



Tourist loyalty to a local cultural event: The case of Turkmen handicrafts festival[☆]

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HIGHLIGHTS

- A comprehensive model of attendee loyalty at a local festival was examined.
- Perceived authenticity influenced perceived quality, value and satisfaction.
- Perceived quality was found to have the direct effect on perceived value, satisfaction and trust.
- Perceived value affected satisfaction, trust and loyalty.
- Satisfaction had the direct effect on loyalty and so did trust.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to examine a comprehensive model of attendee loyalty at a local festival. More specifically, the research tested a model linking festival authenticity to festival quality, value, satisfaction, trust and loyalty to a given festival. Using convenience sampling method, empirical data was collected at the Turkmen handicrafts festival in Gonbad-e-Kavoos, the most important city in the Turkmen Sahra region, Iran. A sample of 301 domestic tourists who attended the festival was surveyed. Applying structural equation modeling, the findings showed that perceived authenticity influenced perceived quality, value and satisfaction. Perceived quality was found to have the direct effect on perceived value, satisfaction and trust. Perceived value affected satisfaction, trust and loyalty. Satisfaction had the direct effect on loyalty and so did trust.

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1. Introduction

Short-term events and festivals are an essential feature of cultural tourism (Chang, 2006; Getz, 2008). In fact, they have become an important part of a destination's portfolio of tourism products (Getz, 2008). Festivals, as one of the fastest growing types of events, have increased with regard to number, diversity and popularity since the 1980s (Getz, 2008; Gursoy, Spangenberg, & Rutherford, 2006; Yang, Yingkan, & Cen, 2011). A festival is defined as "the celebration of a specific theme to which the public is invited for a limited period of time. This celebration can be held annually or less frequently, and includes single events" (Grappi & Montanari, 2011, p. 1129).

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Festivals are recognized as an effective strategy for host destinations to gain several potential economic, social and cultural benefits (Grappi & Montanari, 2011). They can be seen as a strategy to achieve economic development, a way to create positive image, a stimulator of tourism demand, an expander of tourist seasons, a means to enhance the life and pride of local people, and a way to reinforce social cohesion within the communities (Getz, 2008; Grappi & Montanari, 2011; Lee, 2014; Lee, Lee, & Yoon, 2009; Saleh & Ryan, 1993; Weber & Ali-Knight, 2012). Local festivals have been known as a good means to boost sustainable tourism by facilitating learning about unique cultural heritages, ethnic backgrounds, and local customs (Lee, Lee, & Choi, 2011; Yoon, Lee, & Lee, 2010).

Despite political instabilities and unrest in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region, cultural tourism has gained popularity across the region. In the region, which has many cultures, events and festivals have increased significantly in terms of their number

and scope during the past decade (Weber & Ali-Knight, 2012). Iran, as an important country of the region, has a strong potential to develop events and festivals to enhance its tourism potential as a destination. Indeed, there are diverse regions in Iran that hold local festivals during the early spring of every year. The goal of these festivals is to revive the local customs. These festivals, which are a mixture of local handicrafts, foods and traditions of the regions, attract many domestic tourists and play a significant role in the success of the regions. In addition, the festivals contribute economic benefits to the regions, create positive image for the regions, and enhance the life and pride of the residents. Similarly, the Turkmen Sahra region, as an important region of Iran, holds several local festivals during the early spring of every year. Among the festivals, the festival of Gonbad-e-Kavoos city is the most famous.

One of the main ways to achieve success is to build loyalty in attendees (Lee, 2014; Wu, Wong, & Cheng, 2014; Yang et al., 2011). Indeed, customer loyalty is widely recognized as a major element of business success. Various researchers had contributed to develop predictors of attendee loyalty in the festival literature. For instance, researchers had explored the effects of festival authenticity (e.g. Castéran & Roederer, 2013; Shen, 2014), festival quality (e.g. Wong, Wu, & Cheng, 2014; Wu et al., 2014), festival value (e.g. Lee et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2011), and satisfaction with festival (e.g. Grappi & Montanari, 2011; Lee, 2014; Mason & Paggiaro, 2012) on loyalty to festival. In addition, it is widely accepted that trust leads to loyalty (Lee & Back, 2008; Wang, Law, Hung, & Guillet, 2014). Therefore, in order to better understand which factors may lead to attendee loyalty, the current research proposed a comprehensive model to test the effects of festival authenticity, quality, value, satisfaction and trust as predictors of loyalty to a given festival. Furthermore, the research examined the relationships among the predictors. The findings provide information for widening the festival literature. Although this research was limited to the Turkmen Sahra region - a particular geographical region - the findings may be applied to different geographical regions and be used by festival managers and tourism marketers.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1. Festival authenticity

