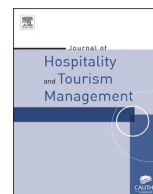




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Loyalty formation process of tourists in sporting event: The case of Turkmen horse races

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this research is to get a further understanding of the determinants of tourist loyalty in horse race event. More specifically, the effects of event quality, tourist emotion, event value, and tourist satisfaction on tourist loyalty, as well as the interrelationships are explored. Using purposive sampling, 330 domestic tourists who attended the horse races in the Turkmen Sahra Region, Iran were surveyed. In order to analyze the effects, structural equation modeling (SEM) is used. The results demonstrate that event quality influences tourist emotion and loyalty. Tourist emotion determines event value and tourist satisfaction. Event value influences tourist satisfaction and loyalty. And, tourist satisfaction predicts tourist loyalty.

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1. Introduction

Horse race refers to a competition in which two or more jockeys ride horses over a set course or distance to identify which of the horses is the fastest. One of the most popular forms of horse races is flat race; it refers to a competition in which each jockey gallops his/her horse between two points around a straight or oval track to finish first (McManus & Graham, 2014). The relationship between horse races and tourism has existed for a long time. Horse tourism is described as a type of tourism where the horse is an element of the tourism experience. Spectating horse races, as a form of horse tourism, has been a major leisure activity in many countries in the world (Jeong, Kim, Ko, Lee, & Jeong, 2009).

Larson and Steinman (2009) and Hall, O'Mahony, and Vieceli (2010) respectively pointed out that attendance at sporting events represents a significant revenue stream for such events and the host destinations. Thus, sport spectators are considered as a valuable niche market segment which must be understood, attracted and retained. An empirical understanding of the factors influencing spectator loyalty is vital for long-term viability of sporting events (Gandhi-Arora & Shaw, 2002; Hall et al., 2010; Okayasu, Nogawa, & Morais, 2010). However, little research has

empirically explored loyalty formation process of tourists in sporting events (Gandhi-Arora & Shaw, 2002; Jeong et al., 2009; Osti, Disegna, & Brida, 2012; Tzetzis, Alexandris, & Kapsampeli, 2014; Wong & Tang, 2016).

Among previous research, only one research has focused on horse races (Jeong et al., 2009). Thus, the literature reveals that very little is known about which factors make tourists loyal to sporting events, especially tourists who watch horse races. Okayasu et al. (2010) have stressed that there is a need to investigate how tourists become loyal to sporting events. Event quality, spectator emotion, event value, and spectator satisfaction have been identified as the determinants of spectator loyalty in the sport literature. However, the relationships among these constructs has not been explored simultaneously yet in the sport, and particularly in the sport tourism literature. Moreover, there is no research shedding light on how spectators evaluate the quality in horse race event. To address these gaps, the current research aims to incorporate the determinants of spectator loyalty, test their effects on spectator loyalty, and examine their interrelationships for tourists. The results will contribute to our knowledge about loyalty of tourists who watch horse races, a type of sport which has largely been neglected. Furthermore, with understanding the relationships, horse race executives can focus their attentions to best satisfy their spectators and make them loyal, which in turn lead to their continued success.

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2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1. Sport tourism, event sport tourism, small-scale sporting events, and tourists' experiences

Sport tourism refers to a type of tourism in which people travel to a place to attend sporting events, visit famous sporting attractions, or participate in sporting and recreational activities (Higham, 2005; Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008). With the growth of leisure culture, consumption of sports and competitiveness within the sport industry are increased. Sport tourism, as the fastest growing type of tourism (Rodrigues, Valdunciel, & Miguel-Dávila, 2014), has a range of benefits for the host destinations, including job creation as well as increment of income and economic development (Higham, 2005). It can also be viewed as a strategy to create and enhance the image of destinations (Gandhi-Arora & Shaw, 2002; Higham, 2005; Moon, Ko, Connaughton, & Lee, 2013; Osti et al., 2012).

Event sport tourism, as the highest profile product within sport tourism, is defined as going somewhere from one's home environment to watch a sporting event (Dixon, Backman, Backman, & Norman, 2012). Sporting events have become an important part of tourism development (Tzetzis et al., 2014; Wong & Tang, 2016), an attraction of tourist destinations (Jin, Lee, & Lee, 2013; Wong & Tang, 2016), a way to create positive image (Moon et al., 2013; Tzetzis et al., 2014), and a strategy to reduce the seasonality of tourist flow (Tzetzis et al., 2014; Wong & Tang, 2016), because there are many people in the world who travel significant distances to watch their favorite sports (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2003; Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008).

