

THE MAIN FACTORS INFLUENCING THE DESTINATION CHOICE, SATISFACTION AND THE LOYALTY OF SKI RESORTS CUSTOMERS IN THE CONTEXT OF DIFFERENT RESEARCH APPROACHES

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Abstract

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The paper summarizes scientific approaches to researches in the field of destination choice, satisfaction and the loyalty of ski resorts customers. Information about existing models and trends from scientific journals are analysed. Multiattribute models are widely used in researches dealing with satisfaction and loyalty. It can be presumed that tourist overall satisfaction is determined by destination image and attribute satisfaction. Tourist attribute satisfaction is also directly influenced by destination image, and destination loyalty is in turn influenced by overall satisfaction. The results will be useful for researchers and practitioners who deal with tourist satisfaction and loyalty in particular for ski resorts operators. This paper represents the initial phase of the project aimed at researching the topical factors with their relationships and links influencing satisfaction and loyalty of ski resort customers in selected countries.

Keywords: ski resort customer, ski destination choice, satisfaction, loyalty, quality

INTRODUCTION

The impact of customer perception, destination image and satisfaction on loyalty has been trendy research topic in tourism research. It is very important to determine the destination image while taking decisions for strategic destination marketing. Because it is assumed that it will result in a positive image of a destination, loyalty to destinations and satisfaction felt by customers, such as variables (Coban, 2012).

The influence of image on destination choice process has been studied by various authors (e.g. Crompton & Ankomah, 1993; Gartner, 1989; Goodall, 1988). It is believed that destinations with more positive images will more likely be included in the process of decision making. In addition, destination image exercises a positive influence on perceived quality and satisfaction. More favourable

image will lead to higher customer satisfaction. In turn, the evaluation of the destination experience will influence the image and modify it (Chon, 1991; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Ross, 1993). Lastly, destination image also affects the behavioral intentions of customers. For example, Court and Lupton (1997) found that the image of the destination under study positively affects customers' intention to revisit in the future.

Understanding the determinants of customer loyalty will allow management to concentrate on the major influencing factors that lead to customer retention. A number of studies have examined the antecedents or causes of repeat purchase intentions (Backman & Crompton, 1991; Cronin, Brady & Hult, 2000; Petrick, Morais & Norman, 2001). Results of this body of research have shown that satisfaction, quality/performance, and different other variables are good predictors of customers

intended loyalty. The more satisfied the customers are, the more likely they are to repurchase the product/service and to encourage others to become customers. In order to retain customers, organizations must seek to satisfy them, but a further objective must be to establish customer loyalty.

In the tourism context, satisfaction with travel experiences contributes to destination loyalty (Alexandris, Kouthouris & Meligdis, 2006; Bramwell, 1998; Oppermann, 2000; Pritchard & Howard, 1997). The degree of customer's loyalty to a destination is reflected in their intentions to revisit the destination and in their willingness to recommend it (Oppermann, 2000). The theory of service management provides knowledge needed to understand the production and consumption process of services. In general, tourists on vacation have demands for a variety of goods and services, which can only be provided by a number of different suppliers. This is an important characteristic because in other economic sectors the collaboration of competing suppliers is only one option among others, whereas it is a pre-condition in tourism, that is, it is mandatory for the creation of the product ('coopetition'; Woratschek, Roth & Pastowski, 2003).

From the economic perspective, special challenges for the management and marketing of sport and tourism services arise from the necessity of coproduction by the demanders and the suppliers, as well as mutual uncertainty about the motivation and the performance of the parties involved in the market. An important feature distinguishing the production process in tourism from those in other economic sectors is the fact that the individual suppliers are connected in a 'complex production compound structure with competing suppliers' (Schubert, 2005).

