

The impact of hiking on visitors' consumer behavior on the French shores

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Introduction

Hiking is the most often reported physical activity among the French. The term itself implies a broad range of pedestrian activities of various length and intensity. Although many attempts have been made to understand its diversity, knowledge on consumers remains fragmented. Therefore, the territorial impact of hiking is a relatively untapped topic with particularly limited data on trails that are equipped with digitally available information for visitors.

Our study is part of the IMTERPED (Territorial Impacts of Pedestrian Activities) project funded by the "Fondation de France". The project focuses on innovations in the sector of coastal walking tourism and their socio-economic and socioecological impacts at five French coastal areas: Corniche de l'Estérel (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur), Ile de Ré (Poitou-Charentes), Lac Léman (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes), Presqu'île de Quiberon and Baie de Saint-Brieuc (Bretagne). The interdisciplinary perspective of the project provides a cross-understanding of coastal pedestrian leisure activities by adopting different, yet interrelated scientific approaches, such as historical, sociological, geographical, legal, political and artistic perspectives. In this context, the present communication focuses on the analysis of hiking's consequences on the leisure consumer behavior at coastal sites.

Problem

The many faces of hiking are cumbersome to capture owing to the heterogeneous nature of these activities: often self-organized, undocumented, etc. The several attempts of categorizing hikers provide only restrictive classifications of individuals without taking into consideration that one might act differently in different situations (for example an avid hiker might adopt non-typical behavior according to various situations, such as particular spatial settings, different travel party compositions, extreme weather conditions, etc.).

The present study offers a theoretically and empirically grounded approach of understanding the impact of spatial setting on hikers' consumption behavior. We propose to analyze combined causes instead of adopting a symmetric perspective of linear model's analyses (Ragin, 2008), as various factors are likely to influence behavior, such as personal attitudes, spatial planning, travel party composition, etc.

Our aim is to reveal how a particular spatial planning ("digital trail") influences hikers' consumption behavior and to analyze this within the complexity of its context. Therefore, we are not seeking to provide with another typology of consumers, but to understand consumptions at particularly equipped sites. Accordingly, we aim to understand the joint effects of a set of factors (such as the importance of pre-consumption cognitions and behaviors, prior visit experience, on-site circumstances and personal characteristics) have on "digital trail" visitors' consumption behavior.

Analytical framework and hypotheses

The figure below provides a general theory of visitors' leisure consumption at sites equipped with digital information resources. The model is based on the "General Theory of Tourism Consumption Systems"(Woodside & Dubelaar, 2002), adapted to the analyses of leisure activities starting from the tenet, that tourism and leisure are indistinguishable from one another, and thus, they are interpreted and analyzed along the same continuum (Carr, 2002). The model focuses on the direct and indirect relationships between the relevant variables for a discretionary visit to one of the coastal study sites. The one-directional arrows summarize our hypotheses regarding leisure consumption systems.

