Exploring the Tourist Satisfaction in Suburban Agritourism Destinations Through an Importance-performance Analysis Approach

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Keywords: Tourist satisfaction; Agritourism; Suburban areas; Importance-performance analysis; Chengdu.

Abstract. The urbanization process has developed rapidly while agriculture extended itself to the tertiary industry. Suburban agritourism with obvious regional transportation advantages has started to be popular among citizens in China. By analyzing the data derived from an on-site questionnaire survey with IPA (Importance-Performance Analysis) technique, this study examined how tourists evaluate their experience in these agritourism destinations outside the urban area of Chengdu, a large city in the southwest of China. Results showed the awareness of importance is significantly stronger than that of satisfaction. Agroecology is an important factor in determining the satisfaction of tourists. Tourists have different perceptions about satisfaction regarding leisure, shopping and entertainment. And the perception of the importance of price is relatively low, similar to the satisfaction of accommodation. Practical and theoretical implications were carried out for both academia and practitioners.

Introduction

Agritourism is no longer a niche phenomenon, it has developed globally throughout the past decades[1, 2, 3, 4]. There are tons of cases which prove that the development model based on the traditional agricultural production is unsustainable. By keeping this path, rural communities have already started to be inactivated worldwide. The narrowing of the rural areas brought by urbanization and industrialization is becoming a global problem[5]. However, as a high value-added business, tourism combines agricultural production and tourism services, which not only promotes a balance between supply and demand, but also creates opportunities for urban-rural integration and sustainable development [6]. On the one hand, agritourism brings the countryside and other agriculture-based areas economic benefits, allowing farmers to utilize the resource in their hand maximally. On the other hand, it does offer an alternative lifestyle and another way of making a living for the people who lived in those places. Under this circumstance, suburban agritourism emerged at the right moment, promoted by a bulk of government policies. With the advantages of convenient traffic, huge market demand and good ecological environment, suburban agritourism spots have become a wonderful destination choice for urban residents' daily leisure and recreational requirement. Hence, Social and economic benefits coming along with it cannot be ignored. As far as the authors are aware, in this thread of the literature, there are plenty studies that focus on western context, but Chinese cases are scant[7, 8, 9, 10, 11]. Due to the diverse cultural background between China and western countries, situation could be remarkably different especially in the agritourism aspect because of the land regulations. Based on the development of suburban agritourism in China, present study selected three representative suburban agritourism spots as research objects, and investigated the satisfaction of tourists from the scope of facilities, environment, services and etc. employing importance-performance analysis approach in order to understand the preferences of tourists, find a suitable development model, and improve the quality of suburban tourist experience.
Literature Review

Suburban Agritourism

Agritourism can be regarded as a specific economic activity within the broader definition of rural tourism[7]. It can be described as a combination of tourist activities that combine rural living, passive or active involvement of guests in agritourism activities, local culture, and genuine food. Apart from the original core of agriculture, agritourism also plays an important role in education, heritage preservation and rural entrepreneurship [9,12,13]. If we laying our eyes on China, we could figure that not all the agritourism is operating in rural area. The rural-urban fringe areas, as in suburbs, possesses the whole function like the rural village does, but with closer distance to the urban area and more sophisticated infrastructure than rural areas. Therefore, the suburban section serves as great soil for agritourism to happen and grow. Nevertheless, no specific study has been found to pay attention to suburban agritourism. The research topics of agritourism are mainly focused on two aspects. First, the supplier of agritourism, which to be precise, the farmers and their performance on agritourism. Tew and Barbieri used the data from agritourism farms in Missouri indicated that both economic and non-economic benefits could be obtained through agritourism, and farm business and familial characteristics are associated with the perceived benefits from agritourism[11]. Similarly, Arroyo, Barbieri, and Rich conducted a comparative study from the perspective of stakeholders in Missouri and North Carolina so as to define agritourism by different attributes. Another topic is about the demand, in other words, the tourist[14]. Carpio et al. illustrated the elements that will influence the tourists’ decision, and explored their economic perceptions towards the agritourism destination[8]. Otherwise, Norby and Retallick and Srikatanyoo et al. investigated the motivations of tourist participating agritourism activities which is a prominent question in those type of research[10,15]. Clearly, there is rare thought considering the Chinese phenomenon. In our study, we seek to contribute a Chinese case to a body of these domain.

