Research note

The effect of price on word of mouth: First time versus heavy repeat visitors

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Many tourist destinations strongly focus and depend on repeat visitors. A central assumption thereby is that repeat visitors are more profitable (e.g. through lower marketing costs) and that their positive word of mouth (WOM) is essential to attract new guests. In this paper, we present a large-scale empirical study to investigate the effect of price for first time and heavy repeat visitors of ski resorts. Applying a hierarchical linear modelling approach, we show that price is negatively related to WOM for first time visitors and that price has no effect on WOM for repeat visitors. Thus, we show that the effect of price on WOM decreases for repeat visitors.

1. Introduction

It is often argued that destinations should try to create loyal customers and focus on repeat visitors (e.g. Oppermann, 1998). Many mass-tourist-type destinations, as for example ski resorts (Tjørve, Lien, & Fløgnfeldt, 2018), strongly depend on repeat visitors (e.g. Gitelson & Crompton, 1984; Oppermann, 1998), especially when novelty and novelty-seeking is not a major travel motive (Jang & Feng, 2007). Repeat visits are associated with lower marketing costs (Reichheld & Sasser, 1989), lower price sensitivity (Krishnamurthi & Papatla, 2003), and increased word of mouth publicity (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999). Repeat visitors are also more likely to revisit a destination (Oppermann, 2000). This phenomenon, also called cumulative inertia (McGinnis, 1968), assumes that behaviourally loyal customers tend to repeat their visit decisions in future. These important behaviourally and attitudinal differences led to substantial empirical research to study differences between single and repeat visitors in tourism destinations (e.g. Chang, Chen, & Meyer, 2013; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Lau & McKercher, 2004; Li, Cheng, Kim, & Petrick, 2008; Oppermann, 1997). While research has made much progress in the study of the relationships among central constructs in this context (e.g. satisfaction, loyalty, repeat visits, and word of mouth), the role of price is less clear and findings are mixed. In this study, we contribute to this research by studying the role of price for word of mouth (WOM) in Alpine ski resorts. We argue that WOM, a central key performance indicator (Reichheld, 2003) and driver of growth (Reichheld, 2003; Reichheld & Covey, 2006), is a function of individual-level predictors (satisfaction with ski area characteristics), and group-level predictors (i.e. destination-level factors like ticket prices, slope kilometres, and height difference). Understanding the antecedents of WOM is especially important for tourism management as travel and destination choices are commonly based on information passed on by WOM practices (Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Murphy, Mascaro, & Benckendorff, 2007). Concerning price responses, it is important to distinguish between price sensitivity and price elasticity. While price elasticity describes and measures changes in demand due to price changes, price sensitivity describes “the weight attached to price in a consumer valuation of a product’s overall attractiveness or utility” (Erdem, Swait, & Louviere, 2002, p. 2) and as a consequence a price-sensitive customer is “one who is more likely to base their purchase decisions on price” (Petrick, 2005, p. 754). With this study, we contribute to literature on the role of price sensitivity in several ways. First, we extend research on the role of price by studying its effects on WOM, a central construct in tourism marketing (Confente, 2015). Second, it has been shown that heavy repeat visitors significantly differ from “light repeat visitors” (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011, p. 271) in a number of ways. Heavy repeat visitors are very important segments in some tourism contexts and by differentiating first time visitors and heavy repeat visitors (more than 10 times), we get a more differentiated understanding of price effects for this important customer group. Third, instead of using price sensitivity scales (Petrick, 2004), this study uses objective ticket prices of the ski resorts and thus avoids limitations of subjective, self-reported scales. Fourth, some previous studies on the role of price were limited to single destinations or service providers and therefore their generalizability was limited (Petrick, 2005). With this

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large-scale study with data from 55 ski resorts, we avoid some shortcomings of previous work.

We consider ski resorts as a particularly interesting research context for several reasons. First, ski tourism is of central importance for winter tourism in many regions, especially in the Alps (Matzler, Füller, Renzl, Herting, & Spith, 2008). Second, for mass-tourist-type destinations like ski resorts (Tjørve et al., 2018) the key variables of this study (price, satisfaction, and WOM) as well as repeat visitors are of central importance (e.g. Gitelson & Crompton, 1984; Oppermann, 1998). Third, for this study we could rely on a large-scale customer satisfaction survey in 55 Alpine ski resorts (n = 25,294) and could correlate it with available, objective secondary data. In the following section, we develop the hypotheses for this study. Then, we present the method and results and conclude with a discussion of the implications and limitations.

