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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between the activities in which visitors participate and their satisfaction with a destination. It investigates a theory that proposes visitors who participate in four realms of tourist activities will express greater satisfaction than those who participate in fewer realms. The findings revealed no significant relationship between satisfaction and either the type or number of activities in which a tourist engages.

Introduction

Destination management organizations (DMOs) and government tourism agencies manage an amalgam of tourist products, services and public goods with the objective of maintaining a viable tourism industry. This goal requires the creation of an overall experience that results in satisfied consumers who are more likely to return, are willing to pay more and who will recommend the destination to others (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Bigné, Sanchez & Sanz, 2005; Murray and Howat, 2002; Yoon and Uysal, 2005). Consequently, numerous studies have examined the relationship between consumer satisfaction and the perception of the quality, price and blend of tourism products within the destination. However, satisfaction is not solely dependent upon the attributes of the destination. Consumer characteristics also have a significant impact on the evaluation of their experience in the destination. Their expectations, traits, and values, the activities in which they participate, their cultural background and their motivation for visiting the destination influence their assessment. Because of the multidimensional, complex, and dynamic nature of consumer satisfaction, identifying and evaluating determinants of tourist satisfaction is a difficult theoretical and empirical task (Fuchs & Weiermair 2003).

Studies of satisfaction with tourist destinations have largely focused on destination attributes as antecedents of tourist satisfaction. Few have considered the relationship between the choices visitors make within the destination and their satisfaction. This study examines the relationship between the activities in which visitors participate and their satisfaction with a destination. It investigates a proposed but empirically unsupported theory that suggests visitors who participate in all four realms of tourist activities, i.e., active immersion, passive immersion, active involvement and passive involvement activities, will express greater satisfaction than those who participate in fewer realms (Pine & Gilmore 1999). The theory raises the question of the extent to which satisfaction is affected by the type and variety of activities in which a tourist engages. This research paper reports the results of an empirical test of what is known as the “sweet spot” theory.

Literature

Satisfaction with a tourist destination is the global evaluation made after the experience of consuming the product. It is an emotional state of mind derived from both cognitive and emotional components (Baker & Crompton 2000; Cronin, Brandy & Hult, 2000; Yu & Dean 2001). The study of cognitive components of consumer satisfaction has resulted in the development of a number of models and methods of measuring customer satisfaction. Theoretical models have analyzed disconfirmation, expectations, perceptions, service quality, price, value and individual traits and values of consumers in relation to satisfaction. Among the most prevalent theories are expectance/disconfirmation (Oliver 1980), equity (Oliver and Swan 1989) importance-performance (Martilla & James 1977) and perceived overall performance (Tse & Wilson 1988). The disconfirmation paradigm that compares what is received with what is expected is perhaps the most common method used in the study of tourist behavior. Theoretically service quality affects satisfaction though some make the argument that the direction of the relationship is reversed (Cronin & Taylor 1992; Dimitrovic, Cvelbar, Kolar, Brencic, Ograjensek & Zabkar, 2009; Parasuraman, Zeithmal & Berry 1994). In either case there is consensus that service quality and customer satisfaction affect behavioral intention (Baker & Crompton 2000; Cronin & Taylor 1992). The evaluation of service quality has been shown to be affected by customer expectations, image, costs, risks and perceived value as it relates to price (Dimitrivic et al. 2009; Johnson, Gustafsson, Andreassen, Lervic & Cha 2001). The effect of the antecedents of satisfaction on consumer satisfaction is an issue still under debate in the academic literature (Campo & Yagüe 2009). There is no consensus concerning either the structure or intensity of the relationships (Fuchs & Weiermair 2004).

