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Committed tourists - an attractive market segment

Abstract

This paper investigates the existence of highly committed tourists as an interesting market segment for the tourism industry. Tourists who see vacations as central to their lifestyle are identified as highly committed tourists and contrasted with tourists who do not attach importance to vacations. Several significant findings between the two groups are reported. Most importantly, highly committed tourists are unlikely to sacrifice their vacations and show a higher willingness to take risks, which makes them an interesting target segment, especially in times of uncertainty. Additionally, these tourists are responsible for planning holidays which allows marketers to directly speak to the decision makers. Implications for tourism marketers and future research are discussed.

Keywords

segment, attractive, tourists, committed, market

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COMMITTED TOURISTS – AN ATTRACTIVE MARKET SEGMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the existence of highly committed tourists as an interesting market segment for the tourism industry. Tourists who see vacations as central to their lifestyle are identified as highly committed tourists and contrasted with tourists who do not attach importance to vacations. Several significant findings between the two groups are reported. Most importantly, highly committed tourists are unlikely to sacrifice their vacations and show a higher willingness to take risks, which makes them an interesting target segment, especially in times of uncertainty. Additionally, these tourists are responsible for planning holidays which allows marketers to directly speak to the decision makers. Implications for tourism marketers and future research are discussed.

Keywords: tourism commitment, risk aversion

INTRODUCTION

Research has attested tourism a significant role in contributing to people's quality of life (Neal, Sirgy, & Uysal, 1999; Sirgy, 2010; Sirgy et al., 2011). Recently it has been discussed that tourism may be an important part in determining quality of life for some, whereas for others, it might not be important at all (Dolnicar, Lazarevski, & Yanamandram, 2013; Dolnicar, Yanamandram, & Cliff, 2012). However, little is known about these people for whom tourism is central to their life.

Commitment to a certain activity can be understood as centrality to lifestyle of this activity (Kim, Scott, & Crompton, 1997) and is, therefore, a stronger positive attitude towards an object or activity than involvement, which revolves around personal relevance (Zaichowsky, 1985). Meyer and colleagues (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Meyer & Allen, 1991) define commitment as encompassing three different dimensions: affective commitment ("I want to"), continuance commitment ("I need to") and normative commitment ("It is the right thing to do"). Consequently, commitment involves a desire-based force (affective commitment), a constraint-based force (continuance commitment), and a force based on a feeling what "ought to" be done (Bansal, Irving, & Taylor, 2004).

Committed people have been repeatedly shown to be reluctant to change their favourable attitude towards a target (Ahluwalia, 2000) and are also unlikely to change their behaviour due to their "binding ... to behavioural acts" (Kiesler, 1971, p. 30). This makes them an interesting target segment, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty (Dolnicar, Lazarevski, & Yanamandram, 2013).

We explore if high commitment tourists exist and how they are characterized.

METHODOLOGY

To identify distinct features of highly committed tourists, an extreme group comparison was carried out. We define the two extreme groups *a priori* based on their scores on a commitment scale. We adopt Meyer and colleagues' three-component framework (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Meyer & Allen, 1991) to encompass affective ("I want to go on vacation"), continuance ("I need to go on vacation") and normative ("It is the right thing to go on vacation") commitment.

Data was collected by a professional online research panel and is available for 762 Australian respondents. Data was cleaned rigorously to safeguard against capturing response styles as substantial extreme groups.

Respondents are identified as belonging to the high commitment group when they agree to at least 8 out of nine items and to the low commitment group when they agree to a maximum of three items. In the following, only these two extreme groups – 160 high commitment tourists (representing 21% of the 762 respondents) and 175 low commitment tourists (23%) – are compared. Depending on the measurement level of the focal variable, chi-square tests, ANOVAs and Kruskal-Wallis ANOVAs were used to test for differences between the two groups; all analyses were carried out using R version 3.0.1 (R Core Team, 2013).

To substantiate the meaning of extreme groups, variables unrelated to the current research question were tested for differences to check if the extreme groups merely capture response styles. Results show mostly non-significant results for variables relating to eating behaviour (15 out of 16), hence dispel concern.

RESULTS

As expected, the theoretically closely linked concept of involvement (measured using Zaichkowsky's (1994) shortened Personal Involvement Inventory) with tourism is higher for high commitment tourists than for low commitment tourists. This is especially true for the items *important* and *needed*, where the differences between the two extreme groups are 1.70 and 1.87 (measured on a 7-point scale; p -values < .01¹). High commitment tourists also show a higher general level to take risks. Respondents' evaluation of their general willingness to take risks in comparison to other people measured on a slider scale anchored 0="I am much less willing to accept risks" and 100="I am much more willing to accept risks" is lower for low than high commitment tourists (mean values = 40 and 49, p -value < .01). Also for distinct risk categories, namely financial (such as buying shares or betting on horses) and social risks (such as violating social norms; measured on a slider scale 0="extremely low" and 100="extremely high"), higher commitment tourists show a higher willingness to take risks. The differences between the two extreme groups are 11.3 for financial risks (p -value < .01, high commitment tourists' mean = 40.7) and 8.9 for social risks (p -value < .05, high commitment tourists' mean = 48). Differences for physical (such as rock-climbing) and health (such as travelling to countries with low hygienic standards) are not significant.

¹ Reported are p -values corrected for multiple testing based on Holm's (1979) method. No significant differences could be detected for gender, education, relationship status and kids, and preference to go on vacation to the same place every year.

High commitment tourists are more likely to be fulltime employed (43%, as opposed to 24% for low commitment tourists, p -value $<.01$), enjoy planning to a higher extent (85%) than low commitment tourists (58%, p -value $<.01$), spent more time on planning (28% as opposed to 8% specify that they spend more time planning vacations than their peers; p -value $<.01$) and also do the majority of vacation planning (74% as opposed to 58%, p -value $<.05$). They are more active than low commitment tourists (on average, 17 out of 27 (as compared to 13, p -value $<.01$) activities undertaken on a typical vacation) and spend more money than their peers (14% compared to 4%, p -value $<.01$) for a typical annual vacation. Similarly, high commitment tourists go on more holiday trips a year than low commitment tourists within Australia (means 3.1 and 1.2, p -value $<.01$); overseas trips do not differ significantly. High commitment tourists would also continue to do trips if they had fewer days of vacation per year (96%; 59% for low commitment tourists, p -value $<.01$).

CONCLUSIONS

Having shown the existence of a sizable segment of high commitment tourists who would not sacrifice their vacation poses interesting questions about for whom this segment is interesting. Dolnicar, Lazarevski and Yanamandram (2013) argue that highly committed tourist are likely to be crisis-resistant, hence, an attractive target segment. Indeed, our findings show that high commitment tourists are more willing to take risks with regards to several aspects and that they would continue travelling even when they had fewer vacation days. Consequently, they are an interesting target segment because they are likely to travel regardless of the circumstances. Approaching this segment goes beyond targeting people who truly value vacations; it means talking to decision-makers. They plan their vacations themselves and enjoy this process. This possibility to directly address active vacation planners makes this segment even more attractive. Future research will have to show how these tourists react when confronted with certain types of crises. Would they travel to a specific destination, irrespective of political upheaval, natural disasters or health threats? Will they stick to their original booking when faced with financial constraints or will they easily change the destination, while staying committed to tourism as such? Most importantly, future research needs to further inform the ways in which tourism marketers could gauge commitment levels, e.g. through gamification approaches or information derived from social media profiles.

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