



Rural Tourism And The Craft Beer Experience: Factors Influencing Brand Loyalty In Rural North Carolina, USA

By: Alison Murray and **Carol Kline**

Abstract

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Rural tourism and the craft beer experience: factors influencing brand loyalty in rural North Carolina, USA

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Craft or “boutique” breweries are increasing in numbers in the USA, and in other parts of the developed world. Many are located in rural areas, and have become new rural tourism visitor experiences, related to wine tourism and linked to the growth in culinary tourism. This study offers a clearer understanding of what factors most influence brand loyalty to craft beer, and craft breweries, and sheds light on methodologies for assessing loyalty to other rural tourism, and culinary tourism, experiences. It is based on a survey of patrons visiting and purchasing from two micro-breweries in rural North Carolina, USA, examining concepts used in brand loyalty research including access, environmental consumption, connections with the community, satisfaction, and desire for unique consumer products. Results show that *connection with the community*, *desire for unique consumer products*, and *satisfaction* are the three factors that most align themselves with brand loyalty to rural brewery visits. *Connection with the community* was the most important factor in influencing brand loyalty especially among those born in the study region, and/or resident there, as well as among tourists. The paper notes implications for rural breweries, for destination management organizations and for marketing and development strategies.

Keywords: brand loyalty; craft brewery; beer tourism; community connection

Culinary tourism, craft breweries, and sustainable rural tourism

Culinary tourism is a fast growing niche within the tourism industry that “emphasizes unique foods and dishes from the culture of the host region” (Green & Dougherty, 2009, p. 148). Culinary tourists spend more money at their destination than mass tourism travelers (around \$1000 more per trip), and therefore represent an attractive market for destinations (U.S. Travel Association, 2010). By developing culinary tourism experiences, a community provides opportunities for local restaurants, farmers, and ranchers to attract tourists who are “seeking authentic and unique experiences and the consumption of local food and beverages brings the tourist closer to the host culture” (Plummer, Telfer, Hashimoto & Summers, 2005, p. 447). Culinary tourism has the potential to attract the sustainable traveler through consuming organically and/or locally grown foods, selecting heritage food items as souvenirs, and by eating at locally owned restaurants or restaurants that employ sustainable practices. Everett and Aitchison (2008, p. 164) note that food tourism offers a means of enhancing and extending tourist spending without compromising the environmental, social or cultural fabric of a region. Additionally, Peña, Jamilena, and Molina (2012) found that in the minds of tourists, rural tourism enterprises (including

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culinary) contribute value to a rural region's sustainability, and that this value positively impacts a visitor's loyalty. The experiential aspects of rural food and drink tourism are explored by Sidali, Kastenholz, and Bianchi (2015). This study explores the factors that influence loyalty to craft beer, a growing rural/small town enterprise, including elements related to the brewery visit experience.

Wine and beer tourism is an extension of culinary tourism. Wine tourism has become an increasingly large market for wineries throughout the United States, parts of South America, Europe, and Australasia. Many people participate in wine tourism while on vacation, although it is not always the primary purpose for the trip (Barber, Taylor, & Deale, 2010a). According to Brown and Getz (2005), "wine tourism is a form of special-interest travel based on the desire to visit wine-producing regions or in which travelers are induced to visit wine-producing regions and wineries in particular, while traveling for other reasons" (p. 266). Wineries and wine tourism depend on the health of the natural environment; however, sustainability within wine tourism is a controversial topic because of the difficulty to balance long-term economic benefits and the desire for protection of the surrounding natural resources (Poitras & Getz, 2006). Several wineries are moving toward sustainable practices and trying to reach a sustainable tourism market. According to Poitras and Getz (2006), "sustainable development and marketing principles are now being applied to tourism in many settings, although there is a need to make them relevant to specific forms of tourism and related niche markets such as wine tourism" (p. 426). Arguably, another type of sustainable development is beer tourism, as craft breweries are generally locally owned, somewhat embedded into their community (Schnell & Reese, 2003), and, in Europe, some are heritage businesses housed in historic buildings.

