



The tourism experience-led length of stay hypothesis



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Backpackers
Ghana
Negative binomial
Length of stay
Tourism experience

ABSTRACT

Even given the continuing interest of both academia and industry to understand what accounts for the length of stay (LOS) of tourists, explanatory variables have mostly been limited to socio-demographic and trip characteristics overlooking the influence of the holiday experience despite it being a major reason why tourism is embarked on. Departing from previous studies, this study proposed and tested an experience-led length of stay hypothesis employing a zero truncated negative binomial regression model. It was revealed that tourism experience significantly explains the variations in tourists' LOS with self development, recreational engagements, hospitality, weather and sanitation identified as specific determinants. The findings also provide support for age, nationality, travel party size, budget, number of international trips, and risk taking behaviour as significant determinants of LOS. With these observations in mind, the study offers practical insights for sustaining tourists' length of stay as well as propositions for future research on the tourism experience-led length of stay hypothesis.

Management implications: Provision of positive memorable experiences in the domains of self development, recreation, hospitality, weather and aesthetics is one way to ensure that tourists stay longer. Specifically, need exits for destination management organisations and service providers to step up efforts in maintaining sanitation at the destination, especially at attraction sites and tourism-related premises. They can do this by ensuring regular cleaning, providing well-designated trash cans and disposing of sewage properly. In addition, a diverse of novel activities should be made available to tourists to sustain their interest and prolong their stay. Activity engagements that allow for skill acquisition such as volunteerism, cultural immersion (i.e. food bazaars) and co-creation of services are recommended.

1. Introduction

Tourists' length of stay (LOS) remains an important subject of interest for both academia and industry, given its positive association to tourism revenue (Thrane, 2012). Tourists who stay longer are believed to spend more than those who stay for shorter periods (Barros & Machado, 2010); meanwhile, studies (e.g. Barros & Machado, 2010; Ferrer-Rosell, Martínez-García, & Coenders, 2014) lament that tourism is increasingly characterised by reduced duration of stays. Campos-Soria, Inchausti-Sintes, and Eugenio-Martin (2015) consider reduced LOS as a phenomenon that adversely affects destinations, especially tourism-dependent economies. Measures must, therefore, be in place to ensure that tourists stay longer at destinations. One way to do so is better understanding of the impact of tourism experiences on LOS (Martinez-Garcia & Raya, 2008).

It is irrefutable that tourism is largely an experiential product, which is value of multiple on-site encounters revealed over time (Pine & Gilmore,

1999). Tourism experiences influence both current and future tourist behaviour (Barnes, Mattson, & Sorensen, 2016) and so, first it is reasonable to state that tourist on-site experiences can impact on-site behaviour such as LOS, during the trip. Research shows that a few days after the October 2002 Bali bombing, about 2000 tourists unexpectedly reduced their holiday LOS (Henderson, 2003). Second, if the statement that fulfilling tourism experiences predict pleasurable emotions, which in turn predicts positive behaviour is anything to go by (Barnes et al., 2016; Kim, 2014), it is sufficient to hypothesise that satisfactory tourism experiences positively relate to LOS while the reverse holds for adverse experiences. On the contrary, findings (see Hajibaba, Gretzel, Leisch, & Dolnicar, 2015) show that other tourists remain resilient during and after unfortunate events, suggesting that not all tourists will alter their travel itineraries due to unsatisfactory encounters at the destination. Obviously, this finding blurs the conventionally speculated direct relationship between holiday experiences and behavioural outcomes. Whether this is in reality the case or not, it needs to be substantiated.

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In spite of the growing number of studies (including Barros & Machado, 2010; Alén, Nicolau, Losada, & Dominguez, 2014; Santos, Ramos, & Rey-Maqueira, 2015; Thrane, 2016; Otoo, Agyeiwaah, Dayour, & Wireko-Gyebi, 2016) investigating the determinants of LOS, holiday experiences have rarely been considered as one possible determinant despite being a major reason why people embark on tourism. Explanatory variables used by past researches have included socio-economic and demographic variables (i.e sex, age, marital status, education and nationality), trip related characteristics (i.e party size, budget and past experience) and trip motivation (i.e adventure, relaxation, and cultural exchange). Remarkably, none of these variables is consistent in prediction of LOS across these studies, which is expected given the differences in study settings and encounters. This observation has been reinforced by Martinez-Garcia & Raya (2008) and Thrane (2016). Therefore, in line with suggestions by previous studies for further research to account for the residual variance in LOS, the current study proposes and tests the tourism experience-led LOS hypothesis using backpackers as empirical subjects. Nevertheless, the study provides no direct information about how experiences influence tourist adjustment of LOS while on-site.

While this study is aware of the difficulty in defining a backpacker, past studies have often made recourse to Pearce (1990) conceptualisation. With this frame of reference, backpackers are typically young tourists who travel alone or in small groups, prefer partly mediated and unstructured trips to unfamiliar destinations and seek contact with fellow backpackers and locals (Badu-Baiden, Boakye, & Otoo, 2016; Butler & Hannam, 2014; Hunter-Jones, Jeffs, & Smith, 2008). Backpackers are curious, motivated by novelty, seek active vacations and engage in adventurous activities (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995). Moreover, they are described as tourists on limited budget and therefore prefer budget accommodation facilities and usually carry their belongings in a backpack. Leiper (2010), however, highlights the increasing proportion of backpackers, who use packs-with-wheels, 'wheelerist', which among other reasons is attributed to their desire to avoid the physical strain of carrying a backpack.

