Social interactions and intentions to revisit for agritourism service encounters

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The study suggests a model integrating agritourists’ interactions with service providers, companions, and other customers. Interactions with service providers and those with companions positively affected satisfaction with the farm visit. Interactions with companions influenced satisfaction more than those with other customers.

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Abstract
This study addresses how agritourists' social interactions affect their satisfaction and, in turn, revisit intentions. Adopting social exchange theory and resource theory, the study proposes that social interactions with service providers, local residents, companion tourists, and other customers influence satisfaction, which in turn affects revisit intentions. For this, an onsite survey was conducted to examine the proposed model and test the hypotheses. Subjects (N = 266) were tourists who visited farms. All, but one of the hypotheses were supported or partially supported by the data and the proposed model also had an acceptable fit. Results provide direction for the development of a theoretical framework to understand revisit intentions by seeking to improve the social exchange relationships with agritourists. In addition, the results call for the incorporation of social interactions as a component of the agritourism servicescape.

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1. Introduction
Agritourism has long been a phenomenon in many countries, but its popularity has only recently increased for farmers, tourists and consumers of agricultural products and services (Sharpley & Vass, 2006). On the supply side, as traditional methods of agriculture production system are becoming less viable, farming communities have experienced economic and social challenges, including decreased farm incomes (Busby & Rendle, 2000). Thus, farmers have looked for alternatives to help diversify traditional farm operations, hoping to reverse the steady erosion of net farm incomes (Fleischer & Pizam, 1997). Farm diversification into tourism, in general, presents a potential to generate additional income, diversify the farming economy, lower risks and uncertainties and form a symbiotic relationship with agriculture for farming communities (Clarke, 1999). Agritourism also provides benefits to tourists and consumers. Since the majority of the general population may have little or no contact with agriculture, agritourism could also be a mechanism by which urbanites can enjoy nature and culture, learn about agriculture and purchase locally grown farm products (Sonnino, 2004). In sum, agritourism has been commonly guided and motivated by a vision for a thriving, diverse, small-scale farm that remains profitable, enhances the environment, enriches the indigenous culture, and improves the quality of life for farmers and consumers.

While a growing body of literature related to agritourism exists, the vast majority has dealt with tourism from the supply side (Jolly & Reynolds, 2005; McIntosh & Bonnemann, 2006). To date, little attention has been given to farm tourists and their relationships with farmers even though the recent growth in agritourism has been driven by both demand and supply (Tew & Barbieri, 2012). There are considerable opportunities for growth of the demand for agritourism as an increasing number of farmers are diversifying into tourism businesses (Lobo et al., 1999). Therefore, it is believed
that research should be conducted to understand the factors affecting consumers’ perspectives for agritourism activities in order to fill this gap.

Like other forms of tourism, agritourism involves much service. This creates a need to focus on service encounters in which a customer interacts with staff and/or other customers (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). Service encounters often occur in the presence of multiple customers and service providers who share the servicescape with each other, involving a series of interactions and/or relationships. In this sense, it would appear to be important to integrate the types of interactions at service encounters to understand how those influence customers’ service experiences. In the service marketing literature, service encounters have typically represented social encounters in which employees’ interpersonal skills affect customer satisfaction and behavior (Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994; Bowers, Martin, & Luker, 1990) and where customers influence one another indirectly as a part of the environment or directly through interpersonal encounters (Bitner et al., 1994; Martin, 1996). Similarly, tourism scholars have examined the dyadic interface between tourists and employees (Solnet, 2007) and customer-to-customer interactions (Huang & Hu, 2010; Wu, 2007). Additionally, interactions with tourists’ companions and with local residents might also be critical parts of tourists’ tourism experiences.

This study therefore sets out to examine an integrated social interaction in agritourism service encounters including four distinctive relationships including: 1) agritourist-to-service provider, 2) agritourist-to-local resident, 3) agritourist-to-companion tourist, and 4) agritourist-to-other customer. Taking findings related to social exchange theory (Homans, 1958) and affect theory of social exchange (Lawler, 2001), this study will examine the link between agritourists’ social interactions and satisfaction with their service experience. Moreover, these four types of social interactions will be compared to see how these interactions can individually or in combination, positively influence post-purchase behaviors. It is hoped that this study will provide marketing implications for developing tourism businesses on farms by seeking to understand the social exchange relationships that agritourists have.

