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Research paper

Market analysis of value-minded tourists: Nature-based tourism in the Arctic

Wei Wang^{a,*}, Joseph S. Chen^b, Nina K. Prebensen^c^a Department of Economic Development, Tourism, and Sport Management The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS 39406, USA^b Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Studies, Indiana University at Bloomington, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA^c School of Business and Economics, The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the underlying tourist markets in peripheral destinations in relation to visitors' perceptions of service values, deploying a series of self-administered, questionnaire-based, onsite surveys of 579 tourists visiting four Norwegian Arctic destinations. The key research variable is a value-related scale, which contains 19 indicators explained by five value dimensions. A cluster analysis based on value measurement was performed to discover the underlying tourist sub-market. Subsequently, the study identifies three mutually exclusive markets: (1) escapist, (2) utilitarian, and (3) nature chaser, based on tourists' perceived trip service values and behaviors. Functional values emerge as the most important value for these tourists, which implies that major attractions in northern Norway offer satisfactory experiences due to their good standards in service provision and amenity design.

1. Introduction

In the tourism sector, participating in leisure activities such as vacations away from home has become increasingly popular and even a necessity, particularly for people in wealthy and developing countries (Dolnicar, Yanamandram, & Cliff, 2012; Lehto, Choi, Lin, & MacDermid, 2009). Tourists have long been exploring travel options both before and during their trip, yet it is important for the hospitality and travel industry to bear in mind that today's tourists have more opportunities via the Internet and social media to explore service information and express their opinions about a service industry than ever before. This understanding can prompt business communities to reduce the likelihood of service failure or tourist disappointment in a more systematic fashion. For example, there is more attention being given to the development of a service blueprint and actively coping with rising pressures from consumer groups, who are more likely to explicitly express their opinions in searching for the best service value (Dolnicar et al., 2012; Lehto et al., 2009; O'Cass & Sok, 2015; Racherla, Connolly, & Christodoulidou, 2013; Schuckert, Liu, & Law, 2015; Yeoman, Munro, & McMahon-Beattie, 2006). These business operations may thrive in the long run if they deploy an evaluation mechanism directed to understanding and anticipating consumer value judgments on services they deliver.

In the past few decades, value perception has been studied in the context of its definition, measurement, and relationships with other concepts. More recently, applied research has examined value percep-

tion in various destinations and hospitality settings (Bajs, 2015; Fang, Ye, Kucukusta, & Law, 2016; Ponte, Carvajal-Trujillo, & Escobar-Rodríguez, 2015). Thus far, limited efforts have been made to validate Williams and Soutar's (2009) newly developed value perception scale, which was built on the work of Bello and Etzel (1985), Sweeney and Soutar (2001), and Weber (2001). This research thus aims to contribute to the literature by using an updated valid measurement based on Williams and Soutar (2009) to glean information on a unique marketing segment of tourists visiting a popular and adventuresome tourist region, northern Norway in the Arctic. This study includes two objectives: (1) to assess tourists' perceptions of value in business and service offerings at a few Arctic destinations; and (2) to examine the similarities and variations of visitors' demographic and trip characteristics among tourist sub-groups. Through replication and empirical examination, this study can provide evidence that extends the validity of Williams and Soutar's (2009) findings to address this rapidly changing tourist region. If the proposed measurement is found to be a valid instrument, value perception can be further used as a segmentation function to profile visitors' characteristics at multiple sites in the Arctic. Specific to this study, local destination marketing organizations (DMOs) could focus on selected marketing strategies to deliver consistent and distinct destination images to visitors in northern Norway, a major Arctic tourism destination known for its quality tourist offerings.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: w.wang@usm.edu (W. Wang), jochen@indiana.edu (J.S. Chen), nina.prebensen@uit.no (N.K. Prebensen).<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2016.12.004>Received 5 January 2016; Received in revised form 14 December 2016; Accepted 21 December 2016
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2. Literature review

2.1. Value perception concept

Value perception is a powerful assessment tool that has received a lot of attention from marketing scholars, since it affects customer satisfaction and loyalty (Flint, Blocker, & Boutin, 2011; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006; Ledden, Kalafatis, & Samouel, 2007). Consumer literature uses the macro- and micro-level perspectives to develop the value measurement. The macro-level perspective links value to national culture, using country of origin or socio-cultural dimensions such as Hofstede's culture taxonomy (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 1991) as an evaluative proxy. The micro-level perspective views value as cognition influenced by personal lifestyle and the particular cultural system in which individuals live (Ladhari, Pons, Bressolles, & Zins, 2011). In attempting to assess personal values, Rokeach (1968) early on defined value as an intrinsic stimulus affecting attitudes and behavioral intention, and later (Rokeach, 1979) proposed that individual valuation of products and services are built on a hierarchical thought process, wherein one value (e.g. money) may have a greater consideration than another (e.g. time).

Previous consumer research has also classified consumer value as the dichotomization of hedonic and utilitarian values (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Holbrook & Corfman, 1985; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Babin et al. (1994), p. 645 conceptualized utilitarian value as the 'conscious pursuit of an intended consequence,' and hedonic value as a 'basic duality of rewards for much human behavior'. Utilitarian value is seen as what the consumers accomplish during their shopping experience, where a product is purchased, for example, in a deliberate or efficient manner. Hedonic value reflects the entertainment and emotional outcomes of consumerism, which is connected to the pursuit of fun, pleasure, and playfulness more than task completion (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Clearly, these two values address the cognitive outcomes as well as the affective evaluation of the shopping experience (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003). Value in general is primarily defined in terms of the financial sacrifice people are willing to make for a product, where Zeithaml (1988) proposed four aspects of economic value as seen in the consumer literature: (1) low price, (2) whatever consumers want in a product, (3) the quality consumers get for the price paid, and (4) what the consumer gets for what is given.

