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The relationship of Social Interactions and Satisfaction for Agritourism Service Encounters

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Abstract

This study suggests that four types of visitors' social interactions exist in agritourism—with service providers (farmers), companion travelers, other customers, and local residents, based on social exchange theory and resource theory, addressing how those affect satisfaction. Of these interactions, the first interaction has been extensively examined with respect to its effect on positive post-purchase behaviors as it is often deemed more controllable than other types of interactions. However, all interactions or relationships at service encounters can individually or in combination, positively influence post-purchase behaviors, although it is often difficult to untangle their effects. By incorporating multiple observable relationships associated with service delivery specific to agritourism settings, this study will provide insight into service encounter research applicable to small-scale enterprises which predominate agritourism operations. A survey of 400 visitors to farms located in Texas reveals that most of hypotheses are supported.

Introduction

Like other forms of tourism, agritourism involves much service. This creates a need to focus on service encounters in which a customer interacts with staff and/or other customers (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). Service encounters often occur in the presence of multiple customers and service providers who share the servicescape with each other, involving a series of interactions and/or relationships. In this sense, it will be important to integrate the types of

interaction existing at service encounters to understand how those influence customers' service experience.

In the service marketing literature, service encounters represent social encounters in which employees' interpersonal skills affect customer satisfaction and behavior (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994; Bowers, Martin, & Luker, 1990) and customers influence one another indirectly as a part of the environment or directly through interpersonal encounters (Bitner, et al., 1994; Martin, 1996; Wu, 2007). Similarly, tourism scholars have examined the dyadic interface between travelers and employees (Solnet, 2007) and customer-to-customer interaction (Wu, 2007). Additionally, interactions each with travelers' companions and local residents might also be critical parts of travelers' tourism experience. This study therefore sets out to model an integrated social interaction in agritourism service encounters including four distinctive relationships namely between: 1) traveler and service provider, 2) traveler and companion traveler, 3) traveler-to-local resident, and 4) traveler-to-other customers. Taking findings related to social exchange theory (Homans, 1958; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), this study will examine the link between the social interaction and agritourists' satisfaction on their service experience. Moreover, these four types of competing social interaction will be compared and contrasted to see how all interactions at service encounters can individually or in combination, positively influence post-purchase behaviors.

Literature Review

While different scholars have paid attention to specific types of interactions during service encounters, Yi and Gong (2009) integrated three discrete relationships readily observable in service environments: customer-to-organization, customer-to-employee, and customer-to-customer interactions. All of these interactions and relationships seem relevant to general tourism service encounters, but they are not necessarily the same for small-scale operations which predominate in agritourism. Agritourists seem to not distinguish their interactions with organizations or employees because farm owners themselves are service providers in many cases (Wilson, 2007). Therefore, this study will only consider a traveler-to-service provider interaction. In addition, agritourists encounter local residents, although not on a regular basis. Local residents' behavior toward visitors can influence whether the experience of agritourists is pleasant. Thirdly, traveler-to-other customer interaction has been received scholarly attention in that the presence of other customers can affect the nature of the service outcome and process. Lastly, as the indigenous presence of social groups in the leisure activity has been recognized in the literature (Crompton, 1981), travel companions might influence the tourism experience. Although this phenomenon has not been identified in tourism literature, this specific interaction afforded by families and friends in shared leisure activities has been explored through the

concept of leisure companionship (Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996; McCormick, 1999). In sum, this study suggests that four types of customer social interactions exist in agritourism—with service providers (farmers), companion travelers, other customers, and local residents.

Social exchange theorists have suggested that successful relationships are characterized by reciprocity and unspecified obligation, and it is likely that they are the keys to positive feelings about sustained social relationships (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). Social exchange relationships evolve when an individual who supplies rewarding services to another obligates him. To discharge this obligation, the second must furnish benefits to the first in turn (Blau, 1964). To the extent that both parties apply the reciprocity norm to their relationships, favorable treatment by either party is reciprocated, leading to mutually beneficial outcomes (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Therefore, the following four hypotheses were derived.

