

Examining the Antecedents and Structure of Festival Loyalty

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Abstract

In this study, we investigated the relationship between emotions, satisfaction, psychological commitment, and loyalty in festival contexts. Data were collected from festival goers using onsite survey in Spring/Summer 2008 at three Texas community festivals. We found that positive emotions, represented by love and surprise, were strong predictors of visitors' overall evaluations of their experience at the festivals. Satisfaction with their overall festival experience was in turn found to strongly influence psychological commitment and loyalty to those festivals. Based on these findings, we provide practical insights and offer suggestions for future research.

Keywords: consumption emotions, satisfaction, psychological commitment, loyalty, festivals

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Introduction

In rural destinations, community festivals and events displaying agricultural and livestock exhibits with a combination of entertainment activities are one of the heritage attractions that draw large numbers of visitors. They have not only provided an economic stimulus along with social and cultural benefits to these small communities, but also played a role in increasing the tourism appeal to nonlocal visitors. Considering the significance of a rural community festival to its hosting local residents and out-of-town visitors, attracting and keeping a flow of visitors have been of great importance for both the festival organizers and destination marketing organizations. In this respect, identification with and retention of loyal visitors who are psychologically committed to the festival are practical means for ensuring a consistent number of visitors to that festival.

Some efforts in the tourism and leisure literature have been made to embrace the concept of customer loyalty from the marketing discipline, and the destination loyalty construct was introduced to capture the repeat visitation phenomenon (e.g., Kyle et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2007; Oppermann, 2000; Yoon and Uysal, 2005). Previous literature has suggested that emotions, satisfaction, and/or psychological commitment are important determinants to predict consumer loyalty. Although these studies in hospitality, tourism, and leisure have paid much attention to identifying the determinants of loyalty to product, service, or brand, empirical examinations into the causal effects of emotions, satisfaction, and psychological commitment on loyalty in a simultaneous manner remain lacking. Based on the past literature, the present study postulates that emotions indirectly affect loyalty through satisfaction and psychological commitment. It is also posited that psychological commitment plays a role as a mediator between the satisfaction-loyalty relationship. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how festival visitors develop loyalty to festivals through the affective and psychological processes. Specifically, this study explored how festival consumption emotions influence visitors' psychological attachment, evaluations of their festival experiences, and loyalty in a festival context. As a result, this study attempts to provide insight into the developmental processes of loyalty that is applicable to festivals.

Literature Review

Satisfaction can be defined as "a judgment that a product, or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment, including levels of under or over fulfilment" (Oliver, 1997, p. 13). Satisfaction has been used as an assessment tool for the evaluation of past experiences, performance of products and services, and perceptions of the physical environments such as a neighbourhood, an outdoor recreation setting, and a tourist destination (Bramwell, 1998; Ringel and Finkelstein, 1991; Ross and Iso-Ahola, 1991). Of many approaches to operationalize satisfaction with experiences in particular destinations, the performance-only approach has been widely applied to measure its overall level (e.g., Füller and Matzler, 2008). Visitors' overall satisfaction has been argued to be "a summation state of the psychological outcomes they have experienced over time" (Tian-Cole et al., 2002, p. 4). Therefore, a high or low level of overall satisfaction can be induced through multiple positive or negative experiences during a visit. Empirical research has provided evidence that overall visitor satisfaction is the appropriate measure to evaluate the quality of their experiences at different settings such as parks and wilderness areas.

Emotions are understood as a mental reaction consciously experienced as a subjective feeling state (Westbrook, 1987). Because there is no consensus on defining emotions in the literature, several taxonomies have been proposed to describe diverse emotional experiences (i.e., Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Richins, 1997). Richins (1997) in particular argued that emotions are more context specific and that different emotions are salient depending on the context in which they are used. In order to describe emotions elicited through product consumption experience, Richins proposed the Consumption Emotion Set (CES). She suggested that possessing different product classes (e.g.,

sentimental objects, recreational products, and vehicles) evoked strong positive emotions of “joy,” “pride,” and “contentment” but weak negative emotions.

According to congruence theory, people’s emotions provide certain environmental cues to become more salient and to evoke deeper information processing and better memory elicitation (Chebat, 2002). Affective states can play a role as a piece of information in evaluating an individual or a situation as long as these feelings account for the object to be evaluated (Schwartz and Clore, 1983). Furthermore, a positive emotion is considered to be a better predictor of evaluative judgments than a negative emotion (Chebat, 2002). Mano and Oliver (1993) have found that consumption emotions are predictive of postpurchase satisfaction within the service and retail environment. Their studies underline that customers who experience positive consumptive emotions are more likely to report a high level of satisfaction. Tourism studies have also empirically shown that emotions play an important role in creating tourist/visitor satisfaction with tourist attractions (Bigné and Andreu, 2004).

