



Case study

Campsite choice and the camping tourism experience: Investigating decisive campsite attributes using relevance-determinance analysis



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This study focuses on camping tourism which is a rather neglected aspect of the tourism and hospitality industry.
- Data were obtained from guests of a large operator of campsite facilities in the coastal part of Croatia.
- A relevance-determinance analysis reveals insight into drivers of campsite choice and the onsite campsite experience.

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ABSTRACT

Camping tourism represents a growing part of the overall tourism industry. Despite this fact, this form of tourism has so far been rather neglected by tourism and hospitality research. Using a case study of a major campsite operator in the coastal part of Croatia, this study thus aims to contribute to the understanding of this specific tourist segment. In particular, a relevance-determinance analysis is conducted to reveal most decisive attributes for campsite choice, on the one hand, and for the actual campsite experience, on the other hand. Overall, the results provide valuable insight to practitioners, especially for the purposes of campsite marketing and experience management.

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1. Introduction

Camping tourism can be broadly defined as a form of nature-based special interest tourism. It is fundamentally determined by the flexible, temporary and mobile nature of its accommodation facilities (such as e.g. tents, recreational vehicles (RVs), mobile homes etc.) and by its inseparable relationship with the natural environment (Blichfeldt & Mikkelsen, 2015; Lucivero, 2012; Nolan & Broxon, 2000). In recent years, camping tourism is recognized as a growing segment of the broader tourism industry (O'Neill, Riscinto-Kozub, & Van Hyfte, 2010), currently evolving from an inexpensive, temporary sojourn in a rural environment into a highly fragmented niche tourism sector (Brooker & Joppe, 2014).

The trends among public-managed campgrounds seem to be moving away from rustic campgrounds that provide only a tent pad and a fire ring to more developed facilities that offer a range of different amenities, where campers still search for unique experiences that go above the opportunity to experience nature and social interaction (Garst, Williams, & Roggenbuck, 2010). In addition, while camping styles and options changed significantly over the last years, coastal camping in particular became valorized as is it regarded with a heightened sense of nostalgia (Collins & Kearns, 2010).

According to *American Camper Report* (Coleman Company Inc. & Outdoor Foundation, 2014) more than 40 million Americans (i.e. 14% of the population) went camping in 2013, generating a total of 597.7 million camping overnights. The average camper went on 5.4 camping trips during 2013 with an average of 14.9 days spent on camping. Most popular types of shelter during camping trips are tents (77%), followed by RVs (16%), cabins (6%) and other (1%). In the USA, camping is dominated by young male Caucasians, highly

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educated with an above average income and by families with young children (up to 12 years). Most popular activities during camping trips include hiking, outdoor cooking, photography, fishing etc.

According to the latest available data from Eurostat (2016), the number of tourist overnights recorded in campsites in EU-28 countries during 2015 amounted to 376.8 million representing a share of 13.8% in the total number of generated tourist overnights. In addition, Eurostat estimates that there are about 26.3 thousand campsites with 10 million campsite bed-places in the European Union (Demunter & Dimitrakopoulou, 2010). Most popular camping destinations are France (30%), Italy (15%) and the United Kingdom (12.4%), while Croatia accounted for 4.5% of the total number of tourist overnights recorded in campsites in EU-28 countries during 2015. Most popular regions for camping are French regions of Languedoc-Roussillon and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, where camping accounts for 25%–50% of the overall number of recorded overnights. It is estimated that European camping generated a gross turnover of around 12 billion € in 2007 (DWIF Consulting, 2007). Even though more recent data on this subject are not available, it is not unreasonable to assume that the economic effects of camping tourism have been steadily increasing over the past few years, given the fact that camping is transforming from a niche-to a mainstream-tourism product. Although camping tourism undoubtedly represents an important part of the overall tourism industry, the attention of tourism and hospitality researchers to this issue has so far been generally low. In particular, to the knowledge of the authors, there is no study that has made an attempt to understand the processes of campsite choice and camping experience formation, which would be particularly valuable insight to the management of such facilities. The present study aims to address this particular gap in the tourism and hospitality literature. Based on a survey-based study among tourists who have stayed at campsites in the coastal part of Croatia, this study conducts a relevance-determinance analysis (Mikulić & Prebežac, 2011), to uncover which campsite attributes are most important when choosing a campsite for a vacation, on the one hand, and to see which campsite attributes are actually most decisive for the onsite experience, on the other hand.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews available empirical studies on camping tourism and provides an overview of the basic foundations of relevance-determinance analysis (RDA). Section 3 introduces the methodology of the underlying primary research, along with a brief description of the research setting. Section 4 presents the results of the conducted RDA and discusses major findings. Finally, the article concludes with a brief summary and a statement of major study limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Empirical research on camping tourism

