Constructing a model of exhibition attachment: Motivation, attachment, and loyalty

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Proposes and measures an innovative concept of exhibition attachment.
- Examines a model of exhibition attachment that includes push/pull motivation, attachment, and loyalty.
- Pull motivation has a significant impact on exhibition dependence.
- Exhibition identity has a greater impact on attendees’ loyalty than exhibition dependence does.

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the theory of place attachment, this study proposes an innovative concept of exhibition attachment. Based on an in-depth literature review, a conceptual model of exhibition attachment was constructed, including push/pull motivation, attachment, and loyalty. To test the model, empirical data was collected from attendees at a trade exhibition. The results show a certain degree of correlation between attendees’ push motivation and pull motivation. Pull motivation had a significant impact on exhibition dependence, which in turn had a positive and strong impact on exhibition identity. While both exhibition dependence and exhibition identity had an impact on attendees’ loyalty, exhibition identity had a greater impact on exhibition loyalty. The theoretical and managerial implications of these results are discussed.

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1. Introduction

People, whether local residents or tourists, develop an attachment to a place wherein the physical and social conditions satisfy their needs and preferences (Gu & Ryan, 2008; Wang & Chen, 2015). This phenomenon pertains to the concept of place attachment, which implies a unique type of interdependence between people and place. Premised on emotional engagement, place attachment describes a personal connection that one feels about a particular place (Suntikul & Jachna, 2016). To a certain extent, the individual’s beliefs, emotions, and behaviors resonate with the place. The notion of place attachment has attracted a great deal of attention in the fields of environmental psychology, leisure studies, and geography (Kyle, Absher, & Graefe, 2003; Smith, 2015; Zia, Norton, Metcalf, Hirsch, & Hannon, 2014). In tourism settings, a sense of attachment leads tourists to revisit or form a certain degree of loyalty to a destination (Gursoy, Chen, & Chi, 2014; Hemsley-Brown & Alnawas, 2016; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010).

Other than the widely used term of destination attachment, however, little research has been conducted on exhibition attachment. Held within a fixed time period in the same location, exhibitions usually possess a long history and strong reputation. The theoretical stance of attachment emphasizes a place endowed with cultural and social significance (Vorkinn & Riese, 2001). The concept of place, including location, material form, and value and meaning, can stimulate emotional responses (Gustafson, 2002; Vorkinn & Riese, 2001). In the exhibition area, a pavilion as a space is not the only attraction for attendees. Instead, what attracts the participants to revisit an exhibition is the sum of the tangible
and intangible services, both in and out of the pavilion, provided by the organizers (Lee, Yeung, & Dewald, 2010). Attendees may experience connections with the organizers, exhibitors, facilities and equipment, and the environment of the location, which altogether can be considered as a place.

Studying attendees’ attachment is important for the exhibition industry. Many large-scale exhibitions have become tourist destinations. Exhibitors and attendees visit such events regularly, since repeated participation could result in lower costs for acquiring information, as well as a sustained connection with other participants (Godar & O’Connor, 2001). This can be recognized as attachment to an exhibition, or exhibition attachment, a concept proposed in this study. To the extent that customer attachment is a desirable business resource (Lee et al., 2010), it would be intriguing to know whether or not such attachment cultivates a sense of loyalty toward the exhibition. Although research has been conducted to explore what attracts exhibition attendees or how to foster their loyalty (Jon & Weber, 2016; Kozak & Kayar, 2009; Park & Park, 2017; Rittichainuwat & Mair, 2012; Whitfield & Webber, 2011), few studies have examined this mechanism from the perspective of attachment. While studies on place attachment increasingly focus on a concrete space, such as a city or a venue, attachment to an exhibition, which represents an entity of on-site experience, is still an under-researched area (Brown, Smith, & Assaker, 2016; Woo & Jun, 2017).

Additionally, although researchers are increasingly interested in identifying factors that affect attendees’ continued participation or their motivation for participating (Lee, Reisinger, Kim, & Yoon, 2014; Lin & Lin, 2013), the power of such motivational drivers on attendees’ evaluative perceptions and behaviors remains underexplored. Several questions, from the theoretical lens of place attachment, motivated the current study: If the physical and social conditions of an exhibition satisfy the attendees’ needs and preferences, is it likely that an attendee may develop an attachment to a popular exhibition? If so, does exhibition attachment influence attendees’ future behavioral intentions?

