

PLACE-ATTACHMENT AND INVOLVEMENT BY TOURISTS OF NATURAL AREAS

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ABSTRACT

Tourism studies have experienced significant advances through the intersection of theories developed in several disciplines: Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, Geography, Marketing, among others. This interconnection is visible in two concepts that have received increasing attention from researchers as they measure how tourists relate with tourism products and with the destinations visited. Involvement from Marketing reflects the perceived importance and/or personal interest that consumers link to the purchase, consumption of goods, services or ideas (Mowen & Mirror, 1998), Place Attachment from Environmental Psychology and Geography represents the effective linkage between people and specific places (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). Recent studies have tested the linkage between those two concepts (Gross & Brown, 2008).

The new paradigm in tourism research emphasizes the understanding of emotional and symbolic subjective meanings associated with nature places and also the connection of people to those places (Williams & Vaske, 2003). Moreover it stresses that natural areas are more than geographical environments with physical characteristics. They are fluid, convertible, dynamic contexts of interaction and memory, and therefore susceptible to different links / relationships (Stokowski, 2002).

There are differences among individuals, which depending on the product or the situation, make some consumers more interested, concerned or involved in the purchase decisions. It influences the proximity relationship of individuals to the decision-making behavior from pre-purchase up to post-purchase (Slama & Tashchian, 1985). Consumers' involvement influences their buying decision, so it is a well-known variable to conduct effective market segmentation (Kassarjian, 1981). Tourism products with high monetary and non-monetary costs are based on extensive problems' solving processes, meaning that they are considered as high involving products (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Involvement is a multidimensional concept analyzed by six dimensions: Pleasure/Interest Probability Risk, Importance of Risk, Signs of Prestige/Self-Expression, Attraction and Centrality.

Place attachment, on the other hand, refers to the involvement of tourists with the places and destinations visited. Is a complex phenomenon that involves social, psychological and cultural interpretations, as well as different meanings built on the interaction between individuals and places (Brandenburg & Carroll, 1995; Relph, 1976; Stedman, 2003). In the contemporary era, the connection to places by individuals must be understood from a multidimensional analysis (Appadurai, 1996),

explained by understanding the ties that connect communities to environments (Feld & Basso, 1996), namely by place-identity and place-dependency.

The combined use of involvement and place attachment concepts occurred only recently in tourism research. The pioneers' researchers were Kyle and his colleagues that studied Involvement (Kerstetter, Confer & Graefe, 2001; Kyle & Chick, 2002; Kyle, Kerstetter & Guadagnolo, 1999, 2002, Scott & Shafer, 2001) and place attachment (Kyle, Absher & Graefe, 2003b; Moore & Graefe, 1994; Moore & Scott, 2003) as separate constructs. The same authors combined those concepts on a study in 2003 where they were successful in measuring the relationship between involvement and place attachment among hikers in leisure activities (Kyle et al., 2003a).

SHORT ABSTRACT

The combined use of the involvement and place attachment constructs is very recent in tourism research. Involvement from Marketing reflects the perceived importance and/or personal interest that consumers link to the purchase, consumption of goods, services or ideas, Place Attachment from Environmental Psychology and Geography represents the effective linkage between people and specific places. The very aim of this study is to develop a model that evaluates the relationship between the involvement and place-attachment levels. Insights from an empirical study of 615 natural areas' tourists indicate that this multi-dimensional scale incorporates constructs from both concepts - involvement and place-attachment. Discussion centers on the implications of this scale for theory development and management decisions regarding tourism marketing and services strategies. Directions for future research are also presented.

KEYWORDS

Tourism of Nature, Place-Attachment, Involvement, Travel Decision Making.

1. OBJECTIVES

The present study intends to contribute to a higher depth examination of the relationship between those two constructs, specifically in the natural areas' context. The main objective is to create a scale to measure involvement of tourists with destinations both as products (involvement) and as places (place-attachment).

2. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Insights from an empirical study of 615 natural areas' tourists indicate that this multi-dimensional scale incorporates constructs from involvement and place-attachment.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Discussion centers on the implications of this scale for theory development and management decisions. Tourism firms may better understand the type of involvement and connection between

tourists and buying decisions along with the visited places and destinations as to what its impact is on tourists' decision making, namely in what regards to natural areas. They may as a consequence use a framework to develop and implement strategies to increase the value associated with these destinations and their services. These scale dimensions might provide some guidance on how to better pursue an information-oriented business strategy. By identifying the level of connection of tourists' with products and destinations it then becomes possible to make choices regarding the best marketing strategies to address, such as identifying different market segments and corresponding differentiated strategies, or improving the destination's positioning. From a theoretical perspective, to our knowledge, a measurement scale that measures the connection of tourists with products and destinations at the same time has never been operationalized. Although we cannot claim to have definitively captured all dimensions involvement and attachment, we believe that we came closer to capturing these overall evaluations by extracting the underlying commonality among dimensions.

In sum, at a time where marketing researchers are challenged to provide research with practical implications, the authors believe that this theoretical framework may be used as a basis to pursue service-oriented destination and business strategies. Directions for future research are also presented.

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