Chapter 7

Nature-Based Tourism: A Study on Consumer Behavior When Participating in Camping Activities

Sandra Filipe
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4159-758X
University of Aveiro, Portugal

Belem Barbosa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4057-360X
University of Aveiro, Portugal

Claudia Amaral Santos
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2630-294X
University of Aveiro, Portugal

ABSTRACT

This chapter is based on consumer behavior theories and analyses consumers’ perspectives about camping as a tourism alternative. It explores motivations and several relevant factors that influence the attitudes and behaviors of tourists regarding camping activities. The methodology was qualitative and used focus groups as a data collection tool. A content and thematic analysis was adopted as data mining technique. Results provide empirical support to the influence of subjective norms, relevant others’ preference for camping, and sustainable consumer profile on attitudes toward camping which influence camping intention. Moreover, camping intention, motivations, relevant others’ preference for camping, perceived control, and past experience affect camping behavior. Overall, this chapter shows that consumer behavior theories and models provide very interesting cues on campers’ decision process, offering alternative and complementing views to the extant literature, namely to the studies using the popular push-pull approach.

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INTRODUCTION

Nature-based tourism (NBT) and leisure travel to the wilderness has grown in most countries of the world, namely as a strategy to compensate for the frequent absence of nature in the urban lifestyle (Park, Ellis, Kim, & Prideaux, 2010; Priskin, 2001; Waitt, Lane, & Head, 2003). One modality that stands out is camping. Although previously considered a niche market, it has emerged as an important tourism alternative and the economic impact of this sector at the European level has been witnessing a continuous growth (Mikulić, Prebežac, Šerić, & Krešić, 2017).

Despite the rising trends in NBT and camping, albeit with some exceptions (e.g., Garst, Williams, & Roggenbuck, 2010; Hardy & Kirkpatrick, 2017; Hassell, Moore, & Macbeth, 2015; Triantafillidou & Siomkos, 2013), the attitudes and behaviors of consumers toward camping activities are under-researched by marketing and tourism literature, calling for further investigation (Van Heerden, 2010). Mikulić et al. (2017) and O’Neill, Riscinto-Kozub, and Van Hyfte (2010) stressed that essential aspects, from camping experiences and campers’ satisfaction to customer attraction and retention, have been neglected by research on consumer behavior regarding camping tourism.

This chapter adopts a consumer behavior approach to campers’ experiences and behavior and aims to contribute to fill this gap in the literature. Its main objective is to explore motivations and other relevant factors that explain the adoption of this tourism alternative. To accomplish this purpose, the chapter builds on theories and models frequently used to explain consumer behavior.

BACKGROUND

NBT stands out as a type of tourism that offers the opportunity to indulge the natural heritage. Despite its current popularity, the preference for nature tourism is not new. In the 90s, Lindberg (1991) identified four segments of nature tourists with distinct motivations and experiences: (i) hard-core nature tourists, including people with educational purposes; (ii) dedicated nature tourists, focusing on tourists looking for protected areas or wanting to learn about local, natural and cultural history; (iii) mainstream nature tourists, comprising people who visit destinations primarily to take an unusual trip; (iv) casual nature-tourists, including tourists who experience nature incidentally or as a part of a broader trip. Naturally, these diverse tourist profiles impact the characteristics of nature tourism offers, namely by considering the nature immersion that is desired by tourists (Shafer & Choi, 2006). Faced with a variety of outdoor activities, consumers can choose from a simple hiking trail or a bike tour while staying in a hotel, to a more intense NBT experience such as camping.

Camping was originally defined as the activity of living in a tent, in nature, and was associated with a low-cost accommodation option when on holiday (Blichfeldt & Mikkelsen, 2014). However, camping has evolved. According to Moghimehfar and Halpenny (2016), camping can range from spending at least one night in a basic tent to staying in a full-service campground in a luxury recreational vehicle. This study focuses on the analysis of consumer behavior regarding the tourism option that uses the tent as accommodation.

Collins and Kearns (2010, p. 59) stated that “if all-inclusive resorts and luxury hotels are one end of the tourism accommodation spectrum, then campgrounds surely lie at the other”. The authors noted that, beyond issues of comfort and cost, campgrounds are distinctive forms of accommodation in two aspects: (i) the real accommodation (tent) is generally owned by the user, hence what is paid for is just