H₁: Positive emotions have a significant and positive effect on visitors’ overall satisfaction with the festivals.

Customer loyalty represents irrational behavior as a result of “a deeply held commitment to repatronize a preferred product/service consistently” (Oliver 1997, p. 392). According to Jacoby and Chestnut (1978), some necessary elements have to be satisfied to be brand loyal, which requires biased (i.e., nonrandom) and consistent responses (i.e., repeat purchase) expressed over time by some decision-making unit, associated with one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands, and caused as a result of psychological processes. There has been a general consensus that customer loyalty is a multidimensional construct with behavioral, attitudinal, cognitive, and conative dimensions (Dick and Basu, 1994).

Many researchers have further recognized psychological commitment as one component of the loyalty construct. Psychological commitment, referring to “the pledging or binding of an individual to behavioral acts” (Buchanan, 1985, p. 402), is used to assess the relative degrees of attitudinal aspect of loyalty and to predict brand patronage or revisiting of places (Kyle et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2007). Therefore, it is viewed as an essential basis to distinguish true loyal customers from others whose brand or place choice fluctuates depending on situational factors such as scarcity of alternatives, availability of other options, and involuntary choice (Pritchard et al., 1999).

Commitment can play a key role in mediating the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty. Positive evaluation of products and services develops commitment to a brand (i.e., resistance to change), which finally leads to consumer patronage (Pritchard et al., 1999). Bloemer and Odekerken-Schroder (2002) analyzed the data from a study of 357 shoppers at a large European supermarket chain to examine the effect of different antecedents on the conceptual model of satisfaction-trust-commitment-loyalty. They found that all three antecedents had a positive impact on store satisfaction, accounting for 67% of its variance. Further, satisfaction positively influenced commitment through trust, which, in turn, predicted store loyalty.

H₂: A high level of festival visitors’ satisfaction with the festivals positively influences their psychological attachment to the festivals.

H₃: A high level of festival visitors’ satisfaction with the festivals has a significant and positive influence on loyalty to the festivals.

H₄: Festival visitors’ psychological attachment to the festivals has a significant and positive impact on loyalty to the festivals.

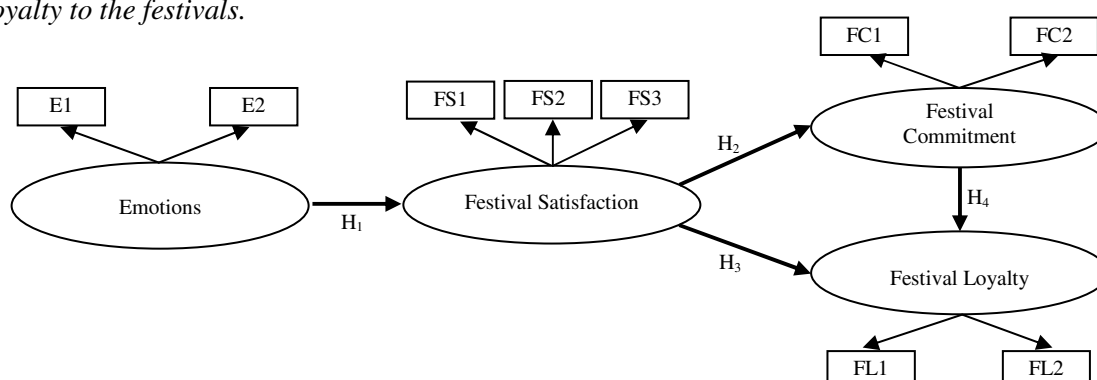


Figure 1 - A Hypothesized Conceptual Model with Four Latent Factors (Emotions, Satisfaction, Commitment, and Loyalty) and Their Respective Subscales

Research Design and Methods

Study Sites

Three community festivals in Texas were chosen as study sites. The Poteet Strawberry Festival, which is located about 20 miles south of San Antonio, is the one of the oldest and largest agricultural festivals held in Texas each year and currently attracts nearly 100,000 visitors during the 3-day event. The Pasadena Strawberry Festival, also held annually, is located in Pasadena, Texas, and receives about 55,000 attendees from Houston and surrounding communities. These two strawberry festivals provide visitors with food and various entertainment attractions at the designated sites over a 3-day period. The Texas Reds Steak and Grape Festival, which drew approximately 6,000 to 8,000 visitors in its first year in 2007, is an annual, 2-day event held in June celebrating Texas' beef and wine industries. The festival allows visitors to enjoy food and wine offerings and to take part in various activities themed around wine and steak cook-offs.