Alongside this growing interest in the camping tourism, a demand for quality servicing infrastructure emerged in order to satisfy the wide variety of needs, wants and expectations of an increasingly demanding traveling public (O'Neill et al., 2010). Camping activity in general (Park, Ellis, Kim, & Prideaux, 2010; Triantafyllidou & Siomkos, 2013), and quality of camping experiences and campers' satisfaction, in particular (O'Neill et al., 2010), remain, however, rather neglected areas of the tourism and consumption behavior literature.

As depicted in Table 1, recent empirical studies on camping tourism have examined the aesthetic dimension of camping (Breiby, 2014), development of camping tourism as a destination positioning strategy (Gržinić, Žarković, & Zanketić, 2010), campers'

loyalty (Hardy, Ogunmokun, & Winter 2005), campers' resistance to change and commitment (Walsh & Lipinski, 2008), social equity judgments (Park et al., 2010), differences among managers' and campers' opinions on modern camping culture (Clark, Hendee, & Campbell, 2009), and camping websites features (Jaković, Kraševac, & Šebek, 2014).

Thus, Breiby (2014) addressed the concept of aesthetics in the context of nature-based tourism, focusing on the man-made environment in nature. The study's results reveal that aesthetics is a multidimensional concept that consists of five different factors, i.e. (i) harmony, (ii) variation/contrast, (iii) scenery/viewing, (iv) genuineness, and (v) art/architecture. According to this study, the first two factors emerged as the most important dimensions.

In the context of camping tourism development at the destination-level, Gržinić et al. (2010) surveyed tourists staying at campsites in Croatia in order to obtain guidelines for positioning camping tourism in the region of Dalmatia. Major implications of their study encompassed the need for restructuring and quality improvement of local camping sites.

With regard to research on loyalty in camping tourism, Hardy et al. (2005) examined whether demographic camper characteristics and satisfaction with a camping site are related to camper loyalty. The findings revealed that satisfaction leads to camper loyalty, while demographic variables were not found to be related to campsite loyalty. In addition, in their study on consumer resistance to change, Walsh and Lipinski (2008) suggested that some changes are not welcomed by consumers in the context of camping tourism, as resistance to change increases among more committed and loyal customers.

Park et al. (2010) investigated the decision-making process and outcome variables that predict social equity judgments and price acceptability of user fees for camping in protected areas in the U.S. Their results suggest that the extent of public input is the most important predictor of social equity judgment, followed by low user fees and revenue being allocated back to the site.

In a study on differing orientations between campers and campground managers, Clark et al. (2009) suggested that differences might be due to the social goals and urban behavior patterns of campers compared to the more traditional, natural environment-oriented expectations held by recreation managers.

Jaković et al. (2014) studied the extent to which e-business principles are applied in camping tourism, by conducting an analysis of 100 websites from five countries (i.e. Spain, France, Italy, Croatia, and Greece). Aspects that were examined involved (i) communication with customers on-line, (ii) pre-sales marketing activities, (iii) online reservation and payment methods, (iv) post-sales marketing activities, and (v) usage of Web 2.0 technologies and mobile technologies. The analysis revealed deficiencies in mobile applications usage and post-sales marketing activities.

Moreover, some empirical studies on camping tourism have also focused on the investigation of camping experiences (e.g. Garst et al., 2010; van Heerden, 2010; Triantafyllidou & Siomkos, 2013) and their drivers (O'Neill, 2010), as well as campsite choices and campground attributes that influence them (Oh, Park, & Hammill, 2007). More specifically, in their study on forest camping experiences and meanings, Garst et al. (2010) found that camping experiences share common features with extraordinary experiences such as connection with nature, social interaction, and feelings of escapism and self-renewal. According to this study, the life-context meanings, considered as interpretive frames with relevant repercussions in the greater context of campers' life, include restoration, family memories and traditions, novelty, and appreciating nature.

When analyzing leisure caravanning experience in a national park in South Africa, van Heerden (2010) concluded that proximity

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