



Repeat visits to attractions: a preliminary economic analysis

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Received 9 August 1999; accepted 23 December 1999

Abstract

This paper examines the way in which repeat visiting to an attraction may affect the visit flow to that attraction over time. The importance of repeat visiting in tourism and its significance in terms of both international tourism flows and of demand for individual tourist attractions is discussed. It is shown that there are important variations over time, and across attraction and visitor types, in the extent of repeat visiting. An analytical framework is provided and the ways in which the pattern of repeat visiting can affect the total visitor flow through time is discussed via a simple 50-period simulation exercise. Some of the implications of the simulation for attraction managements are also considered. The paper concludes by discussing what a more comprehensive approach to the determinants of repeat visiting might look like. It also suggests some avenues for future work. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the way in which repeat visiting to an attraction may affect the visit flow to that attraction over time. The rest of this section sets the context for the study by examining the importance of repeat visiting in tourism. Section 2 provides an analytical framework and Section 3 then shows, via a simple simulation exercise, the ways in which the pattern of repeat visiting can affect the total visit flow through time. This section also considers some of the implications of the simulation for attraction managements. Section 4 concludes the paper by discussing what a more comprehensive approach to the determinants of repeat visiting might look like. It also suggests some avenues for future work.

Repeat visiting is an important phenomenon in tourism, at the level of both the economy as a whole and the individual attraction. For example, according to a 1997 report by the English Tourist Board (ETB) and the British Tourism Authority (BTA) (BTA/ETB Research Services, 1997, p. 18), the proportion of all overseas visitors to the UK who were making a repeat visit varied between 65 and 73 per cent over the period 1986–1996. For leisure visitors only, the percentages for

1995 and 1996 were, respectively, 63 and 66 per cent. (Comparable data on leisure visitors only are not available for earlier years.) A later report by the BTA and ETB (BTA/ETB Research Services, 1998, p. 71) showed that in 1996, 48 per cent of overseas visitors to London were repeat visitors. Not surprisingly, VFR visitors, i.e. those visiting family and friends, had the highest percentage (75) of repeat visits, and the percentage (across all visitor types, taken together) rises with the age of the visitor: in the 16–24 category, the percentage is 36 and this percentage rises to 70 for those above 55.

Visitor surveys at individual attractions frequently identify the significance of repeat visiting. At the British Museum for example, the latest visitor survey (Caygill & Leese, 1994) — for 1992/1993 — showed that in June 1993, 51 per cent of visitors had made an earlier visit, and 22 per cent had made six or more visits in the previous 12 months. These percentages varied with the month of the survey: in November 1992 for example, the proportion of repeat visitors was 69 per cent. A survey of visitors to 14 museums and galleries in Leicestershire by Prince and Higgins (1992), showed that the repeat visitor percentage varied from 39 to 81 per cent. This same survey showed important variations in repeat visiting by visitor characteristics. These and other studies — for example by Hooper-Greenhill (1994), and Prince and Higgins-McLoughlin (1989) — underline the fact that not only is repeat visiting important, but also that there are variations over time, and across attraction and visitor type. These variations call for explanation.

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The potential importance of repeat visiting is further underlined by the finding in econometric studies of both international tourism flows (see, for example, the surveys produced by Johnson and Ashworth (1990), and Sinclair and Stabler (1997), especially chapter 3), and the demand for individual attractions (see, for example, Darnell, Johnson & Thomas, 1990, 1998), that lagged dependent variables have an important explanatory role to play. One possible explanation for this is that a visit in the current period affects the likelihood of a repeat visit by the same visitor in some subsequent period. A visitor in the current period may also have an effect on the likelihood that *other* people will subsequently visit, as his/her opinions on their own visit, shape the perceptions of others about the worthwhileness of making a repeat visit, or indeed a visit for the first time. These ‘trickle down’ effects have not been explored in the literature.

A good knowledge of the determinants of repeat visits is likely to prove valuable for attraction managements and policy makers who wish to influence visit flows, especially where the scope for encouraging further ‘virgin’ demand is limited (‘virgin’ demand is that which arises from those who have never visited the attraction in the past, i.e. first-time visitors). Yet there is little published work available on this topic. It is true that there is some literature on repeat visiting to particular destinations — see, for example, the work by Gitelson and Crompton (1984), and Opperman (1996) — although it is of limited relevance in the present context. In this paper, attention is focused exclusively on repeat visiting to an individual attraction.

2. An analytical framework

We start by examining the determinants of an individual’s probability of visiting an attraction. These determinants may be categorised as

1. those which are individual specific;
2. those which are attraction specific; and
3. other determinants.

Individual-specific factors include such factors as the individual’s tastes, income, family size, the pattern of previous visits and other relevant personal circumstances. Attraction-specific factors include the nature of the attraction (for example, its setting and general ambience, the nature of its exhibits, the frequency of ‘blockbuster’ events and the number of times the display stock is changed in a year), the entry price and all other associated prices (which will include the availability and price of the attraction’s catering facilities and the distance and travel time of the attraction from the individual’s home). Other relevant potential determinants include the price and nature of substitutes (i.e. the relative attractiveness of

competitors) and the price and nature of complements (for example, the price of travel to the attraction).

Let us define the following terms:

\mathbf{I}_i = a vector of characteristics specific to individual i ;

\mathbf{A} = a vector of attraction-specific characteristics;

\mathbf{O} = a vector of other relevant characteristics;

H_i = the history of the individual’s previous visits;

$\Pr_i\{v_t\}$ = the probability of individual i making a visit in period t .

The probability may now be written as

$$\Pr_i\{v_t\} = f_i(H_i, \mathbf{I}_i, \mathbf{A}, \mathbf{O})_t,$$

where f_i is the individual-specific function which relates the determinants to the probability.

Ceteris paribus we can focus on the relationship between $\Pr_i\{v_t\}$ and the history of previous visits. Holding constant all determinants, except H , we have

$$\Pr_i\{v_t\} = g_i(H_i, \bar{\mathbf{I}}_i, \bar{\mathbf{A}}, \bar{\mathbf{O}})_t,$$

where $\bar{\mathbf{I}}_i, \bar{\mathbf{A}}$ and $\bar{\mathbf{O}}$ represent the fixed values of all individual specific, attraction specific and other determinants.

The history of an individual’s visits has many dimensions. Consider a history of r visits over the previous m periods, where not more than one visit can be in any one period; the number of different ways in which an individual could have made these visits is equal to the number of ways of choosing r items from m , and is given by

$$\frac{m!}{r!(m-r)!}.$$

This can quickly become a very large number even for modest values of m and r . For example, if over the previous 5 periods an individual has made 3 visits, there are 10 different histories. This history is set out schematically as in Table 1 (the subscript indicates the particular history to which a visit belongs).

If the number of periods is increased to 10 ($m = 10$), keeping $r = 3$, then the number of possible different histories rises to 120. Clearly, to recognise this full complexity becomes unwieldy. One way to overcome this difficulty is to use a summary statistic such as the number of previous visits, regardless of the actual pattern of those visits. This reduces the complexity of the problem by an order of magnitude. This abstraction from the role of the individuals’ personal histories of visiting, assumes, for example, that the time elapsed since their last visit does not affect the current probability. Whether or not this abstraction is appropriate is an empirical matter.

Thus, by the above assumption, the only dimension of an individual’s visiting history utilised here is the number of previous visits, n_i . Hence the probability may be written as

$$\Pr_i\{v_t\} = g_i(n_i, \bar{\mathbf{I}}_i, \bar{\mathbf{A}}, \bar{\mathbf{O}})_t.$$

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