It is suggested that the destinations should focus on small-scale sporting events, because they play a significant role in the improvement of life quality and pride of the host communities, and thereby sustainable development of the destinations (Gibson et al., 2003; Moon et al., 2013). Small-scale sporting events refer to sport competitions such as basketball and football, which are held regularly throughout a period of time (Chen, 2006; Gibson et al., 2003). The advantages of small-scale sporting events are as follows: they are organized easier than mega events, usually operate within existing infrastructures, do not need big investment of funds (Gibson et al., 2003; Tzetzis et al., 2014), are more manageable with regard to crowding and congestion, minimize the effects of seasonality (Gibson et al., 2003), and do not tax the resources of the host city in the same manner as hosting a mega event (Gibson et al., 2003; Tzetzis et al., 2014).

The sport tourism literature shows that several researchers have investigated the experiences, perceptions and behavior of spectators. More specifically, researchers have focused on the relationships among novelty-seeking, satisfaction and loyalty (Gandhi-Arora & Shaw, 2002); application of Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique to identify the determinants of tourists' loyalty (Chen, 2006); the effect of event image on intention to visit (Jeong et al., 2009); the roles of emotional responses and facilities in attendance (Hall et al., 2010); the roles of repeat visits and satisfaction with event in behavioral intention toward both event and destination (Osti et al., 2012); the relationships among event quality, perceived value, destination image and behavioral intention (Jin et al., 2013); the relationships between event quality, perceived value, destination image and behavioral intention (Moon et al., 2013); the roles of event quality and satisfaction in spectator behavioral intentions (Tzetzis et al., 2014); the impacts of travel motivation and purpose on event loyalty through the mediating roles of event involvement and experience as well as the moderating role of spectator type (Wong & Tang, 2016).

2.2. Tourist loyalty

Loyalty can be defined as "a deeply held commitment to re-buy or re-patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior" (Kuenzel & Yassim, 2007, p. 44). Based on prior experiences and frequently involvements in an activity, consumers develop attitudes toward an activity and decide to access or avoid it (Jin et al., 2013). Loyalty process consists of four phases: cognitive, affective, conative and action (Chen, 2006; Wong & Tang, 2016). "Cognitive loyalty focuses on the brand's performance aspects, affective loyalty is directed toward the brand's likeableness, conative loyalty is experienced when the consumer focuses on wanting to rebuy the brand, and action loyalty is commitment to the action of rebuying" (Chen, 2006, p. 202).

Historically, loyalty had first been conceptualized by behavioral dimension concerning measures at an individual level such as customer repurchase, frequency of consumption, length of relationship, or a mixture of them. Then, attitudinal dimension was proposed to understand the difference between spurious loyalty and true loyalty. Repurchase and recommend intentions have been frequently used for attitudinal dimension (Gandhi-Arora & Shaw, 2002). Due to the fact that actual behavior is hard to measure, many researchers have used behavioral intentions to conceptualize loyalty (Byon, Zhang, & Baker, 2013). Behavioral intention, as a signal of conative loyalty, refers to an individual's willingness to perform a particular action in the future (Byon et al., 2013; Larson & Steinman, 2009). Favorable behavioral intentions are dependent on an organization's ability to stimulate its customers to: (1) remain loyal to it, (2) spend more with it, (3) pay high price, and (4) recommend it to others (Hutchinson, Lai, & Wang, 2009; Wu & Ai, 2016).

As Clemes, Brush, and Collins (2011) have indicated, one of the main concerns for sporting event executives is to focus on spectators, understand which factors may affect their behavior, and try to maintain them. Spectator attendance creates a stable revenue which helps sporting events to remain competitive and profitable. In other words, success of sporting events severely depends on their ability to generate repeat visits. Developing and maintaining loyalty brings a sustainable competitive advantage to sporting events (Okayasu et al., 2010). There are several reasons for focusing on spectator loyalty: loyal spectators have a more positive attitude toward the event, are more likely to re-attend the event and recommend it to others (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Maroco, & Ross, 2012; Jin et al., 2013; Kuenzel & Yassim, 2007), are cost-effective compared to first-time spectators (Kuenzel & Yassim, 2007; Okayasu et al., 2010), are less sensitive to the price (Biscaia et al., 2012; Larson & Steinman, 2009), are more profitable (Okayasu et al., 2010), attract new spectators (Larson & Steinman, 2009), tend to attribute service errors to uncontrollable factors, and are less likely to be attracted to a competitor in spite of marketing activities of the competitors (Larson & Steinman, 2009).

2.3. Tourist satisfaction

Satisfaction refers to a response derived from the comparison of prior expectations and perceived performance after consumption. If the perceived performance falls short of a customer's expectations, the customer is dissatisfied. If the perceived performance meets the customer's expectations, he/she is satisfied. And, if the perceived performance exceeds the customer's expectations, he/she is delighted (Chen, 2006; Van Leeuwen, Quick, & Daniel, 2002; Wu & Ai, 2016). Satisfaction is also defined as "judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment" (Van Leeuwen et al., 2002, p. 100). It, therefore, is a

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