Beer tourism can be defined as "visitation to breweries, beer festivals and beer shows for which beer tasting and experiencing the attributes of a beer region are the prime motivating factors for visitors" (Plummer et al., 2005, p. 450). Craft breweries are one of the many ways in which communities have been reaffirming their local identity (Schnell & Reese, 2003) and potentially attracting tourists. As the neo-localism movement continues to grow, so does the interest in purchasing local beers and visiting the local craft brewery when on vacation. In addition to the potential for attracting tourists, a culinary attraction, such as a brewery, within rural areas can provide other important functions, including employment, and focal points serving local and regional customers as well. In a study of wineries in rural Spain, Alonso and O'Neill (2009) found that the fundamental functions of wineries in rural areas are related to their involvement with the local community by providing local jobs, attracting visitors to the area, donating wines for local festivities, and assisting in local development initiatives. Additionally, they found that singular attractions can raise regional awareness about the benefits of wineries (or breweries) and of tourism in general.

Because beer tourism is a growing, but little researched, niche in the tourism industry, it is important to study the factors that influence brand loyalty for visitors of craft breweries, particularly in rural or developing regions. Everett and Aitchison (2008, p. 164) assert that "food tourism is a legitimate avenue of tourism research and can add a missing perspective to tourism knowledge, especially within the sociocultural sustainability agenda". The purpose of this study is to gain a clearer understanding of what factors influence brand loyalty to craft beer, including elements related to the brewery experience. Specifically, the research question is *which factors related to the brewery visit most influence brand loyalty to craft beer?* In other words, how can the experiential qualities of a brewery visit be built upon as part of a rural tourism experience.

Table 1. Number of breweries in the United States.

Year	Number of breweries
1900	1751
1910	1498
1982	82
1997	1273
2002	1500
2014	2768

Source: Brewers Association (2014) and Schnell and Reese (2003)

The brewery market in the United States and North Carolina

In 1900, there were 1751 breweries in the United States. That number decreased to 1498 by 1910 (Schnell & Reese, 2003) and during Prohibition (when the manufacturing, sale, and transportation of all alcohol were illegal from 1920 to 1933), the majority of breweries in the United States were shut down. The first post-Prohibition craft brewery in the United States opened in 1966 when new ownership of Anchor Brewing Company in San Francisco developed it as a craft brewery outlet. A craft brewery, as defined by the North-American-based Brewers Association, is one with an all-malt product line or has at least 50% of its product volume in all-malt beers or beers that use adjuncts to enhance the flavor (rather than lightening the flavor) (Brewers Association, 2014). Craft breweries are also called micro-breweries or boutique breweries in Europe. Other entrepreneurs began opening their own craft breweries in 1977 (Tremblay, Iwasaki & Tremblay, 2005); however, in 1982 there were only 82 breweries in the entirety of the United States. By 1997, that number grew to 1273, and in 2002 there were around 1500 small-scale craft breweries and brewpubs. According to the Brewers Association, the US brewery count was 2768 in 2013 (Brewers Association, 2014) (Table 1). The growth of small, often rural or small town, craft breweries stands in contrast to the very large breweries, normally in urban locations, which are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a very few major international companies (Howard, 2013).

The first brewery to open in North Carolina (NC) after the Prohibition period ended in 1933 was the Weeping Radish Brewery in 1986 (Table 2). Weeping Radish remained the only brewery in North Carolina through to 1990. There are currently 92 active breweries in NC (North Carolina Alcoholic Beverage Control, 2012).

In 2005, North Carolina passed a law allowing breweries to give product samples to employees and guests, thus paving the way to brewery tourism. The law also changed the definition of a malt beverage by increasing the amount of alcohol by volume (ABV) from

Table 2. Number of breweries in North Carolina, USA.

Year	Number of breweries
1986	2
2000	17
2005	32
2013	92

Source: North Carolina Alcoholic Beverage Control (2012)

6% to 15% ABV, allowing brewers to legally make and distribute craft brews with high alcohol content (North Carolina General Assembly, 2005; North Carolina Alcoholic Beverage Control, 2012). While some breweries now encourage visits by offering brewery tours and special events, little has been done to understand how many people visit breweries each year, where they come from, or why they choose to visit one brewery over another. Aside from market research conducted in the planning stages of opening a new brewery, little research is evident in the literature that determines the level of support consumers might have for the brewery. Less prevalent still is research indicating which characteristics about their customers craft brewing companies take into account when planning to open the facility. Will there be a tasting room or restaurant? How often will tours be provided? What percentage of the facility's operation will cater to brewery patrons, and what percentage to production? Will patrons be drawn from other community attractions, or will marketing efforts focus beyond the local destination marketing organization's (DMO's) strategies to pull in brand loyal consumers? As a quickly expanding product line of tourist and local attractions, breweries are understudied and are a ripe area for investigation.