The connection between service quality, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and economic success can be analysed in service and value-added chains. According to the Service Profit Chain (SPC) model of Heskett, Sasser and Schlesinger (1997), there is a direct economic connection between extraordinary service experiences, loyalty and economic success in terms of profit and growth. In the SPC, it is generally argued that employee satisfaction positively affects service quality and that a high level of service quality leads to customer satisfaction. A high level of customer satisfaction is a prerequisite for customer loyalty and leads to a higher likelihood that the customers will recommend the supplier to other potential customers (Woratschek & Horbel, 2008).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main purpose of this study is to provide the overview about models, methods, approaches, forces and factors influencing the destination choice, satisfaction and loyalty of ski resort customers all over the world. The article analyzes

the results of the key factors examined in the context of using variables of different methods and models. The information about existing models and trends from scientific journals of authors who have dealt with the issue all over the world is analysed. Primary data entering the models have been gained almost by means of questionnaire surveys. This paper represents the initial phase of the project aimed at researching the topical factors with their relationships and links influencing satisfaction and loyalty of ski resort customers in selected countries which is a necessary part of required topical loyalty model proposal.

In theory and practice of customer satisfaction measurement, multiattribute models are widely spread (Weiermair & Fuchs, 1999). Customers are more likely to evaluate and services at an attribute level rather than at an overall level. When customers are satisfied or dissatisfied with a product or service, they may refer to more specific attributes such as friendliness of employees, and so forth. Customers can be satisfied with one attribute and dissatisfied with another one. Therefore, an overall measure of satisfaction on an aggregate level cannot reflect these differences on the attribute level. Finally, attribute level and overall satisfaction seem to be qualitatively different constructs: "It may be that global measures capture other aspects of the use occasion," and "global consumer satisfaction responses may mask more specific product issues" (Oliva, Oliver & Bearden, 1995). Hence, attribute-based measures of satisfaction afford researchers and managers a higher level of specificity and diagnostic value (Mittal, Ross & Baldasare, 1998).

To assess the impact of single quality or satisfaction dimensions on overall customer satisfaction, customers' self-stated importance (e.g. rating scales, constant-sum method) or empirically derived importance (e.g. regression weights of the path satisfaction dimension overall satisfaction) are used (e.g. Oliver, 1997), resulting in strategy recommendations on which attributes the manager should focus to increase satisfaction by combining importance and performance of the attributes. The basic idea is to focus improvement efforts on attributes that are important to the customer and where performance is low. Most reported studies on customer satisfaction and its drivers are based on an aggregate market level instead on a segment level (Wu *et al.*, 2006).

Such an aggregate market perspective, however, neglects individual differences in expectations, product evaluations, and responses to them. The dominant model in customer satisfaction research is the expectation and disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver, 1980), which also forms the theoretical foundation of SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml, 1991; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, Berry, 1985).

The analysis of the disconfirmation influence on satisfaction is based on a cognitive approach. Consumers are viewed as rational decision makers.

They evaluate the ultimate choice set by performing a computation that resembles a multi-attribute model. He or she determines the importance of each attribute or benefit, assigns an importance weighting, assesses and rates the degree to which the attribute is present in a brand, then multiplies the weighting by each rating. The customer then compares the overall utility of each brand against each other brand (Schmitt, 1999).

An alternative approach is developed by Zajonc and Markus (1982) and Hirschman and Holbrook (1982). It aims to analyze consumers' experience. An experience provides sensory emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational values that replace functional values. The experiential model developed by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) aims at understanding consumer experience. According to this approach, consumers are emotionally, symbolically, and rationally driven. They are capable of rational assessment while being also driven by emotions and symbols.

Structural equation modeling is the method to test the relationship of constructs in the model. According to Hair *et al.* (2006), structural equation modeling is a technique combining factor analysis and multiple regression to study a series of interrelated dependence relationships among the measures or observed variables and latent constructs, and also the relationships between or among many latent constructs. In addition, structural equation modeling is also considered a method for theory testing. Hair *et al.* (2006) suggested that theory can be concerned as a systematic set of relationships providing a comprehensive explanation of phenomena or events and the model is used to represent and explain the relationships in the theory. Adequate convergent validity is achieved with the evidence of factor loadings more than 0.60 on each construct.

