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Research Paper

## Perceived value and flow experience: Application in a nature-based tourism context

Minseong Kim\*, Brijesh Thapa

Department of Tourism, Recreation & Sport Management, College of Health and Human Performance, University of Florida, P.O. Box 118208, Gainesville, FL 32611-8208, United States

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## ABSTRACT

This study measured environmentally responsible behaviors and destination loyalty of international tourists who participated in an ecotourism tour package at Jeju Island, South Korea. A conceptual model was formulated and empirically tested to examine how tourists perceived values (i.e. quality, emotional, price, and social), flow experience, and satisfaction influence environmentally responsible behavior and destination loyalty. Three hundred responses to a survey of international tourists were collected and the resulting data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. Findings indicated that perceived quality, emotional, and social values significantly affected flow experience and satisfaction. Further, flow experience was significantly and positively related to satisfaction, environmentally responsible behaviors, and destination loyalty. Tourist satisfaction only had positive effects on environmentally responsible behaviors and destination loyalty. Thus, enhancement of international tourists' value perceptions about eco-travel packages is the first step that will strengthen environmentally responsible behaviors and destination loyalty via increase in tourists' flow experience and satisfaction levels.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of a flow experience is defined as 'a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). Research interest in this phenomenon has been extensively examined with respect to leisure pursuits (Heo, Lee, McCormick, & Pedersen, 2010), outdoor recreation activities (Coble, Selin, & Erickson, 2003; Tan, Kung, & Luh, 2013; Wu & Liang, 2011), adventure recreation (Cater, 2006; Pomfret, 2006), mountaineering (Tsaur, Yen, & Hsiao, 2013), athletic performance (Jackson, 1996), health-related quality of life in community (Hirao, Kobayashi, Okishima, & Tomokuni, 2012), gaming and gambling additions (Hsu & Lu, 2004; Wanner, Ladouceur, Auclair, & Vitaro, 2006), and internet browsing (Zhou & Lu, 2011).

In the context of outdoor recreation, a flow experience is achieved through participation in an activity which requires a sense of control, enhanced concentration, challenge, goal setting, and total immersion (Wu & Liang, 2011). The flow experience is derived from perceptions of control, time distortion, and attention focus to build and maintain high levels of positive emotions and satisfaction with an activity (Wu & Liang, 2011). Previous research has noted that utilitarian (e.g.

excellence, efficiency, and economy value) and hedonic values (e.g. intrinsic enjoyment, escapism, and entertainment) have been associated with flow experience (Senecal, Gharbi, & Nantel, 2002). Additionally, the interrelationship between flow experience and positive outcomes (e.g. satisfaction, destination loyalty, etc), along with identification of antecedents (e.g. skill, challenge, and playfulness) and consequences have also been identified (e.g. positive emotion, satisfaction, and loyalty) (Wu & Liang, 2011).

While the concept of flow has been employed largely across individual outdoor recreation activities, limited studies have identified the determinants and consequences within an eco-travel experience at a major nature-based tourism destination (Wöran & Arnberger, 2012; Wu & Liang, 2011). Since a flow experience could likely result in enhanced loyalty towards the environmental setting and/or visited destination (e.g. likelihood to revisit the places, and likelihood to recommend to others) (Chi & Qu, 2008), hence understanding of antecedents and associated outcomes is important for nature-tourism destination management, and needs to be further examined.

With the demand and popularity of nature-based tourism, various sites have been challenged to maintain sustainability of resources as well as optimize visitor experience and satisfaction (Thapa & Lee, 2017). With growing visitor numbers, there have also been increases in

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [minseong@ufl.edu](mailto:minseong@ufl.edu) (M. Kim), [bthapa@hnp.ufl.edu](mailto:bthapa@hnp.ufl.edu) (B. Thapa).<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2017.08.002>Received 6 March 2017; Received in revised form 7 August 2017; Accepted 8 August 2017  
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depreciative tourist behaviors that have negatively impacted environmental resources (Cheng & Wu, 2015; Thapa, Graefe, & Meyer, 2005). The importance of environmentally responsible behaviors among visitors along with destination loyalty for overall sustainable destination management is therefore needed (Chiu, Lee, & Chen, 2014; Hultman, Kazeminia, & Ghasemi, 2015). Within such context, the role of flow experience provides another avenue to understand visitors, and subsequently apply management actions to heighten experience and for resource management. Thus, this research provides a departure from previous visitor management studies with an exploratory attempt to understand perceived value as antecedents to the flow experience along with outcomes within a nature-based tourism experience (e.g. eco-tours) at Jeju Island, South Korea.