Hypothesis 1: Interaction with service providers will have a positive effect on satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Interaction with local residents will have a positive effect on satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3: Interaction with other customers will have a positive effect on satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4: Interaction with companion travelers will have a positive effect on satisfaction.

The type of relationship is another influential factor in social exchanges, as previous research in social psychology has indicated that different kinds of social interaction have distinct effects on life satisfaction. Among them, Rook (1987a, 1987b) compared the role of companionship and other social relationships on life satisfaction, emphasizing the important nature of shared experience and activities associated with companionships. Accordingly, when the traveler-to-companion traveler interaction is compared with the traveler-to-other visitor interaction on satisfaction judgment, the effect of the former may be more significant than the latter in agritourism encounters. In a similar vein, how visitors interact with service providers (farmers) is hypothesized to be more prominent in their satisfaction judgment than their interaction with other local residents (maybe other local farmers). This does not mean the interaction with local residents is not important, but rather to understand how visitors' interactions with service providers and local residents influence together at agritourism encounters. Therefore, the specific hypotheses regarding the type of relationship are:

Hypothesis 5: The effect of travelers' interaction with their own companions on satisfaction will be stronger than the effect of travelers' interaction with other visitors on satisfaction.

Hypothesis 6: The effect of travelers' interaction with service providers on satisfaction will be stronger than the effect of travelers' interaction with local residents on satisfaction.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected from February to March 2009 in two ways: (1) onsite survey at selected organic farms; and (2) the online survey to the group of community who

visited local farms in TX and visitors to selected farms through email addresses provided by the two farmers. During a 8-week period, a total of 452 surveys were returned. Of those, 21 incomplete or duplicate responses were identified and removed. Thus, 431 were kept in the final sample (onsite 286; online 145) for analysis. Since this study only considers visitors to farms with their companions, the respondents who visited farms alone were removed. This sampling screening procedure resulted in a final sample of 400 respondents, representing 92.8% of the 431 survey respondents, who have visited organic farms with their companions. Demographic characteristics of study subjects (N=400) were compared with subjects (N=31) excluded in the full study sample (they are called “other subjects” below) to assess if there is any difference exists. Results of this comparison are presented in Table 1. Participants’ gender, age, education level, income level ethnicity and residency (state and city) did not differ significantly between study subject and other subject except family status.

Following the conceptualization of social interaction drawn from social exchange theory and resource theory (Foa & Foa, 1974), 18 items (Table 2) were included to measure the concept of interaction with service providers (Morais, Backman, & Dorsch, 2003). For visitors’ interactions with local residents, companions, and other customers, the same items were used excluding six irrelevant items. All variables were measured on five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study subjects and other subjects for all survey respondent and study subjects and other subjects.

	Study subject (N=400)	Other subject (N=31)	Test statistics ^a	
			χ^2	p
Gender				
Male	38.6%	56.0%	$\chi^2=-1.7$.086
Female	61.4%	44.0%		
Age				
18-29	27.9%	12.0%		
30-39	35.7%	12.0%		.291
40-49	18.7%	20.0%	$\chi^2=1.1$	
50-59	8.1%	40.0%		
60-74	8.9%	8.0%		
75+	0.8%	8.0%		
Income				
Less than 19,999	8.6%	16.7%	$\chi^2=-1.2$.214