2. Theory – key constructs

Destination loyalty and word of mouth (WOM) are of central importance in tourism management (e.g. Alegre & Juaneda, 2006; Conforte, 2015). Studies on loyalty and WOM use a simple and straightforward chain of arguments: Satisfaction with destination attributes leads to guest loyalty and positive WOM, loyalty and WOM in turn increase profitability. This chain of effects (satisfaction–loyalty–profitability) has been subject to many empirical studies that include the role of moderators and mediators in different contexts (e.g. Chen, 2012; Matzler, Füller, & Faullant, 2007; Matzler et al., 2008). Two central variables in tourism management are repeat visits (Oppermann, 1997) and price (Petrick, 2005). This is especially true for ski resorts, as many of them are highly dependent on repeat visitors (Tjørve et al., 2018) and as price plays a major role (Unbehaun, Pröbstl, & Haider, 2008). Skiing is often seen as expensive (Falk & Hagsten, 2016) and an “elitist” sport (Gilbert & Hudson, 2000) and lift ticket prices vary considerably between ski resorts (Falk, 2011). In this study, we integrate these two variables (repeat visits and ticket prices) in a model that links satisfaction with WOM of ski resorts.

WOM is a function of the subjective satisfaction with ski resort attributes (individual-level predictors) that typically are measured with a survey-based approach (e.g. Füller & Matzler, 2008; Konu, Laukkanen, & Komppula, 2011; Matzler et al., 2008). There are however also predictors and moderators on destination-level that can be entered as objective data in a model. Such factors are the ticket prices, slope kilometres, and height differences (e.g. Matzler et al., 2008). Hence, we argue that for the context of a ski resort WOM is a function of the guests’ satisfaction with individual-level predictors (size of the ski resort, quality of slopes and transport comfort of the ski lifts) and objective destination-level predictors and moderators. Ticket prices have a negative impact and slope kilometres and height differences have a positive influence on WOM.

Extensive research has shown that previous destination experiences and the number of previous visits have a significant impact on various relevant constructs like decision-making and destination selection (e.g. Woods & Lyonski, 1989), perception of destination image and future behaviour (e.g. Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001), perceived quality and satisfaction (e.g. Li et al., 2008), and intention to revisit and WOM (Petrick, 2004). Among these studies controversy emerged regarding repeat visitors’ price sensitivity (e.g. Petrick, 2005), leading to the provoking questions whether loyal visitors indeed are desired visitors (e.g. Petrick, 2004). While many studies found that repeat visitors spend less (e.g. Petrick, 2004), others found that loyalty reduces consumers’ sensitivity to price variations (e.g. Conforte, 2015; Fuchs & Reichel, 2011; Krishnamurthi & Papatla, 2003; Matzler et al., 2008; Petrick, 2004, 2005).

Alegre and Juaneda (2006, p. 685) identify two opposing effects: “One the one hand repeaters have a greater knowledge of the destination and thus can make a more efficient choice (based on lower prices) for all or some components of the cost of the trip. On the other hand, if quality ranks among their motivations, they will be prepared to pay a surcharge. A reduction in the holiday’s non-monetary costs and risk aversion could also be linked with a surcharge.” It seems that the majority of literature on loyalty and price sensitivity comes to the conclusion that loyalty reduces price sensitivity (Petrick, 2005). Literature also argues that first-timers in a tourist destination are more driven by external factors (including the price), repeat visitors’ decisions are more influenced by internal factors (i.e. quality of an offering), or consequences of a previous stay (like lower non-monetary costs or emotional attachment), resulting in a higher willingness to pay (Alegre & Juaneda, 2006). Tjørve et al. (2018, p. 95) report in their study about Norwegian ski resorts that “the number of visits is clearly negatively related to price level, meaning that no purchasers and first-time visitors are more sensitive to price level as a criterion for choice of destination than repeat visitors.” When tourists visit a place several times, they develop emotional links with this place, resulting in a sense of identification with the destination and in place attachment (Alegre & Juaneda, 2006). Therefore, we assume that the effect of price on post purchase behaviour is lower the more often the tourist has visited a ski resort. This lower price sensitivity should also influence WOM behaviour. First time visitors’ and destination-naïve visitors’ recommendation behaviour will be negatively influenced by ticket prices. Heavy repeat visitors will recommend the ski resorts to others independent of the price.