In regard to LOS, backpackers typically stay longer and are considered to spend more days at a destination than other travellers. Pearce (1990) in Australia observed that backpackers on the average stay 8 months. Similarly, Loker-Murphy and Pearce (1995) noted in their study that most backpackers stayed at least 6 months compared to other tourists whose stay was less than a month. Studies further note that for many backpackers the date of return is usually not decided in advance due a lot of time at their disposal and their quest for experiences furthest the 'beaten track' (Dayour, 2013a; Frew, McGeorge, Grant, & de Wildt, 2016). Reinforcing the "open return" nature of backpackers, Riley (1988) argues that backpackers are neither explorers nor drifters, but budget travellers. Budget travellers are "people wanting to extend their trips beyond that of a brief annual holiday and, therefore, faced with the necessity of living on a budget. The minimum period of travelling time required to qualify as a budget traveller is one year" (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995: 825).

Despite the extended LOS of backpackers, determinants of their LOS remain under-researched in the tourism literature. Moreover, backpackers are a growing market segment for developing destinations, which is explained by their high, direct and wide-spread spending in rural and deprived communities relative to their institutionalised counterparts (Dayour, Adongo, & Taale, 2016; Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995; Luo, Brown, & Huang, 2015). Finally, backpacking as an alternative form of tourism offers unique, diverse and meaningful experiences compared to other forms of tourism (Cohen, 1979, 2011), which makes backpackers ideal subjects when investigating the influence of holiday experiences on LOS.

Consequently, findings of this study are expected to add novel information to the tourism literature given the scarce information that exists on the impact of on-site experiences on LOS. To practice, insights are ultimately crucial since they can provide measures through which

service providers can maximise benefits from tourists' while they are still on-site. Maximisation of benefits from tourists while they are on-site is central since the association between satisfactory experiences and post-behaviour intention, including word of mouth publicity and revisit (Saayman, Krugell, & Saayman, 2016; Tung & Ritchie, 2011), is deemed hypothetical and actualisation cannot be guaranteed (McKercher & Tse, 2012).

2. Literature review

2.1. LOS

LOS is conceptualised as the duration of an individual's leisure consumption and any other services or activities whose demand is prompted by virtue of visiting the destination. In the literature, LOS has been measured using various time cohorts. Most studies have looked at it in terms of short, medium and long duration of stay. However, what defines any of these time categories remains vague except for Otoo et al. (2016), who argue that periods between one month and a year yields better outcomes to both the tourists and the host. Another conceptualization of LOS was introduced by Thrane (2016) who considered it as two segments: "prefix" and "open" returners. For 'prefix, the date of return is decided in advance, while with the 'open' returners it is partly or fully open. Cohen (1972) mass tourists and individual mass tourists may be typical cases of the former while explorers and drifters both akin to backpackers, best fit the latter. A majority of studies (see Box-Steffensmeier and Jones (2004), Alén et al. (2014)) have established that for many tourists the date is prefixed. It is extremely important to recognise, however, that depending on the type of tourists and circumstances at the destination, it is possible that a tourist can cut short or extend his or her duration of stay.

Data on tourism consumption is either collected before, during or after the holiday or at a combination of these stages. A review of the literature shows that the 'during and after stages' are common with LOS studies. The 'during stage' is also termed the on-site approach. This is where data is collected while respondents are still at the destination (see Otoo et al. (2016)). In other words, LOS is measured in-situ or concurrently with tourism consumption. Such studies usually ask of the intended LOS in view of the fact that the individual is yet to complete his or her holiday. In the situation that some or a majority of respondents are open returners, collecting data on LOS while the trip is ongoing risks measuring the variable inaccurately due to the possibility of extensions or reductions. The 'after stage' is also referred to as the ex-post facto approach where data is collected after respondents have exited (see Alén et al. (2014), Thrane (2016)) or are about to exit the destination (i.e. at the airport) (Aguiló, Rosselló, & Vila, 2017). Much as this stage is also liable to ex-post facto memory losses, it conceivably offers reliable information compared to the on-site method given that respondents may still have good recall ability and can provide accurate information about their holiday (Adongo, Anuga, & Dayour, 2015).

As regards the mode of measurement, LOS has been measured from various competing perspectives of which a few are highlighted in this section. Some studies have considered it as a continuous variable (Otoo et al., 2016; Thrane, 2015), others as a count variable (Alegre, Mateo, & Pou, 2011; Brida, Meleddu, & Pulina, 2013; Salmasi, Celidoni, & Procidano, 2012) and others as a categorical outcome. In line with the varied modes of measurement, researchers have debated the appropriate estimation technique for analysing LOS. Studies including Thrane and Farstad (2012), Lee, Alexander, & Kim (2014) and Scholtz, Kruker, & Saayman (2015) resorted to ordinary least squares regression [OLS] while Alegre et al. (2011), Salmasi et al. (2012) and Alén et al. (2014) employed poisson and negative binomial regressions [NBR]. The unsuitability of count models for estimating LOS in the tourism context has been argued given that they do not satisfy the condition of "how many times something has happened" within a

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