

Study Objectives and Hypotheses

The study explored how interaction between foreign tourists and local tourist mediators can be a means to address the concerns of sustainability in tourism, and identified what role tourist mediators play in developing tourist attachment and influencing tourists' attitudes toward the environment as these tourists engage in various forms of tourism in Japan.

This study also looked at tourism through the lens of Psychology with the application of the Social Exchange Theory and Theory of Attachment, and sought to extend the current body of research on social psychological theories and tourism by (1) juxtaposing the social exchange theory vis-à-vis both the tourist and tourist mediator's experience and perspectives, (2) focusing on the social interaction aspect of place attachment, and (3) highlighting the role of tourist mediators in the tourism experience. In addition to its contributions to theory, the current study has practical implications for Japan's tourism industry as the findings can help individuals and organizations in the tourism sector to develop better and more sustainable tourist experiences for foreign tourists.

The current study proposed that quality tourism experiences, that is, the extensive and meaningful interaction between tourists and tourist mediators will foster an emotional attachment to the tourist mediators and Mt. Fuji. This attachment will be key in encouraging behaviors aligned with sustainability and conservation in the Mt. Fuji area.

More specifically, the current study hypothesized that

1. lengthier and more frequent interactions between foreign tourists and tourist mediators will lead to stronger attachment, and
2. stronger attachment to tourist mediators will lead to more positive attitudes toward environment conservation behaviors.

Key Concepts

Sustainable tourism, in its simplest and most general form, is that which minimizes tourism's negative impacts while maximizing its positive impacts (Weaver, 2006). Sustainable tourism is often discussed in relation to the concept of alternative tourism as alternative tourism is considered to be a means to achieve sustainable tourism.

Alternative tourism can be described as that which is the opposite to mass, conventional, commercial, or traditional tourism (Christou, 2012; Triarchi & Karamanis, 2017). Alternative tourism is often associated with ecotourism, sustainable tourism, agri-tourism, community-based tourism, and volunteer tourism. Ecotourism and agri-tourism, in particular, are considered to be kinds of alternative tourism (Triarchi & Karamanis, 2017).

The **Social Exchange Theory** proposes that relationships are characterized by reciprocity and interdependence, and viewed according to the costs and benefits incurred from the interaction (Cook, 2015; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Individuals are said to often engage in a series of interdependent and contingent interactions that generate obligations with the potential of forming high-quality relationships (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Place attachment refers to the positive cognitive-emotional bond that individuals have towards a particular place (Scannell & Gifford, 2013), and is often defined according to two dimensions: place identity and place dependence. Some researchers have expanded the concept of place attachment to cover emotional attachments to individuals and social interactions (Dywer et al., 2019; Raymond et al., 2010; Scannell & Gifford, 2013; Vada et al.,

2019). Place attachment is based on the Attachment Theory in Interpersonal Relationships which is characterized by the five elements, namely, prolonged association, uniqueness of the attachment figure, joy of reunion, distress from separation and loss, and seeking security and comfort (Giuliani, 2016). One of the key outcomes of place attachment is environmental stewardship (Scannell and Gifford, 2013).

Quality tourism experiences generally result from the interaction between tourist, tourist mediators, and the environment (Jennings & Nickerson, 2006). When talking about tourist-tourist mediator interaction and its relation to quality tourism experiences, “quality” will be based on the tourist and tourist mediators’ interpretation and may mean excellence, meeting expectations, or other gains from the experience and exchange (Jennings & Weiler, 2006). The current study defined quality tourism experiences as that which allows for extensive interaction between tourists and tourist mediators, and to a certain extent address both the tourist and tourist mediators’ intrinsic and intangible expectations from the exchange.

Procedure

The study employed a convergent mixed method approach. Qualitative data was gathered mainly through interviews and participant-observations.

Quantitative data was gathered through a consolidated online survey measuring place attachment, conservation commitment and environmentally responsible behavior.

Place attachment was measured using items modified and adapted from the place attachment scale developed by Williams and Vaske (2003), and attitudes toward the environment were measured using the conservation commitment and environmentally responsible behavior scales developed by Lee (2011). The survey was first piloted to test for reliability and validity, before being administered to a total of 64 tourists who previously visited Mt. Fuji or Japan. Sixty-one respondents were considered valid for analysis.