North Carolina, situated in the middle of the east coast of the USA, is the sixth most visited state in the USA (North Carolina Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development, 2014). For this reason, as well as the growing number of craft breweries cited in Table 2, it serves as an appropriate locale for exploring brand loyalty of patrons to craft breweries.

Breweries as sustainable rural development

Rural tourism has become more popular in recent years due to increased interest from people in urban areas to escape into the countryside (George, Mair, & Reid, 2009; Lane, 2009). Local food/beverage and rural and regional tourism development have been inextricably linked through heritage preservation (Bessière, 2013), the sustaining identity and authenticity (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Renko, Renko, & Polonijo, 2010; Sims, 2009), incentives for collaboration (Alonso & Liu, 2012a; Plummer et al., 2005), increasing destination competitiveness (Plummer et al., 2005; Renko et al., 2010), entrepreneurship (Hjalager & Johansen, 2013), landscape preservation, agricultural industry expansion, and contributing to sustainability (Everett & Aitchison, 2008), and as a rural development strategy (Henderson, 2004). Further, there is a need for research, marketing, and partnership development among culinary-based attractions to foster success (Alonso & Liu, 2012b). The current study focuses its attention on craft breweries as contributors to rural development. As rural areas explore tourism as a means to attract external wealth, the development of new culinary attractions to add to their product mix of natural, cultural, and heritage resources is a bold strategy. Expansion of dining options is needed for the survival of rural destinations. However, new businesses must also be patronized by local residents to survive. Tourist activity will likely not sustain the business on its own, particularly in rural regions. Therefore, because of this study's emphasis on craft breweries in rural settings, the distinction between resident and tourist is less critical, and can be considered along a continuum (Figure 1).

In a study of "Old World" winery regions in Spain, Alonso and O'Neill (2009) asked 94 winery owners to estimate how many patrons are locals. Of those open to the public, nearly 15% of respondents estimated that 90% of their on-site sales are to locals, another 10% cited 80% locals, and a further 19% said that 70% of their patrons were locals. Brand loyalty of both tourists and locals is certainly worthy of exploration.

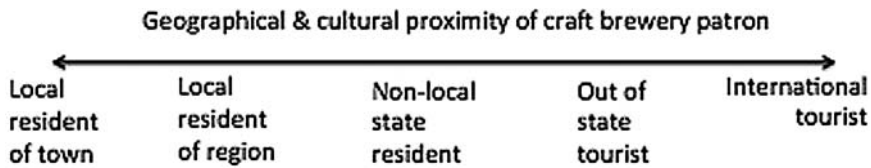


Figure 1. Continuum of visitors to a rural brewery.

Brand loyalty

For decades, researchers have attempted to understand which factors influence brand loyalty (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995; Day, 1969; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). Brand loyalty is important because loyal customers buy more products, they are less price sensitive and pay less attention to competitors' advertising, and they help recruit other customers by word-of-mouth; additionally, serving existing customers already familiar with the product is cheaper than attracting new customers (Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). Bloemer and Kasper (1995) defined true loyalty as "the biased (i.e. non-random) behavioral response (i.e. purchase) expressed over time by some decision making unit with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands which is a function of psychological (decision making, evaluative) process resulting in brand commitment" (p. 313). Day (1969) suggested that brand loyalty cannot be defined just by the repeat purchasing patterns of one item by one consumer, stating that "these spuriously loyal buyers lack any attachment to brand attributes, and they can be immediately captured by another brand that offers a better deal, a coupon, or enhanced point-of-purchase visibility through displays and other device" (p. 30). This was confirmed by McKercher, Denizci-Guillet, and Ng (2012) in their study; informants drew a distinction between loyalty and habitual purchases. Within this same study, the existence of experiential loyalty was strongly implied, which may prove beneficial to breweries and brew pubs who may not necessarily attract repeat tourists from outside the region, but who might target visitors who like to engage in brewery visits in general. Dick and Basu (1994) developed a framework for customer loyalty that identified various antecedents and their influence on relative attitude and repeat patronage. The implications from this framework provide evidence of the customer's motivation to search for the specific product, their resistance to counter persuasion, and the influence of marketing through word of mouth.

