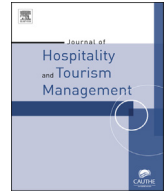




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What drives green advocacy? A case study of leisure farms in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to test a research model to gain a better understanding of the relationships among environmental concern, green experiential quality, green experiential satisfaction, green experiential loyalty, green perceived flow, green perceived playfulness and green advocacy. The findings are based on a structural equation model analysis of a convenience sample of 483 visitors at Tamarind Ecological Education Leisure Farm in Taichung, Taiwan. The results will assist leisure farm management to develop and implement market-orientated service strategies to increase environmental concern, green experiential quality, green experiential satisfaction and green experiential loyalty, enhance green perceived flow and green perceived playfulness, and increase green advocacy.

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1. Introduction

Chang (2003, p. 22) defines a leisure farm as “a farm that combines agriculture production and the functions of leisure, travel, recreation, and accommodation in one.” In 1989, the Council of Agriculture of Taiwan selected 31 rural areas in which to develop leisure farms to create and promote agricultural tourism and to help sustain agriculture. With annual revenues of roughly NT\$4.5 billion, leisure agriculture has become a promising sunrise industry in Taiwan (Taiwan Leisure Farms Development Association, 2017). Each year, approximately 49.13 million visitors visit leisure farms in Taiwan. On average, around 45,000 visitors can be attracted to visit each leisure farm (Taiwan Tourism Bureau, 2014). The primary reason for developing leisure farms in Taiwan is to offset fluctuations in agricultural income (Chang, 2003; Liu & Wu, 2014); another reason is the low value of income from agricultural production (Tsaor, Yen, & Ku, 2016). The term “green” is typically used interchangeably with “environmentally-friendly” or “eco-friendly”. Recently, leisure farms have inspired people who are keen on the environmentally-friendly life but also educated all other visitors in friendly behavior to the environment. To protect the natural environment, the Council of Agriculture of Taiwan does not allow

leisure farms to build huge buildings or artificial facilities inside the farm area. The green concept was derived from environmentalism, which became prominent in the 1970s (Tsaor et al., 2016). The World Commission on Environment and Development defined green development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 43). In the past decade, the concept of green development has generally been applied in the area of business management (Tsaor et al., 2016). However, the green concept remains scarce in leisure farm context.

Chelminski and Coulter (2011) propose that advocacy has emerged as an effective means to empower customers and gain their trust. When practiced by customers, advocacy reflects a tendency to offer enthusiastic referral for an organization. From the organization's perspective, advocacy entails a customer-centric organizational approach to empower customers in the marketplace by providing transparent, unbiased information about its offerings (Lawer & Knox, 2006). Though the concept of advocacy sounds appealing on a conceptual level, very few studies focus on the constructs resulting in green advocacy. Therefore, there is a need to investigate and study the key determinants of green advocacy from the perspective of leisure farm visitors.

In general, government and non-profit organizations work to educate people to elevate their concern for the environment and exert pressure on organizations to accept greater responsibility for the environmental impact of their products (First & Khatriwal, 2010). Environmental concern has been increasingly playing an

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important role in influencing quality, satisfaction and loyalty. Greater environmental concern results in higher levels of perceived quality, satisfaction and loyalty (Saeednia & Valahzghard, 2012). Kao, Huang, and Wu (2008) and Wu and Ai (2016) assert that quality influences satisfaction and loyalty respectively. Roy, Eshghi, and Quazi (2014) and Wu and Ai (2016) propose that satisfaction influences loyalty, which, in turn, results in advocacy. Ali and Ali (2016) show that quality is an antecedent of perceived flow, which, in turn, influences satisfaction and loyalty. Moreover, perceived flow moderates the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty (Kuo, Chang, Cheng, & Lin, 2016). Hsu, Chang, and Chen (2012) indicate that quality influences perceived playfulness, which results in satisfaction and loyalty. However, to the best of current knowledge, no prior research has studied the relationships among environmental concern, green experiential quality, green experiential satisfaction, green experiential loyalty, green perceived flow, green perceived playfulness and green advocacy in the tourism context. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to test the relationships between green advocacy and the constructs environmental concern, green experiential quality, green experiential satisfaction, green experiential loyalty, green perceived flow and green perceived playfulness as perceived by leisure farm visitors.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Environmental concern

Environmental concern is a general attitude against environmental deterioration (Fransson, Davidsson, Marell, & Garling, 1994). Thompson and Barton (1994) propose that environmental concern is motivated either by a true care for the nature as such, or by a care for nature as a human resource. Gamba and Oskamp (1994) indicate that knowledge about environmental influences caused by human activities has been a motive for action. Since environmental concern is considered superior knowledge and interest, visitors who are more concerned about the environment are more likely to be familiar with various green ratings and make finer distinctions between them (Kwon, Englis, & Mann, 2016).

