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DESTINATION ATTRACTIVENESS AND LOYALTY OF HEALTH TOURISM– A PERCEPTION STUDY

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ABSTRACT

With the globalisation of the healthcare, people began to travel to other destinations in search of wide variety of alternative treatment that brought them a healthy living. This trend has given birth to a fast growing niche tourism segment known as 'health tourism'. To attract more and more health tourists, it is essential to study, one of the important components in health tourism i.e., attractiveness of a destination. This study strives to analyse the perception of health tourists towards destination attractiveness and its influence on loyalty based on previous travel experience. The sampling group of the study consists of international tourists visiting Kerala for ayurvedic treatment and in order to distinguish their perception on the basis of previous travel experience they were segmented into first – time visitors and repeat visitors. The study concluded that the tourists' perceived the destination attractiveness attributes of health tourism in Kerala as moderate and there was a positive and strong relation between destination attractiveness and loyalty. Moreover, repeat visitors had more perception towards destination attractiveness compared to first – time visitors, revealing that previous travel experience influences their choice of destination. Therefore, the awareness about the destination attributes leading to loyalty between the first – time visitors and repeat visitors aids the destination managers in marketing their destination best.

KEYWORDS :Destination Attractiveness, Destination Loyalty, Previous Visit Experience, Ayurvedic Health Tourism, Kerala.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism, is one of the fastest growing and significant industries for many growing economies, like Asia, in terms of foreign exchange earnings and employment generation which contribute to economies' GDP (WTTC 2014). In addition to the change and innovations in the demographics, socio – economic and technological fields in tourism, the competition among tourists' destinations has increased significantly during recent years. In order to survive and compete with rivalries, these destinations are struggling to enhance their attractiveness and generate loyalty (Cracolici&Nijkamp, 2009; Owusu- Frimpong, Nwankwo, Blankson, &Tarnanidis, 2013). The cut throat competition has made the study of destination attractiveness an important subject in the market research of the tourism sector. One of the important elements for tourism managers is understanding tourists' behaviour. If tourists can be persuaded to return to a destination this will ensure both revenue and an opportunity to establish close relationship with the tourists (Petrick, 2004). Although, there are numerous studies applying loyalty in general tourism context, there is scarcely few studies investigating the relationship between these constructs in health tourism context.

Destination attractiveness can be described as a reflection of the feelings, beliefs and opinions that an individual has regarding the destination's ability to satisfy that person's special vacation needs (Hu & Ritchie, 1993). Recently, Medina-Muñoz & Medina-Muñoz (2013, p. 1) defined attractiveness as 'the destination's ability to attract and satisfy potential tourists'. In this sense, attractiveness is a subjective construct and thus depends ontourists' perceptions of destination attributes (Chen &Hsu, 2000; Manoj &Babu, 2008). Therefore, to enhance attractiveness, it is important to understand how tourists perceive destination attributes constituting the overall destination attractiveness (Taplin, 2012; Caber, Albayrak, &Matzler, 2012).

KERALA AS A HEALTH TOURISM DESTINATION FOR AYURVEDA

Kerala is a tourist's ecstasy and is a state withliberal social environment coupled with the outstanding tourism infrastructure, making it an ideal holiday destination and a haven for health tourism. It is a land of diverse attractions and unique tourism products like Ayurveda, backwaters, wildlife sanctuaries and fantastic beaches. Of these ayurvedic health tourism assumes prime importance as the contributor of a significant portion of the total earnings of tourism industry and is the USP of Kerala Tourism. The state has distinct advantages of cost – effectiveness, less waiting time and excellent product mix of medical systems such as Ayurveda, modern medicines, sidhha, yoga and meditation. It is the fast emerging health tourism hub in the Asian subcontinent. Kerala has attained a unique status in health care through the professionalism of the doctors and its paramedical services and has always been a prominent destination for international tourists from USA, Europe and other western countries. Though, there is immense potential for the state to develop it has utilised only little in ayurvedic health tourism. However the available literature reveals a scanty of studies in health tourism, in particular Ayurveda. Hence, the researcher made an attempt to fill this gap by developing a conceptual model and analysing the perception of health tourist towards destination attractiveness and its influence on loyalty. The proposed conceptual model of the study is presented in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

LITERATURE REVIEW
Destination Attractiveness

Destination attractiveness is a topic of importance in tourism research because of cut- throught competition and its influence on tourists' behaviour (Lee, Huang, &Yeh, 2010), particularly on loyalty (Buhalis, 2000; Chen & Hsu, 2000; Um, Chon, & Ro, 2006). Destination attractiveness has been investigated from two main angles: the supply-side and the demand-side perspectives (Formica &Uysal, 2006; Lee et al., 2010). According to the supply approach, attractiveness is the pull force generated by destination attractions (Formica &Uysal, 2006). On the other hand, in the demand-driven approach, destination attractiveness is based on tourists' evaluations of destination attributes (Kim, 1998; Um et al., 2006; Kim & Perdue, 2011).