The rationale to focus on Jeju Island is due to its immense popularity which has created a major flow of visitors that has provided positive economic impacts, as the economy is heavily dependent on the tourism and hospitality industry. However, visitor influx has also created growing environmental impacts such as, increased garbage, noise pollution, and damage to the local ecosystem (The Jeju Weekly, 2014). This has created a dilemma with respect to balancing locals' economic needs and the island's environmental sustainability. In response, the application of sustainable tourism principles has been promoted to manage development and ecosystem maintenance, while visitors are strongly encouraged to engage in responsible behaviors during their visits (Jeju Special Self-Governing Provincial Tourism Association, 2016). Hence, an assessment of visitors' flow experiences will provide insights to assist the authorities to effectively monitor and manage the island's resources, while improving satisfaction. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify how perceived values of an eco-tour influence tourists' flow experience and satisfaction, and the extent to which they mediate the relationship with environmentally responsible behavior and destination loyalty at Jeju Island, South Korea.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Perceived value

The concept of perceived value is well established in the marketing literature, and has been used to examine variables that affect the future use of services and products as well as purchase decisions (Jamal & Sharifuddin, 2015). Perceived value offers a good theoretical background to assess an eco-travel package from a tourist's perspective (Pandža Bajs, 2015). Specifically, an evaluation of the use experience is based on how valuable the content is perceived (Eid & El-Gohary, 2015). An emphasis on perceived value also provides a good foundation to attract responsible tourists who share common values (Kim & Park, 2017). Furthermore, perceived value has been considered as a reliable concept to anticipate tourist behaviors (Eid & El-Gohary, 2015; Pandža Bajs, 2015), and provides practical implications for marketing eco-travel packages to tourists (Kim & Park, 2017).

Perceived value is contingent on consumer judgments, which in succession depends on outcomes, such as pre-purchase information, contextual judgments, and moment of purchase (Jamal & Sharifuddin, 2015). Zeithaml (1988, p. 14) defined perceived value as 'the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given'. Monroe (1990, p. 46) referred to perceived value as 'buyers' perceptions of value [that] represent a trade-off between the quality/benefits they perceive in the product relative to the sacrifice they perceive by paying the price. Moreover, perceived value is largely based on a utilitarian perspective, whereby economic and cognitive valuations are employed to examine the cognitive trade-off between the costs and benefits/quality (Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). However, others (Chi & Kilduff, 2011; Koller, Floh, & Zauner, 2011; Lee, Lee, & Choi, 2011) have insisted that a utilitarian perspective is too narrow and simplistic to embrace holistic representations of value perception, such as an

intrinsic dimension. Hence, it is advocated that perceived value based on a multidimensional construct embrace emotional value, social value, and hedonic and utilitarian dimensions that critically builds up positive emotions and customer satisfaction (Lee et al., 2011).

### 2.2. Flow experience

Flow is characterized by a narrowing of focus of awareness, loss of self-consciousness, responsiveness to clear goals and unambiguous feedback, and a sense of control over the environment. Additionally, it is also noted by a heightened sense of playfulness experienced in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Basically, when individuals are involved in a flow state, their attention is attracted by activities and goals, and may not recognize the tools required to create the experience (Vittersø, Vorkinn, & Vistad, 2001). Flow can be experienced during participation in outdoor recreation activities (Pomfret, 2006; Wu & Liang, 2011), and occurs when the purpose and perceived difficulties are balanced with the participant's skills (Coble et al., 2003).

Few studies have explored individuals' flow experience in a tourism activity within a group tour context (Chang, 2014; Kitnuntaviwat & Tang, 2008). Results denote that if individuals experience a high degree of flow, they are more likely to do something because they feel more engaged in activities and with others during their travel experience. More specifically, a flow experience can be formed by various sources that include tour guides, attitudes of other tourists, and presence of locals in the group (Kitnuntaviwat & Tang, 2008). This 'shared' experience of flow can create a bond or 'communitas' among outdoor recreation participants (Weber, 2001, p. 368). Furthermore, eco-tour activities provide tourists with a flow experience through experiencing enjoyment and natural settings (Wu & Liang, 2011).

### 2.3. Satisfaction

Satisfaction is defined as the psychological state when emotions that enclose disconfirmed expectations is coupled with consumers' prior feelings about consumption experiences (Pizam, Shapoval, & Ellis, 2016). Satisfaction has been considered as a significant driver of destination loyalty (Wu & Liang, 2011) and revisit intentions (Chen & Chen, 2010). Previous literature has segmented satisfaction into two categories: 'transaction-specific satisfaction' and 'general overall satisfaction' (Deng, Lu, Wei, & Zhang, 2010). First, transaction-specific customer satisfaction refers to the assessment a customer makes after a consumption experience. Second, overall satisfaction refers to customers' rating of the purchase to their experiences (Deng et al., 2010). However, overall satisfaction is defined as the cumulative influence of a chain of distinct service transactions with the provider within a fixed period (Shankar, Smith, & Rangaswamy, 2003). Overall, satisfaction strongly and positively influences customer loyalty across a wide range of destination as well as service and product categories (Wu & Liang, 2011). Specifically, Jones and Suh (2000) considered overall satisfaction is a combination of all previous transaction-specific satisfaction.

In the context of tourism, overall satisfaction is associated with summary evaluations of destination quality. In comparison to more transaction-specific or episode-based measures of performance, such evaluations tend to have a greater effect on tourist behaviors, such as revisit intention and positive word of mouth (Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2009). Since customer satisfaction is a consequence of a tourist's experience during various travel stages, it is also significant for destination management organizations (DMOs) to understand satisfaction of travel packages.

### 2.4. Environmentally responsible behavior

Environmentally responsible behaviors tend to be expressed via

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