	\$20,000 to less than \$40,000	11.1%	16.7%		
	\$40,000 to less than \$60,000	17.4%	20.8%		
	\$60,000 to less than \$80,000	20.3%	16.7%		
	\$80,000 to less than \$100,000	24.6%			
	\$100,000 +	18.0%	6.9%		
Income	Average	Median	\$79,000/\$80,000	\$70,000/\$60,000	
Marital status					
	Single	31.8%	44.0%		
	Married	29.8%	44.0%		
	Single parent w/child(ren)	16.2%		$\chi^2=-2.1$.035
	Married w/child(ren)	20.6%	12.0%		
	Other	1.7%			
Employment status					
	Employed full-time	35.8%	38.1%		
	Employed part-time	21.4%	23.8%		
	Self-employed	5.7%	9.5%		
	Full-time homemaker	11.9%		$\chi^2=.1$.910
	Student	13.2%	4.8%		
	Retired	7.5%	14.3%		
	Not currently employed	4.4%	9.5%		
	Other				
Education background					
	Less than high school	0.3%			
	Some college, not completed	13.5%	4.0%		
	Completed high school	4.7%	12.0%	$\chi^2=1.7$.098
	Completed college	49.9%	32.0%		
	Post graduate work started/completed	31.7%	52.0%		
Ethnic background					
	Caucasian	79.7%	92.0%		
	Hispanic or Mexican American	5.5%	8.0%	$\chi^2=-1.9$.058
	African American	1.1%			
	Asian	10.4%			
	Native American	0.5%			
	Other	2.7%			

^a All demographic variables except marital status in the above table exhibit no significant differences between the two groups, at $p < .05$.

Table 2. Description of constructs and observed variables in hypothesized model

Construct	Observed Variables	Survey Questions	Scale
SI	SI_S1, SI_R1, SI_C1, SI_O1	() were very fond of me.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S2, SI_R2, SI_C2, SI_O2	() treated me as an important person.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S3, SI_R3, SI_C3, SI_O3	() provided me with information on attraction, lodging, or restaurant around the farm.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S4, SI_R4, SI_C4, SI_O4	() helped me greatly in this visit.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S5	() offered discounts.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S6	() provided or shared good quality equipment to use in this visit (basket, bag, etc).	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S7, SI_R7, SI_C7, SI_O7	() treated me personally.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S8, SI_R8, SI_C8, SI_O8	() treated me with high esteem.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S9, SI_R9, SI_C9, SI_O9	() provided me with information	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S10, SI_R10, SI_C10, SI_O10	() assisted me in arranging the visit.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S11	() provided monetary benefits.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S12	() provided good quality products.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S13, SI_R13, SI_C13, SI_O13	() cared about me.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S14, SI_R14, SI_C14, SI_O14	() treated me special.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S15, SI_R15, SI_C15, SI_O15	() educated me about a farm,	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S16, SI_R16, SI_C16, SI_O16	I took advantage of ()' help.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S17	() provided or share a free stuff.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
	SI_S18	() provided or shared souvenirs.	1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree
Satisfaction (SA)	SA1	I was satisfied with the farm and its service.	1:Dissatisfied to 5: Satisfied
	SA2	I was pleased with the farm and its service.	1: Displeased to 5: Pleased
	SA3	My experience at the farm was.....	1: Unfavorable to 5: Favorable
	SA4	My overall feelings about the farm was ...	1: Negative to 5: Positive

Results

The conceptual model was tested with Structural Equation Modeling using AMOS 7.0. In the first step, the measurement models of all constructs (i.e., social interactions with service providers, companions, and other customers and satisfaction) except social interactions with

local residents were identified. social interaction with local residents was dropped from the final structural model due to its low reliability (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998) (Cronbach's $\alpha=.45$). The second step tested the estimation of the structural model and hypotheses for this study. The items included in the final model were identified in Table 3, which also shows standard path coefficients, standard deviations, reliabilities, and standard multiple correlations among latent variables. All reliabilities are greater than the recommended .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Table 3. Summary Statistics