Specifically, the current study aims to achieve the following research objectives: 1) Propose and validate the new concept of exhibition attachment from the perspective of attendees; 2) Propose and validate the pull and push motivations and loyalty in the exhibition setting; 3) Analyze the relationship between the pull and push motivations, exhibition attachment, and exhibition loyalty. The dynamic relationships were tested in the context of a mega exhibition in Shenzhen, China. The research findings are expected to make several important contributions. First, this research confirms which motivation category, be it push or pull, is a prerequisite for the development of exhibition attachment. This information allows for exhibition organizers and marketers to better understand attendees’ decision-making. Second, drawing upon the concept of place attachment, this study proposes and tests a novel concept of exhibition attachment in the context of a mega exhibition, thereby expanding the scope of the extant exhibition literature. Third, just as place attachment is crucial to understanding tourist behavior, the revealed relationship between motivation, exhibition attachment, and loyalty sheds light on attendees’ thought processes and subsequent behavior.

2. Literature review

2.1. Exhibition motivation

Push and pull motivation has been one of the most frequently used typologies to measure tourists’ motivation. Pull motivation stems from the extrinsic forces of destination attributes or the attractiveness of the toured objects. For instance, the pull motivators for mountain hikers were found to be the effectiveness of the organizing company, accessibility, perceived safety risks, and the character of the landscape (Taher, Jamal, Sumarjan, & Aminudin, 2015). Push motivation, on the other hand, mainly refers to the visitors’ intrinsic needs, such as escape, adventure, and social interaction (Seebuluck, Munhurrun, Naidoo, & Rughoonauth, 2015). In other words, motivations pulling tourists to a place are related to the characteristics of the place or destination, while motivations pushing tourists to a place stem from tourists’ cognition (Needham & Little, 2013).

While some researchers consider the push and pull factors to be separate (e.g., Dann, 1977), others believe that the two aspects are interdependent (e.g., Klenosky, 2002; Prayag & Ryan, 2011). An increasing number of researchers have begun to empirically investigate the interrelationship between pull and push factors (Caber & Albayrak, 2016; Chen & Chen, 2015; Mohammad & Som, 2010; Seebuluck et al., 2015; Zhang & Peng, 2014). Zhang and Peng (2014) found that the push and pull motivational factors of Chinese tourists visiting Australia were strongly correlated, which means that tourists tend to visit destinations where the external features address their internal desires and needs.

In the setting of exhibitions, Lee et al. (2010) identified five motivations of attendees, including fulfilling business needs, taking an opportunity to network, searching for information, traveling as a reward, and market investigation. Among others, the two most important motivations of trade show attendees were investigating the market (comparing products) and searching for new information (new products or technologies). Bauer, Law, Tse, and Weber (2008) and Rittichainuwat and Mair (2012) found that attendees’ motivations to exhibitions consisted of purchasing, searching for information, networking, and education. Attendees’ motivations were further categorized into two clusters, including buyers and general visitors. The major motivation of the buyers was purchasing, while the major drivers of the visitors were searching for information and catching up with new industry trends. As also evidenced in the meta-analytic study of Whitfield and Webber (2011), it is interesting to note that the decisions to attend such exhibitions were contingent upon the access to new information and opportunities, as well as basic exhibition attributes, such as exhibition reputation, quality or quantity of exhibitors, and presence of competitors (Kozak & Kayar, 2009; Rittichainuwat & Mair, 2012; Severt, Wang, Chen, & Breiter, 2007; Song, Bae, & Lee, 2017; Whitfield & Webber, 2011). Although a few studies have documented the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations of volunteers (Lee et al., 2014) or exhibitors (Lin, 2016; Yoon, Lim, & Park, 2012), previous studies have mainly focused on push motivation, which stems from attendees’ socio-psychological needs (e.g., Lee et al., 2010; Rittichainuwat & Mair, 2012). The supply side of the exhibition industry remains underexplored and a more complete view of exhibition motivation, from the push and pull perspective, is still lacking. This study utilizes the push-pull framework for better explaining attendees’ decisions. Given the inconclusive relationship between push and pull motivations, the current study proposes the following hypothesis in exhibition settings:

H1. Attendees’ push motivation positively correlates with pull motivation.

2.2. Place attachment

Place attachment as a concept originated from and has been applied to the fields of geography and environmental psychology (Bonaïuto, Alves, De Dominis, & Petruccelli, 2016; De Dominis, Fornara, Ganucci Cancellieri, Twigger-Ross, & Bonaïuto, 2015; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004a; Kyle, Mowen, & Tarrant, 2004).
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