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Destination Loyalty in Sport Tourism Revisited: A Field Study

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Abstract

The return and re-demand of tourists depends on their satisfaction from destination. Their satisfaction, in turn, will increase the loyalty of them to destination. This study aimed to design and explain the destination loyalty pattern of football tourists in Tehran. This was a descriptive-analytic field study. The data were collected using library and survey study. The research tool was researcher-made questionnaire with closed questions. After confirming the validity (surveying experts) and reliability (with study and guide) of questionnaire, it was distributed among sports tourists. In this study, the simple random sampling method was used. The researcher attended at the place of several important Premier League football events in Tehran and collected the needed data by distributing questionnaires among the spectators (15-50 years old) who had settled one or more nights in Tehran for watching the event. However, the collected data from questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, and standard deviation). The data were analyzed at level $P < 0.05$. In addition, the conceptual model of research was studied in inferential statistics section and the relationship between other variables was also determined. However, it was found that among the variables, the service quality, satisfaction, and image of destination had the greatest impact on loyalty of football tourists to destination in Tehran.

Keywords: Destination Loyalty, Sport Tourism, Soccer, Premier League, Iran

Introduction:

Tourism, among the service industries, is one of the leading and growing sectors at international level; according to the predictions, demand for international tourism will achieve 1.6 billion people per year by 2020 (Goshall & Charleswort). For this reason, tourism is a basic and important issue in economic, social and cultural revolutions of countries and by developing it, it can be a way to increase country's revenues and reduce the dependence on oil revenues and so to provide an optimal path for achieving a sustainable and comprehensive development .

Tourism has various forms and sports tourism is one of those forms which had the highest growth among different segments of tourism . Sports tourism, like general tourism, has several definitions from the viewpoint of authorities. These definitions have enormous similar and opposite forms and cause problems in reaching a certain concept. Gibson has offered one of the most comprehensive definitions in the field of sports tourism: Sports tourism is leisure travel in which people are temporarily out of their homes in order to participate in physical activities, watching physical activities, or respect for the interest of physical activities (Byon et al., 2008). According to this view of Gibson, Sports tourism is divided into three categories due to the distinct behaviors that it manifests: active sports tourism, sporting events tourism, and sports memorabilia tourism. But Gibson and others (2003) suggested in their recent study that these categories may not be incompatible and the motives of all three groups can be examined simultaneously (Gibson et al., 2003).

As previously mentioned, sports tourism is among service industries and the quality of services can have an important role in sports tourism development. The quality of services is a concept that has raised numerous conflicts due to lack of consensus on how to define and measure it. Several definitions of quality of services have been provided. One of the definitions that is widely used, defines quality of services as extent of meeting needs and expectations of customers by services. So, the quality of services can be defined as the difference between customer's expectation of services and the received services . It must be understood that the quality of services or products plays the most essential role in satisfaction or dissatisfaction of customers; hence, ahead and sublime organizations are always seeking to ensure that customers are satisfied .

The study of customers' satisfaction is most closely associated with the measurement of quality of services. Satisfaction is a feeling or attitude that customer faces with after receiving services. Although a review of existing literature on the subjects under consideration suggests the fact that the understanding of the relationship between customers' satisfaction and quality of services perceived by them is still a challenging problem, the research trend believes that the overall customers' satisfaction arises from the quality of received services . In addition, it should be considered that great satisfaction of clients and high quality of received services result in renewed referring of customers (Sprang et al., 2009).

The quality of services in sports tourism had been studied in different researches too and it has several dimensions. The quality of tourism services in one of the researches conducted in this field includes the quality of access, the quality of sports complex, the quality of residence and the quality of competition. The meaning of the quality of access is the ease and speed of tourists' arrival in intended regions and includes the quality of access to destination, sports complex and residence (Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008).

Accessibility is one of the important factors in sports tourism and may relate to some details such as parking lots, freeways, and public transportation. The quality of sports complex relates to the quality of stadium and a place where sporting events are held and encompasses the way employees interact in sports complex, sports complex surroundings, and price of ticket and products in the sports complex. The meaning of the quality of residence is the quality of environment, the manner of interactions between staff and the price of residence; also, the meaning of the quality of competition is the quality of the process of holding competition and the competition itself (Shonk, 2006).

