely meeting expectations or providing satisfying experiences may not be enough. It is essential that a business can foster engaging or memorable experience for customers (Kim, Ham, Moon, Chua, & Han, 2019; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of this research is to understand the dimensions conducive to memorable agritourism experiences and how such experiences can impact agritourists' loyalty.

Due to the experiential nature of agritourism experiences, Pine and Gilmore's (1998) theoretical framework; the experience economy, was adopted to examine agritourists' visiting experiences. According to Pine and Gilmore, a memorable experience is composed of four components: education, escapism, entertainment, and esthetics. Past research also suggest that a memorable experience could increase visitors' perceived authenticity of a place (Cohen, 1988; Gilmore & Pine, 2007), be accompanied with strong positive emotions (Loureiro, 2014; Oh, Fiore, & Jeung, 2007), and enhance visitors' memories of a destination (Kahneman, 2015; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). In the meantime, increased perceived authenticity (Bryce, Curran, O'Gorman, & Taheri, 2015), positive emotions (Dean & Yu, 2001), and memories (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2013) have the potential to positively increase agritourists' loyalty.

Given no previous research has simultaneously examined the structural relationships between experience economy dimensions, perceived authenticity, positive emotions, memories, and loyalty intentions in an agritourism setting, this research aims to address this research gap. We also propose two moderators (i.e., travel distance, past experience of buying local food) that may influence the relationship between perceived authenticity, positive emotions, memories, and loyalty intention. Therefore, in view of these forgoing discussions, we proposed a theoretical model below (Figure 1).

Research Method

Study site. We collected data from people who participated in Alberta Open Farm Days on August 17-18th, 2018. The event provides visitors with backstage farm experiences such as farm tours and opportunities to engage in a variety of culinary activities e.g., beer and gin tastings.

Open Farm Days provides visitors with various engaging experiential activities which allow people to see, hear, taste, and learn; this event provides an excellent context to explore the impact of the experience offerings on visitor loyalty.

Research instrument. The survey instruments used in our research, such as experience economy measurement, perceived authenticity, positive emotions, memories, and loyalty's proxies (i.e., revisit intention, recommend intention, and repurchase intention) were adopted from reading extant literature (Cohen, 1988; Loureiro, 2014; Oh et al., 2007; Prayag & Ryan, 2011; Wang, 1999). All items were measured with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree=1" to "strongly agree=5."

Data collection and analysis. During the 2-day event, research assistants were sent to 7 event sites to intercept farm visitors and collect contact information from those who agreed to participate in the research. Two days after the end of the event, we distributed online surveys (Google forms) to participants via email. In total, we collected 250 valid responses. SPSS 22.0 was employed to calculate descriptive statistics and reliability scores. SmartPLS 3.0 was used to analyze the path relationships (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). We followed Hair and associates' (2017) and Ali and colleagues' (2018) guidelines to clean and analyze data.

Results and Conclusion

Visitors' profile. Table 1 shows the visitors' profile (n=250). The majority of respondents are female (70% of the sample), most of them are (54%) are aged between 25 and 44. Over 50 of the participants received post-secondary education (79.6%). A large amount of sample (78.4%) were first time visitors.

Research findings. Item reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.7), average variance extracted (AVE, >0.5) were assessed to examine measurement adequacy. The proposed model constructs showed validity and reliability for further analysis (see Table 2). A bootstrapping with 1000 iterations was performed to examine the statistical significance. Our results show that the four dimensions of agritourism experiences (i.e., education, esthetics, escapism, and entertainment) together, substantially explained visitors' memories ($R^2=.800$), perceived authenticity ($R^2=.871$), and positive emotions ($R^2=.872$). Also, memories, perceived authenticity, and positive emotions explained agritourists' intention to revisit ($R^2=.497$) and intention to purchase ($R^2=.552$) moderately, but also predicted intention to recommend ($R^2=.753$) strongly. See complete results of the structural model and hypotheses testing in Table 3. Meanwhile, our moderating analyses showed no moderating relationships were significant (i.e. the influence of distance travelled and awareness of Alberta agriculture on loyalty).

