



The Behavioral Consequences of Tourist Experience



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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the behavioral consequences of experience in Taiwanese tourist townships. A multiple indicator-multiple cause (MIMIC) approach is applied to conceptualize the construct of tourist experience, a dynamic process in which tourists transform mere exposure of stimulus into a state of flow and positive emotion. The results reveal a psychological process of “tourist experience → perceived value → satisfaction → loyalty intentions.” Perceived value intervenes between tourist experience and satisfaction. Satisfaction is a dominant antecedent of loyalty intentions. Overall, only when perceived value and satisfaction are considered together in the tourist experience model will the nuances of tourist behaviors be understood. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Tourist experience and destination choice have become a focus of tourism in both academy and industry. Tourists are value-driven, and the destination itself is a value provider for tourists. The nature and range of tourist experiences offered by a destination determines the destination's value. Perceived value is a strategic instrument to maintain competitive advantage for destination management organizations (DMOs), and understanding the antecedents and consequences of perceived value of a destination has strategic relevance (Han & Hwang, 2013; Prebensen, Woo, Chen, & Uysal, 2012).

Creating value is complex in particular when DMOs cover a large destination. In general, perceived value can be achieved through the enhancement of benefits and/or the reduction of sacrifices. For example, as a destination, Hong Kong is well known for its year-round sales promotions. Meanwhile, the number of tourists to Japan has increased substantially due to the depreciation of the Japanese Yen and tax exemptions favorable to tourists (Kyodo, 2015; Nip, 2014). These examples illustrate the effects of reducing perceived monetary costs at a national level. However, more local destinations can hardly compete with such aggressively strategic tools. For example, to encourage tourists to engage in an in-depth experiential tour, the Taiwan Tourism Bureau selected its “Top 10 small tourist townships” to promote the most featured areas within each city (Taiwan Tourism Bureau, 2012a), such that participating townships compete with each other for tourists based on an enjoyable experience.

The appeal to experience is consistent with the shift toward an experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Due to the trend of service commoditization, tourism differentiation based on service attributes may lead to a homogeneous market structure and subsequent severe price competition (Morgan, Elbe, & de Esteban Curiel, 2009). Providing high-quality tourism products or services does not necessarily lead to an extraordinary experience, as experience is not merely the multiplicity of features offered (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). The primary goal of a tourist is to search for the peak experience (Quan & Wang, 2004), and thus meeting tourists' inner need for experience becomes highly relevant.

Building on above backgrounds, the current study investigates the behavioral consequences of tourist experience in the context of Taiwanese tourist townships. Our goal is to contribute to the literature on the essence of tourist experience and its influence on tourists' loyalty intentions. The results may also provide guidelines for formulating strategic thinking for DMOs.

This paper consists of four parts. First, we review literature on tourist experience, perceived value, and satisfaction, and present the conceptualization method of tourist experience. Second, we describe the research design. Next, we discuss our findings from data analyses. Finally, we discuss theoretical and practical implications, and make suggestions for future research.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1. Process-based and outcome-based views of tourist experience

A dynamic experience encompasses objective, interactive encounters and the resulting subjective outcomes (Duerden, Ward, & Freeman, 2015), and a tourist experience can be classified into before-,

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during-, and post-tour experiences (Aho, 2001). We further categorize during-tour experience (the actual visit) into process-based and outcome-based experiences (Helkkula, 2011). A process-based experience involves the transformation or change during an experience. A destination's context—including its culture, history, religion, nature, events, shopping, architecture, hospitality, accommodation, and transportation—trigger tourist experiences. Similar to mere experience of simply passive exposure and acceptance of events, such experiential stimuli or direct responses from the stimuli, is only part of an experience; tourist experience is sequentially formed, and the endpoint involves searching for the moment of a memorable experience (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). Therefore, external stimuli constitute the major source of subjective and internal responses to an experience in a longitudinal process.

On the other hand, the outcome-based experience focuses on the immediate result of an experience. Studies have consistently conceptualized the end-state of experience with similar themes in terms of cognition or affect orientation (e.g., Ballantyne, Packer, & Sutherland, 2011; Kang & Gretzel, 2012). A cognitive experiential outcome involves thinking or a conscious mental state, whereas an affective experiential outcome involves one's moods, feelings, and emotions.

For the cognitive part of experience, tourists may seek "flow," a state of optimal experience "in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). People screen out irrelevant thoughts and perceptions in the state of flow and focus entirely on interacting with the environment (Novak, Hoffman, & Yung, 2000). Tourists achieve optimal experiences when they actively participate in and are immersed in an activity (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Regarding emotions, hedonic dimensions of feelings, fantasies, and fun (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) reflect the emotional state of an experience, and positive emotions are more easily remembered than negative ones by tourists (Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, & Diener, 2003). While various experiential stimuli form an enduring process, flow and positive emotions such as happiness are both transitory states (Tsaour, Yen, & Hsiao, 2013).