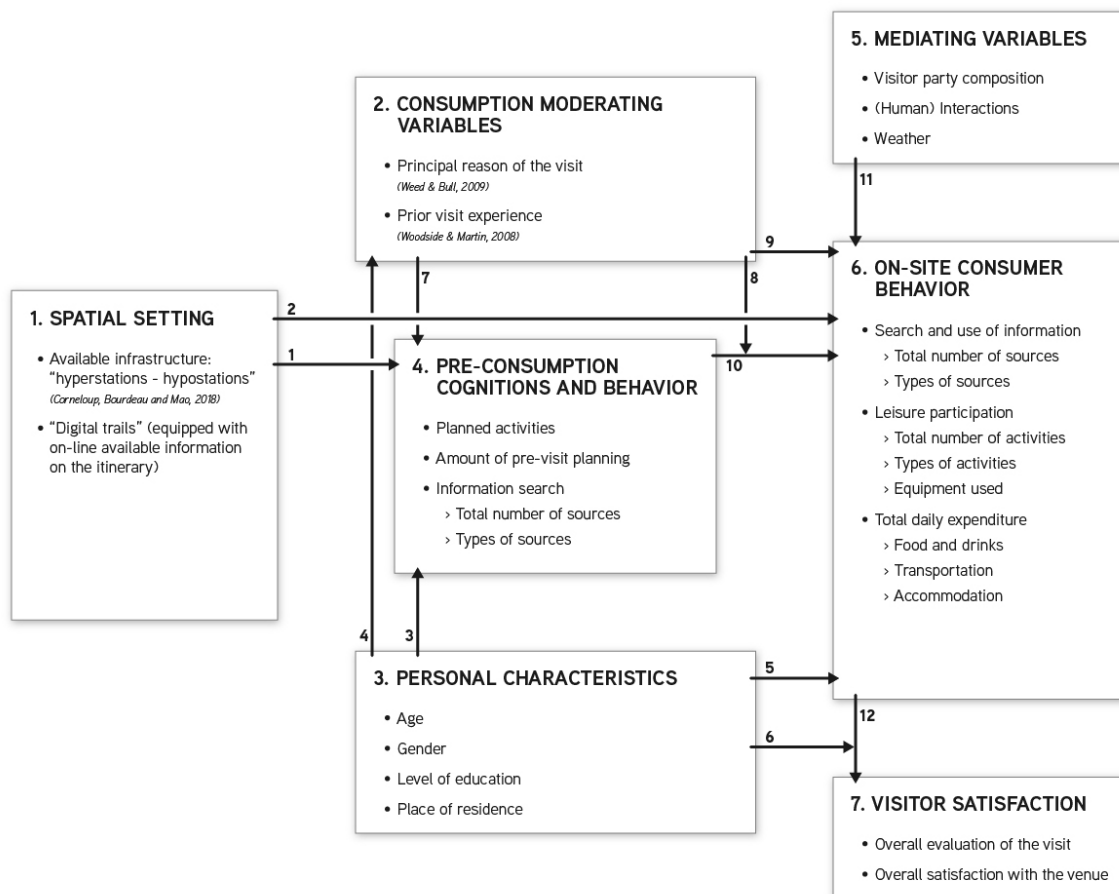


Figure - General theory on leisure consumer behavior at "digital trails" (Model based on Woodside & Dubelaar, 2002)

In this , various hypotheses - as presented in the figure - have been established based on the existing literature on factors influencing consumer behavior in a leisure setting, such as the effects of the prime motivation of the visit(Weed & Bull, 2009), prior visit experiences to the destination, age, gender and other demographic characteristics, etc.

Spatial planning of the territory - combined with other influences –seems to represent a determinant factor for consumers. Corneloup, Bourdeau and Mao (2018) distinguish 3 types of spatial planning according to the available tourism and leisure products and the stakeholders' (mostly marketers' and decision makers') intention on utilizing the territory. In this manner, taking French ski resorts as examples, they have identified nature sites with a high aspiration for tourism development, offering various tourism and leisure services, which they call hyperstations. Conversely, hypostations are mentioned, where the emphasis is

placed on practices in line with a relational and social ecology. In between the two extremes we find resorts which are seeking balance between naturalness and urbanity, territoriality and inhabitability, the wild and the domestic and tourism and recreation, striking a balance between the hyper-resort model and the immersion in alternative ecological practices.

A place, often observed from an ethnographical approach releases an atmosphere, forms situations and guides action, creates social links and interactions (Corneloup, Bourdeau and Mao, 2006, p.13). Starting from a spatial setting perspective, our analysis is aimed at visitors of “digital trails”, that is a designated trail equipped with digitally available information about the itinerary. Therefore, our study takes an interactionist perspective with the objective to understand visitor experiences and consumption patterns at these specially equipped sites.

Methodology and Perspectives of the Study

Data is to be collected during the spring/summer period of 2018 using a mixed methodology: (1) a questionnaire is to be completed by visitors of the “digital trails” about their experiences and consumption in relation to the site, the visit and the pedestrian activity they are involved in. Quantitative data is to be completed by (2) semi-structured interviews with hikers, and (3) participant observation of the sites and visitors using “digital paths”.

The survey instrument comprises of issues about the afore-mentioned variables including questions on pre-visit planning, cognitions and behavior, on-site experiences and activities and evaluation of the experience and the destination. Interview questions are to be specified after the first results of the survey with the aim to broaden our knowledge on emerging issues. For each field study, an observation guide is used including items about the spatial setting, particularities of the site and the visit and particularities about the observed populations.

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