Research Paper

An investigation of the relationships among destination familiarity, destination image and future visit intention

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A B S T R A C T

The presence or absence of differences in the perceptions of previous visitors and non-visitors toward a destination is important to tourist theorists and practitioners. Destination familiarity, destination image, and future visit intention are suitable marketing variables for investigations into these two groups. Destination familiarity has been defined in many different ways. Adding to the complexity, related concepts, such as awareness, knowledge, experience, and expertise, have, in one way or another, been used in combination with familiarity. There is also inconsistency in whether familiarity is a unidimensional or multidimensional construct. Considering previous studies, Prentice (2004) provided an inter-related seven-dimension familiarity construct. Taking into account previous familiarity and familiarity-related studies and setting experiential familiarity as a moderator, this study aims to achieve a deeper understanding of familiarity by examining how Prentice's familiarity dimensions are interrelated, as well as to gain insights into the structural relationships among familiarity, destination image, and future visit intention via the comparison of previous visitors and non-visitors. Hong Kong was selected as the tourist destination, and the partial least squares method was applied to analyze 493 surveys collected from residents in Taiwan. The findings provide a range of academic and practical implications. In this light, certain previous findings may have to be reconsidered. The present work indicates the importance of experience as a criterion for segmenting consumers, and it demonstrates the usefulness of a critical examination of non-visitors. This study offers numerous suggestions regarding how destination marketing organizations can formulate effective strategies for both previous visitors and non-visitors.

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1. Introduction

Tourism researchers have investigated the presence or absence of differences in the perceptions and behaviors of previous visitors (individuals who have visited a particular destination) and non-visitors (individuals who have not visited the destination) toward a destination. These differences include how they perceive the image of the destination (Baloglu, Henthorne, & Sahin, 2014; Hughes & Allen, 2008; Phillips & Jang, 2010), as well as their attitudinal and behavioral patterns (Choi, Tkachenko, & Sil, 2011; Phillips & Jang, 2010; Riscinto-Kozub & Childs, 2012). In addition to their theoretical importance, these studies also have practical purposes. Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) are interested in encouraging non-visitors to visit and previous visitors to revisit specific destinations. Repeat visitation is a stabilizing influence, and repeat visitors are a cost-effective market segment for most destinations. They provide continued revenues and lower

costs in market communication (Kastenholz, Eusebio, & Carneiro, 2013; Lau & McKercher, 2004; Zhang, Fu, Cai, & Lu, 2014). A good appreciation of the differences between previous visitors and non-visitors and the contributory factors to these differences will help DMOs design appropriate strategies for different segments of consumers.