This argument is also supported by literature on perceived risks. Perceived risk, as a “subjective expectation of a loss” (Sweeney, Soutar, & Johnson, 1999, p. 81), consists of several dimensions (i.e. financial, performance, physical, psychological, social, and time (Jacoby & Kaplan, 1972; Murray & Schacter, 1990)), of which financial risk is of relevance in this context. Financial risk “represents the perceived likelihood of not getting the best value for money resulting from an overpriced ticket ... In general, it is the risk that the service purchased may not be worth the money paid for it” (Boksberger, Bieger, & Laesser, 2007, p. 92). It has been found that in a tourism context, financial risk is negatively related (via image perceptions) to revisit intentions (Chew & Jabari, 2014). First time visitors of a ski resort will perceive higher financial risks as they have less knowledge about the ski resort and are less sure whether they get the value for the money spent. Repeat customers have more information about a vendor and as they have more information, they perceive lower levels of risk (Kim & Gupta, 2009). Hence, heavy repeat visitors know what they get for their money spent. Therefore, they perceive a very low or no financial risk, and price will not negatively influence their WOM.

Hence, we believe that

H1a. For first time visitors, ticket prices will negatively influence WOM.

H1b. For first time visitors, ticket prices will negatively moderate the influence of individual-level predictors on WOM.

H2a. For heavy repeat visitors, ticket prices will have no influence on WOM.

H2b. For heavy repeat visitors, ticket prices will not moderate the influence of individual-level predictors on WOM.

In the next section, we report the results of a large-scale empirical study in 55 Alpine ski resorts to test these proposed hypotheses.

3. Study

3.1. Data, scales and analytical procedure

Data for this study stem from a large scale customer satisfaction survey in 55 Alpine ski resorts from all over Europe. The survey was conducted in 2014. In line with other large scale customer satisfaction surveys (e.g. Hult, Morgeson, Morgan, Mithas, & Fornell, 2017),
attribute satisfaction and WOM were measured with single item measures on 10-point rating scales. For instance, the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) (http://www.theacsi.org/) relies on 10-point rating scales and single-item measures. The ACSI surveys more than 180,000 customers in more than 40 industries on a yearly basis, using 10-point rating scales and single-item measures. Single-item measures with an unambiguous meaning not encompassing various dimensions are considered predictively valid (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007, 2009). 10-point rating scales are advantageous in this setting because they yield greater data variance, achieve a higher measurement reliability and precision and enable detecting changes in satisfaction more easily (Krosnick & Presser, 2010; Wittink & Bayer, 1994). Questionnaires were translated by professional translation offices and were available in seven languages (German, English, French, Italian, Russian, Czech, and Polish). Translations were double-checked by industry experts (managers, professionals). The data collection was conducted by handing out a self-administered questionnaire to skiers in the ski resorts who agreed to participate in the study. As no information about the statistical population of ski tourists is available beforehand convenience sampling had to be applied. Data collection took place in highly frequented places in the ski area such as restaurants or lodges, where skiers were most easily reached and where data collection was most convenient for skiers. Each ski resort was accessed for data collection purposes at least four times between December and April covering the peak and off-peak season. For the research at hand only responses from first time visitors and heavy repeat visitors (more than 10 destination visits) were considered (Lam & Hsu, 2006). As in Fuchs and Reichel (2011, p. 271), visitors that have visited a destination more than 10 times were considered as “heavy repeat visitors”. Overall, 25,294 fully completed and usable questionnaires for the purpose of this study were available for data analysis (Table 1 displays the sample demographics and characteristics). Customer satisfaction with the size of the ski resort to friends/relatives? was measured on a 10-point-scale with the question “How likely is it that you recommend this ski resort to friends/relatives?” (1 = insufficiently, 10 = excellently). WOM was measured on a 10-point-scale with the question “How satisfied are you with …?” (1 = insufficiently, 10 = excellently). WOM was estimated that partitioned the variance in the outcome into within-destination variance, and between-destination variance on WOM. The dependent variable, WOM, is an individual-level construct. We test the model in four steps (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992; Liao & Chuang, 2004). In the first step, a null model with no predictors is estimated that partitioned the variance in the outcome into within-(level 1; individual level) and between- (level 2; destination level) unit components. The second step involves estimating a level 1 model within each destination with WOM regressed on individual-level predictors. In the level 2 analysis, constituting the third step, the estimated intercepts obtained from level 1 are used as outcome variables and regressed on destination-level predictors. In the fourth step, the slope estimates obtained from level 1 are regressed on the destination-level predictors to detect interaction effects between level 1 and level 2. We use z-values for our predictors (Heck & Thomas, 2015) and control for gender and skiing expertise at level 1.