Treatment of Data

Key points from the interviews and fieldwork observations were analyzed for themes. Themes were juxtaposed vis-à-vis the current study’s assumptions. Quantitative data was analyzed through Spearman and Pearson’s correlation.

Findings

The current study presented two cases of alternative tourism: ecotourism in Fujinomiya City and agri-tourism in Kofu City. The study also detailed the experiences of tourists who visited the town of Kawaguchiko and participated in a Mt. Fuji climbing tour. Lastly, the study presented quantitative evidence of the relationships between tourist-tourist interaction, attachment, and attitudes toward the environment.

The Tourist Experience

Results from the study support the inclusion of the tourist mediators and type of tourists in Cutler and Carmichael’s original framework of the tourist experience, and consequently, the assumptions based on the modified model. That are, (1) tourist mediators are part of the social aspect of the influential realm; (2) tourist mediators may be present at each phase of the tourist experience; and (3) tourist mediators bring their own motivations, expectations and personal characteristics to the experience.

Tourists who engaged in alternative forms of tourism had more substantial interactions with different tourist mediators compared to those who visited Kawaguchiko or participated in the Mt. Fuji climbing tour. Similarly, results from the survey indicate that foreign tourists in Japan mostly interact with hotel, restaurant, and shop staff, followed by their local tour guides for those who participate in some form of tour during their stay in Japan. Results also show that despite the frequency of the tourists' interactions with various tourist mediators, the extent of their interactions is often limited to 10 minutes or less. Thus, it seems that unless the tourism activity intentionally provides occasions for extensive interactions with locals, there is little opportunity available for tourists otherwise.

Moreover, the current study's findings show that tourist mediators appear in all phases of the tourist experience, especially when they engage in alternative tourism, such as the case of N Farm. N-san was very much influential in shaping the tourists' anticipation of the farm-stay experience. His demeanor and the information he shared during the farm volunteer screening process served to shape some of the tourists' expectations of their stay and overall experience. However, tourist mediators are most influential in shaping the tourists' experiences during the on-site activity. This is because the majority of the tourists' interaction with tourist mediators happen during the on-site activity. In the case of N Farm, it was during the actual farm-stay experience that the tourists interacted with fellow tourists, the other farm workers, and N-san's family. After the on-site activity, the tourist mediators remain present in the return travel and recollection phases. This can be seen in how N-san or H-san assists the volunteers back to the bus stop from which they first arrived when they finally leave the farm, and how N-san, his family and the rest of the farm workers become a permanent fixture in the volunteers' memories of their visit and stay in Japan.

Social Exchanges, Attachment and the Environment

Social exchanges between the tourist mediators and foreign tourists engaged in alternative tourism reveal that both parties have complementary expectations from the relationship, and that these expectations have been mostly met through their experience. One of the key expectations from the tourist-tourist mediator relationship is the exchange opportunity itself. Tourist mediators, especially the locals in the host community, hope for cultural exchanges with foreign tourists, and that tourists will have a better appreciation of Japan. Similarly, tourists hope for immersive and interactive experiences to better understand Japan and its culture. Therefore, it can be confirmed that alternative tourism does allow for quality tourism experiences, such that, tourists and tourist mediators have an opportunity for extensive interaction, and the experience addresses both the tourist and tourist mediators' expectations from the exchange. Thus, the study supports the assumption made earlier that the tourism experience is not only shaped by the tourists' motivations and expectations, but also the motivations and expectations of the tourist mediators.

Research results also show that factors in the personal realm are determined by the type of tourists and tourist mediators engaged in the tourism experience. Different types of tourists engage in different types of tourism, and thus, their motivations for engaging in certain types of tourism may also differ. Tourist mediators need to respond accordingly to these differences to provide quality tourism experiences. The tourists who visited Kawaguchiko were mainly motivated by the desire to see Mt. Fuji as it is considered a "must-see" when visiting Japan. The tourists who participated in the climbing tour wanted to reach Mt. Fuji's summit. The tourists who joined the ecotours from Ecotour E wanted to see Mt. Fuji, while at the same time, explore Japanese culture through interactive and experiential activities. Finally, the tourists who volunteered at the farm wanted an immersive activity through which they could experience the typical countryside lifestyle in Japan. In addition, the types of tourists who take part in alternative tourism tend to be individual mass tourists,