Familiarity is useful in explaining differences in various aspects of touristic behavior between previous visitors and non-visitors because it represents 'a key marketing variable in segmenting and targeting certain groups and developing a marketing action plan, including product, distribution, pricing and promotion decisions' (Baloglu, 2001, p. 127). Destination familiarity enables us to understand how individuals shape the image of a destination (Chen & Lin, 2012). Furthermore, familiarity, by itself or in combination with the destination image, can affect an individual's choice of destination, satisfaction, and word-of-mouth behavior (Chen & Lin, 2012; Ozdemir et al., 2012). Excessive familiarity may also make a visit less interesting and involving (Kastenholz, 2010). Thus, destination familiarity is an important topic for tourism research and DMOs. This study aims to further investigate one of the most
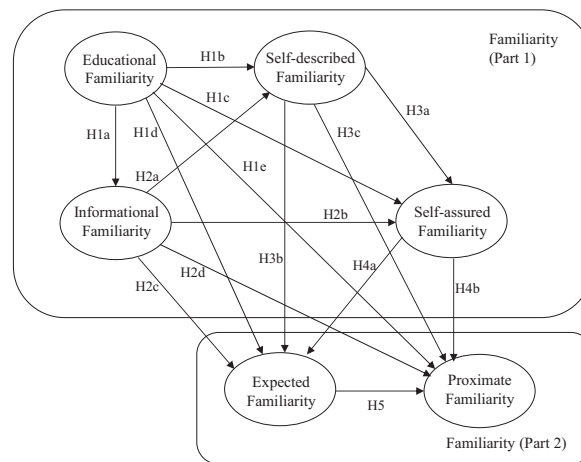
(a) Relationships among familiarity dimensions
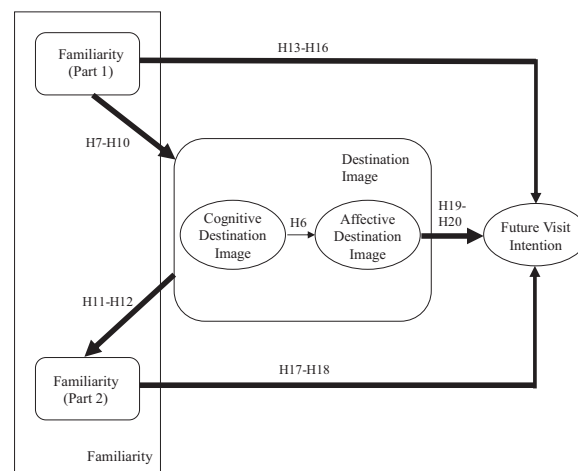
(b) Relationships among familiarity, destination image, and future visit intention

Fig. 1. Research model: (a) relationships among familiarity dimensions, (b) relationships among familiarity, destination image, and future visit intention.

important stakeholders of a destination, i.e. visitors, and consider the destination familiarity of previous visitors and non-visitors.

Destination familiarity is also worthy of further examination. This important concept has been defined in many different ways (Baloglu, 2001). Related concepts, such as awareness, knowledge, experience, expertise, and prior knowledge, have, in one way or another, been used in combination with familiarity, i.e. as a synonym, a component, or an umbrella term with familiarity as a component (Lee, Floyd, & Shinew, 2002; Sharifpour, Walters, Ritchie, & Winter, 2014). There is also inconsistency in whether familiarity should represent a unidimensional or multidimensional construct: the answer depends on how familiarity is defined. Familiarity has traditionally been treated as a unidimensional construct, such as the number of previous trips (Snepenger, Meged, Snelling, & Worrall, 1990). However, current researchers have increasingly recognized the multidimensionality of familiarity. For example, Baloglu (2001) operationalized familiarity as a multidimensional construct that consists of previous experiences (experiential familiarity), the extent of information used (informational familiarity), and how familiar with a place individuals believe themselves to be (self-rated familiarity). Based on previous studies, Prentice (2004) gathered and expanded the familiarity taxonomy into seven dimensions: experiential, informational, self-described (self-rated), proximate (the extent to which individuals

feel connected to a destination), educational (the extent of formal and informal education), self-assured (own judgments and feelings of safety), and expected (the extent of coziness and attractions expected) familiarity. However, further research regarding the composition of familiarity remains necessary because these seven dimensions are interrelated (Prentice, 2004).

The holistic overview by Prentice (2004) serves as a useful launch pad for further examination of the destination familiarity of previous visitors and non-visitors, and its subsequent impact on the destination image and future behavioral intention to visit the destination. Experiential familiarity can be used to segment individuals into non-visitors and previous visitors. Although some studies have examined a limited number of the components of familiarity, to the best of our knowledge, few researchers have demonstrated how all dimensions of Prentice's familiarity taxonomy are interrelated and how this interrelationship affects familiarity as an antecedent of destination image and visit intention within a single study. The question that arises is, when viewed from Prentice's familiarity taxonomy, does the familiarity of non-visitors significantly differ from previous visitors to cause them to behave differently in terms of future visit intention?

Through a comparison of previous visitors and non-visitors, with experiential familiarity as a moderator, the present study aims to achieve a deeper theoretical understanding of familiarity