Authenticity as a concept indicates genuineness, reality and truth as three qualities and may be connected with a region's tradition and culture (Brida, Disegna, & Osti, 2013; Castéran & Roederer, 2013; Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Robinson & Clifford, 2012). There are three types of authenticity in tourists' experiences that have been identified: objective, constructive and existential. Objective authenticity refers to the originality of objects. Contrary to objective authenticity, constructive and existential authenticities are very subjective. Constructive authenticity relates to tourists' perceptions of the objects they visit. This type of authenticity is socially constructed and depends on tourists' viewpoints and perspectives. Constructive authenticity is also reliant on the situation and context, which evolves over time. Existential authenticity is built on the principals of constructive authenticity, but further liberates tourists. It refers to tourists' emotions which are activated by their experiences. In fact, objective and constructive authenticities are object-related, whereas existential authenticity is experience-related (Castéran & Roederer, 2013; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Robinson & Clifford, 2012).

In tourism, authenticity is an expression, which describes tourists' perceived degree of the genuineness of products and experiences (Brida et al., 2013; Shen, 2014). Indeed, authenticity is a

perception or value placed on what is assessed, not a tangible thing (Brida et al., 2013). Authenticity is an important element influencing human behavior, particularly tourist behavior. It is one of the most crucial issues for contemporary tourists. Since contemporary society is inauthentic, quest for authenticity elsewhere has become a significant motivator in tourism (Castéran & Roederer, 2013). Tourists are interested in learning different cultures; therefore, authenticity motivates individuals to travel (Chhabra et al., 2003; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Robinson & Clifford, 2012). In the case of cultural products such as festivals, tourists perceive them as authentic if they are made by the local people according to the custom and tradition (Brida et al., 2013; Castéran & Roederer, 2013; Chhabra et al., 2003).

Authenticity is one of the important factors in the success of cultural festivals (Brida et al., 2013). In the contemporary world, cultural festivals have to offer authenticity to meet the need of tourists, because cultural exploration is among the significant motivations for attending festivals (Chang, 2006; Kim, Borges, & Chon, 2006). In other words, one of the reasons to attend a festival is the uniqueness and symbolic meaning of the festival (Getz, 2008; Gursoy et al., 2006). Castéran and Roederer (2013) indicated that "even if some tourists expect to be entertained regardless of the authenticity of a tourist site, authenticity matters to most visitors" (p. 154). Authenticity is a vital factor in assessing the quality and value of cultural products and experiences (Chhabra et al., 2003; Kim & Jamal, 2007). Furthermore, one of the major elements resulting in satisfaction with cultural events is the authenticity perceived by attendees (Brida et al., 2013; Chhabra et al., 2003; Robinson & Clifford, 2012). Authenticity also connotes trustworthiness (Robinson & Clifford, 2012) and results in loyalty (Brida et al., 2013; Castéran & Roederer, 2013).

Several researchers investigated the role of authenticity in the festival literature. For example, Chhabra et al. (2003) found that most of the tourists came to the event to purchase authentic goods, and were eager to pay more money to purchase them. Kim and Jamal (2007) examined the experience of highly committed tourists to the festival. Their findings showed that authenticity was central to understanding the experience of regular, repeat festival-goers who took their participation seriously. Brida et al. (2013) deduced that tourists were more likely to spend if they perceived the event and the products sold to be authentic. Robinson and Clifford (2012) found that perceived foodservice authenticity in the festival, as a dimension of satisfaction with festival, was positively correlated with revisit intention. Castéran and Roederer (2013) concluded that visitors were motivated to return to the event if the event was perceived as loyal to its origins. The findings of the research by Shen (2014) in which event authenticity was measured by two dimensions, namely food-related authenticity and overall authenticity, showed that food-related authenticity influenced revisit intention.

Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1.** Festival authenticity has a positive and direct effect on festival quality.
- H2.** Festival authenticity has a positive and direct effect on festival value.
- H3.** Festival authenticity has a positive and direct effect on satisfaction with festival.
- H4.** Festival authenticity has a positive and direct effect on trust in festival.
- H5.** Festival authenticity has a positive and direct effect on loyalty to festival.

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