Our results suggest that the four dimensions of experience can positively influence agritourists' positive emotions, memories, and perceived authenticity. These three aforementioned variables can predict customers' loyalty intention; positive emotions can predict recommendation intention whereas perceived authenticity can influence purchase intention. In particular, producing positive memories was the only variable that predicted all three loyalty intentions, which reinforces the importance of producing memorable experiences for customers. These results provide practitioners with important information on how to design agritourism experiences to increase visitors' intention to return, to recommend, and to purchase products from them.

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Appendix
Figure 1 Theoretical model

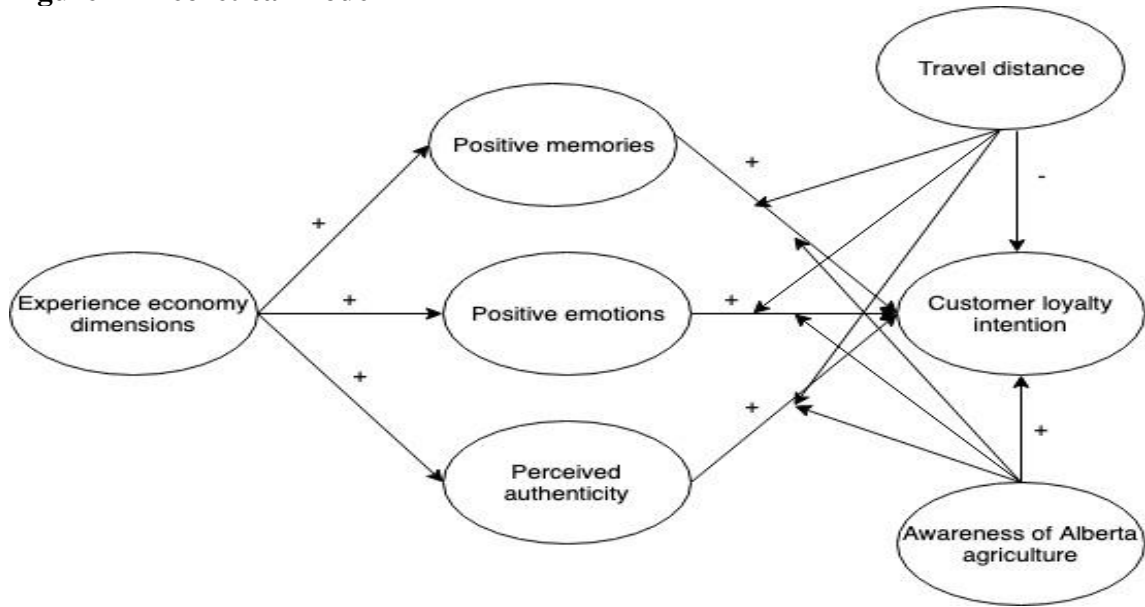


Table 1 Agritourists' profiles (n=250)

		Frequency	N %
Age	18-24 years old	21	8.4%
	25-34 years old	66	26.4%
	35-44 years old	69	27.6%
	45-54 years old	28	11.2%
	55-64 years old	40	16.0%
	65-74 years old	23	9.2%
	75 years or older	2	0.8%
	Under 18	1	0.4%
Gender	Female	175	70.0%
	Male	75	30.0%
Years in Canada	1-3 years	4	1.6%
	10 or more years	224	89.6%
	3-9 years	20	8.0%
	I do not live in Canada	1	0.4%
	less than 1 year	1	0.4%
Education Level	Community college/technical school diploma	51	20.4%
	Graduate degree	74	29.6%
	High school diploma	21	8.4%
	Less than high school	1	0.4%
	Some post-secondary	29	11.6%
	Undergraduate university degree	74	29.6%
Household Income	\$100,000 or higher	77	30.8%
	\$50,000 – \$74,999	41	16.4%
	\$75,000 - \$99,999	39	15.6%
	I choose not to answer this question	64	25.6%
	Under \$50 000	29	11.6%
First Time or Repeat Visitors	First time visitors	196	78.4%
	Repeat Visitors	54	21.6%