4. Results

For hypotheses testing, we split the sample into two groups: first time visitors and heavy repeat visitors. Then, we conduct HLM for each of the groups separately (Table 2: first time visitors; Table 3 heavy repeat visitors). In the following, we first discuss the results for first time visitors and then for heavy repeat visitors.

Null model: To detect if there is significant between-destination variance in WOM, we estimate a null model with no predictors. The level 2 residual variance of the intercept is 0.06 and significant ($p < .001$). The intraclass correlation is 0.051, which means that 5.1 percent of the total variance in WOM is associated with destinations as opposed to 94.9 percent of the variance residing within individuals.

Main effects of individual-level predictors on WOM: Satisfaction with skiing characteristics exhibits an influence on WOM. Specifically, satisfaction with size of the ski resort (0.338, $p < .001$), quality of slopes (0.256, $p < .001$), and transport comfort of the ski lifts (0.185, $p < .001$) are positively associated with WOM.

Main effects of destination-level predictors on WOM: We test the effects of ticket prices, slope kilometres, and height difference on WOM. The results show that ticket prices are negatively related to WOM ($-0.053$,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Sample demographics and characteristics.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographics</strong></td>
<td><strong>Characteristics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (%)</td>
<td>Skiiing expertise (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-19</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-34</td>
<td>34.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>35-49</td>
<td>27.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>17.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (%)</td>
<td>Type of sport (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality (%)</td>
<td>Skiiing days per season (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For heavy repeat visitors, we repeat the procedure of analysis described above. Table 3 presents the results. The intraclass correlation is 0.068. Again, skiing characteristics exhibit a significant influence on WOM (size of the ski resort: 0.225; quality of slopes: 0.189; transport comfort of the ski lifts: 0.169; all p < .001). Different to first time visitors, however, destination-level predictors do not seem to be associated with WOM for heavy repeat visitors (ticket prices: −0.009; slope kilometres: −0.009; height difference: 0.024; all n.s.). In support of H2a, ticket prices have no influence on WOM for heavy repeat visitors. Furthermore, the relationship between skiing characteristics and WOM does not vary across destinations for heavy repeat visitors as we do not detect any significant interaction effects between individual-level and destination-level predictors on WOM. We thus find support for H2b proposing that ticket prices do not moderate the influence of individual-level predictors on WOM. As Table 3 shows the model including individual-level predictors is superior to the null model (Δ $X^2 = 7499.96$, Δ df = 11, $p < .001$). The model including destination-level predictors is inferior to the model including individual-level predictors only (Δ $X^2 = 7.38$, Δ df = 12, n.s.). Thus, destination-level predictors do not add to explain variance. Specifically, for destination-experienced tourists’ destination-level factors such as ticket prices, slope kilometres, or height difference do neither strengthen nor lower the positive effect of individual-level predictors on WOM.
5. Discussion and conclusion

We argued that WOM is a function of individual-level predictors (satisfaction with ski area characteristics), and group-level constructs (i.e. destination-level predictors like ticket prices, slope kilometres, and height difference), as well as their cross-level interactions. Our empirical study shows that three ski area characteristics (size of the ski resort/slope offering, quality of slopes, and transport comfort of the ski lifts) positively and significantly influence visitors' WOM and that ticket prices have a negative effect on specific visitor groups. When separating visitors into first time visitors and heavy repeat visitors (more than 10 times), we see that for heavy repeat visitors ticket prices have no significant impact on WOM, indicating that heavy repeat visitors' WOM behaviour is not influenced by prices, whereas there is a significant negative effect of price on WOM for first time visitors. With this finding we also confirm previous studies suggesting that repeat visitors respond less to external factors such as the price than first time or destination-naive visitors (Alegre & Juaneda, 2006).

This finding has important theoretical and managerial implications. First, this study contributes to the extensive literature that tries to describe behavioural and attitudinal differences between destination-naive and repeat visitors (Li et al., 2008; Oppermann, 1997; Tjørve et al., 2018), empirically showing the declining role of price. Thus, we corroborate literature on the satisfaction–loyalty–profitability chain that argues that loyal customers are more attractive as they are less sensitive to price (Kandampully, Zhang, & Bilgihan, 2015).