2. Literature review

2.1. Agritourism and service encounters

The primary reason for the recent emergence of tourism as an important rural economic activity can be found from the supply side. Farm-based tourism has increasingly given farmers an opportunity to generate additional income (Knowd, 2006), to be an opportunity to generate additional income (Knowd, 2006), to be an an avenue for direct marketing to consumers (Sonnino, 2004; Tew & Barbieri, 2012; Veeck, Che, & Veeck, 2006) and as a way to counteract social and economic problems—loss of income, increased expenses, globalization, and others—associated with the decline of traditional agriculture industries (McGehee, 2007). In general, farmers diversify into tourism services for significant and steady retail sales of farm products, but opportunities for educating agritourists and consumers about the farming and farming resources and offering entertainment/recreation services are useful side benefits of these activities. While these potential benefits have attracted many farmers into agritourism, farmers should keep in mind that this activity requires them to have extended marketing practices. Compared to long supply chains of traditional agricultural systems as a part of the production system, agritourism involves much service, including direct interactions with agritourists and consumers. This suggests attention needs to be paid to service encounters in both agritourism research and practice.

In the service marketing literature, service encounters are defined as any period of time during which a customer interacts with a service (Bitner, 1990; Shostack, 1985). This definition includes discrete, separate, and distinct events and behaviors, as well as customers’ interactions with all the dimensions of a service. However, a majority of service encounter scholars believe that interpersonal interactions between customers and service providers are typically important because it is during this time when customers judge the services provided to them and most services involve at least one human being interacting with another (Czepiel, 1990; Shostack, 1985). Hence, such an encounter has been the focus of service marketing research.

While different scholars have paid attention to specific types of interactions during service encounters, an integrated model explaining three discrete relationships has been identified in general service environments: customer-to-organization, customer-to-service provider, and customer-to-customer interactions (Yi & Gong, 2009). All of these interactions seem relevant to general tourism service encounters, but they are not necessarily the same for small-scale operations which predominate in agritourism. Agritourists seem not to distinguish their interactions with organizations or employees because farm owners themselves are service providers in many cases (Wilson, 2007). Therefore, out of the three types of interactions, this study will not consider customer-to-organization interactions.

Agritourists do encounter local residents, although not on a regular basis. Local residents’ behavior toward tourists can influence whether the experience of agritourists is pleasant. Tourist-to-customer interactions have received scholarly attention in that the presence of other customers can affect the nature of the service outcome and process. Lastly, as the indigenous presence of social groups has been recognized in the tourism literature (Crompton, 1981), travel companions might also influence the tourism experience. A vast majority of leisure tourists do not travel solo and most tourism statistics indicate an average travel party over two. Although the phenomenon of tourists’ interaction with their companions has not been identified well in the tourism literature, this specific interaction, afforded by families and friends in shared leisure activities, has been explored through the concept of leisure companionship in other fields (Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996; McCormick, 1999). In sum, this study suggests that at least four types of social interactions exist in agritourism—with service providers, companion tourists, other customers, and local residents. This study will further examine how these interactions influence revisit intentions through satisfaction.

2.2. Satisfaction and social exchange theory

Satisfaction is one of the most heavily researched topics in consumer behavior and marketing. The importance of understanding satisfaction is primarily based on its potential outcomes, such as: loyalty and commitment (Cronin & Taylor, 1992), word-of-mouth (Hua, Wan, & Ho, 2006), complaining behavior (Landon, 1977), and repurchase intentions (Hu, 2003; Petrick, 2004; Petrick & Backman, 2001, 2002; Petrick, Morais, & Norman, 2001; Petrick, Toner, & Quinn, 2006).

