

Sport Tourism Loyalty Revisited: An Overview

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Abstract

The return and re-demand of tourists depends on their satisfaction with destination. Their satisfaction, in turn, will increase the loyalty of them to destination. The present study revisits the thoughts on sports tourism loyalty worldwide. Of course, it is not inclusive of all the theories and thoughts and just an overview is presented. It may help those interested in loyalty in sports tourism.

Keywords: Destination, Loyalty, sports tourism, theories, thoughts

Introduction:

It is generally believed that the tourism service quality led to the satisfaction and the intent to return of tourists. In this context, a research was made in a sport tourism program in Plasteera Lake in Greece. This study was done to assess SERVQUAL model which including tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The results showed SERVQUAL is not a suitable model for measuring service quality in outdoor sport tourism ((Kouthoris and Konstantinos, 2005)). In another study it has been found the quality of contest itself is the most important element is port tourism industry (Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008). In addition, the characteristics of the host city impact the tourist perceptions and positively is related to satisfaction and behavioral intentions of tourists (Zabkar et al, 2010). In the other studies, some facilities such accessibility, parking and comfortable seats are variables affecting spectators attending (Hall et al, 2010). In one of the newest studies it has been suggested empathy and tangibles are the most important dimensions of service quality (Lee et al, 2011).

Service quality is a challenging concept and there are various definitions of it. One of the most widely used definitions of service quality is: "to meet part of the needs and expectations of customers". So, it can be defined as the difference between customer expectations of service quality and services which are

received (Azar et al, 2010). Moreover, service quality was not an important field of study in sport until the half of 1980 decade (Ko & Pastore, 2004). Sport researchers have studied service quality in health and physical fitness centers, sport clubs, sport camps, leisure places and service quality of spectators (Shonk, 2006).

Service quality in sport tourism has been studied in several studies and has several dimensions. In one of the researches that have been done in this area, sport tourism service quality consists of access quality, sport complex quality, accommodation quality and contest quality. The access quality is the ease and speed of reaching of tourists to the target area and containing destination, sport complex and accommodation access quality. Accessibility is one of the most important elements in sports tourism and may be related to some details, such as parking lots, airports, freeways and public transportation. Sport complex quality is related to the quality of sport stadium and places where sporting events are held in them. Sport complex quality consisted of sport complex employee interactions, sport complex environment, sports ticket and products prices. The quality of the accommodation includes environment of accommodation, employee interactions, and the price of accommodation service and products and contest quality consisted of the process of sporting event and the sporting competition itself (Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008).

Tourism development, especially in less developed countries, is an important factor in tackling poverty. It increase the revenue of various segments, reduce unemployment, increase economic prosperity and social welfare, and result in improved quality of life (Tassiopoulou & Haydamb, 2007).

Sports tourism is a developing sector of tourism. According to statistics, about 32% of the success and achievement of world tourism accounted for it. Considering the changing lifestyle of people interest in this phenomenon, it is important (Chalip, 2005). However, predictions show that tourism and travel will have 5 percent growth in the worldwide in 2020. The Secretary General of the World Tourism Organization and president of the International Olympic Committee in September 2004 reaffirmed in a common message that sports and tourism are two driving force to stabilize economic growth, job creation, and increased income. Today, many countries try to develop sports tourism by management, planning, and implementation of strategies. Some of the global efforts in this regard is the establishment of specialized field of sports tourism in the universities of America, England, and Australia in PhD, graduate, and undergraduate levels, publishing magazines of sports tourism, conferences and international conferences, and creating websites in order to introduce Sports tourism attractions and attract tourist (Richard, 2005). But in Iran, the lack of sufficient knowledge, lack of management, and lack of clear and formulated strategies have caused this area to be neglected and the unique opportunities available in the country have been lost. Given the many social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental benefits of sports tourism, recognizing the importance of having a healthy and happy society, and the desire of people to have dynamic holiday and recreation, paying attention to sports tourism and its development in the country is inevitable .

Sports tourism is a relatively new industry. It is one of the segments of tourism that has the fastest development and has been identified as a factor in economic and social regeneration of urban and rural communities. It seems that sports tourism is a means for improving the quality of life for residents by attracting tourists and contributing in improving the economics of local economy (Kasimati, 2005). Sports tourism is defined as a leisure-based travel. People temporarily move from their home for games, watching sports, or seeing the charms associated with this activities (Kasimati & Dawson, 2008). Today,

Sports and Tourism are important economic activities in developed and developing worlds and have increasingly attracted attention in recent years as growing domestic market (2009, Kasimati & Dawson). Therefore, sports, as an economic sector, have a basic role in production and consumption of sports goods and services and economic development of communities. Now, it is one of the most influential factors in the growth of the national economy and is considered one of the most productive industries in the 21st century (Poudyala et al, 2008). Studies have shown that sports tourism is one of the sectors that has the highest growth in world tourism (Tao a & Wall b, 2008). As a multi-billion dollar global business and the fastest growing sector in global travel and tourism industry, it has a value over 4.5 trillion dollars (2009, Kasimati & Dawson).