Within rural tourism, destination loyalty has been explored to a greater extent than brand loyalty, and the focus on a particular culinary product brand is less frequent still. Yuksel, Yuksel, and Bilim (2010) found that positive emotional and cognitive bonds with a place could affect an individual's assessment of a destination and his/her loyalty to the place. However, not much is known about loyalty to one particular brand within a destination, or if brand loyalty can spur travel to a destination, despite its potential importance. The concepts of destination and brand loyalty are relevant in the case of loyalty to craft breweries. The factors explored in this study in terms of loyalty are (1) the customer's accessibility to the product and to the company, (2) the customer's environmental consumption, (3) the brewery's connection with the local community, (4) the customer's desire for unique consumer products (DUCP), and (5) the customer's satisfaction. These are each discussed in more detail below.

In the current study, two brewery brands were explored – the Mother Earth Brewing Company (<http://www.motherearthbrewing.com/>) based in the small town of Kinston, and the Aviator Brewing Company (www.aviatorbrew.com) in the even smaller town of

Fuquay Varina (see Methods section). The survey instrument question related to loyalty was phrased as: *Overall I consider myself loyal to the Mother Earth/Aviator brand* and was measured on a five-point Likert scale (with 1 equating to strongly disagree and 5 equating to strongly agree, with an option of “Not sure”).

Access

Marketers and market researchers have used the concept of access or convenience in consumer product marketing for years. Brown (1989) proposed five dimensions of convenience: time, place, acquisition, use, and execution. The time dimension is the idea that the product can be consumed or accessible at a convenient time for the consumer. Accessibility to the *company* is most prevalent in Mitchell and Orwig's (2002) concept of Consumer Experience Tourism, which relates to the level of support for a company that consumers feel after a tour of that company. Access to the company helps to establish trust in the organization by patrons. Similarly, seeing the brewing process may help consumers understand the brewing process and their connection to the brewery.

Art museums are also attractions that serve both local residents and tourists, and must continually rotate exhibits to keep customers' interest and to maintain a positive public image. Geissler, Rucks, and Edison (2006) studied access in relation to brand loyalty of art museums. Access to the museum included not only operating hours and convenience of ticket sales, but guided and self-guided tours. Using a conceptual model of service convenience, Geissler et al. (2006, p. 81) found that “perceptions of art museum service convenience appear to be influenced by perceived decision, access, and transaction convenience”. Moeller, Fassnacht, and Ettinger (2009) investigated the effects of decision, access, search, and transaction convenience on shopping behavior and purchases, and found that decision and access convenience influence behavioral loyalty in terms of visits and money spent. In the current study, access is measured in terms of accessibility to the brewery, and the knowledge gained from it.

Environmental consumption

Environmental consumption is a well-researched concept within tourism and sustainable tourism (Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, & Tribe, 2010). According to Belz and Peattie (2009, p. 78), there are several different types of sustainable consumers: “Some may favor socially oriented ethical consumption issues such as Fair Trade, while other will favor environmental issues such as organic produce or carbon reduction. Some consumers may have a broad spread of socio-ecological issues to which they respond, while others may feel passionately about very specific issues such as animal cruelty”.

Within the last few decades, there have been several studies examining trends in global sustainability (Leiserowitz, Kates, & Parris, 2006; Stoner, & Wankel, 2010). According to Leiserowitz et al. (2006) “[within a residential sample] in 20 developed and developing countries, 36% of respondents stated that they had avoided a product or brand for environmental reasons, 27% had refused packaging, and 25% had gathered environmental information” (p. 421). In the United States specifically, Americans are becoming more conscious of environmental issues. Vermeir and Verbeke (2005) note that, “sustainable consumption is based on a decision-making process that takes the consumer's social responsibility into account in addition to individual needs and wants” (p. 170). In 2010, 61% of Americans expressed a sympathetic attitude toward the environmental

movement, which has had an effect on consumer lifestyles when purchasing goods (Barber et al., 2010a).