Structurally, researchers have segregated satisfaction into either basic, performance and excitement factors or emotional, practical and logical factors (Anderson & Mittal 2000; Fuchs 2002; Fuchs & Weiermair 2004; Johnston 1995; Matzler & Sauerwein 2002). In the two structures excitement and emotional components may play a critical role in the determination of satisfaction. Fuchs & Weiermair (2004) propose a hierarchical structure that places service quality factors into three categories – basic, performance and excitement. Factors in the basic category are prerequisites for satisfaction, i.e. if not fulfilled dissatisfaction results. Performance factors lead to satisfaction if fulfilled or exceeded and dissatisfaction if not fulfilled. The excitement factors increase customer satisfaction but do not cause dissatisfaction if not fulfilled. On the other hand, Zins (2002, p.4) argues that there is “ample evidence that emotional reactions associated with the consumption experience are fundamental for the determination of satisfaction. For example, emotional components have been shown to have a significantly stronger affect on satisfaction in a study by Danaher & Mattsson (1994) and Fuchs claims that a “destination will only be considered as attractive when its performance factors are at least as good as those of its competitors. It is the excitement factors that significantly improve the perceived customer value” (2002, p. 153). Research supports this assertion by demonstrating that basic factors are high in importance but have little influence on satisfaction and that excitement factors score low on importance but show high implicit influence on overall satisfaction (Vavra

1997). The inclusion of excitement in the tourist experience into the study of satisfaction appears justified not just as an addition to satisfaction but as a requirement (Bing, Andreu & Gnoth, 2005; Zins, 2002).

The quality of a meal or excellent room service is not likely to generate the excitement component of a tourism experience. The activities in which tourists participate are the major creators of excitement and the emotions required for high levels of satisfaction as demonstrated in a study by Danaher & Arweiller (1996) who found that of four factors of a tourist destination – transportation, accommodations, attractions and outdoor activities – only outdoor activities had a significant impact on satisfaction. Consequently, research on destination satisfaction that examines the impact that participation in activities has on satisfaction is critical for destination managers.

A taxonomy of tourist activities was proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1999) who theorized four realms of tourist activities. In their theory tourist activities were grouped according to their position on a vertical pole where one end point was active participation and the other was passive participation and on a horizontal pole with absorption on one end and immersion on the other (see Oh, et al (2007) for a diagram and further details). Activities were classified into four realms: *education, esthetic, escapism and entertainment*. Active absorption activities were called educational while passive absorption activities were labeled entertainment. When participating in educational activities tourists actively absorb the experiences as a mental state. For example, visiting art galleries or wineries fall into the education category because visitors may learn about wine and increase their ability to select suitable wine. On the other hand passive absorption activities do not alter the mind such as in attending a concert where participants simply absorb their environment with no increase in knowledge or skill. In the opposite quadrant are escapism activities that actively immerse tourists into their environment to the point where the participants affect or alter the outcome as in rock climbing or camping. Esthetic activities are those that immerse the participant into the environment but do not affect or alter the environment such as in a walk in the woods (Oh, et al, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Empirical evidence supports the four realm theory. Oh, et al.'s (2007) study on a bed and breakfast experience concluded that the four realms of experiences offered “a conceptual fit and a practical measurement framework for the study of tourist experiences” (p.127). Another study of a regional tourist destination verified the taxonomy as proposed. However, the study was unable to find evidence to support the relationship among various types of activities and tourist satisfaction (Jurowski 2009).

Pine and Gilmore (1999) further proposed that there was a “sweet spot” in the taxonomy that resulted in higher levels of satisfaction. Theoretically, visitors who participate in all four realms of tourism experiences have higher levels of satisfaction than those who participate in fewer realms. When tested there was no conclusive evidence to support higher levels of satisfaction with participation in all four realms but there was some evidence that favored the theory (Jurowski 2010). The inability to verify the theory may have been related to the global nature of the satisfaction questions or to other issues related to data collection (See Jurowski

2010). This study further examines the “sweet spot” theory by first testing the theory and then examining the extent to which participation in various types of activities affects satisfaction levels, how satisfaction with specific components within a destination differs with participation in types of activities and if there is any relationship between the number of activities in which visitors participate and their level of satisfaction.

Methodology

Nonresident visitors to Montana during third quarter (July-September 2009) were examined for this study. The population of travelers was defined as those persons who entered Montana by private vehicle or commercial air carrier during the study period and whose primary residence was not in Montana at the time.