The sporting event is a main part of revenues and economic profits of cities and regions. While attendance at sporting events is known as an important activity and entertainment in leisure time, the cost of attendance at sporting events as a percentage of recreation costs has fallen during the past 20 years (Hall et al., 2011). In addition, the current number of tourists entering the country, in comparison to the existing capacities, is very low. Also, the number of the spectators for sporting events, even those important competitions, is increasingly reduced. Regarding that the customers' perception of the experience of providing service is of great importance for the success of a service organization in sports tourism industry and providing quality is very important for customers' satisfaction and their renewed return and also regarding that there has not been much attention to the quality of services in conducted researches in the countries' sports tourism sector and the relationship between quality of services and tourists' satisfaction has not been much reviewed, the researcher aims to examine each of three variables, "quality of sports tourism service", "satisfaction", and "willingness to return" in sports tourism altogether and answer the question that what is the relationship between the perception of quality of services, the image of destination, satisfaction, and loyalty to sports destination?

Research methodology

This descriptive research is correlational and was conducted in the field. The population of research was all the tourists who had traveled from other cities to Tehran and were present at the match between the teams Sepahan and Esteghlal (10^{th} of Bahman, pilot study) and Persepolis and Malavan Anzali (17^{th} of Bahman, implementation of the revised questionnaire) in Azadi Sports Complex. It should be noted that it was attempted to consider those tourists among population of this research who stayed at least 24 hours in Tehran.

The sampling method is in the form of multi-stage stratified random; in this case, the seats of stadium were divided into different groups of spectators- native and guest; then those seats occupied by guest spectators were identified and different parts of them were selected by checkered technique in simple random form and then the questionnaire was distributed among the spectators who were present at those seats and had the researcher's intended conditions to respond. The final applicable questionnaire is composed of two parts. The first part examines the general and demographic characteristics of sports tourism and includes questions about age, marital status, occupation, academic paper, income, spending during the trip, the number of sports trips per year, the number of days of presence in Tehran, and the manner of sports tourists' staying. The second part consists of two parts and contains 60 questions; so that the first part relates to these variables: quality of access, quality of access to destination, quality of access to sports complex, quality of sports complex, quality of the sports complex environment, the manner of

interaction between staff in sports complex, the price of products and services in sports complex, the quality of competition, quality of product, quality of the process of holding competition, accessibility, transportation, satisfaction and willingness to return in sports tourists. Also, the second part contains questions about variables of quality of access to residence, quality of residence, quality of residence environment, the manner of interaction between staff in residence and price of products and services in residence. All 60 questions of second part were regulated based upon five point Likert scale and the numerical values from 1 to 5 (1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree) were allocated to each of indices.

In this study the raw data from questions of first part of questionnaire were distributed using statistical descriptive methods such as frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation and also applying SPSS 22 software. In order to analyze the relationships between indices in inferential statistics and identifying relevant indices to each factor, the exploratory factor analysis in SPSS 22 was used.

Research Findings

The descriptive findings of sample showed that the average age of participants was 31-35 years; 24% of them were single, 76% married, 66% employees, 14% workers, 14% students, 4% self-employed, and 2% were unemployed. The income of samples were such that 4% of them had income between 350- 500 thousands tomans, 8% between 500- 650 thousands tomans, 72% between 650- 800 thousands tomans, and 16% over 800 thousands tomans. Moreover, the average amount of their spending during trip was 100 thousand tomans. The level of education in 2.6% of participants was primary education, 32% secondary education, 16% diploma, 30% associate degree, 8% bachelor's degree, 10% master's degree and higher. Most samples (68.8% had 1 to 2 sports trip per year. Also, the results showed that 44.9% of samples had used their own car to attend the event. The results of SEM confirmed all three hypotheses of this research; so:

♦ Research on the existence of relationship between the quality of sports tourism services and loyalty towards tourism destination in sports tourist of football spectators in Tehran was confirmed.

♦ The second hypothesis of research based upon the existence of relationship between quality of sports tourism services and willingness to return in sports tourists was confirmed.

♦ The third hypothesis regarding the existence of relationship between the image of destination and loyalty to tourism destination in sports tourists of football spectators in Tehran was confirmed.

In addition, the conceptual model of research in inferential statistics was examined too and the relationship of other variables with each other was specified; so, among variables, the variables of quality of services, satisfaction, image of destination and so on, respectively, have the most effect on dependent variables of research, i.e. loyalty to tourism destination in sports tourist of football spectators in Tehran.

All the main fitting model indices including RMSEA, P-Value, df, and Chi-Square showed that the model has appropriate fitting and there is possibility for applying its results to deduce the concepts and relations.