Customer satisfaction has generally been conceptualized as a post-purchase evaluative judgment concerning a specific purchase choice (Westbrook & Oliver, 1999). Satisfaction is created more from feelings-based criteria than cognitive criteria, yet it tends to relate as much to perceptions of the intermediate steps of personal exchange during the process of service delivery as to its actual outputs (Nowak & Washburn, 1998). Satisfaction is further complicated by the influence of personal and social variables such as needs, disposition, traveling companions and previous...
experience (Crompton & Love, 1995; Kozak, 2001). This suggests that the importance of examining various antecedents of satisfaction (Cronin & Taylor, 1992).

According to social exchange theory, interpersonal interaction includes exchanges of resources and satisfaction is primarily influenced by the social and economic outcomes of those exchanges (Homans, 1958). On the contrary, the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm, which is arguably a dominant satisfaction framework, focuses on internal processing which involves comparison of the actual and expected performance of a product or service (Oliver, 1977). Therefore, a key advantage of social exchange theory is that it considers the interpersonal variables influencing satisfaction. Successful relationships are characterized by reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), and it is likely that they are the keys to positive feelings about sustained social relationships. Social exchange theory was originally built upon rational choice assumption of human behavior, but Lawler and his colleagues connected rates of social exchanges and positive emotions (Lawler, Thye, & Yoon, 2000; Lawler & Yoon, 1993). The theory takes its specific form as an affect theory of social exchange, which conceives of the importance of emotion as an outcome of social exchanges for relational satisfaction. Hypothesis 2 states that positive affect will have a positive effect on satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 5

Hypothesis 6

2.4. Revisit intentions

Many tourism scholars have increasingly discussed the concept of revisit intentions and its antecedents by examining their beneficial rewards; creating positive word-of-mouth, achieving better cost-effectiveness by repeat visitors, and increasing economic profit (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999). In agritourism, as seasonal changes are part of the farming environment, this also creates the importance of attracting a high portion of repeat tourists.

The concept of revisit intentions is adopted and modified from both social psychology and marketing perspectives.
psychology, the intention to continue/to stay in a relationship is referred to as relationship maintenance by social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Consistent with this conceptualization of revisit intentions as an extension of the relationship framework, this study examines the relationship between agritourism experiences and their revisit intentions, mediated by satisfaction. A number of tourism researchers in this domain have suggested several other key antecedents of revisit intentions, though theoretical and empirical findings are quite consistent in suggesting satisfaction positively related to revisit intentions (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Kozak, 2001; Petrick, 2004; Yuksel, 2001). This study thus postulates that satisfaction will ultimately influence agritourists’ intention to revisit the farm in the following:

**Hypothesis 7.** There will be a positive relationship between satisfaction and revisit intentions.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Survey development

Following resource theory’s suggestion that social interactions include as many as six different resources, a preliminary 18 items (Table 2) were included to measure the concept of interaction with service providers. In addition to 14 items suggested in the previous literature (Morais, Backman, & Dorsch, 2003), 4 additional items relevant to agritourism context were included. For agritourists’ interactions with local residents, companions, and other customers, the same items were used excluding six irrelevant items (three items each of interactions through product and money exchange, e.g., local residents/companions/other customers offered discounts). All variables were measured on five-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). In addition, four sets of polar items on a five-point modified semantic differential summation scale for satisfaction and the two items on a 5-point scale for revisit intentions were adopted from Baker and Crompton (2000) and Grewal, Monroe, & Krishnan (1998) respectively.

#### 3.2. Data collection

Texas was selected for the study site due to its significant contribution of agriculture to the whole country. Although data is unavailable for the total number of farms involved in tourism in Texas, according to the National Agriculture Statistics Service (NASS) in 2008, Texas led the nation in number of farms (229,000), total land in farms (129 million acres), and livestock and product commodity sales ($9.3 billion) in 2008.