Tourist Satisfaction

At the end of the last century, American scholar Pizam and others took the lead in researching tourist satisfaction of destinations, and proposed that tourist satisfaction is a vague concept, which is interpreted explicitly as the interaction of tourists' expectations and experiences with tourist destinations[16]. Regardless the debate about tourist satisfaction, it still holds a very important position in assessing one destination by measuring the sensual experience of tourist. Literature seldomly shine the light on this issue. Only some scholars made some efforts to examine tourists’ attitudes about agritourism experience based on the expectancy disconfirmation theory, social exchange theory and resource theory, which urges us to take a further, wider look from another context for the sake of getting better knowledge concerning the operation of agritourism[17, 18]. Drawing the essence from previous research, this study mainly adopts factors namely “catering, accommodation, transportation, sightseeing, shopping, entertainment, overall impression” to construct an evaluation system for the satisfaction of suburban agritourism tourists.

Research Location

Nong-Jia-Le (to visit a happy farmer’s family and enjoy a rural leisure lifestyle) began to gain its popularity in China during the late of twentieth century while Sichuan Province is regarded as the birthplace of this kind of tourism business [19]. And Chengdu, as provincial capital of Sichuan, is taking the lead in tourism industry. At present, Chengdu's agritourism basically covers urban areas (districts) and counties, forming an agritourism brand with local characteristics, and the market competitiveness is gradually strengthened. All of our research objects are situated near Chengdu, with different features, and have a history of implementing agritourism. They are Qingcheng Bay Park, Huaxi Farm, and Shaxi Nong-jia-le.
Research Method

We developed a self-administered questionnaire to detect how tourists feel about their trip in those agritourism spots. Primarily, on the basis of previous researchers’ contribution, 7 dimensions were obtained and 22 related items were formed in terms of these factors’ domain. The items were measured by a five-point Likert scale. Following that, demographic information survey was also added into the questionnaire. On-site survey was carried out by the second and third author in October, 2018 which is the national holiday in China. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed and 148 were returned completed (i.e. a 98.7% response rate). At last, 127 were proven to be effective. The data then was screened and analyzed by SPSS 25.0. Importance–performance analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the data. IPA is a simple and effective technique that can assist practitioners in prioritizing customer attributes when enhancing service quality and customer satisfaction which have been found to be a useful and versatile tool in tourism and hospitality research.

Table 1. Suburban Agritourism Satisfaction Evaluation Index.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catering Service</td>
<td>Freshness of Food, Hygiene of Food, Price of Food, Characteristics of Food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>Comfortness, Tidiness &amp; Cleaness, Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>Convenience, Travel Safety, Parking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel Experience</td>
<td>Travel Environment, Residents’ Attitudes, Leisure Facility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase Experience</td>
<td>Price of Goods, Features of Goods, Service Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment Experience</td>
<td>Authenticity, Originality, Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Impression</td>
<td>Service Attitude, Service Efficiency, Ecological Environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Sample Characteristics

The proportion of male tourists participating in the survey was 50.3%, and that of female tourists was 49.6%. Most visitors are between the ages of 19-30 (48%) and between 31-44 (25.9%). The majority of visitors holds a bachelor degree (44.0%). And more than half of tourists’ household mostly varies from 3000 RMB to 5000 RMB (53.5%). Nearly half of them (42.5%) travel once or more to agritourism spots per year. It can be seen that a group of relatively young, well-educated, regular tourists with middle and high income are the main force of consuming agritourism product. Not surprisingly, in the survey, 83.46% of the tourists were from places within Sichuan Province, indicating that the suburban agritourism was highly wanted by the tourists in the province and the acceptability was high. Self-owned car (70.8%) is the most popular way to agritourism destinations among tourists. And the primary motives of this trip falls on release of stress (83.46%) and physical and mental relaxation (61.42%), representing that people’s participation in agritourism activities is mainly to relieve the pressure from life and work, and to maintain physical and mental freedom and tranquility.