explorers and drifters. This may be a result of the very nature of alternative tourism, such that it caters to small groups and individuals versus the large groups of mass tourists. Furthermore, the more immersive forms of alternative tourism, such as the case of N-farm, seem to attract the explorers and drifters who are travelling in an experiential and experimental mode. Tourists who frequent places considered to be “tourist areas”, such as Kawaguchiko and those who participate in group tours tend to be organized and individual mass tourists. Although the organized and individual mass tourists, who experienced regular forms of tourism, did not engage in quality tourism experiences as defined in this study, this does not necessarily mean that they were any less satisfied with their experience. This is because interactions with tourist mediators may not have been their main motivation for visiting. However, when the interactions did occur, they were very much welcomed and appreciated. In the same vein, different tourist mediators also have different motivations, expectations and characteristics, and seek different gains from their interactions with the tourists.

It was also hypothesized that quality tourism experiences will foster an emotional attachment to the tourist mediators and Mt. Fuji, which will then encourage sustainability and environment-conservation aligned behaviors on the part of the visiting foreign tourists. Data gathered from the qualitative phase of the current study partially support this hypothesis. The experiences of the tourists clearly show evidence of their attachment to the tourist mediators they encountered, but not necessarily Mt. Fuji itself. This is consistent with the survey results indicating a moderate relationship between tourist-tourist mediator interaction and attachment, with particularly stronger relationships between interaction and attachment to the locals versus attachment to the place as a whole. Furthermore, attachment was seemingly stronger when they engaged in alternative tourism because of the frequency and extent of their interactions. It is important to consider that the degree of attachment that occurs between tourist and tourist mediators may differ based on the tourism experience. Different tourism experiences allow for different levels of interaction, and the extent of that interaction determines the strength of attachment that takes place. The tourists in this study ranged from the mass tourists visiting specific tourist areas, such as, Kawaguchiko, to the explorers and drifters who would spend two weeks or more at a farm. Although survey data indicate that attachment still occurs despite the limited interactions between tourist and tourist mediators, the qualitative data clearly show that alternative tourism, such as the farm-stay volunteer experience, allows for stronger attachments between tourist and tourist mediators.

There was, however, no direct indication from the interviews that this attachment translates to sustainability and environment-conservation aligned behaviors. Perhaps this may be due to the fact that environmental issues and sustainability were topics rarely discussed between the tourists and tourist mediators. Even during the Mt. Fuji climbing tour, the guide made no mention of the ¥1000 donation for Mt. Fuji’s conservation efforts. However, there was evidence of influence on consumer behavior resulting from attachment. One example was the case of the French tourist who participated in the *Satoyama Village Cycling Tour* with Ecotour E. One of the stops of the tour was a visit to a *sake* brewery. Prior to meeting the *sake* brewery owner, the tourist mentioned his lack of interest in drinking *sake*. However, after an hour at the brewery and having listened to the owner’s stories of his life and the brewery, the tourist suddenly decided to purchase one of the *sake* bottles on sale. Considering the influence on consumer behavior, it can be assumed that attachment can also influence other forms of behavior, such as environmentally-responsible behavior, if issues on sustainability and the environment were mentioned during tourism experiences. It can also be assumed that the tourists’ attachment, expressed in their willingness to revisit, will also contribute to sustainable tourism. One of the main issues with tourism is that tourism activities are often concentrated in specific tourist areas because most first-time tourists tend

to visit the more frequented and well-known places. However, repeat tourists will likely be more open to explore uncharted areas, and be more supportive of efforts on redirecting tourist traffic. Despite the limited data from the interviews showing a direct relationship between attachment and environmental sustainability, results from the survey conducted do indicate that attachment is strongly related to attitudes toward the environment. That is, stronger attachments to a place or people likely lead to more positive attitudes toward environment conservation and a willingness to engage in environmentally responsible behaviors. Furthermore, attachment and attitudes toward the environment in Mt. Fuji showed a very strong relationship. Perhaps Mt. Fuji's presence, being a natural site, allows for a stronger environmental consciousness in the visiting tourists.