While sympathetic attitudes toward sustainability have been measured both on national and global scales, studies on attitude behavior gap show that these environmental attitudes will not always lead to environmental consumption. Behavioral intentions then shape our actions, which are also motivated by other social influences; however, conflicting studies show both linear progression as well as cyclical models in regards to the decision-making process (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Regardless of the order in which we make decisions, as environmental attitudes continue to trend globally, and in the United States, it is important to understand that such attitudes will not always influence behavior but may help to sway people toward environmental behaviors.

As the interest in purchasing sustainable goods has rapidly grown over the past decade, it is important to understand the demand for environmentally sustainable products in all market sectors including breweries. To keep within the academic focus of culinary tourism, questions about environmental consumption related to wine tourism were adapted from Barber et al.'s (2010a) study on environmental attitudes and wine tourism. Questions about environmentally-focused branding and image were adapted from Park and Boo (2009).

Connection with the local community (CLC)

Shortridge (1996, p. 38) developed the idea of “neo-localism” as “deliberate seeking out of regional lore and local attachment by residents (new and old) as a delayed reaction to the destruction in modern America of traditional bonds to community and family”. The neo-localism movement is about reconnecting with place and cultivating a relationship with local identities while boosting local economies. More recently, Schnell (2013) comments on the continued trend toward supporting local businesses: “What makes neo-localism different from local ties in the past is its self-conscious aspect. It is the result of people cultivating local ties by choice, not by necessity” (Schnell, 2013, p. 56). According to Wes Flack, “neo-localism of microbreweries is an intriguing attempt to create a sense of place” (1997, p. 49). Craft breweries often attempt to ingrain themselves into their local community and represent the history and landscapes of the area through the label design, logo design, and beer names. Schnell and Reese (2003) cite several categories that brewers use to name their beers including historical folkways, blue-collar lifestyles, sport teams, local characters, local legends, historical events, landmarks, wildlife, and climatic events. Researching the history of a town and/or region and reintroducing local heritage to communities through labeling is just one of the ways in which local businesses are trying to reinvent their local identity.

This study explores whether the connection with local culture is a driving force for loyalty to the brand. While spending money with locally-owned businesses is important to many visitors who participate in sustainable tourism, it is also very important for fostering a positive attitude toward tourism for residents. If residents understand that money spent at the brewery or money spent on the local beer brand outside of the community brings money into those communities, they may be more likely to support craft breweries in general. Additionally, the residents living in the more urban areas close to the towns may patronize rural breweries to support regional efforts. Questions in the survey instrument (see below) regarding culture, history, and social benefits were adapted from tourism impact attitude scales (Brehm, Eisenhauer & Krannich, 2004; Perdue, Long & Kang, 1996). Brehm et al. (2004) discuss the promotion of local culture and its traditions, while

Perdue et al. (1996) include the social benefits of tourism. The community-related questions on the instrument identify the amount of history and historical significance patrons learn about the brewery while on a brewery tour, as well as their awareness of economic contributions of the brewery to the community

Desire for unique consumer products

The DUCP (also studied as consumers' need for uniqueness) concept, in which consumers choose products that are rare and help create a unique self-image and social-image (Ruvio, Shoham, & Brencic, 2008), has been researched in many fields including marketing (Oh, Fiore & Jeoung, 2007), psychology, and sociology. Related to this is the concept of brand personality, or a set of human characteristics that have been attributed to a brand. Brand personality can be affected by the image of the brand users, product spokespersons, and product attributes (Levy, 1959), and customers may choose products based on their own traits or the traits with which they would like to be associated. Long-Yi (2010) explored brand personality in relationship to brand loyalty in a study on children's toys and found that brand personality has a significant positive influence on affective loyalty (consumers' overall feelings about brands as well as their purchase intention) and action loyalty (response to the stimulation of sales promotions). Balakrishnan, Lee, Shuaib and Marmaya (2009) also studied brand personality as it relates to brand loyalty in coffee and concluded that "brand personality has a strong effect and influence on brand preference and consumer loyalty [and that] intangible attributes contribute to brand perceptions, consumer preference and loyalty" (p. 109). The two beer brands in this study have developed their individual brand personalities, as well as relied on the traits associated with craft beer in general.