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There are various types and definitions of sport tourism and different experts have different idea about it. One of the experts whose definition is so popular is Gibson. Gibson (2006) defines sport tourism as “leisure-based travel that takes individuals temporarily outside of their home communities to participate in physical activities, to watch physical activities, or to venerate attractions associated with physical activities”. Based on Gibson’s definition, sport tourism can be categorized into three groups of active sport tourism, event sport tourism and nostalgia sport tourism (Adabi, 2006). However, sport tourism in all its different types, is a service industry and is influenced by services provided. Service quality is a key concept in tourism organizations, because researches have suggested service quality directly is related to repeat vision of tourists and make more benefits for organization (Kouthoris and Konstantinos, 2005). So, it can be said quality management is an important issue in tourism policy that can help tourism and sport tourism development.

In recent years, sports and tourism has been identified as the important potentials of sports tourism. For being professional in sports tourism, the impact of sport and tourism on each other should be recognized. Nowadays, therefore, sport tourism major has been taught in graduate, postgraduate, and doctoral level in colleges and universities in America, Canada, England, New Zealand, Australia, and Dubai. Also, training programs approved by the management of sport tourism are held around the world.

The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) named the 2010 as the year of Islamic Tourism. In addition, the tourism industry has become an important factor in the interaction of cultures, civilizations dialogue, and establishment of fondness and affection between nations. Therefore, it seems necessary to recognize the important sectors of this industry, especially Islamic tourism.

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Tourism development, especially in less developed countries, is an important factor in tackling poverty. It increase the revenue of various segments, reduce unemployment, increase economic prosperity and social welfare, and result in improved quality of life (Tassiopoulou & Haydamb, 2007).

For succeeding in attracting tourists, the destination countries should provide the necessary infrastructure according to their geographical and cultural characteristics and convert themselves to a tourist destination. This requires a systematic approach towards tourism in order to develop tourism through the creation and provision of the necessary facilities. Providing needed facilities is the first step in attracting and retaining tourists. Familiarity with the region provides the needed information for the development of tourism. Therefore, the needs and expectations of tourists will be met and their satisfaction and loyalty towards the region will be attracted. Expectations of tourists from the region is formed based on the experience of previous trips, propagandas, and others' recommendation. The perceived service quality, perceived facilities quality, and perceived value has a direct impact on the quality of the travel, tourism experience, and level of demand in the future (Uysal, 2003). In other words, the possibility of tourists return depends on their satisfaction from the destination. Their satisfaction will increase their loyalty to the destination. As a result of this action and reaction, a growing and developmental cycle will be created and the destination will benefit from economic, social, and cultural advantages.

Like the other services, consumption experience in tourism is complex due to being subtle, dynamic, and subjective. Tourists' experience includes a complex combination of tangible, objective, and practical components -travel, food, drinks, and recreation- and also symbolic, emotional, and enjoyment -joy, laughing, having a good time, and socialization (Williams, 2005). High quality service and guaranteed customer satisfaction are the most important factors for the success of tourism industry. High quality services, tourists' satisfaction, and loyalty to a destination are closely related to each other. Customer satisfaction has a key role in the success of businesses strategies. Studies show that companies that have paid attention to customer satisfaction have been successful in increasing the efficiency of production processes, the company's rapid growth, increasing knowledge about the customer, and increasing the value of their products. The customer satisfaction is a determining factor in customer loyalty which leads to customer retention (Ebrahimpoor, 2011).

The destination selection process consists of five stages of decision-making hierarchy: 1) the decision to involve (Travel), (2) The decision to invest in tourism, (3) the frequency and duration of stay, (4) the decision about tourist destination, (5) the final destination and type of transport (Law, 2004 & Smith, 2000). The tourism destination selection has two unique characteristics making it different from other products: (1) Tourism is experience-based rather than product-based (2) the real purchase and consumption occurs in the destination and not in the resident location of tourists (Hsieh, 2004 & Ibrahim et al., 2005).