Importance-performance Analysis

Firstly, an internal consistency test of 22 related items was performed using SPSS 25.0, and the Cronbach’s α value was 0.955. The results showed that the reliability of the scale is very good. Next, IPA analysis was employed. The data showed that the total mean of 22 items under the importance of agritourism in Chengdu suburbs was 4.182, and that of satisfaction was 3.068. This point of
I=4.182 and P=3.068 was the coordinate origin. Based on the intersection point, the vertical intersecting coordinate axes were drawn, the IPA map is divided into four quadrants, and the vertical intersection points of each pair of the 22 pairs of items were marked in corresponding positions in the quadrant.

![IPA Grid for Items](image)

Figure 1. IPA Grid for Items.

As shown in Fig. 1, the first quadrant has nine items: Freshness of Food, Hygiene of Food, Convenience, Travel Safety, Travel Environment, Security, Service Attitude, Service Efficiency, Ecological Environment. These items are the factor that tourists consider to be both important and satisfactory.

The items in the second quadrant are: Price of Food, Characteristics of Food, Parking, Residents’ Attitudes, Leisure Facility, Price of Goods, Features of Goods, Service Quality, Authenticity, Originality. These 10 items can only be the basic functions of one destination, which is not enough to influence views and perceptions of tourists to a suburban agritourism spot.

The item in the third quadrant of the IPA chart is only the Innovation. This quadrant is expressed as an area where tourists think it is not important or satisfied. The items in the fourth quadrant of the IPA chart are Comfortness and Tidiness & Cleanness. These two items are considered important by tourists, but they are actually not satisfied. The difference between expectation and perception is large, indicating that these two are significant factors affecting the satisfaction of agritourists.

**Conclusion**

This study used the IPA analysis method to investigate the tourist satisfaction of participating in suburban agritourism spots outside Chengdu, and comprehensively evaluated the factors that affect its satisfaction. Based upon what we have, the following brief conclusions could be drew:

Firstly, agroecology is an important factor in determining tourist satisfaction.

Secondly, tourists have different perceptions of travel, purchase and entertainment satisfaction, but the degree of importance of those dimensions is the on the same side.

Thirdly, tourists’ perception of the importance of price is generally not high.

Last but not least, tourists have a negative perception of the accommodation in the suburbs of Chengdu, thus their satisfaction is very poor.

For agritourism practitioners and policy makers, optimize and upgrade the supporting infrastructure is their priority. The government should strengthen the management and support of the farms, give financial support and inclination to the destination where has the potential to attract agritourists. Deepen the development of special agritourism products is urgent as well. Moreover, target-oriented marketing strategy will be of a lot of use in terms of drawing attention from outside the province. Due to the fact that most of tourists is within the province. Next level of market contains huge potential needed to explore.

No doubt that this study is a pilot probe in Chinese context. The principal objective of this study is to take a little glance on this huge but not fully understandable market, to see if there is still something unsolved that need us to answer. The knowledge output related to this issue that generated by Chinese scholars is mainly in Mandarin. Scarce publications can be found from
international academia. This study gives a representative Chinese case regarding the on-site experience of agritourism’s consumer. However, in the limitation of man power and financial issues, a larger scale or longitudinal study seems to be impossible for us to operate. Besides, the method applied in the data analysis part is appreciably traditional. Future attempts could focus on the methodological triangulation using different data source (e.g. in-depth interview, secondary data) and analytical techniques (e.g. content analysis, grounded theory) to validate the results. Both quantitative and qualitative approach is welcome to this domain. In the future, mixed research is of many advantages towards the experience of agritourism.

References
