



Destination perceptions, relationship quality, and tourist environmentally responsible behavior



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ABSTRACT

This research examines the relationship of tourists' perceptions and relational quality with their environmentally responsible behaviors. Data was collected at a variety of times and days over ten weeks from visitors ($n = 568$) exiting a tourist destination located in central China. Perceived service quality provided by employees at a destination was found to positively impact value perceptions, environmental commitment, and tourist environmentally responsible behavior. Value perceptions positively impact tourist satisfaction, environmental commitment, and tourist environmentally responsible behavior. Tourist satisfaction and environmental commitment were found to fully mediate the relationship of the value obtained from visiting a destination, as perceived by tourists, with environmentally responsible behavior. Multiple mediation analysis confirmed two paths: 1) perceived employee quality to value perceptions to service experience satisfaction to tourist environmentally responsible behavior; and 2) perceived employee quality to value perceptions to environmental commitment to tourist environmentally responsible behavior.

1. Introduction

Much of the tourism industry depends heavily on sustaining the natural environment of destinations (Su & Swanson, 2017). Unfortunately, degradation of destination environments can at times be attributed to a range of behaviors in which tourists engage. These behaviors might include the release of harmful emissions related to touring and/or other recreation-based activities (Dwyer, Forsyth, Spurr, & Hoque, 2010), collecting or damaging flora and fauna specimens (Kim, Airey, & Szivas, 2011), disrupting the habitat (Ballantyne, Packer, & Sutherland, 2011), and overcrowding (Dickinson & Robbins, 2008). As such, reducing or eliminating tourist behaviors harmful to the environment is an important issue for researchers and destination marketers and managers (Han & Hwang, 2017; Han & Hyun, 2017; Han, Olya, Cho, & Kim, 2018; Su & Swanson, 2017).

The environmentally responsible behavior (ERB) of tourists has emerged as a critical area of study (Su & Swanson, 2017). Based on numerous theoretical frameworks (e.g., Theory of Planned Behavior, Protection Motivation Theory, Norm Activation Theory, Place Attachment Theory), previous studies have explored a variety of potential antecedents to environmentally responsible behavior: attitude toward the environment (Cottrell, 2003), emotion (Han & Hwang, 2017; Su &

Swanson, 2017), environmental knowledge (Cheng & Wu, 2015; Cottrell, 2003), subjective norms (Han, Hsu, & Sheu, 2010), environmental sensitivity (Cheng & Wu, 2015), concern for the environment (Kang, Stein, Heo, & Lee, 2012), environmental awareness (Han & Yoon, 2015), place attachment (Cheng & Wu, 2015; Cheng, Wu, & Huang, 2013; Lee, 2011), recreational involvement (Lee, 2011), recreation experience (Lee, Jan, & Huang, 2015), ascribed responsibility (Han et al., 2018; Han & Hwang, 2015), and injunctive and personal norms (Han & Hwang, 2017; Han & Hyun, 2017). Marketing and environmental psychology scholars have widely confirmed that relationship quality constructs can act as important antecedents to a wide range of intentions and behaviors. As such, we suggest that exploring the antecedents of tourist ERB based on relationship quality theory can provide new insights into this literature stream.

Service quality perceptions, value perceptions, and customer satisfaction have previously been identified as important precursors to consumer behaviors (e.g., Brady et al., 2005; Chen, 2008; Chen & Chen, 2010; Hutchinson, Lai, & Wang, 2009; Lai, 2015; Petrick, 2004). More specific to the current study, Chiu, Lee, and Chen (2014) have reported that value perceptions and satisfaction directly impact environmentally responsible behavior, while Han and Kim (2010) report that greater levels of service quality and customer satisfaction can help to predict

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green hotel customers' decision-making. We are unaware of any study examining the effect of service quality perceptions, value perceptions, and tourist satisfaction with a destination on ERB in a single model. Thus, it is valuable to understand the relationship among tourists' perceptions (perceived quality, value), tourist satisfaction regarding a destination, and tourist ERB, which can help identify strategies to better protect destination environments and, in turn, achieve destination sustainability.

Davis, Green, and Reed (2009) introduced environmental commitment as a new theoretical construct. The construct is an application of the model proposed by Rusbult (1980) that examines the human-environment commitment relationship. Environmental commitment is effective in predicting environmental attitudes and behavioral intentions (e.g., Coy, Farrell, Gilson, Davis, & Le, 2013; Davis et al., 2009; Davis, Le, & Coy, 2011) and is related to the readiness of someone to forfeit their personal current self-interests to support environmental well-being (Davis et al., 2011). As such, environmental commitment is a relationship construct that may play a significant role in predicting ERBs (e.g., Lai, 2015; Shukla, Banerjee, & Singh, 2016). However, few studies have examined environmental commitment in the tourism literature.