The Role of Tourist Mediators

The current study shows that tourist mediators play an important role in shaping quality tourism experiences, fostering attachment, and influencing behavior. Tourist mediators ensure that the tourists' experiences are meaningful and memorable. This is consistent with the survey results which show that despite the limited interactions experienced by the tourists, interaction with tourist mediators was still found to be associated with attachment. This is also evident in the correlations between tourist-tourist mediator interactions and attachment to locals that show a stronger relationship compared to the general attachment to Japan or Mt. Fuji. Tourist mediators are key recipients of the tourists' attachment. Additional interviews with the N-Farm volunteers, months after they left Japan, indicate that part of their reasons for wanting to return to Japan was to visit the people they met at the farm. Interactions with tourist mediators, and consequently, their stories can serve to change tourists' behavior, such as, the case of the *sake* brewery owner and the French tourist. This is also evident in how the farm volunteers' behavior and anticipation of the experience were influenced by their interactions with the farm owner throughout the rigorous screening process. Such that, even prior to their on-site tourist activity, the tourist mediator already played a part in influencing their experience.

These findings reinforce the argument that tourist mediators are key players for tourists to develop attachment, and consequently, play a significant role in potentially influencing environmentally sustainable behaviors in tourists.

Practical Implications

The study's findings provide support for the Japanese government's strategy of offering rural-stay experiences to international tourists as a way for them to better understand Japanese nature and daily life, provide tourists with more opportunity to interact with the locals, and allow for a better appreciation of Japan's heritage sites. Similarly, other forms of alternative tourism, such as ecotours, also serve to accomplish the same goal. However, to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of tourism, support from the various stakeholders in the tourism industry is essential.

One of the key findings of the current study is the recognition of the tourist mediators' significance in tourism. Tourist mediators, such as tourist guides, play an important role in interpreting Japan to foreign visitors, and they are key players in ensuring quality tourism experiences for international tourists. Japan's ecotourism policy acknowledges the importance of guides, but does not specifically indicate how guides can contribute to the achievement of ecotourism goals. According to the Ministry of Environment (MoE), the responsibilities of guides include ensuring the tourists' safety, developing their interest in Japan's nature and culture, and encouraging environmentally responsible behaviors, while making sure that the tourists' expectations from the experience are fully met. (Yamada, 2011). The current research shows that in addition to focusing on their task-based

responsibilities, it would also be beneficial for guides to make the tourism experience more personal and memorable, such as through the sharing of their stories, to foster a deeper relationship with the tourists. Thus, tourist mediators not only contribute to ensuring sustainable tourism by educating tourists, but also by making tourists care more about the places they visit. Considering the importance of tourist mediators in shaping the tourism experience, it would be vital to support the development of tourist mediators through training and other interventions.

Both locals and tourists have also expressed that language continues to be one of the bigger challenges throughout their tourism experiences, especially, in relation to their desire for interaction and communication. Hence, support in the form of language training for locals, availability of interpreters, detailed travel and tourist information in multiple languages will help the host communities be better equipped to welcome foreign tourists. Other locals have expressed that along with their desire to increase tourism in their town or city, there is also a reluctance to have their hometowns turn into a “touristy area”. Therefore, there is a need to ensure that any disruption to the locals’ lifestyles from the increased tourism will be kept to a bare minimum.

Collaborations and partnerships between different institutions will be key to address these challenges. For example, universities can partner with specific communities to establish a tourism internship or research program for students majoring in tourism studies. Locals can benefit from the program by having the students act as their interpreters, for example. In exchange, students gain practical experience. Government support will also help in ensuring the continuity of these partnerships and programs.

Lastly, the current research has shown that environmental issues are rarely discussed by tourist and tourist mediators as tourists participate in the on-site tourism activities. Perhaps one way of addressing this is by taking advantage of the fact that the full tourism experience includes the pre and post on-site activity experiences. Organizations can work to introduce a step by which tourists will be educated about sustainable tourism and environmentally sustainable behavior prior to their on-site activities. For example, in the case of the Mt. Fuji climbers, introducing a screening process for tourists intending to climb the mountain, similar to that done by N Farm, will allow tourists to learn more about Mt. Fuji, its value to the locals and the environmental impact of climbing activities. This will hopefully make tourists more environmentally aware, and more willing to support the conservation efforts in the mountain.