



Attraction sustainability in North Carolina and its impact on decision-making



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 July 2015

Received in revised form 10 April 2016

Accepted 15 April 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Sustainability practices

Attractions

Green consumers

Decision-making

Perceived consumer effectiveness

Certification

Furnishings

ABSTRACT

The green movement has generated an increase in research on consumer behavior related to green products and services. The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influence consumer choice regarding sustainable attractions and to develop a better understanding of whether the sustainable features impact visitor decision-making. Results show that the environmental practices of an attraction were not as important to visitors as other factors such as reputation, price, and the activities at the site. The results also demonstrate that when selecting among green factors, eco-furnishings and sustainability related certification play the largest role in determining the likelihood of visitation to a sustainable attraction.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

Sustainable tourism consists of various sectors including but not limited to accommodations, dining, transportation, retail, visitor information, tour operators, and attractions. There has been a fair amount of research conducted on green consumer behavior and motivations regarding hotels and restaurants (Choi, Parsa, Sigala, and Putrevu, 2009; Han, Hsu, and Lee, 2009; Han and Kim, 2010; Kim, Kim, and Goh, 2011; Kim, Njite, and Hancer, 2013; Lee, Han, and Willson, 2011; Tsai and Tsai, 2008). In contrast, consumer selection of attractions, including the potential influence of Corporate Social Responsibility or sustainability features, has not been investigated to the same extent (Coles, Fenclova, and Dinan, 2013). Understanding consumer choice in regards to attractions is critical because the selection of destination, particularly for ecotourists, is frequently based upon the attractions (Chan and Baum, 2007; Weaver, 2006). Furthermore, out of the \$1.4 trillion generated by the travel and tourism industry in 2011, 10% of that, or roughly \$140 billion was from recreation and attractions (SelectUSA, 2016, para. 1). While many different criteria affect a consumer's decision, it is

important to understand whether, and to what degree, visitors consider sustainable features of attractions during their purchasing decision.

Attractions can be defined as the main motivation for leisure travel and consist of both natural and developed sites including cultural attractions, natural attractions, events, recreation, and entertainment attractions (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2011); additionally, attractions vary in terms of ownership, and exist in the public, private, and non-profit sectors of the economy. Regardless of attraction type, owners and developers will be better positioned to make investment decisions once they have a fuller understanding of visitors' green travel preference. Industry research has shown a significant portion of tourists prefer greener attractions. PGAV Destination Consulting (2008) reported that 70% of attraction visitors are more likely to visit attractions that pursue green practices rather than those that continue business as usual. While this would suggest investing in green practices increases an attraction's desirability, a further comparison across features, both green and others, will allow attractions to cater to the consumer's preferences while also advancing the broader understanding of consumer green preferences.

When exploring consumer decision-making, there are a variety of possible theoretical foundations to consider. Prior research has found a positive correlation between environmental concern and environmentally-friendly behavior (Kim and Han, 2010). This existing relationship would suggest perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) as

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a relevant perspective to further examine the relationship between attraction desirability and the adoption of green practices. PCE reasons that an individual is more likely to engage in certain behaviors if he/she believes that those particular actions will have a beneficial social or environmental impact (Belz and Peattie, 2009). PCE has been applied to varying types of products and behaviors including pollution abatement (Kinneer, Taylor, and Ahmed, 1974), sustainable food products (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006), and various sustainability related activities (Ellen, Wiener, and Cobb-Walgren, 1991; McDonald and Oates, 2006). The purpose of this research is to explore the motivations underlying consumer selection of attractions, whether sustainability factors played a role, and if a relationship exists between an individual's green purchase behaviors and their decision to select a sustainable attraction.

2. Consumer decision-making in sustainable tourism

Researchers in the marketing field have examined consumer decision-making since the 1950s (Sirakaya and Woodside, 2005). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, this work was expanded to service markets, including tourism, as well as green marketing (Belz and Peattie, 2009). As a result, there has been a rise in research regarding consumer decision-making in tourism and sustainable tourism. However, what customers understand is not always clear. For example, research by the European Commission found that two thirds of consumers find it difficult to understand which products are better for the environment (Roth, 2011). In regards to travel, Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, and Tribe (2010) found that individuals who describe themselves as concerned about environmental issues were still confused as to how tourism related to the environment.

Even if consumers are aware of the relationship between the environment and tourism, there may still be a lack of engagement and action. Hjalager (2000) concluded it is still unknown whether travelers will investigate environmental standards of a travel product before actually engaging in the decision-making process. To encourage more sustainable behavior, researchers argue an increase in awareness and education among tourism consumers is important (Miller et al., 2010). For example, the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) suggests that 'sustainable tourism' is a term and concept unclear to consumers, partly because the industry has not defined it well (GSTC, n.d., slide 6), and partly because the industry uses multiple terms such as sustainable tourism, responsible tourism, ecotourism, and green tourism (GSTC, n.d., slide 6).

