The Role of Consumer Involvement in Environmental Concern, Intention to Protect Environment and Word of Mouth/E-word of Mouth Intentions among Outdoor Sport Recreationists.

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The natural environment-related research terrain recently received tremendous attention from scholars in many academic disciplines. Recently, Kotlar (2011) emphasized the need for environmentally sustainable marketing practices due to the changes of economy and consumers’ lifestyle. He also suggested that scholars would need to accumulate background knowledge on natural environmentalists as a consumer segment.

In the park and recreation field, Dunlap and Heffernan (1975) argued that outdoor recreationists are more likely to care about the natural environment because they interact with nature when participating in outdoor recreational activities.

In response to the call for more research on the issue, the current study examined the differences of outdoor recreationists’ environmental concerns and their behavioral intention to protect the natural environment based on their level of enduring involvement in recreational activities. Moreover, it is hypothesized that the level of involvement positively influences recreationists’ word of mouth (WOM) behavior in both online and offline mediums. In consideration of the existing void of research on this important segment, this study will contribute to the literature in sport management and marketing.

Iwasaki and Havitz (2004) define involvement as “an unobservable state of motivation, arousal, or interest toward a recreational activity or associated product” (p49). Involvement is one of the most important indicators in predicting leisure and recreational sport participation. Involvement is also regarded as an important consumer variable used for segmenting recreationists (Fesenmaier & Johnson, 1989; Park et al., 2002; McGehee et al., 2003; Ritchie et al., 2010).

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between outdoor sport recreationists’ psychological characteristics and their behavioral patterns. Kyle et al. (2003), for example, found that recreationists’ involvement level positively influenced their affinity toward a place. Additionally, Vaske and Kobrin’s study (2001) revealed that psychological attachment toward places also have positive impact on environmentally responsible behavior. It maybe because highly involved recreationists are more likely to protect their favored places. In a similar vein, it is believed that there are significant differences between the high and low levels of outdoor recreationists’ involvement in terms of their environmental concerns and intentions to protect the environment. Therefore, the first and second hypotheses were developed:

H1: High involvement outdoor recreationists have stronger environmental concerns than the low involvement group does.

H2: High involvement outdoor recreationists have stronger intentions toward environmental protection than the low involvement group does.

There are two forms of WOM behaviors. According to Bickart and Schindler (2001), WOM (offline) is based on spoken-face-to-face communications between a person others who are friends or relatives, while e-WOM is more influential with respect to its speed, contagiousness, and convenience due to the development of Internet and computer technology (Phelps et al., 2004). Whereas the information receivers of offline WOM are usually friends and relatives, receivers of e-WOM can be a mass audience through the Internet communication medium (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). In many cases, both receivers and transmitters may not be recognizable in e-WOM. However, little is known about recreationists’ WOM and e-WOM behavior to date. Positive attitudes such as satisfaction, commitment, or attachment toward products are required for people to transmit WOM or e-WOM. These psychological variables were found to be predicted by involvement (Kyle et al., 2003). Hence, consumers’ WOM can be different based on their level of involvement. However, Consumers’ intentions to transmit WOM and e-WOM can
According to Cohen (1978), when a large number of people visit a place, it could negatively impact that place (e.g., traffic jam). Those who are attached to places (associated with natural resources) may not want to share information about the location to many other people to avoid heavy use of the places through increased tourism activities. Hence, it is assumed that highly involved recreationists are more likely to transmit WOM, but the strength of intention to transmit e-WOM can be weaker due to the aforementioned characteristics of face-to-face communications and online interactions.

H3: Highly involved outdoor recreationists are more likely to transmit word-of-mouth.

H4: Highly involved outdoor recreationists are less likely to transmit e-word-of-mouth.

Data was collected at Nozawa Onsen Ski Resort in Japan (March 3rd, 2011). Questionnaires were distributed to visitors at the main facilities where restrooms, restaurants, and other related amenities were located. A total number of 324 questionnaires were returned. However, 73 incomplete cases were eliminated, leaving 251 usable cases. The questionnaire was mainly constructed in three parts: (a) Socio-demographic questions (e.g., gender, age, and occupation), (b) enduring involvement, and (c) environmental concerns, intention to protect natural environment, and WOM questions.

To measure recreationists' involvement, we used McIntyre's (1989) enduring involvement scale which includes attraction, self-expression, and centrality. To establish convergent validity, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed. Results of the CFA suggested that the model fit was acceptable ($\chi^2$/df=4.407, GFI=.93, AGFI=.85, CFI=.93, NFI=.92, RMR=.062). All item loadings were significant. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of each factor were calculated to examine the reliability of the scale. The scale achieved an acceptable level of internal consistency (attraction=.88, self-expression=.67, and centrality=.64). Using cluster analysis with general mean scores of assigned factors’ subscales, respondents were categorized into a high involvement group (n=148) and a low involvement group (n=103). An independent sample t-test was utilized to investigate whether there were differences between the high involvement group and the low involvement group with respect to environmental concerns, behavioral intention to protect the environment, and WOM/e-WOM intention.

Results of the independent sample t-test suggested that there were significant differences in environmental concerns, behavioral intention to protect the environment, and WOM between the two groups. Thus, H1 – H3 were confirmed. However, there was no significant difference in e-WOM and H4 was not supported. Detailed theoretical and managerial implications will be discussed in the presentation.