Word-of-mouth recommendations obtained from agricultural professionals in practice, academics, and the government resulted in the identification of 19 Texas farms engaged with tourism activity. Among those, five relevant agritourism farms located in central Texas, were chosen based on the distance and year-round availability. They were contacted for possible participation and three farms agreed to participate in study. The data were collected from February to March 2009 via onsite surveys. Every 5th visitor was systematically approached (Dillman, 2000) and informed about the purpose of the survey in advance before they were given the questionnaire. During an 8-week period, a total of 307 surveys were returned. Of those, 21 incomplete or duplicate responses were identified and removed. In addition, responses from those who stated that they routinely visited the farm almost every week (20 responses) were also removed as they were identified as local customers who purchase farm products. Thus, 266 were kept in the final sample for analysis, and the response rate was 82.6%.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents were women (59.4%) and in the 18 to 39 age cohort (63.1%). Agritourists tended to be highly educated with 82.8 percent having completed college and the average income being $69,000. Among the respondents, 58.3 percent were employed either full-time or part-time. Among them, 29.5% were repeaters and the average number of visits among the repeaters was 2.9 times. Of the respondents, 255 (95.9%) accompanied companions. The average party size was 2.6 ranging from 2 to 19, and their visit/s was/were mainly with their families (60.8%) or friends (34%).

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1. Measures

The measurement models of all constructs (i.e., social interactions with service providers, companions, and other customers, satisfaction, and revisit intentions) except social interactions with local residents were identified. In this step, social interactions with local residents was dropped from the final structural model due to its low reliability (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998) (Cronbach’s alpha = .402) and too many missing values (35.1% nonresponse rate for this construct) (Raymond & Roberts, 1987).

Factor analyses were preliminarily conducted (Mulaik, 2004) in order to reduce the number of variables for the three social interactions scales and unidimensionality of satisfaction and revisit intentions scales. The social interaction scale had not been
sufficiently tested since its development in a tourism setting (Morais et al., 2003). Hence, it was determined that it would be more appropriate to conduct a multi-step process for examining and refining each scale. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to examine the dimensional structure and properties of the measure relevant to the study context was chosen as suggested by Churchill (1979). Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure with .79 exceeded the minimum standard for reliability of .70 recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). For the satisfaction and revisit intentions constructs, factor analyses confirmed one factor each, accounting for 92.4% and 91.5% of the total variance, respectively. Reliability coefficients of .92 and .90 respectively, indicated acceptable reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

4.2. The hypothesized structural models

AMOS 17.0 was employed to examine the structural models. For this, Skewness and Kurtosis tests were preliminary performed to evaluate normality of the data. The absolute value for univariate skewness and kurtosis ranged from .03 to 2.09 and from .01 to 3.79 respectively and fell within conventional criteria of normality (Kline, 2005).
The nine constructs were incorporated into the structural model to examine the hypothesized relationships among the latent factors. Since some of the factors were measured by more than four items, a parceling procedure (Bagozzi & Heatherton, 1994) was adopted. This procedure, by combining items randomly into composites, can help reduce random errors, increase the stability of the parameter estimates, improve the variable to sample size ratio, remedy small sample sizes, and simultaneously maintain the properties of multiple indicators (Bagozzi & Edard, 1998; Hallak, Brown, & Lindsay, 2012). In addition, a structural model that is based on parcelized items is more “parsimonious” than a model with individual items (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002), and parameter estimates calculated when item parcels are used are more stable and therefore, more generalizable (Cunningham, 2007). Researchers often recommend the use of item parceling strategies, particularly when the underlying research questions involve relationships between the constructs rather than the functioning of individual items (Laboviv & Ruetsch, 1993; Rocha & Chelladurai, 2012). For this study, a total of ten parcels were created for the five social interaction dimensions having more than four items.

Maximum likelihood model estimation was used to test the fit of the hypothesized structural model. In the hypothesized structural model, the seven social interaction constructs were exogenous, and predicted satisfaction, which is the term predicted revisit intentions. The results of the SEM showed that the proposed model provided a good fit to the data ($\chi^2$ (162) = 426.01, $p = .001$, CFI = .91; NNFI = .90; GFI = .90; IFI = .94; RFI = .93; and RMSEA = .07). These fit indices appropriately met the cutoff requirements of suggested model fit indices by Kline (2005) and Bollen (1989). The hypothesized structural model indicated that all standard factor loadings were greater than .50 (Kline, 2005) and no variable had modification indices (MI) scores greater than 100. Moreover, the present MI results were fairly complex, and did not present a theoretically meaningful solution to improve the model fit further.