2.2. *Within-experience and between-experience comparison*

Post-tour comparison is an important stage of the tourist experience, with comparison results serving as an anchor for future actions (Aho, 2001). Perceived value and satisfaction are two major determinants of loyalty behaviors (e.g., Duman & Mattila, 2005; Gallarza & Saura, 2006; Lin & Kuo, 2013; Sun, Chi, & Xu, 2013); both display commitment to varying degrees (Oliver, 1999) and involve the concept of comparison.

Perceived value is an overall assessment of what is received from the experience and what is given to acquire such experience (Zeithaml, 1988). Perceived value concerns the obtained experiences relative to the acquisition cost paid (either monetary or nonmonetary). Therefore, perceived value is a comparison within an experience. In contrast, satisfaction is a comparison across experiences. Satisfaction may arise from broad, multiple standards of comparison (Bolton & Lemon, 1999). Satisfaction involves comparing the actual, substantive experiences with the prior expectations formed based on various external or internal information sources. According to the expectation disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980), positive disconfirmation (i.e., experience outperforms expectation) increases feelings of gratification, and hence post-visit satisfaction.

2.3. *Effect of tourist experience on loyalty through post-tour comparison*

We propose that the effects of the tourist experience on loyalty behaviors are through post-tour comparisons (i.e., perceived value and satisfaction). The role of post-tour comparisons as mediators of the experience-loyalty relationship would be supported by links between (1) experience and loyalty, (2) experience and comparison, and (3) comparison and loyalty.

The first link between experience and loyalty is well established in literature. For example, brand experience influences loyalty (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009), and service experience influences word-of-mouth and loyalty behaviors (Klaus & Maklan, 2012). Tourists' emotional experiences influence intentions to revisit and recommend a hotel (Han & Back, 2008) or a destination (Hosang, Prayag, Deesilatham, Caušević, & Odeh, 2015).

As for the link between experience and comparison, experience is positively correlated with perceived value in heritage tourism (Chen & Chen, 2010) and satisfaction in consumption (Brakus et al., 2009; Klaus & Maklan, 2012). At the outcome experience level, flow positively influences satisfaction of adventure recreation (Tsaour, Lin, & Cheng, 2015). Affective experience in group travels (Gallarza & Saura, 2006) and emotional response (Duman & Mattila, 2005) positively influence perceived value and satisfaction.

Regarding the link between comparison and loyalty, the tradeoff evaluation of perceived value involves the process of receiving, selecting, organizing, and interpreting information from actual experiences (Prebensen et al., 2012). Perceived value has direct influence on word-of-mouth and revisit intentions (Duman & Mattila, 2005; Han & Hwang, 2013).

Satisfaction is an affective state toward the holistic tourist experience (Oliver, 1980). Tourists evaluate whether or not the ideal tourism expectation is fulfilled based on the actual experience. Although outcome-based positive emotion and satisfaction both appear to be affective orientation, it is important to note their subtle differences. The positive emotion is an immediate and transitory state that occurs during tourism. According to hedonic adaptation (Nelson & Meyvis, 2008), the subjective intensity of affective experiences tends to decrease over time. In tourism, the affective destination image held by sport tourists after event participation decays over time (King, Chen, & Funk, 2015). On the contrary, the formation of overall satisfaction is based on not only the single, specific, and unique experience but also on the accumulation of multiple similar past experiences (Anderson, Fornell, & Lehmann, 1994). The positive effect of affective commitment, which is a closely related construct to satisfaction, on loyalty intentions increases over time (Johnson, Herrmann, & Huber, 2006). Thus, we posit that satisfaction is a closer antecedent of behavioral intentions than is experience of positive emotion. Previous studies have shown that tourist satisfaction influences intentions to recommend and revisit (Duman & Mattila, 2005; Sun et al., 2013). Taken together, we posit that perceived value and satisfaction mediate the relationship between tourist experience and loyalty intentions. Formally, we reach the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Tourist experience is positively related to loyalty intentions through the creation of perceived value.

Hypothesis 2. Tourist experience is positively related to loyalty intentions through the creation of satisfaction.

2.4. *The relative importance of perceived value and satisfaction*

It is expected that evaluating value is easier than evaluating satisfaction for tourists. From the perspective of information processing theory (Bettman, 1979), post-tour comparison involves post-hoc recall of actual experiences, with memory playing a role in the process. Comparison of multiple experiences in forming satisfaction requires not only recall of actual experiences of the current target but also expectations or prior similar experiences. The information acquisition process is a difficult decision-making task that involves internal and external search. To facilitate remembering, individuals use the strategies of organizing, associating, and grouping information (Bower, 1972). The tradeoff judgment of value perception is explicit in nature. Therefore, tourists benefit by initially forming concrete perceived value from abstract experience to be used in subsequent between-experience comparison (i.e., satisfaction). In the literature, the effects of perceived value

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