The decision of tourists to choose a destination is one of the important issues that have been considered by researchers. Such decisions are closely associated with the loyalty of tourist to destination (Smith, 2006 & Huang et al., 2006). Numerous studies have examined the relationship between loyalty to destination and tourists' behavior (Lin et al., 2006 & Petrick et al., 2005). If tourism managers and marketers may guess the possibility of selecting a particular destination by tourists, they may estimate the demand of tourists properly and implement strategies to satisfy their demand (Opperman, 1999).

Measuring the loyalty to a brand, product, or a tourist destination is difficult. There are two major issues concerning the loyalty measurement that includes the type of used and the level of measuring loyalty to a tourist destination (Oppermann, 1999). There are three types of data for loyalty measurement including behavioral data, attitudinal data, and combined data. However, studies have pointed out that behavioral measurement is not free of error due to the lack of distinction between true loyalty and spurious loyalty. But, on the other hand, this type of measurement has attracted attentions for focusing on longitudinal data. The attitudinal measurement has been criticized for its focus on cross-sectional data (Oppermann, 1999). Finally, combined data have been considered by researchers because of including the data of both types (Riley et al., 2001 and Lee, 2001).

The index for measuring loyalty to a destination has been a challenging issue among researchers. For example, Chen and Gursoy (2001) interpret loyalty to destination as tourists' eager to recommend it as a tourist spot. Riely et al. defined loyalty to destination as the best indicator of visiting destination frequently. Also, Patrick (2005) and Crosby et al. (1990) argue that past experiences of tourism can affect the loyalty of tourists.

This is an important question for sports marketers and sports managers who are responsible for organizing sport events: What factors affect frequent re-visit or return of tourists in athletic events?. However, the increased number of tourists is associated both directly and indirectly with the level of revenue in sport events. Providing high-quality services, easy transportation, and attracting the tourists satisfaction influence tourist loyalty to return to the sport events (Travassos, 2008 ; Huang, 2006 & Ibrahim, 2005). By determining the factors influencing tourist loyalty to attend sport events or return them, sports marketers and sports managers may develop strategies for attracting tourists (Jacoby, 1978).

The studies of Mosin (2005), Kim and Patrick (2005), Kesin (2005) indicated that the host city may take concrete steps in attracting tourism and sports tourism by hosting important events. Also, the studies of Kozak (2005) showed that the host city may help to tourists' attraction by providing accommodation facilities and facilitating the access of tourists to tourism attractions. Soolberg and Prussia (2007) believe that hosting major sports events will lead to long-term positive changes in tourism demand. Large sporting events require costly investments in sport equipments in non- sports buildings of city. These investments must be consistent with the long-term plan for the economic success of event. Most of the cities which demand hosting of major sporting events to earn significant short or long term regional income. Law (2006) investigated the driving factors in attracting tourism and selecting destination. The findings showed that factors such as social and psychological factors, relaxation and social interaction in sport venues, tourism attractions, tourism expectations, destination image are the attracting and driving factors. The empirical literature related to tourism indicate that tourist satisfaction is a good predictor of revisiting the destination and recommending it to others (Rimmington, 2000). The studies of Ling and Ding (2005) showed that trust and satisfaction are the components of loyalty. Also, Chen and Gursoy (2001) showed that the safety, perceived cultural differences, and transportation are the three characteristics that affect the loyalty to tourist destination. Ibrahim and Jacqueline (2005) suggested that there is relationship between the satisfaction, security, comfort, service, the atmosphere of the tourism area, and cultural differences. Also, Riley et al. (2001) concluded that loyalty is the result of satisfaction, commitment, and attitude of tourists.

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Nowadays, one of concerns and problems of international sporting events organizers and marketers in the Iran is raising the interest of visitors and spectators to sports events, identifying the factors affecting their presence, and identifying the type, process, and model of marketing fitted with each of the target communities and markets. However, it is necessary to have a comprehensive and appropriate model for sports tourism which act as a framework for implementing the strategies of sports tourism. Different models have been proposed for the satisfaction and returning of tourists, and their loyalty to tourism destinations (; Shonk, 2006; Travassos, 2008 Lee, 2001; Huang & Chiu, 2006; EbrahimPur, 2011; Foster, 2001; Yusal, 2003; (Chen, 2010).

Conclusion:

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In summary, the findings show that the quality of sports services (Shonk, 2006), safety (Shonk, 2006; Travassos, 2008 ;), cultural differences (Travassos, 2008), transport (Travassos, 2008; Shonk, 2006 ; Huang & Chiu, 2006), image from destination (Chen, 2010), and environmental factors (Ebrahim Pur, 2011) are variables that have an impact on the satisfaction and loyalty of sports tourists. In the following researcher made conceptual model, a combination of theories of models have been included.

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