In the hypothesized model, all the indicators loaded significantly and substantively on their factors ($p < .05$), suggesting convergent validity (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). As shown in Table 4, the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded .5, further supporting convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The correlations among factors were not higher than .85 (Kenny, 2012). In addition, the most conservative method using AVE also confirmed the discriminant validity because the AVE for each construct was greater than the squared correlation coefficients for the corresponding inter-constructs and this confirmed discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) (Table 4). The items included in the hypothesized model are identified in Fig. 1, which also shows the standard path coefficients and standard deviations.

### 4.3. Alternative model

In order to validate the hypothesized model and the mediating role of satisfaction, an alternative model which included direct paths between the social interaction constructs and revisit intentions was also examined. The $\chi^2$ difference test examined the null hypotheses of no significant difference with a nested structural model. If the null hypothesis is sustained, the more constrained model would be tentatively accepted.

A set of fit statistics indicated that the alternative model moderately fit the data ($\chi^2$ (155) = 413.21, $p = .001$, CFI = .90; NNFI = .89; GFI = .90; IFI = .93; RFI = .93; and RMSEA = .07). The change in chi-square indicated that the fit of the alternative model did not perform better than the hypothesized structural model ($\Delta \chi^2 = 12.8, df = 7, p < .01$). Examination of the individual path coefficients indicated that three paths were found to be positive and statistically significant ($\beta_{\text{Money-Service Providers}} = .08, p < .05$, $\beta_{\text{Service-Service Providers}} = .12, p < .01$, $\beta_{\text{Information-Companion}} = .09, p < .05$). Although three of the seven direct paths from the seven social interaction constructs to revisit intentions were statistically significant ($p < .05$), all three path coefficients indicated only weak direct relationships, whereas the paths between the six social interaction constructs and satisfaction and those between satisfaction and revisit intentions remained relatively strong and significant (Fig. 2). Although these results technically indicated partial mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986), given the fact that the more parsimonious hypothesized model fit the data better and only three paths from social interaction to revisit intentions were statistically significant with the relatively weaker path loadings, it was concluded that the hypothesized structural model fit the data better than the alternative model.

### 4.4. Hypotheses testing

Path coefficients estimated by SEM and the results of hypotheses 1 to 6 are presented in Fig. 1. The path coefficient from social interactions with service providers to satisfaction was significant at the .01 level, indicating a positive relationship ($\beta_{\text{Money-Service Providers}} = .31$, $p < .01$, $\beta_{\text{Service-Service Providers}} = .25, p < .01$, $\beta_{\text{Money-Service Providers}} = .11$, $p < .01$)
The path coefficients from the two factors of social interactions with companions to satisfaction were also significant, indicating a positive relationship ($\beta_{\text{Love} \_ \text{Companions}} = .28, p < .01$, $\beta_{\text{Information} \_ \text{Companions}} = .15, p < .05$). Yet, for the path coefficients between the two factors of social interactions with other customers and satisfaction, only the path coefficient from the Status_O factor to satisfaction was positive and statistically significant ($\beta_{\text{Status} \_ \text{Other Customers}} = .12, p < .05$). The path coefficient from the Information_O factor to satisfaction was negative, yet statistically insignificant ($\beta_{\text{Information} \_ \text{Other Customers}} = -.09, p > .10$). The relationship between satisfaction and revisit intentions showed a positive relationship, significant at the .01 level ($\beta_{\text{Satisfaction}} = .68, p < .01$). Therefore, while hypothesis 1 and 3 were supported, hypothesis 4 was only partially supported.

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**Fig. 1.** Estimation of the hypothesized structural model.