Data Collection

Data were collected in two phases using the onsite and follow-up survey procedure. The first phase, the onsite survey, was conducted from April through June 2008 through collaborations with festival organizers at the three study sites. At approximately 15-minute intervals, trained interviewers handed out a self-administered questionnaire to only one person in a randomly selected group that had spent some time at various venues at each site. We ensured that festival goers who just arrived at study sites were excluded in our sample population to assess their overall emotional experience. Altogether, 743 individuals at the three festivals completed the survey questionnaire. After eliminating visitors whose mailing and/or email addresses were missing or invalid, 579 potential respondents were identified for the next phase.

The second phase involved the follow-up survey procedure using postal mail and/or e-mail/Internet. Based on the preference of a follow-up survey distribution method indicated by respondents in the previous phase, individuals received a self-administered survey questionnaire via postal mail and/or e-mail/Internet. The sample in this phase was chosen from those who agreed to take part in the follow-up survey and provided us with valid mailing/e-mail addresses in the onsite survey phase. Using Dillman's (2007) Tailored Design Method, a three-wave survey questionnaire and a postcard reminder were distributed via either postal mail or email over a 6-week period. A total of 228 questionnaires were returned in 6 weeks, accounting for 37.31% of the overall effective response rate for the three events.

Survey Instruments

For the measures of emotions, we used a four-stage of exploratory study to identify the measures that best reflected festival visitors' emotional experience. After compiling the full range of emotions relevant to the festival context by asking 34 individuals to list adjectives that best described the feelings they experienced when visiting a festival, we eliminated irrelevant, unfamiliar, and rarely used descriptors based on the criteria of Ortony et al. (1988) and using frequency analysis (Francis and Kucera, 1982). The last step involved categorizing the remaining 47 items under the six basic emotions (i.e., *love, joy, anger, sadness, fear, and surprise*) proposed in Shaver et al.'s (1987) prototype analysis. After eliminating the subcategorical descriptors with a substantially lower likelihood of usage rating within a basic category, we obtained 24 emotion descriptors specific to the festivals. The intensity of these selected emotions was measured along a 5-point scale where 1 represented "not at all" and 5 represented "extremely much."

Festival commitment was measured using the psychological commitment scale proposed by Pritchard et al. (1999). Wordings from their original scale to test the relationship between commitment and loyalty in service contexts (e.g., airlines and hotels) were modified to reflect the festival context. Similar to the psychological commitment instrument, festival commitment as a multidimensional construct consisted of position involvement, volitional choice, information complexity, and resistance to change. A total of 14 items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”).

The universal scale of satisfaction with the festivals were measured using 11 items suggested by Oliver’s (1997) evaluative set of cumulative satisfaction measures. His measures encompassing cognitive and affective aspects of overall satisfaction were selectively adapted to examine the antecedents and outcomes of satisfaction in tourism studies (e.g., Bigné and Andreu, 2004). Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement on all items using a 7-point Likert scale.

In terms of festival loyalty, we adapted Jones and Taylor’s (2007) service loyalty scales that were applicable to festival contexts (i.e., behavioral intentions, word of mouth, willingness to pay more, and strength of preference). Responses to all items were indicated on a 7-point Likert scale where 1 represented “strongly disagree” and 7 represented “strongly agree.”

Results

Characteristics of Respondents

Overall, the respondents at the three festivals were predominantly white and female with an average age of 41. Respondents from the Poteet Strawberry Festival, on average, were older and had a higher proportion of Hispanic/Latino attendees than did the other two festivals. A majority of all respondents in each of the surveys indicated that they had graduated from college and/or earned an advanced degree (82%). In terms of annual household income before taxes, respondents to the Pasadena Strawberry Festival and Texas Reds Steak and Grape Festival survey reported higher incomes than did respondents to the Poteet Strawberry Festival survey. The proportion of nonlocal, repeat visitors was significantly higher at the two strawberry festivals than at the steak and wine festival.