Data Collection. Highway nonresident travelers were intercepted by seven surveyors at gas stations and rest areas around the state in 30 different communities. Air travelers were intercepted at the four major airports in Montana. Surveyors identified nonresident travelers by observing vehicle license plates and questioning boarding air passengers at Montana airports using random sampling techniques stratified by location and time period. Visitors were asked a variety of questions which were recorded by the surveyor, then visitors were asked to complete a mail-back questionnaire about their Montana travels upon completion of their trip. Mail-back questionnaires were returned by 1,201 visitors for a 32 percent response rate.

Research Process and Analysis. Leisure visitors were selected from a larger data base that included other motivations for travel. The analysis began with an examination of the frequency of participation in 31 activities. Next, activities were placed a priori into the four realms of tourism activities according to the findings in two previous studies (Jurowski,2009; Oh, et al.2007) and frequencies of participation in each realm were calculated. Then, a new variable that identified those who participated in all four realms of tourism experiences was created and frequency of participation in all four realms was calculated. The fourth step in the analysis was to create an overall satisfaction score by summing the scores on 20 satisfaction items. ANOVA analyses were performed to compare mean scores on satisfaction for each realm and the four-realm variable. Finally, the total number of activities in which respondents participated was regressed against overall satisfaction.

Results and Discussion

More than half of the respondents participated in three activities: scenic driving, wildlife watching and nature photography. Other popular activities in which at least one third participated were hiking, camping, recreational shopping, visiting historical sites other than Lewis and Clark sites. Table 1 depicts the number of participants in each activity along with the participation percentage.

Table 1 Frequency of participation in activities

Activities	N	%
Scenic driving	675	74.8
Wildlife watching	501	55.5
Nature photography	483	53.5
Hiking	423	46.9
Camping	320	35.4
Recreational shopping	306	33.9
Visit other historical sites	281	31.1
Visit museums	238	27.3
Visit Lewis & Clark sites	191	21.1
Fishing	179	20.6
Visit farmers market	118	13.0
Attend festivals or special events	114	13.1
River rafting/floating	111	12.7
Visit Indian Reservation	99	10.9
Birding	91	10.1
View art exhibits	84	9.7
Horseback riding	82	9.1
Road/tour biking	78	8.6
Gambling	71	8.1
Sporting event	69	7.9
Canoeing/kayaking	64	7.4
Attend performing arts	61	6.7
Backpacking	59	6.6
Golfing	56	6.4
Rockhounding	56	6.4
Motor boating	50	5.5
OHV/ATV	43	4.8
Mountain biking	40	4.4
Hunting	37	4.0
Geocaching	37	4.1
Follow Dinosaur Trail	36	4.2

The a-priori classification of the activities into the four realms of tourism activities was based on the theory proposed by Pine & Gilmore (1999) according to the findings of studies by Oh et al. (2007) and Jurowski (2009). Activities in which the participant actively absorbed the

environment or learning experiences were placed in the education realm. Six activities met the parameter for this category: visiting farmers markets, Indian Reservation, Lewis and Clark and other historical sites and museums and recreational shopping. Approximately one-third (32.2%) of the respondents participated in educational activities. Passive absorption activities, i.e. entertainment, included attending festivals, sporting events, special events, and performing arts as well as viewing art exhibits. Just over 10 percent of the respondents participated in at least one of the entertainment activities. Those activities that actively involved the participant were categorized as active immersion or escapism activities. Almost half (49.9%) of the respondents participated in escapism activities which included camping, backpacking, canoeing and other outdoor recreation activities listed in Table 2. The final realm, esthetics, included activities in which participants were passively immersed in their environment such as when watching wildlife, birding, scenic driving, hiking, motor boating and following the Dinosaur Trail. Close to half (47.5%) of the participants spent some time passively immersed in the environment. A variable called “Sweet” identified the 8.7% who participated in all four realms of tourism experiences. The classification of the activities along with category frequencies and percentages is displayed in Table 2.