**Fig. 2.** Estimation of the alternative model.
Hypothesis 5 was not able to be examined due to removal of social interaction with local residents. But, the Love_S factor for social interaction with service providers had the highest explanatory power for satisfaction among all types of social interactions, based on the relative values of the path coefficients shown in Fig. 1. For hypothesis 6, the effect of social interactions with companions on satisfaction was higher than that of social interactions with other customers ($\beta_{\text{Love-Companions}} = .28, p < .01, \beta_{\text{Information-Companions}} = .15, p < .05$); $\beta_{\text{Status-Other customers}} = .12, p < .05, \beta_{\text{Information-Other Customers}} = -.09, p > .05$. Therefore, hypothesis 6 was supported.

5. Discussion and implications

The purposes of this study were to: (1) integrate observable interpersonal interactions between service providers, local residents, companions, and other customers in small-scale farms involved in tourism; and (2) examine the relationships between the interactions and revisit intentions mediated by satisfaction.

The proposed model examined integrated social interactions that have been observed in tourism contexts particularly for small-scale tourism operations on farms, and extends Yi and Gong's work regarding service encounters as an exchange process (2009). By examining agritourism service encounters from a social exchange perspective, this study suggests that agritourism operators need to consider a tourist's interpersonal interactions and how those interactions influence his/her tourism experiences. Providing an opportunity for positive and supportive interactions using agritourism programs and services could help improve tourists' satisfaction with their tourism experience. As a person perceives the process and outcome of the relationship, he/she will most likely devote him/herself to it. Thus, it is believed to be an important part of functional social exchange because it ensures that partners will put forth the effort necessary to produce mutually desirable outcomes. However, it should be noted that all social interactions make important, but complementary contributions to tourists' satisfaction judgment.

The results of this study supported Hypothesis 1 to 6, except hypotheses 2 and 5, which included social interactions with local residents. The integrated model indicated that social interactions with service providers through love, money, and service exchange and those with companions through love and information exchange positively affected satisfaction with the farm visit. For the effect of interactions with other customers, exchange of status resources was positive, but the link between interactions through exchange of information resources was neither positive nor statistically significant. Additionally, this study demonstrated that the type of relationships were also important indicators in comparing the effects of interactions on satisfaction, as interactions with companions influenced satisfaction more than those with other customers. Although the tourism literature has not paid attention to the relationships between tourists' and their companions associated with service experiences, this study revealed an important role of travel companions on agitourists' overall experience.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study contributed to the repeat visit and satisfaction literatures because it examined an alternative theoretical explanation focusing on social interactions. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, this is the first study in tourism to examine social interactions with service providers, companions, and other customers simultaneously in the visitors’ domain. Although there are different types of social interactions that can play critical roles in tourism service encounters, previous research has focused mainly on those interactions respectively with service providers and customers. By integrating observable social interactions at agritourism encounters, this study provides a framework for understanding the contributions of different types of social interactions to satisfaction and revisit intention that are grounded in social exchange theory and resource theory. In general, relationships between customers and tourism operations are based on repetitive interactions over time, which provide opportunities for customers to develop an enduring, positive relationship with service providers, companions, and other customers. This implies the importance of examining the role of social interactions from a customer perspective drawn from social exchange theory, which has only been applied to local residents in the tourism literature (Gursoy, Chi, & Dyer, 2009; Perdue, Long, & Kang, 1999). Additionally, the study provided empirical support to the hypothesized influence of social interactions on satisfaction and to the usefulness of resource theory as an alternative theoretical framework to explain satisfaction and revisit intentions. Different from previous studies on customers’ social interactions with service providers (Solnet, 2007) and other customers (Huang & Hsu, 2010), this study adopted resource theory, which suggests multidimensional constructs of social interactions. The usefulness of resource theory in measuring customers’ social interactions is manifest in important contributions to the research (Berg, Piner, & Frank, 1993).