Conclusion:

Regarding to product quality and being sensitive to better services are among the most important issues that international community has given a special priority to them at the present time . This issue is of great importance in sports tourism, which is a service industry. Furthermore, the continuous reduction in the number of sporting events' spectators in the country is one of the challenges that has been a cause for concern for the agents of holding competition and sporting events. For this reason, in order to improve the quality of service, the related organizations to this issue should consider the factors affecting it. Moreover, it is necessary for the successful marketing that the process of buying and service requirements be consistent with the expectations of tourists. Also, it can be mentioned that demographic characteristics (such as age, gender, education) are among the influential factors on expectations of tourists and they should be considered in order to predict the quantity of sports tourists' attendance at competition (Tikander, 2010).

The average age of the samples in this research (31- 35 years) indicate their youth. Moreover, the average age of samples shows that the fans of these events are young people and the needs and expectations of this group of community should be considered in providing services; because the quality is identified based upon the expectations of tourists and should meet the needs of tourists Regarding results of tourists' job indicate that employment accounted for 66%; although about 6% of them (pupils, students, and unemployed people) did not have an independent income but were present at that event.

The results of the level of education in participants suggest that most of them lack higher education. Although it was determined that higher education results in higher willingness to travel (Brothers, 2002), this is not true in the present research. This may be due to the type of (inactive) present tourists in this research. In this regard, Cha et al. (1995) believed that age and level of education are important variables that according to them, tourism motivation is different and in each of models present for motives for leisure time, the age and level of education of tourists should be considered (Cha et al., 1995).

Most of participants' income(3.72%) was more than 650 thousand tomans and this indicated that more than half of present tourists at that event had relatively average income. This is consistent with the fact that whenever the level of education of fans increase, their attendance often reduces at events (Smith, 2008). In this regard, Hartzer (1994) states that tourists who participate inactively in Olympic Games are mainly from high-income families (100 thousand dollars and more) (Hartzer,1994).The reason for contradiction between the result of this research and Hartzer's statement can be in type of sporting events. The event studied in this research is of small scale sporting events; while Olympic Games are of major sporting events. The average amount of money that samples of research spent during trip was 100 thousand tomans. Although the quantity of tourists' spending is relatively small, it should be borne in mind that some of the participants of research did not have independent income. In this regard, Kim & Chalip (1004) pointed out in their research results that financial constraints do not have significant effect on individuals' willingness to participate in soccer World Cup.

Regarding that about 67.8% of participants had reported 1-2 sport trips per year, it can be understood that sports trips of most of them is limited. Thus, in the current competitive situation and regarding that customer retention is more important than attracting new customers in service industry (Kim & Li, 2011),

the way of services must be in such a way that satisfaction of sports tourists could be attracted to attend again. The results related to the rate of using private cars showed that most of sports tourists (55.1%) did not use their own car. Therefore, we can say that the level of acceptance of research samples of public transportation is average. However, there should be more attention to development of country's public transportation; because transportation system is in the heart of tourism industry and efficiency, convenience, and degree of health and safety of this system guarantee the experience of quality which is obtained from travel .

The results of descriptive statistics indicate that different sporting events depending on the type of sports and level of events, attract tourists, especially those who have different features. Therefore, the study of demographic characteristics of sports tourists should be considered more carefully in order to meet the needs of tourists.

The results of inferential statistics showed that there is a significant relationship between satisfaction and loyalty to tourists' destination. In this regard, the results of Kuturis & Konstantines' research (2005) indicated that the implementation of SERVQUAL service quality model in sports tourism services was not available in the open air and 5 dimensions of this service quality model predicted very small variance of satisfaction and behavioral tendencies of tourists. Also, Shonk (2006) concluded in his research that quality of services plays a major role in sports tourists' satisfaction. Moreover, the result of this research is consistent with what Zabkar (2010) concluded in his research. He concluded that the perceived quality is positively associated with tourists' satisfaction and behavioral tendencies. In one of the researches conducted in this field, Li et al., (2011) reported that there is a positive and significant relationship between quality of services and tourists' satisfaction. Therefore, although some researches pointed out from managerial approach that there is not a direct relationship between tourists' satisfaction and attractions, facilities, and services and also considering the studied subject indicates the fact that understanding the relationship between customers' satisfaction and their perceived quality of services is still a challenging issue, the research trend believes that customer's satisfaction is generally arises from the received quality of services.