Features of functional value include the establishment, host provider, service, and cost, also in relation to the perception of the product or service's physical performance or benefit (Jamal, Stein, & Harper, 2002), while hedonism and novelty fall under the category of emotional value (Duman & Mattila, 2005). As noted in earlier research, due to the heterogeneous and uncertain nature of service products, a functional value perspective may be too simplistic for evaluating shopping experiences in the service context (Williams & Soutar, 2009). Schwartz and Bilsky (1987) presented a way to better utilize the notion of value to foresee consumer behavioral variations, where it is viewed as having a few characteristics or dimensions instead of being a single descriptor. In their application of consumption values theory, Sheth, Newman, and Gross (1991) proposed five value dimensions: functional, social, emotional, epistemic, and conditional. This conceptual framework was also supported in subsequent consumer studies (Holbrook, 1999; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001; van Riel & Pura, 2005; Williams & Soutar, 2009). Personal value can be considered within various exclusive value domains that embody multivariate or individual value traits, where it has been conceptualized and incorporated into structural models to test its predicting effects on tourists' travel decisions.

2.2. Value perception in destination research

Concerning the evolving concept of value in tourism, the empirical works have in large mirrored the field of marketing. The concept of value perception has been empirically validated by numerous hospital-

ity industries and destination markets (Eid & El-Gohary, 2015; Kim, Holland, & Han, 2013; Prebensen, Vittersø, & Dahl, 2013; Stevens, 1992; Ye, Li, Wang, & Law, 2014). An early survey of value measurement and perception in tourism marketing research is seen in Rokeach (1973) second version of his Value Survey (RVS). This influential work, now studied in the context of personality psychology, behavior, marketing, and social structure and cross-cultural studies, is based on over 25 years of accumulative research. It introduced 18 terminal values (desirable end-states of life) and 18 instrumental values (preferred behaviors that can help achieve terminal values). Instrumental values that reflect positive behavior or socially desirable characteristics include cheerfulness, ambition, love, cleanliness, and self-control. Terminal values that can be achieved by instrumental values include true friendship, mature love, self-respect, happiness, inner harmony, and equality.

Slightly revising Sweeney and Soutar's (2001) four-dimensional value scale on product and service in general, Williams and Soutar (2009) proposed a value scale with five dimensions that fit into the tourism phenomenon. The scales of both Madrigal and Kahle (1994) and Sweeney and Soutar (2001) were able to demonstrate predictive property in a hierarchical order, although Williams and Soutar (2009) scale is considered more up to date and in compliance with tourism settings for model testing. Given that it was developed in the tourism context, Williams and Soutar's value instrument has been used as a perceived value scale for conceptual and relationship testing in recent tourism research (Bajs, 2015; Mohd-Any, Winklhofer, & Ennew, 2015; Prebensen, Woo, Chen, & Uysal, 2013; Walsh, Shiu, & Hassan, 2014). The value concept has also been found to contribute to visitors' satisfaction (Lee, Lee, & Choi, 2010; Prebensen, Woo, & Uysal, 2014), experience (Prebensen, Woo et al., 2013; Prebensen, Vittersø et al., 2013), travel styles (Madrigal, 1995), and behavioral intentions (Bajs, 2015; Cheng & Lu, 2013; Duman & Mattila, 2005; Lee & Min, 2013).

2.3. Segmentation research in Norway

Tourism has become one of the most promising businesses for economic development and job creation in Norway (Chen & Wang, 2015). It is especially important in the northern region, which is mostly above the Arctic Circle. It has been found that many tourists associate Norway with nature, fjords, mountains, outdoor adventure, and the northern lights (Chen, Wang, & Prebensen, 2016). It is reported that in 2015, about 3.6 million foreign hotel guests registered at hotels in Norway to take advantage of these offerings, the majority being German, Swedes, Danes, and visitors from the United Kingdom (VisitNorway, 2016). This number is up 382,000 from 2014, representing an increase of 12%. For travelers who stayed overnight, a total expenditure of NOK68.6 billion (US\$8.41 billion) was estimated on their trips in Norway (VisitNorway, 2016).

With the rising number of tourists in Norway, various studies have been conducted to segment travel market in the region. Some studies selected situational factors such as seasons (Tkaczynski, Rundle-Thiele, & Prebensen, 2013) to profile tourists' activity preferences, as many tourist offerings are season-specific. The majority of marketing studies still rely, however, on visitors' characteristics as descriptors. For example, Flognfeldt (1999) compared differences in tourist profiles in the Jotunheimen region of Southern Norway, the country's most famous mountain area and national park. Using two descriptors, nationality and mode of travel, this study suggested that visitors' geographic origin influences their knowledge about Norway and their trip activities, where the modes of travel would be deciding factors in their decision to visit primary attractions. Thrane and Farstad (2012a) also reported that visitor nationality is strongly associated with expenditure behaviors. While these studies provide basic information about visitor profiles and their travel patterns, they do not always adequately explain tourist motivation and behaviors, particularly in nature-based tourism settings.

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