In the past researches, destination attractiveness is measured either as multi – attribute or single – item approach. Kim (1998) summarized previous researches which measured destination attractiveness on multi – item scales. For example, Laws (1995) groupeddestination attributes into two main categories: innate characteristics, such as natural resources, and characteristics introduced mainly for tourists, such as accommodation and tourist activities. Although the first group represents the primary purpose of a touristic visit, the second group is necessary to reinforce destination attractiveness (Laws, 1995). More recently, Das, Mohapatra, Sharma, and Sarkar (2007) claimed that destination attractiveness might be analysed in terms of attractions, facilities and accessibility. Similarly, in the study about forest recreation tourism, Lee et al. (2010) identified four determinants of destination attractiveness: tourist attractions, accessibility, amenities and complementary services. It should be noted that perceptions of destination attributes may depend on tourists' region of origin (Chen &Hsu, 2000; Das et al., 2007). For example, Quintal et al. (2014) found significant differences between national and international visitors to Australia. Some studies used a single item measure of attractiveness (e.g. Chen & Hsu, 2000; Um et al., 2006; Das et al., 2007). Using this measure, destination attractiveness is defined as a holistic category not liable to be broken down into components (Das et al., 2007). Nevertheless, a single-measure approach does not provide insights on specific dimensions of destination attractiveness (Um et al., 2006). Therefore, the study used multi-attribute measures of destination attractiveness from a demand side perspective (e.g. Chen & Hsu, 2000; Gokovali, Bahar, &Kozak, 2007).

Loyalty

The concept of loyalty was used to enhance control and power in ancient times but in the 21st century loyalty is considered as an activity which all companies carry out to protect the market shares they have achieved by establishing customer loyalty. Customer loyalty is considered a significant gain in competitive markets (Srivastava, Sherwani, & Fahey, 2000). Loyalty has been described as 'tourists' commitment to adestination, expressed in a stable form over a prolonged period(San Martin, Collado, & Rodriguez del Bosque, 2013,p. 327). According to Petrick (2004), loyal tourists are more likelyto visit a destination again in the future and to generate positiveword-of-mouth recommendations. Therefore,

identifyingthe predictors of loyalty could enable destinations toallocate scarce resources more efficiently, thus increasingtourists' intentions of visiting (Prayag& Ryan, 2012).In their review of previous research, Prayag andRyan (2012) identified three main approaches to measuringloyalty: (i) behavioural data; (ii) attitudinal data; and (iii) acombination of both. Early studies (Oppermann, 2000;Yoon &Uysal, 2005) used a behavioural approach in whichloyalty implied repeated purchase or experience. Morerecently, scholars have recognized the need to consider theattitudinal component of loyalty (Moutinho, Albayrak, &Caber, 2012; Prayag& Ryan, 2012). Attitudinal loyaltydescribes a sense of emotional attachment to the destination,thus reflecting tourists' preferences (McKercher,Denizci-Guillet, & Ng, 2012). Various studies haveoperationalized attitudinal loyalty as intention to visit andintention to recommend the destination (Prayag& Ryan, 2012; San Martin et al., 2013). Lastly, the composite approach is an integration ofbehavioural and attitudinal measures (Yoon &Uysal,2005). A composite measure could include, for example,tourist preferences, as well as frequency of purchase,repeat purchase and total amount of purchase (Yoo&Bai, 2013). The measurement of loyalty in the context ofhealth travel is difficult because the purchase of atourism product is infrequent, perhaps even occurring oncein a lifetime (Pike & Bianchi, 2013). Even the most loyalvisitor may not have the opportunity to visit a distantdestination repeatedly. Therefore, for health travel, attitudinalloyalty can be a more appropriate measure of loyaltythan repeat visitation (Bianchi et al., 2014).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main aim of the study is to find the relationship between destination attractiveness and loyalty. The population used to determine the objective consisted of international tourists who visited Kerala for ayurvedic treatment. A sample of 150 respondents were selected by the researcher on the basis of convenience sampling for the attainment of the objective of the study. The survey used structured questionnaire as the data collection tool and constituted of three parts. The first part consisted of the questions relating to the respondents profile, the second part devoted statements measuring destination attractiveness. The third part consist of statements relating to loyalty. The measurement items were obtained and modified from prior research studies made by Baloglu and Mangaloglu (2001), Bindu et al (2009), Lee et al (2010), Manoj &Babu (2008). Each item in the scales was subject to the Likert style of grading; and participants views were scored as "Strongly Agree = 5 to Strongly Disagree = 1". Mean and Standard Deviation values were calculated in order to portray the views of the participants in terms of destination attractiveness in the study. In addition, the Pearson correlation analysis was applied to determine the relationship between destination attractiveness and loyalty and a multiple regression analysis was established to determine the cause and effect relationship between the variables. The collected data was processed by using IBM SPSS version 20.0. The study used 25 statements to measure the destination attractiveness. By the use of factor analysis, 25 statements were condensed to five factors namely 'medical image', 'opportunity', 'benefits', 'touristsattraction', and 'promotion'. In the later part of the study, these factors were considered as independent variables. Based on these factors, the following hypotheses are developed:

H1: Tourists Attraction positively affects loyalty
H2: Medical Image positively affects loyalty
H3: Opportunity positively affects loyalty
H4: Benefitspositively affects loyalty
H5: Promotion positively affects loyalty

STUDY FINDINGS

Respondents Profile

The distribution of respondents characteristics in the sampling group of the study are presented in Table 1. It can be observed from the table that in case of first time visitors, majority (69.76 per cent) were male, 46.52 per cent of them were between the age group between 26 – 45 years and 67.45 per cent were married and were serving for private concerns (44.18 per cent). In case of repeat visitors, majority (54.68 per cent) of the respondents are male and fall under the age group 26 – 45 years (53.23 per cent). Majority of them were married (85.07 per cent) and working in government firms (29.68 per cent).

Table 1: Respondents Profile

Respondents Profile		Total (in %)	First – time visitors (in %) N = 86	Repeat visitors (in %) N = 64
Gender	Male	63.33	69.76	54.68
	Female	36.67	30.24	45.32
Age	Up to 25	6.66	5.81	10.93
	26 – 45	49.34	46.52	53.23
	46 – 65	34.00	41.86	23.44
	Above 65	10.00	5.81	12.50
Marital Status	Single	23.33	32.55	10.93
	Married	76.67	67.45	85.07
Occupation	Govt. Employee	16.66	6.98	29.68
	Pvt. Employee	33.33	44.18	18.76
	Businessmen	23.34	23.26	23.44
	Housewife	20.00	18.61	21.87
	Students	6.67	6.97	6.25

Source: Primary Data

Dimensional Differences in Perception of Destination Attractiveness

To identify the destination attributes constituting to the destination attractiveness, a factor analysis was conducted on 25 statements representing the construct and the results are represented in Table 2. The Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin measures of sampling adequacy value was 0.74 which was greater than the recommended value 0.60 (Kaiser, 1974) revealing the sample were adequate for performing factor analysis and the Barttlet's test of Spericity reached significance at five per cent stating that the statements were correlated to each other. As recommended by Hair et al. (2006), factor loadings greater than 0.50 were considered to obtain a strong effect on the variable. The final solution derived five factors with 18 attributes that explained 55.52 per cent of the total variance. The factors were termed as 'medical image', 'opportunity', 'benefits', 'tourists attraction', and 'promotion'. The reliability test was conducted on all the five factors and the Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.75 to 0.89 which was above the acceptable value suggested by Nunnally (1987), signifying a strong contributions of each item within the factors.

Table 2: Dimensions of Destination Attractiveness

Factors	Components					% of Variance	Cronbach's Alpha Value	Factor Name
	1	2	3	4	5			
Quality Infrastructure & other Equipments	.757					14.52	0.89	**Medical Image**
Certification of the Ayurvedic Health care centres.	.669							
Efficiency and results of treatments	.621							
Confidence in Services Received	.574							
Personalised care provided by competent physicians	.504							
Type of Ayurvedic treatment not available in your home town		.735				11.60	0.85	**Opportunity**
Experiencing Ayurveda in its traditional form along with yoga and meditation		.653						
Wide range of Ayurvedic treatments available in Kerala.		.582						
Less expensive compared to your home town			.725			10.89	0.80	**Benefits**
Shorter waiting time for treatment compared to your hometown			.700					
Treatment given in Kerala is worth for money spent			.685					
Reputation of Kerala as a popular Ayurveda destination				.747		10.05	0.79	**Tourists Attractions**
Great place for relaxation after treatment for recapturing patients				.625				
Humidity in the climate that best suits for ayurvedic treatment				.611				
Advertisements in the Print Medias, railways and bus stand					.699	8.44	0.75	**Promotion**
Participation in trade fair, conferences, exhibitions, etc.					.577			
Internet Advertisements & Provision for online health newsletters					.509			