Wandel and Bugge (1997) assert that environmental concern plays a key role in forming an opinion of quality. The growing concerns of humanity by organizations can be satisfied by adopting strategies that are resource supportive and environmentally-friendly in all steps of the value chain of the organization (Johri & Sahasakmontri, 1998). Saeednia and Valahzghard (2012) propose that environmental concern influences satisfaction. Kassanjian (1971) identifies that consumers' concern about environmental pollution is a crucial variable that makes them willing to keep loyal to green products. Saeednia and Valahzghard (2012) find that quality, satisfaction and loyalty are positively influenced by environmental concern.

2.2. Green experiential quality

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) develop a conceptual scale for service quality in SERVQUAL, which is designed to measure perceptions of service quality in the service industries. This scale includes five dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. However, numerous studies have been skeptical about whether these dimensions are applicable when service quality is evaluated in other service industries (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). For example, Cronin and Taylor (1992) argue that the evaluation of service quality based on the expectation-performance gap derived from Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) is insufficient because much of the empirical research supports performance-based measures of service quality.

Fick and Ritchie (1991) find that SERVQUAL does not adequately address both affective and holistic factors that contribute to the overall quality of service experience. Although the importance of service quality has been stressed in tourism literature, another related and nuanced factor, that of experiential quality, has been increasingly receiving attention (e.g., Chen & Chen, 2010; Jin, Lee, & Lee, 2015; Wu & Li, 2014; Wu, Li, & Li, 2014). A better understanding of experiential phenomena in tourism services is particularly important and will permit the industry to perform better (Chen & Chen, 2010).

In tourism, service quality refers to service performance at the attribute level but experiential quality is the psychological outcome resulting from visitor participation in tourism activities. The former has been defined as the quality of the attributes of a service which are under the control of a supplier, whereas the latter involves not only the attributes provided by a supplier but also the attributes brought to the opportunity by the visitor (Jin et al., 2015). Therefore, experiential quality is conceptualized as visitors' affective responses to their desired social-psychological benefits. Because of global warming, visitors are willing to pay more attention to the environment and are becoming committed to purchasing green products (Chang & Chen, 2014). Therefore, following the definition of Wu, Ai, and Cheng (2016), this study proposes a new construct, green experiential quality, which is defined as a subjective measure of a visitor's experiences with environmentally-friendly products or services provided by a supplier. Green experiential quality is applied to measure the extent to which leisure farm management considers the specific needs of the visitors in delivering environmentally-friendly products or services (Fiedler, Kilkki, & Reichl, 2009). Jin et al. (2015) indicate that the quality of visitors' experiences influences experiential satisfaction. Several researchers (Wu & Ai, 2016; Wu & Li, 2014; Wu et al., 2016) find that experiential quality is an antecedent of experiential satisfaction, indicating that experiential quality has an influence on experiential satisfaction. Kheng, Mahamad, and Ramayah (2010) argue that improvement in quality plays a role in increasing loyalty.

2.3. Green experiential satisfaction

From an experiential perspective, experiential satisfaction reflects the satisfaction experienced from the service content associated with a specific transaction. Customers compare experiences with their prior expectations, which cause positive or negative disconfirmation (Kao et al., 2008). Organizations are currently facing growing pressure to become responsible and green. Several stakeholders press organizations to reduce their negative impacts on society and natural environment (Barnett, 2007). With the rise of environmentalism, not only do customers become more willing to purchase products that generate minimum impact, but also society becomes more concerned about the environment. Recently, international environmental regulations have increased dramatically and become stricter (Chang & Fong, 2010). Therefore, this study proposes a new construct – green experiential satisfaction, and defines the term as visitors' overall evaluation of environmentally-friendly content based on their visiting experiences (e.g., Lee, 2012; Wu, Cheng, & Ai, 2017a, 2017b; Wu, Cheng, & Chen, 2017c; Wu, Cheng, & Hong, 2017d, 2017e; Wu et al., 2016). Green experiential satisfaction is the outcome of consumption in that the performance meets or exceeds the green experiential needs of customers, the requirements of environmental regulations and the sustainable expectations of society (Chang & Fong, 2010; Wu & Li, 2014).

Kao et al. (2008) and Wu and Ai (2016) indicate that experiential satisfaction is an antecedent of loyalty, indicating that experiential satisfaction influences loyalty. In general, satisfaction is a mediating

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