Research on price sensitivity however has also shown that the loyalty-price sensitivity relationship varies across product categories and consumers (e.g. Krishnamurthi & Papatli, 2003). Hence, while we confirm the general relationship between these constructs, additional research is needed to clarify the nature of this relationship in different contexts (i.e. different tourism and travel-related services) and for different customer segments. Satisfaction and loyalty research for example in ski resorts has shown that several personal, situational, and product factors (Matzler et al., 2008) as well as lifestyle, spending and skiing skills (Matzler et al., 2007) are important contingency factors to consider. We base our theoretical argumentation on the assumption that repeat visitors develop stronger emotional ties with a destination which in turn trigger a sense of identification and attachment (Alegre & Juaneda, 2006) and on a decreasing perceived financial risk that reduces the negative impact of ticket prices on WOM. While we believe that these effects occur in most tourist settings, there is no guarantee that our findings are generalizable to any context.

We also add another interesting facet to the satisfaction–loyalty—performance chain in tourism: WOM is considered an important key performance indicator (Reichheld, 2003) and driver of growth (Reichheld, 2003; Reichheld & Covey, 2006). We show that WOM of heavy repeat customers is not influenced by ticket prices. This is a particularly important finding as WOM is effective and powerful (Kandampully et al., 2015) and more impactful when it comes from credible and trustworthy sources. WOM is influential as it is transmitted personally and the content is based on personal experiences (Kandampully et al., 2015). The source of WOM is especially credible and trustworthy when it possesses a high degree of expertise, has more experience and is more knowledgeable (Bansal & Voyer, 2000) and when the message is rich and strong (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazarrol, 2008). Hence, heavy repeat visitors’ WOM will be particularly impactful.

Our findings obviously have important managerial implications. To further increase the ski resort’s performance, managers are advised to foster WOM activities of visitors. For instance, visitors could be encouraged to engage in electronic WOM (eWOM) activities. Social media platforms act as amplifiers of travel information and destinations can reach a wide audience through these channels (Luo & Zhong, 2015). Managers should be aware that for eWOM to be effective, it depends on how much the eWOM sender reveals about her/himself so that the WOM receiver can gauge homophily (Rosario, Sotgiu, Valck, & Bijmolt, 2016). Therefore, photographs and reviews about personal skiing experiences should be most impactful and convince prospects to visit the ski resort.

First time visitors and destination-naïve tourists are more responsive to prices in their WOM behaviour. Hence, smart tools of price differentiation between first-time and repeat visitors and segmentation with price sensitivity (Petrick, 2005) can be very effective to maximize returns. In our study, we include only ticket prices and do not look at spending behaviour of tourists in the destination. Hence, we do not add to the literature that investigates spending behaviour in the destination and argues that repeat visitors spend less as they are better informed and make a more efficient choice (based on lower prices) (Alegre & Juaneda, 2006). Furthermore, it would be important to know how ticket prices interact with other prices in a destination (e.g. accommodation), and how this interaction influences loyalty and WOM. Another avenue of research is price bundling and dynamic pricing, as it has been shown that these pricing tactics influence price fairness perceptions (Li, Hardesty, & Craig, 2018) and may also be related to price sensitivity (Munnukka, 2008). Furthermore, this study investigated how destination-level characteristics (price etc.) interact with individual-level characteristics (satisfaction with quality attributes). So, variance of destination-level data only exists between destinations but not within destinations and as such not between the individuals of a destination. Thus, future research could therefore investigate how price variances within destinations impact visitor behaviour such as WOM.

Finally, although data collection for this study is in line with other large scale satisfaction surveys (e.g. Hult et al., 2017), relying on single item measures might pose some problems. Research has demonstrated that results based on single item measures might vary across different situations (Diamantopoulos, Sarstedt, Fuchs, Wilczynski, & Kaiser, 2012). Generally, multi-item measures are better able to capture the continuous nature of a variable because this type of measurement provides more response variations (Diamantopoulos et al., 2012). Thus, relying on single item measures might pose problems for detecting existing relationships.

Author contribution

Kurt Matzler: Survey Development, Theoretical Framing & Discussion of Results.

Karín Teichmann: Statistical Analysis, Results & Discussion of Results.

Andreas Strobl: Theoretical Framing, Data Collection & Discussion of Results, Limitations.

Michael Partel: Survey Development, Sampling, Data Collection & Discussion of Results.

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