

Implications of Destination Loyalty in Soccer Premier League in Iran

Hashem Kozechian

Ph.D in Sport Management, Department of Physical Education, Tarbiat Modares University,
Tehran, Iran

(Corresponding Author)

Email: kozechih@modares.ac.ir

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Abstract

Soccer premier leagues` authorities in Iran are supposed to consider spectators and fans` concerns in to consideration in order to substantiate their destination loyalty. Based on the literature review, safety, service quality, destination image and social environment may be antecedents of destination loyalty in sport tourism. The present study develops a theoretical background in this respect.

Key words: Destination, Loyalty, Soccer, Premier league

Introduction

Tourism development, especially in less developed countries, is an important factor in tackling poverty. It increases the revenue of various segments, reduce unemployment, increase economic prosperity and social welfare, and result in improved quality of life (Tassiopoulou & Haydamb, 2007).

For succeeding in attracting tourists, the destination countries should provide the necessary infrastructure according to their geographical and cultural characteristics and convert themselves to a tourist destination. This requires a systematic approach towards tourism in order to develop tourism through the creation and provision of the necessary facilities. Providing needed facilities is the first step in attracting and retaining tourists. Familiarity with the region provides the needed information for the development of tourism. Therefore, the needs and expectations of tourists will be met and their satisfaction and loyalty towards the region will be attracted. Expectations of tourists from the region is formed based on the experience of previous trips, propagandas, and others` recommendation. The perceived service quality, perceived facilities quality, and perceived value has a direct impact on the quality of the travel, tourism experience, and level of demand in the future (Uysal, 2003). In other words, the possibility of tourists return depends on their satisfaction from the destination. Their satisfaction will increase their loyalty to the destination. As a result of this action and reaction, a growing and developmental cycle will be created and the destination will benefit from economic, social, and cultural advantages.

Sports tourism is defined as a leisure-based travel. People temporarily move from their home for games, watching sports, or seeing the charms associated with these activities (Kasimati &

Dawsona, 2008). Sports tourism is a relatively new industry. It is one of the segments of tourism that has the fastest development and has been identified as a factor in economic and social regeneration of urban and rural communities. It seems that sports tourism is a means for improving the quality of life for residents through attracting tourists and contributing to improving the economics of local economy (Kasimati, 2005).

There are various types and definitions of sport tourism and different experts have different idea about it. One of the experts whose definition is so popular is Gibson. Gibson (2006) defines sport tourism as “leisure-based travel that takes individuals temporarily outside of their home communities to participate in physical activities, to watch physical activities, or to venerate attractions associated with physical activities”. Based on Gibson’s definition, sport tourism can be categorized into three groups of active sport tourism, event sport tourism and nostalgia sport tourism (Adabi, 2006). However, sport tourism in all its different types, is a service industry and is influenced by services provided. Service quality is a key concept in tourism organizations, because researches have suggested service quality directly is related to repeat vision of tourists and make more benefits for organization (Kouthoris and Konstantinos, 2005). So, it can be said quality management is an important issue in tourism policy that can help tourism and sport tourism development.

Like the other services, consumption experience in tourism is complex due to being subtle, dynamic, and subjective. Tourists' experience includes a complex combination of tangible, objective, and practical components -travel, food, drinks, and recreation- and also symbolic, emotional, and enjoyment -joy, laughing, having a good time, and socialization (Williams, 2005). High quality service and guaranteed customer satisfaction are the most important factors for the success of tourism industry. High quality services, tourists' satisfaction, and loyalty to a destination are closely related to each other. Customer satisfaction has a key role in the success of businesses strategies. Studies show that companies that have paid attention to customer satisfaction have been successful in increasing the efficiency of production processes, the company's rapid growth, increasing knowledge about the customer, and increasing the value of their products. The customer satisfaction is a determining factor in customer loyalty which leads to customer retention (Ebrahimpoor, 2011).

The destination selection process consists of five stages of decision-making hierarchy: 1) the decision to involve (Travel), (2) The decision to invest in tourism, (3) the frequency and duration of stay, (4) the decision about tourist destination, (5) the final destination and type of transport (Law, 2004 & Smith, 200). The tourism destination selection has two unique characteristics making it different from other products: (1) Tourism is experience-based rather than product-based (2) the real purchase and consumption occurs in the destination and not in the resident location of tourists (Hsieh, 2004 & Ibrahim et al., 2005).

The decision of tourists to choose a destination is one of the important issues that have been considered by researchers. Such decisions are closely associated with the loyalty of tourist to destination (Smith, 2006 & Huang et al., 2006). Numerous studies have examined the relationship between loyalty to destination and tourists’ behavior (Lin et al., 2006 & Petrick et al., 2005). If tourism managers and marketers may guess the possibility of selecting a particular destination by tourists, they may estimate the demand of tourists properly and implement strategies to satisfy their demand (Opperman, 1999).