Satisfaction with the tourist destination was measured using twenty items that asked the respondent to rate their overall satisfaction on a 6-point scale from very dissatisfied to very satisfied with the specified item. Respondents were allowed to check N/A if they didn't experience a certain aspect and could not respond. The N/A responses were recoded as missing data. The data points for all 20 items were summed to create a global satisfaction score. ANOVA analysis of mean scores between participants and non participants found no significant differences in global satisfaction at the .05 level in any of the realms or in the four-realm variable. The difference in mean scores for participants versus non participants was minimal with no consistent pattern. For example, the mean score for those who did not participate in escapism activities was slightly higher than those who did but the opposite was true for entertainment activities. The greatest difference in mean scores was in the four-realm category where those who participated in all four types of experiences were slightly more satisfied than those who did not. However, the difference was not significant at the .05 level. Table 3 depicts the mean satisfaction scores for participants and non participants in each realm and for those who did and did not participate in all four realms. No evidence to support the sweet spot theory was found confirming the findings of an earlier study that determined that satisfaction scores were higher for those who participated in all four realms but not at a significant level (Jurowski, 2010).

Table 2 Activity Classification with Frequencies

Activity Realm	Activity	Frequency	%
		291	32.2
	Recreational shopping		
	Visit farmers market		
	Visit Indian Reservations		
	Visit Lewis & Clark Sites		
	Visit other historical sites		
Passive		95	10.5
	Attend festivals or special events		
	Attend performing arts		
	View art exhibits		
Active Immersion/Escapism		451	49.9
	Camping		
	Backpacking		
	Horseback riding		
	Hunting		
	Mountain biking		
	Road/tour biking		
	Geocaching		
	OHV/ATV		
	Canoeing/kayaking		
	Fishing		
	River rafting/floating		
	Golfing		
	Gambling		
Passive Immersion/Esthetics		427	47.2
	Day hiking		
	Birding		
	Wildlife watching		
	Scenic driving		
	Motor boating		
	Follow Dinosaur Trail		
4 Realms/ Sweet		79	8.7

Table 3 Realm Satisfaction Mean Score Comparisons

Activity	Participation	N	Satisfaction	F	Sig
Education				.141	.707
	Yes	391	108.96		
	No	408	109.39		
Entertainment				.749	.387
	Yes	83	110.28		
	No	716	109.05		
Escapism				.254	.615
	Yes	394	108.96		
	No	408	109.39		
Esthetics				.345	.557
	Yes	371	108.91		
	No	428	109.42		
Sweet				1.140	.286
	Yes	70	110.67		
	No	729	109.04		

The data analyzed does not provide support for the sweet spot theory. There appears to be no basis for the theory that visitors to a destination will be more satisfied if they participate in all four realms. Theoretically those who participated in more activities may be more satisfied than those who participated in fewer. To test this theory, the number of activities in which each respondent participated was calculated and regressed against total satisfaction. The mean number of activities per participant was 5.80 with a standard deviation of 4.08. The resultant adjusted R Square of .001 with a significant level of .225 does not provide evidence to support a relationship between the number of activities and satisfaction.

Conclusion

While the four realms theory may be useful for segmenting activities, it offers no value in relation to satisfaction with tourist destinations. Academic research shows that the sweet spot theory by Pine and Gilmore (1999) may be too shallow and simplistic to be considered as theory. Satisfaction is an individual concept based on individual expectations, perceptions, values, motivations, and interests (Martilla & James 1977; Oliver 1980; Oliver and Swan 1989; Martilla & James 1977; Tse & Wilson 1988). There is little value in examining satisfaction based on participation in activities without controlling for individual differences. From a theoretical perspective a person would be highly enriched if involved in all four realms and enrichment could be related to satisfaction. However, people travel in groups and may, with little or no interest, participate in an activity solely to cooperate with other members of the group. Instead of adding to satisfaction participation in this activity may result in decreased satisfaction.

Investigation of the relationship between satisfaction and activity type failed to support the theory that participation in more or any combination of types of activities increases satisfaction. Future research on the relationship between satisfaction and activity participation is needed to better understand the role that activity participation has on satisfaction with a destination. Destinations need to understand what types, number, or combination of activities increases satisfaction to gain a competitive advantage over other similar destinations. Research that examines similar markets in different destinations with varying types of activities may provide insight into the contribution activities make to destination competitiveness. Market characteristics should include demographic characteristics along with expectations, traits, values, cultural background and motivation for visiting the destination as well as the level of interest in participation in specific activities.

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