Additionally, there are individuals who believe that the green traveler must be defined and segmented, a reasonable assertion for certain research and marketing purposes. For example, the CMIGreen Annual Green Traveler Survey Report exclusively utilizes results obtained from green travelers. This segment is comprised of respondents who consider themselves to be very or extremely eco-conscious and who took at least one overnight vacation in the past year (Roth, 2011). However, CMIGreen, a green tourism marketing research organization, does acknowledge, that a green traveler can range anywhere from an upscale tourist desiring a comfortable green hotel to a self-sufficient eco-adventurer (Roth, 2011).

Another instance of the segmentation of green consumers is the typology created by McDonald, Oates, Alevizou, Young, and Hwang (2012). Their typology consists of three categories of green consumers: Translators, Exceptors, and Selectors. Each category approaches green consumption differently (McDonald et al., 2012). Translators are partially green, motivated by a sense of doing what they believe is the right thing in each situation, not holistically, and they are open to change. The greenest group in the typology is the Exceptors. For this group sustainability is a priority in every facet of their lives, they are change seekers, and they have the "most sophisticated understanding of sustainability" (McDonald et al., 2012, p. 454). Motivated by one green factor, Selectors are the largest group. Selectors are green in one

aspect of their lives and they do not focus on sustainability holistically (McDonald et al., 2012).

While this work has identified the relationship between environmental preferences and travel, green is only one part of sustainable choices. In terms of sustainable tourism, the effects of tourism on socio-cultural values have been previously recognized and impacts on the environment can be linked to impacts on communities (Pomeroy, Noble, and Johnson, 2011). Responsible tourists not only place an emphasis on environmental concerns but also "a desire to show respect for local communities, and to share the economic benefits of tourism directly with local people" (Weeden, 2011, p. 215).

2.1. Certification programs

One strategy advocates and researchers have put forth to alleviate some of the confusion for tourists to make sustainable travel choices is sustainable tourism certification (Font, 2002). A certification program is a set of standards and criteria created by a third party that if abided by, provide assurance to the consumer (Font, 2002). However, even certification programs have created a set of their own problems, such as a lack of well-defined certifications available for the identification of environmentally friendly tourist products (Hjalager, 2000), a proliferation of ecolabels creating confusion for customers to the point where they prefer to ignore the messages altogether (Font, 2002). Font (2002) identified over 100 ecolabels for tourism, hospitality, and ecotourism. Esparon, Gyuris, & Stoeckl (2014) similarly expressed that the abundance of competing programs and the lack of uniform standards, creates a challenge for consumers who wish to choose a reliable program. These issues indicate that trusted certification programs for sustainable tourism products may have significant value for consumers. Research has shown that consumers view certification programs and ecolabels as positive and find them to be important (Esparon et al., 2014; Puhakka & Siikamäki, 2012). Lastly, certification has been said to benefit consumers by providing a guarantee of quality and reliability (Esparon et al., 2014).

In order to ease the complexity of certification programs in tourism, and help clarify sustainable tourism choices, more simple, efficient, effective, and universal certification organizations and standards would be advantageous. As noted by Font (2002), only in the late 90s were there efforts to create international umbrellas for environmental certification, beginning with Green Globe in 1998. He states that international labels are likely the only labels that will influence tourist purchases. Currently, there are emerging environmental standards such as Global Sustainable Tourism Council's criteria (GSTC). According to the GSTC guidelines, sustainable tourism certification programs recognized by their program should define "sustainable tourism in a way that is actionable, measurable, and credible" (GSTC, n.d.). This organization certifies systemic sustainability, but whether this will be sufficient to encourage travelers to choose sustainable businesses and organizations that have such a certification designation is still undetermined.

2.2. Hotel, restaurant, and attraction research

Despite the ongoing debate regarding sustainability and traveler preferences, there has been a great deal of consumer behavior research conducted on hotels and restaurants, some of which involves environmentally friendly characteristics of the facilities and products. For example, Tsai and Tsai (2008) have researched consumer behavior related to environmental ethics in green hotels and found a positive relationship between the environmental ethics of consumers and hotel related consumption behaviors (Tsai and Tsai, 2008). Similarly, Choi et al. (2009) study of the lodging industry found that consumers demonstrated high willingness to pay for hotels that employed environmentally responsible practices. According to Han et al. (2009) consumers' attitudes toward green behaviors and overall image of a green hotel resulted in positive relationships toward visit intentions, word of mouth intentions,

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