

151 The experiential value of national park visits

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Conceptual framework: experiential consumption and consumer value

The marketing discipline offers suitable and well-established constructs for viewing outdoor recreation from the demand perspective, namely experiential consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) and consumer value (Woodruff 1997, Holbrook 1999). Although non-commercial, visiting national parks represents consumption in terms of acquiring experiences; visitors immerse themselves in an experiential, nature-based context to derive personal experiences that provide value. The concept of consumer value has been established in marketing for long, but self-organized and independent visits to national parks represent a new area of application. This approach, viewing park visits through the eyes of the visitors, combines the setting attributes and individuals' activities to their desired personal outcomes. Thus, it is similar to the Outcomes Focused Management approach (Driver, 2008) as well as the Recreation Preference Scale (Driver, 1983) and Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (Clark and Stankey, 1979) frameworks, but provides an integrated outlook by comprising also the underlying universal values unlike conventional outdoor recreation research.

Empirical research

Two qualitative research projects were conducted to explore the experiences and perceived consumer value of national park visitors. The first one focused on the drivers and dimensions national park experiences – what people experience during their visit. Wilderness huts' guest book entries written by visitors 1970 – 2016 provided its rich, naturally occurring and longitudinal empirical material. Purposive sampling yielded 200 narratives for qualitative content analysis. The subsequent study focused on the value of park experiences using 49 introspective, in-depth soft laddering interviews. Their means-end approach explored visitors' dynamic construction of value disclosing the causal connections between attributes, consequences and universal values.

The main value types that emerged in these two inductive studies were nature, setting attributes, physical accomplishments, mental benefits and social interaction. Natural values represented the reason of visiting, the substance of parks while the setting attributes were instrumental facilitators of the visits. Once on-site, outdoor recreation was a physical activity expressed as personal accomplishments and self-efficacy. Typically, these three domains - nature, setting attributes and physical exertion - represented concrete attributes and visitors' manifest values. More abstract, emotional consequences could be found in the narratives as latent content and they were revealed during the interviews by elicitation. These types were connected to mental benefits, freedom and escape and social interaction that provided a relaxing break and recovery from a hectic ordinary life. Hence, the findings of a consumer value approach were similar to experiential studies on nature-based tourism and national park experiences (cf. Sorakunnas, 2020, p.3).

Social interaction with other people turned out to be a significant value component. It was expressed as enjoying the company of friends and family members, a sense of belonging to a hiking community, and virtual togetherness with friends via social media. Thus, social value was both extrinsic and intrinsic, active and reactive, which complemented established value typologies (Holbrook, 1999; Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991) that regard it solely as other-oriented impression management.

Consumer value was investigated in two different types of Finnish national parks. One was a large, remote wilderness park ("Wild") and the other was a small, urban park located close to major cities ("Urban"). These two parks offered similar types of value to visitors, but on different levels. The Urban park provided convenient access to nearby nature offering fresh air, time with friends and a few hours relaxing break from a stressful ordinary life. Visits to the Wild park required more planning and investments, but also their value was perceived

greater. This was due to specific value dimensions not perceived in the Urban park and also common value dimensions were experienced more intensively in the Wild.

Managerial implications

Social value that emerged in this study presumably contributes to consumer value also in other nature-based contexts. Service providers' influence on this type of value is limited, because it rests heavily on the situation and interaction with other people. Indirect ways of influencing the construction of social value include destination profiling, customer segmentation and managing group dynamics.

References

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For national park management in particular, this study demonstrated the usefulness of the consumer value approach also in a non-commercial outdoor recreation context. Consumer value views parks' offerings through the eyes of visitors revealing a value landscape with diverse subjective value types and dimensions. The value approach encourages shifting attention from the tangible setting to visitors' subjective outcomes - what they desire and get when visiting a park thereby complementing traditional attribute-based management.