Based on relationship quality theory, this research investigates the effect of tourists' quality perceptions resulting from visiting a destination on several outcome variables: value perceptions, tourist satisfaction, environmental commitment, and environmentally responsible behavior. Although tourist ERB has previously been explored from several different perspectives, to the best of our knowledge relationship quality theory has been overlooked. Taken collectively, the purposes and contributions of this research for academia and practice are fourfold. First, we introduce the environmental commitment construct into a tourism destination context. No study we are aware of has modeled environmental commitment to determine its impact in predicting tourist ERB. Second, this study explores the effect of four antecedents (i.e., perceived employee quality, value perceptions, tourist satisfaction, and environmental commitment) on tourist ERB. We are unaware of any study examining the effects of these antecedents on ERB in a single model. Third, the present study examines the potential mediating role that the relationship variables of tourist satisfaction and environmental commitment play between tourists' perceptions and their environmentally responsible behaviors. Finally, based on the mediating roles played by the relationship quality constructs and the impact of perceived employee quality and value perceptions, this study further explores the effect of perceived employee quality on tourist ERB utilizing multiple mediation analysis. A review of the literature suggests that the potential mediation impact of these variables has not previously been investigated in a natural tourist destination context.

The paper continues with relationship quality theory being discussed, followed by a review of the literature regarding the core concepts being investigated, and the development of our hypotheses. The study methodology and results are then presented. An examination of the findings is provided that includes a discussion of managerial implications and directions for potential future research.

2. Theoretical foundation, literature review, and hypotheses development

2.1. Relationship quality theory

Prior studies have demonstrated that relationship quality is effective in predicting customer behaviors (e.g., Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Huntley, 2006; Kim & Cha, 2002) and plays an important part in the decision-making and post-purchase processes of consumers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Recognizing and fulfilling the needs of people is the focus of building relationships. The core of the relationship perspective is recognition that retention and development of relationships is critical over time. This contrasts with the transactional view of relationships

where the focus is on a single exchange that has a distinct beginning and end. Relationship quality theory suggests that customers provide continuing value over the time they interact with a firm, and vice-versa. As a higher-order construct, relationship quality can consist of several distinct dimensions (Huntley, 2006; Su, Swanson, & Chen, 2016) which represent the relational strength between customers and some entity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) such as a brand or organization. Similarly, people can have relationships with the environment (Davis et al., 2009). As such, we suggest that, like brand relationships, tourists actively react to the relationship efforts put forth by travel destinations. An important construct identified in the person-environment relationship used to help predict behavior is environmental commitment (Davis et al., 2009, 2011). The present study examines two relationship quality dimensions: tourist satisfaction and environmental commitment.

2.2. Tourist satisfaction

Satisfaction is a sensed condition. One evaluates perceptions formed from an outcome against prior held expectations (Kotler & Armstrong, 1996). In a consumer context, *satisfaction* has been defined as an evaluation of how well a product addresses needs (Bitner & Zeithaml, 2003). Oliver (1997) suggests that satisfaction is directly related to the fulfillment response as perceived by a customer. More specifically, satisfaction is a judgment regarding how content one is with a service experience. In the current study, we adapt this definition and define *tourist satisfaction* as the amount of contentment with a destination's provided service experience.

2.3. Environmental commitment

Commitment includes the feelings and thoughts that elicit behaviors needed to continue and preserve associations (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). It represents a focus on continuing a relationship via psychological attachment (Davis et al., 2011; Rusbult, Olson, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). As a relationship between a person and the environment, environmental commitment (Davis et al., 2011) is based on the interdependence theory of interpersonal associations (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), and the Rusbult (1980) model of commitment. *Commitment*, as defined in interdependence theory, is the subjective experience of reliance—the extent that a persons' needs are addressed (Le & Agnew, 2003). Thus, individuals exhibit greater commitment to something to the degree they are reliant on it to fulfil their needs. We would suggest that this could include the natural environment.

Davis et al. (2011) suggest that commitment derived from a relationship based on dependence will be associated with cognitive change as interpersonal relationships develop. Dependence on the relationship will result in the commitment. Greater levels of commitment have been demonstrated to foretell positive consequences including maintenance of relationships (Davis et al., 2011) and sacrificial behavior (Etcheverry & Le, 2005). Davis et al. (2009) report that dedication to the environment can predict not only individuals' past environmental behaviors, but also their future intentions. In this study, *environmental commitment* is investigated as a potentially important relationship construct between tourists' perceptions and their resulting environmentally responsible behaviors.

2.4. Tourist perceptions

Perceptions of both service quality and value play essential roles in helping to form customer relationships (e.g., Ariza-Montes, Arjona-Fuentes, Han, & Law, 2017; Hutchinson et al., 2009; Orel & Kara, 2014; Petrick, 2004). The current study explores how the perceived service quality provided by employees at a destination and value perceptions of a tourist destination impact relational quality (tourist satisfaction and environmental commitment) and resulting tourist ERB.

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