This study could also contribute to developing a servicescape framework specific to agritourism or possibly relevant to general tourism. The servicescape concept builds upon well-established research traditions in environmental psychology and marketing that the design of the physical environment can be an extremely important element in influencing consumption patterns and practices by emphasizing the co-creation of experience between service providers and customers. The servicescape is typically comprised of three dimensions: ambient conditions, spatial layout and signs/symbols/artifacts and the concept (Bitner, 1992). It has been argued that these dimensions remain invaluable to tourism marketing (Abubakar, 2002). However, many servicescape researchers have increasingly moved beyond a consumption setting's physical dimension to less palpable dimensions, including social dimensions which are also housed within the servicescape (Hightower, 2010; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011; Tombs & McCall-Kennedy, 2003). The importance of social dimensions is particularly evident in tourism as tourists fulfill not only their utilitarian needs but also their social and psychological needs. Therefore, an integrated model of the three interactions during agritourism encounters can serve as a basis for the social elements framework that are encapsulated in the tourism servicescape. A servicescape framework embracing three types of interactions into three dimensions of the physical elements advocates that the service setting is not only physically appealing and symbolically welcoming, but also socially supportive and engaging (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011).

5.2. Managerial implications

Regarding social interactions with service providers, steps should be taken to encourage customer—service provider interactions, as the current research suggested that these benefit customers. In particular, in terms of the dimensions of social interactions with service providers, an important tenet can be suggested. As the theoretical framework suggested that particularistic resources exchanged may help increase customers’ satisfaction with their experience, this study provides evidence that providers who wish for their customers to return should exchange love and services. For example, providers could create personalized interactions to let their customers know how they are cared for and how important they are. On the other hand, monetary benefits such as price discounts did not sustain customer satisfaction as highly as care and personal relationships did. The value associated with a price discount can be
perceived as just a cheaper price that is applicable to all customers, which might be why offering a price discount was the least valuable resource that customers were looking for. In order to provide universal resources more effectively, results of this study suggest they need to be designed to convey personal care and attention towards individual tourists rather than monetary benefits.

Regarding interactions between unacquainted customers, status exchanges were found to be important aspects. Thus, educating customers on the types of behavior expected of them might be important. As in some other service contexts, sharing the environment with unacquainted people and standing in line at the farmer’s market, which are common aspects of agritourism, are possible serious challenges. However, agritourism environments that convey high prestige and regard among unacquainted customers could be managed as a satisfying experience through proper customer education.

For farm tourists, it was found that families, friends, and relatives play important roles as travel companions who exchange care and warmth through shared experience as well as being a source of information related to farm visits. Accordingly, when developing marketing programs, operators should emphasize the wants and needs of travel groups as well as those of individual tourists. Although interaction with companions is not directly controllable, agritourism services could provide a context for mutual enjoyment and shared experience, leading to couple-, family-, and group-friendly environments. As a vast majority of respondents were accompanied by their family to the farms, service providers should emphasize in their advertising family-friendly environmental characteristics that could enhance satisfaction for the travel party with whom agritourists will travel.

5.3. Limitations and further research

Additional efforts in scale development need to be done to ensure the validity and reliability of the social interactions scales used as the process of developing the social interactions scale adopting resource theory in the tourism field is fairly new. In particular, due to dual factor loading and insufficient factor loading scores, all items belonging to the product dimension of social interactions with service providers were not included in the final model. Therefore, the influence of product exchange could not be tested in this study, although at face value it appears to be theoretically and practically important. Subsequent efforts in scale formation addressing this dimension should be made for more theoretical completeness.

Additionally, a high item nonresponse rate of social interactions with local residents resulted in the deletion of this concept from the final model for this study. The characteristics of study farms (i.e., standalone farms without near farms or many neighbors) and the lack of a concrete definition of “local residents” from the various agritourists’ perspectives (i.e., local visitors, out-of-state visitors) are potential reasons for the high item nonresponse rate. A more specific definition of “local resident” relevant to the various types of agritourists needs to be determined for future research. In addition, the data collection for this study relied on survey informant gathered at only three farms in Texas, so the result of the study likely should not be generalized beyond the study population.

Finally, this study suggests that the success of tourism business on farms can be derived from the integration of social encounters into a meaningful experience developing trust and attachment to current visitors. Understanding agritourists’ behavior on small-scale tourism operations, might not only broaden the horizons of theoretical advancement for agritourist behavior, but also help small-scale tourism operations develop marketing strategies and define their own markets specific to them for a more successful business.

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