Table 2 Measurements of this study's constructs

Latent constructs and measures	Mean (SD)	Std. Deviation	Item loadings	Cronbach's alpha	AVE
Education	3.87	1.10		.944	.808
I learnt a lot	3.76	1.13	.889		
It stimulated my curiosity to learn new things	3.82	1.07	.876		
It was an authentic learning experience	4.03	1.08	.920		
The experience made me more knowledgeable	3.88	1.20	.910		
Esthetics	4.22	0.76		.919	.692
Being at the Open Farms Days site was very pleasant	4.51	.77	.905		
The setting was very attractive	4.34	.78	.759		
The setting provided pleasure to my senses	4.14	.93	.758		
I felt a sense of harmony	3.93	1.06	.828		
The surroundings strengthened my overall experience	4.19	.88	.898		
Escapism	3.10	1.00		.852	.593
I escaped from reality	3.28	1.19	.672		
I felt like I was in a different time or place	3.07	1.17	.826		
I totally forgot about my daily routine	3.35	1.15	.740		
The experience let be imagine being someone else	2.72	1.27	.832		
Entertainment	3.59	0.93		.891	.671
I really enjoyed watching what others were doing	3.60	1.20	.760		
Activities were fun to watch	3.77	1.03	.815		
Watching others perform was captivating	3.24	1.05	.812		
The activities the hosts and visitors engaged in were very entertaining	3.76	1.03	.885		
Perceived authenticity	3.54	.92		.841	.644

Was personally transformative	2.94	1.100	.699		
Was highly immersive and absorbing	3.59	1.063	.820		
Was authentic and real	4.08	1.026	.878		
Positive emotions	3.94	0.88		.904	.703
Was very stimulating	3.69	1.083	.851		
Was very exciting	3.66	1.000	.836		
Was very interesting	4.10	1.001	.835		
Was very enjoyable	4.29	.897	.831		
Pleasant memories	4.11	0.90		.930	.768
Produced many positive memories of the rural destination	4.07	1.002	.875		
Produced many positive impressions of local agricultural producers	4.16	.984	.891		
Produced many positive impressions of the Open Farm Days venue	4.16	.962	.871		
Provided wonderful memories of rural Alberta	4.05	.989	.868		
Awareness of Alberta Agriculture					
I had high levels of awareness and knowledge of Alberta agriculture prior to attending Open Farm Days in 2018	3.22	1.148	.163		
Travel Distance					
Calculated using vendors and participants' postal codes	106.215	17.360			

Note. 1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree

Table 3: Tests of the relationships

	Path Coefficients	t-value
Education -> Memories	.142**	2.820
Education -> Perceived authenticity_	.338***	5.283
Education -> Positive emotions	.114**	3.024
Entertainment -> Memories	.184**	3.171
Entertainment -> Perceived authenticity_	.282***	3.584
Entertainment -> Positive emotions	.390***	6.761
Escapism -> Memories	.135**	3.362
Escapism -> Perceived authenticity_	.234***	4.780
Escapism -> Positive emotions	.042*	2.121
Esthetics -> Memories	.551***	8.495
Esthetics -> Perceived authenticity_	.246***	4.351
Esthetics -> Positive emotions	.492***	8.830
Memories -> Intention to recommend	.877***	5.247
Memories -> Intention to purchase	.405*	2.542
Memories -> Intention to revisit	.523*	2.134
Positive emotions -> Intention to recommend	.028**	2.977
Perceived authenticity-> Intention to purchase	.0295*	2.323

*p<.05. **p < .01. ***p < .001; X²=1,330.551, SRMR=.044.