The wine connoisseur is not a new phenomenon, however, beer connoisseurs have "emerged in tandem with the rise of microbreweries" (Flack, 1997, p. 46). Craft breweries offer a way for consumers to break away from drinking beers produced by major industrial breweries. The DUCP is applied in this study to see if consumers enjoy drinking a unique beer brand. Lynn and Harris (1997) developed several questions used to identify consumers' DUCP, which were adapted for craft beer consumption.

Satisfaction

Understanding the level of perceived satisfaction with the product is a key concept when examining brand loyalty. The concepts of quality and satisfaction occur in much of the literature on brand loyalty (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995; Day, 1969; Dick & Basu, 1994; Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978). Lockshin and Spawton's (2001) study on brand loyalty in wine tourism conclude that a consumer's satisfaction with the perceived quality of a product is the most prominent factor related to profitability and return on investment. Satisfaction has been studied both in brand loyalty (Bloemer & Kasper, 1995) and leisure and tourism literature (Li & Petrick, 2008; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Studies within the leisure and tourism literature attempt to link customer satisfaction with destination loyalty. Additionally, the investment model described by Li and Petrick (2008) outlines how people generally seek to maximize rewards (including satisfaction) and minimize costs, and posit satisfaction as a potential measurement of brand loyalty. Satisfaction with the beer brand, the taproom (the room where the beer is served), and the tour product will be measured in this study to understand the satisfaction patrons have with their beer choice as well as their brewery choice.

Enthusiast status, previous experience, sociodemographics

A survey question was developed to explore a self-rating of “beer enthusiast”, *on a scale of 1–5, 1 being “not at all” and 5 being “very much so”*, *would you consider yourself a beer enthusiast?* This question was included to determine if respondents with different levels of enthusiast status valued different aspects of the breweries. Additionally, previous experience with the brewery was measured with the question, *including this past visit, how many times have you visited Mother Earth Brewery in the last year?* These measures of enthusiast status and previous experience, along with sociodemographic variables of gender, age, and education, were explored to gain further understanding of the craft brewery patron.

Methods

Study area

This study focuses on two breweries located in the towns of Kinston and Fuquay-Varina. Selecting breweries in rural areas was done for two key reasons: (1) to target consumers who deliberately had to travel to the breweries and (2) because the breweries serve as economic drivers in their towns and rural regions. Kinston and Fuquay-Varina are similar in that they have comparable population sizes (c.20,000) and because neither town is considered a major tourism destination within North Carolina. Both were once vibrant towns but are undergoing efforts to revitalize their economy and recreate their identity since the decline of agriculture (tobacco, cotton, and timber) and manufacturing, as well as the railroad (History of Fuquay-Varina, n.d.). Additionally, Kinston and Fuquay-Varina are situated within a 30–45-minute drive of urban areas that receive tourists who visit for corporate, government or university purposes. Residents of these urban areas, while falling within the 50-mile parameter, would not be considered a resident of the more rural Kinston or Fuquay-Varina. The authors argue that these “fringe” urban areas are vital for the survival of rural destinations in that they serve as a primary market to rural establishments, but are also a hub for tourists. For population and income information on both towns and surrounding areas, refer to [Table 3](#).

Survey development

The instrument used for this study was built by adapting concepts and established survey instruments from previous tourism, sustainability, and brand loyalty research; survey questions were organized in sections corresponding to the factors discussed above. In

Table 3. Study area population and average annual income.

	Kinston	Fuquay-Varina	North Carolina
Population of town	21,677	17,955	9,656,401
Per capital average annual income of town	\$18,589	\$26,099	\$24,745
Population of closest urban area	84,581	403,947	–
Per capital average income of closest urban area	\$22,506	\$30,377	–

Note: The closest urban area to both Kinston and Fuquay-Varina are within 30-miles, falling under UNWTO’s 50-mile definition of a tourist.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2010a, 2010b)

addition, sociodemographic questions (residence, gender, work sector, age, birthplace, education, and income) were asked to determine a profile of the respondents. Additionally, a few questions exploring how often respondents visit the brewery and purchasing behavior of souvenirs were also included. The survey was reviewed by an expert panel including faculty in sustainable tourism, recreation, geography, and business, and with professionals in the brewing industry. Based on comments from the panel, the instrument was revised before adapting it to an online format. A copy of the survey instrument can be found as supplemental data for this article in the online version of this paper.