The relationship between quality of services and loyalty to sports tourists' destination was also examined in this research. The results indicated that there is a significant relationship between quality of services and willingness to return in sports tourists. In this regard Yamaghushi (2002) announced that positive variables such as facilities, easy access, host by volunteers, social programs, suitable services to families, and services related to food and drink can facilitate re-visit. He believed that increasing or maintaining the number of participants and tourists is a difficult task. So, attracting them again is very important for successful holding the event. Hall (2010) also concluded that recreation and sports facilities would have an influence on renewed attendance of spectators in sporting events. In this regard, Chen et al. (2011) noted that there is a positive relationship between quality of services and tourists' satisfaction and willingness to revisit. Moreover, the result of this research is not consistent with what Kohyan & Zhang (2008) concluded. They stated that the quality of festival would not affect directly the behavioral tendencies of tourists. From what stated about the relationship between quality of service and willingness to return in tourists, it can be realized that the general belief is based upon that high quality of services in tourism leads to satisfaction, return of tourists, and higher profits. Therefore, by increasing the quality of

services and meeting needs and expectations of sports tourists, the possibility of their return can be increased.

The results concerning to image of destination and loyalty to sports tourism shows the significant relationship between them. In addition, Shonk (2006) pointed out that satisfaction results in renewed return in sports tourists. The researches of Zabkar et al. (2010), Kampu- Martins (2010), and Chen et al. (2011) have confirmed this relationship. In general, it could be said that these researches, conducted on loyalty to destination, show that one of the most important determining factors in revisiting a destination, is the tourists' satisfaction with previous trips (Alegre & Garau, 2010). So, to enjoy the benefits of customer retention, the sports-related organizations should act in a way that the satisfaction of sports tourists could be gained.

The results of the relationship of other variables showed that among different dimensions of quality of sports tourism services, variables of quality of access, quality of sports complex, and quality of competition have significant relationship with the quality of sports tourism services. However, only the significant relationship between quality of competition and quality of sports tourism services has been confirmed in Shonk's research (2006). The issue that the relationship between quality of competition and quality of sports tourism services is significant, can be resulting from that present tourists in this research were part of the sports tourism event and in this kind of sports tourism, the event itself is the essential factor and quality of competition and factors related to holding event are of great importance for tourists.

As stated before, the relationship is significant between quality of access and quality of sports tourism services. This corroborates the notion that if tourists could easily go to different places and visit them, they would experience a higher quality (Shonk, 2006). Hall et al. (2010) also noted that factors related to emotional responses and facilities (accessibility, parking lots, and stadium seats) are most important predictors of attending sporting events.

According to Wakefield et al. (1969), factors related to quality of stadium, venue for holding competition, includes access to parking lots, activities before and after the event, the music playing in the stadium, interaction between staff of stadium, pleasing environment of stadium and other experiences related to holding event. The results of this research indicated that there is a significant relationship between quality of sports complex and quality of sports tourism services. From this result it can be deduced that the environment of sports complex, activities before and after the event, music that can be played in the stadium, conditions of health services and manner of interaction with police officers, are of great importance for sports tourists. The results support the significant relationship between environment of sports complex and interaction of staff and quality of sports complex, while the relationship between price and quality of sports complex is not significant. The issue that variable of sports complex environment has significant relationship with quality of sports complex is consistent with the fact that consumers'' perception of physical environment in a sporting event is positively associated with attending a sporting event (Green Vale et al., 2002). The interaction of sports complex staff with tourists is also very important; because researchers have pointed out that human interactions are one of the most important dimensions of sporting experience (Ku & Pastor, 2004 and Alexandris et al., 2004). Moreover, the results indicated that there is a significant relationship between staff interaction and quality of sports

complex and among factors related the this relationship, the variable of "friendly encounter between staff" is an important factor. Therefore, staff and agents of stadium can have a major impact on improving quality of services and hence satisfaction of tourists by creating a friendly atmosphere and dealing effectively and appropriately with spectators.

From what mentioned above, it can be concluded that if we consider marketing mixture in services sector, including product, place, promotion, price, individuals, physical evidence and process, we can provide high quality services to sports tourists.

Suggestions arising from research results

Regarding that quality of access has an important role in quality of sports tourism services, the following suggestions can be made:

♦ To consider the development of country's inter-city transportation

♦ To consider the geographical location and quality of access in choosing venues for sporting events

♦ To launch special passenger stations within city on the day of holding event

Regarding that quality of sports complex and factors related to it play an important role in quality of sports tourism services, the following suggestions can be made:

♦ To train stadium staff in appropriate interaction with spectators

♦ To further monitor the status of food in sports complex buffets

Regarding that the competition itself and related factors play an important role in quality of sports tourism services, the following suggestion can be made:

♦ To consider international standards in holding sporting events

♦ To employ skilled human force in holding sporting events

♦ To use seat numbers and tickets in order to organize spectators

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