Source: Computed Data

For the purpose of the study, the tourist were separated based on the previous travel experience as first time visitors and repeat visitors. To investigate,the distinction in the perception of tourists based on previous travel experience with the destination, an independent sample t – test was used and the results are depicted in Table 3. It could be observed from the mean value of each construct that the tourists perceived the destination attractiveness attributes as moderate since their values lies around 3 and it showed that mean value of Opportunity was high for both groups, repeat visitors expressed more favourable perception (3.83) than first time visitors (3.69) with this dimension. Moreover, the mean value for promotion was low for both groups, where repeat visitors expressed more perception (2.79) than first time visitors (2.41). The findings of t – test revealed a significant differences in all five factors of destination attractiveness. In other words, previous visit experience has a significant effect on the tourist decision making while the choice of a destination.

Table 3: Dimensional Differences in Perception of Destination Attractiveness

Determinants of Destination Attraction	First – time visitors		Repeat visitors		T	sig
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Tourists Attractions	3.21	.777	3.66	.351	3.71	.040*
Medical Image	3.40	.921	3.57	1.02	2.29	.000*
Benefits	3.68	1.08	3.77	.859	2.63	.005*
Opportunity	3.69	0.847	3.83	1.12	2.43	.000*
Promotions	2.41	.453	2.79	.287	2.59	.049*

Source: Primary Data
Note: * significant at five per cent level

Determinants of Destination Attraction as a predictor of Loyalty

To assess how the destination attractiveness dimensions impacted on destination loyalty based on previous travel visitation, a multiple regression analysis was conducted for each group of respondents and the results are presented in Table 4. The factors which emerged from factor analysis (medical image, benefits, opportunity, tourists attractions and promotion) were used as independent variables and loyalty as dependent variable. The findings revealed that, in case of first – time visitors the multiple regression model was fit as their F – value was significant at five per cent (F – value = 12.59, p<0.01) and the R^2 value was 0.45 revealing that 45 per cent of the variation in loyalty are explained by the destination attractiveness dimensions. An examination of the t – value reveals that all the dimensions were significant which had an impact on loyalty. Thus, supporting all the hypotheses. For repeat visitors, the model predicted 67.9 per cent of the variations in loyalty is explained by the dimensions of destination attractiveness and their t – values of all the factors were significant at five per cent level, supporting all the hypotheses. This indicates that the previous travel visitation has an effect on the relationship between the destination attractiveness and loyalty and such an effect that if the tourists has a previous visit experience to a destination he is likely to be more loyal than one who visits a destination for the first time.

Table 4: Determinants of Destination Attraction as a predictor of Loyalty

Variables	First time visitors			Repeat Visitors		
	Std. Co - efficient	t	sig	Std. Co - efficient	t	Sig
Constant	0.421			0.53		
Tourist Attraction	0.17	1.86	.510	0.37	8.69	.650*
Medical Image	0.23	1.59	.040	0.69	5.79	.000*
Benefits	0.26	3.50	.000	0.52	2.96	.000*
Opportunity	0.26	2.07	.000	0.66	7.45	.000*
Promotion	0.15	1.68	.610	0.25	3.69	.031*
R^2	0.453			0.679		
F – value	12.97 (p =.000*)			8.95 (p = .000*)		

Source: Computed Data

Note: * significant at five per cent level

CONCLUSION

Health tourism is the fastest growing niche tourism segment all around the world. Kerala, is considered as the hub of health tourism in India. In order to sustain in this competitive environment it is very essential to know their competitive advantage. In this context, the importance of destination attractiveness arises. Attractiveness is nothing but the ability of the destination to satisfy the tourist needs. Hence, a study highlighting the attractiveness of health tourism and its influence on the loyalty on the basis of previous travel visitation has been studied. The results of the study reveal that destination attractiveness has impacted on loyalty and it is very much influenced by the previous travel experience of the tourist to that destination. This study provides the major factors which can be used as the promotional tool for attracting potential tourists as well as to sustain the existing tourists.

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