UNDERSTANDING GOLF TOURISM: INSIGHTS FROM ROLE THEORY

Heather Gibson & Lori Pennington-Gray, University of Florida

Context

Since the mid 1990s much discussion in sport tourism has been dominated by definitional debates; the pressing issue now appears to be, how do we better understand and explain sport tourism? Gibson (1998, 2002, 2004) suggested one way to achieve this goal is to frame studies in theories and concepts from other relevant disciplines. Following this view, we suggest that role theory as applied in tourism studies might provide a framework to help classify and explain different types of sport tourist. We illustrate the potential using one form of active sport tourist, the golfer.

In sociology, there have been two perspectives on role theory, one largely functionalist, where roles are largely deterministic (Linton, 1936; Parsons, 1951) the other largely symbolic interactionist, where individuals create roles in a particular social context (Mead, 1934). To attempt to provide some conceptual clarity, several scholars suggested developing an integrated theory (e.g., Biddle, 1986; Hilbert, 1981; Turner, 1979/80). Turner defined a role as "a comprehensive pattern for behaviour and attitude, constituting a socially identified part in social interaction and capable of being enacted recognizably by different individuals" (1979:123). Indeed, Biddle suggested a need to develop a theory accounting for both the influence of society and individuals as active participants in their worlds. Role theory has been applied to tourism behaviour since the 1970s. Cohen (1972) first used the concept to distinguish four types of tourist: the organized mass tourist, the independent mass tourist, the explorer and the drifter. Since then, scholars have extended his work by developing several typologies (e.g., Pearce, 1985; Mo, Howard & Havitz, 1993; Yiannakis, 1986; Yiannakis & Gibson, 1992). Cohen (1972) and Ryan (1997) suggested it is likely that individuals enact more than one role on a trip, and Gibson and Yiannakis (2002) confirmed this may be so, but found individuals appeared to choose roles with similar characteristics (such as novelty, risk and spontaneity), and that it is usually possible to identify a dominant role characterising a particular vacation. In turn, it is possible to distinguish roles that are likely to cluster together.

This logic can also be applied to sport tourism, as we know that some sport tourists are uni-dimensional in their behaviour (Faulkner et al's [1998] "sport junkies"), whereas others take part in non sport-related behaviours while attending sports events (Ritchie, Mosedale, & King, 2000). Certainly, in relation to golf tourists, Priestly (1995) identified three types based on their preference for either a budget or upscale style of vacation, or their nostalgic motivations to embark on pilgrimages to visit the famous courses in Scotland, particularly the Mecca of golf at St Andrews. Cohen (1984) suggested motivations for tourism should be contextualized in an individual's life-long plans and needs. Since then, various scholars have applied the family life cycle and life span perspectives to understanding tourists' behaviour (e.g., Lawson, 1991; Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002). Such studies lend further support to the contention that to understand sport tourism behaviour we need to address both social and psychological facets. They also support the idea that role choice is a function of both internal and external factors. The influence of social structure, particularly gender, is important, substantive work in both sport and tourism studies suggesting that men and women experience sport and tourism differently (e.g., Butler, 1995; Cole, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994; Kinnaird & Hall, 1994). Thus, in developing a framework to understand and explain different types of sport tourism behaviour, we propose that role theory, life stage, and gender may be useful starting points. To illustrate these ideas, we use a secondary data source to examine one of the most popular forms of active sport tourism, travelling to play golf.

Methods

This study used secondary data collected in 1995 by Coopers & Lybrand Consulting for the Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC). A sub-sample of 492 respondents who indicated that golf was an important part of their travel was analysed, ranging in age from 15 to over 65 years. More than half (58%) had some post-secondary education; 55% reported an annual household income higher than Can$50,000, and more than half (53%) were male. Two scales from the questionnaire were used in

addition to five demographic items. One measured general travel preferences and the other attitudes to travel. Using SPSS, descriptive statistics were computed, then responses to a list of preferences for travel were analyzed using hierarchical and non-hierarchical cluster analysis. To further clarify the results from the cluster analysis, analysis of variance and discriminant analysis were used. Finally, demographics and attitudes towards pleasure travel were examined in relation to each cluster.

Results

Ward's hierarchical clustering method was used to determine the number of clusters (National Statistics, 2005). An examination of the dendrograms and agglomeration coefficients suggested four clusters. These four were used *a priori* in a follow-up non-hierarchical (K-means) cluster analysis. The results of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that they were statistically different.

Cluster I comprised golf tourists who preferred destinations that provided value for money (M=2.05) and budget accommodations (M=2.87). These tourists sought opportunities for alpine skiing (M=2.10), water sports (M=2.82), hunting/fishing (M=2.29), casinos/gambling (M=2.05) and nightlife (M=2.91) when travelling for pleasure. They tended to be male (57.8%) and aged between 30 and 39.

Cluster II tourists preferred high quality restaurants (M=2.44), outstanding scenery (M=3.53), environmental quality (M=3.49), outdoor activities (M=2.64), national or provincial parks (M=3.16), and museums and art galleries (M=2.49). They tended to be aged 40 and above, and college educated.

Cluster III golf tourists placed more importance on a range of activities while on vacation, reporting that opportunities for arts and cultural attractions (M=2.58), spectator sporting events (M=2.76), shopping (M=3.35), beaches and sunbathing (M=3.22) and theme parks (M =2.58) were important. They were more likely to prefer package trips (M=2.72) and availability of activities for the entire family (M=3.43). They tended to be younger than the other types, at between 15 and 29 years.

Cluster IV tourists reported they liked going to the same place every year (M=2.25), do not like to travel (M=1.38), in fact regarding long-distance travel as a hassle (M=1.88). They were aged between 60 and 64 (7%), were slightly more female (57.8%) and married (74.2%).

Discussion

The overall purpose of this paper was to suggest a theoretical approach that could be used to increase our understanding of sport tourism behaviour. While the dataset used should be viewed as illustrative and constrained by the limitations associated with secondary data, our findings appear to provide initial support for the proposition that role theory might provide some insights for sport tourism research. The identification of four types of golf tourist appears to partly reflect some of the current debates as to how to classify sport tourists. For example, Cluster I appears to exemplify the pure sport tourist, Faulkner et al's (1998) 'sport junkie.' Conversely, the other three clusters appear to support the supposition that for some tourists sport may not be the primary purpose of their trip (Glyptis, 1991; Gammon & Robinson, 2003). The distinct preferences, behaviours and demographic characteristics associated with each cluster may also indicate not only of the influence of gender, class and life stage but also of Zurcher's (1977) and Turner's (1976) hypothesis that Americans are now more influenced by preferences than norms largely as a result of the pervasive influence of the mass media. Certainly, when investigating a domain like sport tourism where preferences may largely govern the choice of behaviour, perhaps the true value of role theory for future research lies in helping us to understand the influence of preferences and lifestyles on sport tourism choices.

Selected References

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Contact: hgibson@hhp.ufl.edu