Construct (Items)	Standard path coefficient (β)	Standard error	t-value	p	Reliability (α)	Standard multiple correlation R^2
SI_S \rightarrow SA	.28	.179	2.427	<.01		
Love_S (SI_S1, 7& 13)					.806	.862
Money_S (SI_S4& 10)					.775	.236
Service_S (SI_S6& 17)					.729	.739
SI_C \rightarrow SA	.46	.258	3.494	<.001		
Love_C (SI_C1&13)					.729	.741
Info_C (SI_C3&115)					.791	.753
SI_O \rightarrow SA	.10	.141	1.198	P<.05		
Service_O (SI_O3&9)					.712	.511
Status_O (SI_C5,7&8)					.740	.501
Satisfaction (We_SA1,2 &4)					.977	

Table 4. Overall fit indices for the proposed structural model (N=400)

Model	χ^2 (df)	RMSEA	CFI	GFI	NNFI (Rho)
Proposed Model	289.6 (142)	.05	.96	.93	.95

As can be seen in Table 4, the fit statistics of the proposed structural model suggested that a moderate or good fit to the data with RMSEA equal to .05 (Which is smaller than .08) and χ^2/df equal to 2.03 (which is smaller than 3). Other fit indices included: $\chi^2 = 289.6$ (df=142), $p < .00$, CFI=.96, NNFI=.95. In the final model, all the indicators loaded significantly and substantively on their factors ($p < .05$), suggesting convergent validity (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). To assess discriminant validity, a test was conducted to determine whether the correlations among 8 latent constructs were significantly less than one. Because none of the pairs for 95% confidence interval approach 1.00, thus providing support for discriminant validity (Anderson

& Gerbing, 1988).

One tailed test revealed that there are significant relationships between service providers/companions/other customers and satisfaction. ($\beta^{\text{service providers}} = .28$, $t=2.427$, $p<.01$; $\beta^{\text{companions}} = .46$, $t=3.494$, $p<.00$; $\beta^{\text{other customers}} = .10$, $t=1.198$, $p<.05$). Hence, Hypothesis 1, 3 and 4 were supported. These findings suggest that visitors who perceive themselves to be in a higher-quality-relationship with their companions, service providers and other customers are in turn more satisfied with their visit than those who perceive themselves to be in a lower-quality relationships with their companions, service providers and other customers.

In terms of the type of relationship influencing the effect of interactions on satisfaction, only Hypothesis 5 was tested by comparing the path coefficients and testing the significance of the difference between two paths since Hypothesis 6 was not able tested due to the lack of reliability of social interactions with local residents construct. The result supports Hypothesis 5 as the path from the interactions with companions to satisfaction was greater than that from interactions with other customers. (difference =.36, $t=2.296$).

Conclusion

The proposed model develops the integrated social interactions readily observable in the tourism context particularly for small-scale tourism operations on farms, extending Yi and Gong's work regarding service encounters as an exchange process (2009). It appears that social exchange theory has not been explored to any great extent in the tourism behavior literature, with the exception being studies of resident attitudes towards tourism development. Yet there are a number of questions that lend itself to the analytical framework in tourism interaction behavior. By examining agritourism service encounters from a social exchange perspective, this study suggests that agritourism operators need to keep in mind that considering how a traveler encounters interpersonal interactions with whom and how those influence his/her tourism experience is important for successful marketing. Providing an opportunity for positive and supportive interactions using agritourism programs and services will help improve travelers' satisfaction with their tourism experience. As important as a person perceives the process and outcome of the relationship, he/she will accordingly devote him/herself to it. This is an important part of functional social exchange because they ensure that partners will put forth the effort necessary to produce mutually desirable outcomes. However, it should be noted that all social interactions make important, but complementary contributions to travelers' satisfaction judgment. In particular, in order to derive joint enjoyment between travelers and their companions, tourism programs and services need to focus on shared activities of exchanges, considering that people usually travel in a group of some size.

The result of this study suggests that there are various types of social interaction present

on agritourism encounters and all of those can influence tourism service experience on a farm. An understanding of information related to interpersonal interaction of visitors to farms would be important to farmers engaging in or considering tourism business and development planners who are considering agritourism as an option to promote regional development.

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