Measuring the loyalty to a brand, product, or a tourist destination is difficult. There are two major issues concerning the loyalty measurement that includes the type of used and the level of measuring loyalty to a tourist destination (Oppermann, 1999). There are three types of data for loyalty measurement including behavioral data, attitudinal data, and combined data. However, studies have pointed out that behavioral measurement is not free of error due to the lack of distinction between true loyalty and spurious loyalty. But, on the other hand, this type of measurement has attracted attentions for focusing on longitudinal data. The attitudinal measurement has been criticized for its focus on cross-sectional data (Oppermann, 1999). Finally, combined data have been considered by researchers because of including the data of both types (Riley et al., 2001 and Lee, 2001).

The index for measuring loyalty to a destination has been a challenging issue among researchers. For example, Chen and Gursoy (2001) interpret loyalty to destination as tourists' eager to recommend it as a tourist spot. Riely et al. defined loyalty to destination as the best indicator of visiting destination frequently. Also, Patrick (2005) and Crosby et al. (1990) argue that past experiences of tourism can affect the loyalty of tourists.

This is an important question for sports marketers and sports managers who are responsible for organizing sport events: What factors affect frequent re-visit or return of tourists in athletic events?. However, the increased number of tourists is associated both directly and indirectly with the level of revenue in sport events. Providing high-quality services, easy transportation, and attracting the tourists satisfaction influence tourist loyalty to return to the sport events (Travassos, 2008 ; Huang, 2006 & Ibrahim, 2005). By determining the factors influencing tourist loyalty to attend sport events or return them, sports marketers and sports managers may develop strategies for attracting tourists (Jacoby, 1978).

The studies of Mosin (2005), Kim and Patrick (2005), Kesin (2005) indicated that the host city may take concrete steps in attracting tourism and sports tourism by hosting important events. Also, the studies of Kozak (2005) showed that the host city may help to tourists' attraction by providing accommodation facilities and facilitating the access of tourists to tourism attractions. Soolberg and Prussia (2007) believe that hosting major sports events will lead to long-term positive changes in tourism demand. Large sporting events require costly investments in sport equipments in non- sports buildings of city. These investments must be consistent with the long-term plan for the economic success of event. Most of the cities which demand hosting of major sporting events to earn significant short or long term regional income. Law (2006) investigated the driving factors in attracting tourism and selecting destination. The findings showed that factors such as social and psychological factors, relaxation and social interaction in sport venues, tourism attractions, tourism expectations, destination image are the attracting and driving factors. The empirical literature related to tourism indicate that tourist satisfaction is a good predictor of revisiting the destination and recommending it to others (Rimmington, 2000). The studies of Ling and Ding (2005) showed that trust and satisfaction are the components of loyalty. Also, Chen and Gursoy (2001) showed that the safety, perceived cultural differences, and transportation are the three characteristics that affect the loyalty to tourist destination. Ibrahim and Jacqueline (2005) suggested that there is relationship between the satisfaction, security, comfort, service, the atmosphere of the tourism area, and cultural differences. Also, Riley et al. (2001) concluded that loyalty is the result of satisfaction, commitment, and attitude of tourists.

Nowadays, one of concerns and problems of international sporting events organizers and marketers in the Iran is raising the interest of visitors and spectators to sports events, identifying the factors affecting their presence, and identifying the type, process, and model of marketing fitted with each of the target communities and markets. However, it is necessary to have a comprehensive and appropriate model for sports tourism which act as a framework for implementing the strategies of sports tourism. Different models have been proposed for the satisfaction and returning of tourists, and their loyalty to tourism destinations (Travassos, 2008 ; Lee, 2001; Huang & Chiu, 2006; Ebrahim Pur, 2011; Foster, 2001; Yusal, 2003; Chen, 2010; Guerreire, 2006 & Jin HUE, 2001) as follows:

Security >cultural differences ... > Transport >images of destinations >. Satisfaction..... >. Loyalty to the destination (Travassos, 2008).

Organizational factors >environmental factors..... >Satisfaction..... > Loyalty to destination (Ebrahim Pur, 2011).

Security > Transportation >. Trust >. Satisfaction >. Loyalty to the destination (Huang & Chiu, 2006).

Image of destination> Perceived quality..... > satisfaction..... > loyalty to the destination (Chen, 2010).

In summary, the findings show that the quality of sports services (Shonk, 2006), safety (Shonk, 2006; Travassos, 2008 ;), cultural differences (Travassos, 2008), transport (Travassos, 2008; Shonk, 2006 ; Huang & Chiu, 2006), image from destination (Chen, 2010), and environmental factors (Ebrahim Pur, 2011) are variables that have an impact on the satisfaction and loyalty of sports tourists. In the following researcher made conceptual model, a combination of theories of models have been included.

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