Testing a Measurement and Structural Model

First, we performed data screening and preparation: (1) checking outliers, (2) dealing with missing observations using multiple imputation method, and (3) handling the non-normal distribution of observed variables through normal scores transformation in PRELIS. We then tested the conceptualizations of each hypothesized latent construct using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in LISREL 8.8 (Byrne, 1998). After eliminating the cross-loaded items and combining the items of two factors with a substantial correlation ($r > 0.90$), we obtained a 16-item measurement of a five-dimensional emotions [$\chi^2_{(237)} = 459.39$, RMSEA = 0.06, NNFI = 0.97, CFI = 0.98], a 10-item measurement of a bidimensional festival commitment [$\chi^2_{(41)} = 101.78$, RMSEA = 0.08, NNFI = 0.98, CFI = 0.98], a 5-item measurement of unidimensional festival satisfaction [$\chi^2_{(34)} = 81.41$, RMSEA = 0.08, NNFI = 0.98, CFI = 0.99], and a 11-item measurement of a three-dimensional festival loyalty [$\chi^2_{(59)} = 109.38$, RMSEA = 0.06, NNFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99]. The next step involved estimating the composite variables by grouping subscale items of respective underlying constructs (i.e., item parceling) and proportionally weighing each observed variable based on its factor score regression coefficient. Item parceling can be used for dealing with large numbers of measured variables in small samples (Hau and Marsh, 2004).

Using the composite scores as the indicators of each construct, we again tested the measurement model to validity the factorial structure of the hypothesized model. The CFA results of festival consumption emotions are shown in Table 1. Parameter estimates of each emotional descriptor had correct signs and sizes and appropriate standard errors, which indicated their statistical significance (Byrne, 1998). A review of the selected fit indices revealed that the four-factor measurement model for festival visitors was considered psychometrically valid [$\chi^2_{(20)} = 24.57$, RMSEA = 0.03, NNFI =

1.00, CFI = 1.00]. An investigation of reliability of each of these factors showed that Cronbach's alpha values fell between 0.74 and 0.88, thereby indicating good internal consistency of the items of all constructs respectively.

Subsequent tests were performed to verify the validity of the causal structure reflected in our hypothesized model (see Figure 1). The goodness-of-fit indices for the hypothesized model indicated a good fit to the sample data [$\chi^2_{(23)} = 32.31$, RMSEA = 0.04, NNFI = 0.99, CFI = 1.00]. *Festival satisfaction* was positively and significantly predicted by *festival consumption emotions* ($\beta = 0.64$, $t = 6.91$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 41% of the total variance. In turn, *festival satisfaction* had a positive and significant effect on both *festival commitment* ($\beta = 0.77$, $t = 7.64$, $p < 0.001$) and *festival loyalty* ($\beta = 0.86$, $t = 7.01$, $p < 0.001$). A large amount of the variation in both dependent variables was explained by *festival satisfaction* (0.59 and 0.74, respectively). It was interesting to find that *festival commitment* had no significant effect on *festival loyalty*. It was also demonstrated that the indirect effects of festival consumption emotions on both *festival commitment* (indirect effect = 0.77, $t = 5.16$, $p < 0.001$) and *festival loyalty* (indirect effect = 1.06, $t = 4.96$, $p < 0.001$) through festival satisfaction were statistically significant.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our findings in this study illustrated that positive emotions, represented by love and surprise, were strong predictors of visitors' overall evaluations of their experience at the festivals. That is, visitors who experienced positive emotions at festivals tend to more positively evaluate their overall satisfaction with the festivals. This direction and strength of association of emotions and satisfaction are echoed in the findings reported in earlier consumer behavior studies examining (1) consumer goods such as cars (Oliver, 1993; Westbrook, 1987; Westbrook and Oliver, 1991), (2) services such as education (Oliver, 1993) or service providers such as cable television (Westbrook, 1987) and commercial rafting operators (Price, Arnould, and Tierney, 1995), and (3) hedonic product/service consumption such as shopping (Machleit and Mantel, 2001) and theme parks (Bigné, Andreu, and Gnoth, 2005).

Satisfaction with festivals was in turn found to strongly influence festival commitment and festival loyalty to a much greater extent. In other words, visitors who have feelings of love and surprise at the festivals tend not only to be psychologically attached to those festivals but also to revisit those festivals, spread positive reports via word of mouth, and have a strong preference for entertainment opportunity. These findings provide further empirical support for the previous observation that satisfied consumers influence destination/setting preferences, consumption of products and services, and decisions to return (Alegre and Juaneda, 2006; Baker and Crompton, 2000; Bigné et al., 2005). However, there was no direct effect of visitors' emotional attachment to the festivals on festival loyalty, which is inconsistent with previous empirical findings in various contexts (Crosby and Taylor, 1983; Oliver, 1999; Pritchard et al., 1999).

These findings have practical implications for festival organizers and marketers. They can focus on creating positive emotions, in turn contributing to developing psychological attachment and repeat visiting to the festivals. In this study, we did not explore the attributes of festival environments capable of inducing feelings of love and surprise in order to effectively design and manage environments that can enhance visitor experiences, which deserves more attention from researchers in future studies. An investigation into identifying and choosing appropriate festival atmospheres that reflect what the target audience is seeking through repeat festival visitation is also necessary.

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