The proposed model also demonstrated adequate discriminant validity. Since Anderson and Garbing (1988) suggested that the difference between the fixed and free model of each pair of construct should be greater than 3.841. Therefore, with sufficient results of convergent validity and the discriminant validity, the constructs can be further tested in the structural model and hypothesis testing can be performed.

Geng-Qing Chia and Qu (2007) studied an integrated approach for understanding destination loyalty and to examine the theoretical and empirical evidence on the causal relationships among destination image, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty. A research model was proposed and tested. The model investigated the relevant relationships among the constructs by using a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. The empirical data for the study was collected in a major tourism destination in the state of Arkansas-Eureka Springs. The main purpose of the study was to develop and test a theoretical model, which represented the elements contributing to

the building of destination loyalty: destination image, attribute satisfaction, and overall satisfaction. Below is a brief overview of the interrelationships of the constructs in the model.

Kotler, Bowen and Makens (1996) established the following sequence: image – quality – satisfaction. In this model, image would affect how customers perceive quality – a more positive image corresponds to a higher perceived quality. Perceived quality will in turn determine the satisfaction of consumers (Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha & Bryant, 1996; Kozak & Rimmington, 2000), because satisfaction is the result of customers' assessment of the perceived quality.

Understanding why people travel and what factors influence their behavioural intention of choosing a travel destination is beneficial to tourism planning and marketing. One popular typology for understanding travel decision is the "push and pull" model (Crompton, 1979). Travel motivation is a push factor, which provides an impetus to an individual to make a trip. Holiday motivations can be characterized as need of relaxation, social contact, mastery and intellectual stimulation (Ryan, 1998). According to Leiper (1990) tourists are pushed by their own motivations towards the places where they expect their needs will be satisfied. Pull factors are those that attract people to a specific destination once the decision to travel has been made.

Yoon and Uysal (2003) describe five existing models that are commonly used for assessing consumer satisfaction:

- the expectation-disconfirmation model,
- the equity theory,
- the norm theory,
- theory of "comparison standard",
- performance model.

In customer satisfaction literature there are two approaches in satisfaction: cognitive (based on the product quality, benefits etc.) and emotional, which became popular in last two decades. Also researchers divide overall and attributive satisfaction (Campo-Martinez & Garau-Vadell, 2010; Chi & Qu, 2007; do Valle *et al.*, 2011; Williams & Soutar, 2009) and their interrelationships (Campo-Martinez & Garau-Vadell, 2010; Chi & Qu, 2007).

The loyalty was researched in various studies, predominantly as the loyalty to the destination. In the context of travel and tourism, a review of literature reveals an abundance of studies on tourist satisfaction; and destination loyalty has not been thoroughly investigated (Chi & Qu, 2007; Yoon & Uysal, 2003; Zhang *et al.*, 2013). If tourists' experience at a destination is understood as a product, the level of loyalty can be reflected in their behavioral intention to revisit the destination and intention to recommend the experience to friends and relatives (Oppermann, 2000). Generally, loyalty has been measured in one of the following ways: the behavioral approach, the attitudinal approach

and the composite approach (Yoon & Uysal, 2003; Yuksel *et al.*, 2009; Zhang *et al.*, 2013).

Baloglu and McCleary (1999) identified two key forces which influence image formation; the forces were stimulus factors and personal factors. Gartner (1993) classified image formation into five sections; overt induced, covert induced, autonomous, organic and visit the destination. According Crompton (1993) personal factors affect the formation of destination image. Beerli and Martin (2004) classified personal factors into two sections; socio-demographic characteristics and psychological characteristics. Socio-demographic characteristics included gender, age, level of education, family life, social class, place of residence, occupation, income, marital status and country of origin. Psychological factors included motivations, values, personality, lifestyle, need, past experience, prior knowledge, preference and satisfaction.

The commonly-adopted methodology of satisfaction survey consists of identifying the most important attributes and asking tourists to rate them on a symmetrical one-dimensional scale. Based on the above information, it is possible to find out how satisfaction with different attributes affects a tourist's overall satisfaction or even his/her intention to return (Alegre & Garau, 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The relationship between satisfaction and loyalty intentions is very important to the literature in the areas of customer loyalty. Tourists have expectations and tourism businesses have to emphasize the needs of tourists. The empirical research supports the notion that destination loyalty is significantly influenced by customers' satisfied experience or memorable experience. In other words, it has been noted that when tourists have a more enjoyable experience with a particular destination, are more likely to return than otherwise. Focusing on the value proposition and ensuring customers to the destination are satisfied with their experiences are also important predictors of the attitudinal loyalty from the destination customers.

Tab. I compares the results of studies aimed at factors influencing the destination choice, satisfaction and loyalty where different research tools and models were used. In their research Hudson and Shephard (1998) used the method of Importance Performance Analysis, which involves assessing different aspects of an organization's features in terms of customers' perceptions of performance and of the importance of this performance.

I: Comparison of the results of studies dealing with factors influencing the destination choice, satisfaction and loyalty

Authors and title	Methodology	Results
Klenosky <i>et al.</i> (1993) Understanding the factors influencing ski destination choice: a means-end analytic approach	Cluster analysis	● Variety of the hills and trails, ● snow conditions, ● social atmosphere, ● time and money savings, ● resort services, ● local culture and familiarity.
Hudson and Shephard (1998) Measuring service quality at tourist destinations: An application of importance-performance analysis to an Alpine ski resort	Importance Performance Analysis	● Tourist information services, ● accommodation, ● ski shops, ● ski slopes, ● ski slope services, ● tour operator services.
Riddington <i>et al.</i> (2000) Modelling choice and switching behaviour between Scottish ski centers	Conjoint analyses	● Snow cover, ● type of ski slopes, ● availability of accommodation, ● travel distance, ● expenditure per day.
Won <i>et al.</i> (2008). Relative Importance of Factors Involved in Choosing a Regional Ski Destination: Influence of Consumption Situation and Recreation Specialization.	Conjoint analyses	● The snow condition, ● travel time, ● expected daily expense, ● trail variety, ● the variety of amenities.
Konu <i>et al.</i> (2011). Attributes of ski destination choice: A Finnish survey	An exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis	● Downhill skiing services, ● cross-country skiing services, ● restaurants, ● social life, ● spa services.

Source: authors

Konu *et al.* (2011) used in the research method of exploratory factor analysis using the principal component method with varimax rotation and method of confirmatory factor analysis. Six different customer segments were identified using the factor-cluster method: passive tourists, cross-country skiers, want-it-all, all-but-downhill skiing, sports seekers, and relaxation seekers.

Riddington *et al.* (2000) and Won *et al.* (2008) used in their research conjoint analyses to determine how customers value different factors that make up a satisfaction and loyalty of the ski resort. Additional subgroup level conjoint analyses were conducted based on the participants' preferences. Pearson correlations were computed to examine the relationship between recreation specialization sub-dimensions and choice attributes for the entire sample.

To illustrate an application of the conjoint approach, cluster analyses were performed (Green & Krieger, 1991). The biggest cluster was named the 'excitement and safety' cluster because this cluster prioritized the snow quality and trail variety, which influences the level of excitement and safety in skiing or snowboarding activities (Klenosky *et al.*, 1993). Cluster analyses were conducted to segment the sample for two consumption situations.

All the authors have mentioned features for a skier but its also important to notice non-skier features and après-ski activities such as shopping, fine dining, pubs and clubs and the opportunity to participate in other recreational activities which are also relevant to the destination choice. These results correspond with Grönroos (2007) quality components definition. Satisfaction is generally perceived as a broad concept while service quality focuses mainly on service dimensions.

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