Data collection and analysis

This study examines what factors influence brand loyalty to craft beer on the part of tourists to, and residents of, the host community. Residents were defined as living within 50 miles of the brewery, however as explained above, the distinction between the two is not the critical focus of the study. The sampling frame considered anyone who participated in the free public tour offered by either brewery. After each tour, the primary researcher collected the email addresses from the consumers at the brewery and sent a survey solicitation via email. One week after initial contact, a follow-up email was sent out reminding patrons of the survey, and a third email was sent one week after the reminder. An incentive, to be entered into a drawing for a US\$ 50 gift card to spend at the brewery, was offered to respondents and was awarded at the end of the six-week study period (31 March to 28 April 2012). Inter-item correlation was examined and each factor was tested for reliability using Cronbach's coefficient alpha. Data analyses were done using SPSS 19.0.

Results

After six weeks of data collection, 260 usable surveys were amassed resulting in a 63.7% response rate between the two breweries.

Descriptive profile

The largest respondent group was between the ages of 21 and 30 (41.9%), and the majority were male (59.4%), and well educated, holding a Bachelor's degree or higher (79.5%; Table 4). The majority of respondents were employed in the private sector (48.5%) and income was normally distributed ($M = 2.96$; $SD = 1.382$ on a five-point scale) with 25% of respondents making between \$60,000 and \$89,000 annually (26.2%). Residency within 50 miles of the brewery was examined to determine how many respondents were tourists (Table 5). Just under one-fifth (18.75%) were residents of either Kinston or Fuquay-Varina, making 81.25% of the respondents non-residents.

Reliability within each loyalty factor

Reliability was tested for the five loyalty factors: *access*, *environmental consumption*, *connection with the local community* (CLC), *DUCP*, and *satisfaction*, within the Aviator, Mother Earth, and the combined data-set. When necessary, an item was removed due to a low correlation or redundancy with another item.

Table 4. Sociodemographic profile of sample.

Variables	Aviator	Mother Earth	Combined data
Gender			
Male	85 (14.2%)	70 (61.9%)	155 (59.6%)
Female	62 (41.9%)	43 (38.1%)	105 (40.4%)
Work sector			
Public	52 (35.4%)	0 (0%)	52 (20%)
Private	50 (34%)	76 (67.3%)	126 (48.5%)
Non-profit	9 (6.1%)	5 (4.4%)	14 (5.4%)
Own business	10 (6.8%)	10 (8.8%)	20 (7.7%)
Retired	7 (4.8%)	2 (1.8%)	9 (3.5%)
Student	15 (10.2%)	17 (15%)	32 (12.3%)
Unemployed	4 (2.7%)	3 (2.7%)	7 (2.7%)
Age			
21–30 years old	55 (37.4%)	54 (47.8%)	109 (41.9%)
31–40 years old	36 (24.5%)	31 (27.4%)	67 (25.8%)
41–50 years old	28 (19%)	14 (12.4%)	42 (16.2%)
51–60 years old	20 (13.6%)	9 (7.9%)	29 (11.2%)
61–70 years old	8 (5.4%)	3 (2.7%)	11 (4.2%)
Over 70 years old	0 (0%)	2 (1.8%)	2 (0.8%)
Education			
High school	8 (5.4%)	17 (15.2%)	25 (9.7%)
Technical school	8 (5.4%)	3 (2.7%)	11 (4.2%)
Community college	11 (7.5%)	6 (5.4%)	17 (6.6%)
Four-year college or university	92 (65.2%)	60 (53.6%)	152 (58.7%)
Advanced degree	28 (19%)	26 (23.2%)	54 (20.8%)
Annual household income			
Less than \$30,000	19 (12.9%)	30 (26.5%)	49 (18.8%)
\$30,000–\$59,000	32 (21.8%)	22 (19.5%)	54 (20.8%)
\$60,000–\$89,000	36 (24.5%)	32 (28.3%)	68 (26.2%)
\$90,000–\$120,000	26 (17.7%)	11 (9.7%)	37 (14.2%)
More than \$120,000	34 (23.1%)	18 (15.9%)	52 (20%)

Table 5. Residence of respondents.

Residence	Kinston	Fuquay-Varina	Total
Resident	30 (26.5%)	21 (14.3%)	42 (19.6%)
Visitor	83 (73.5%)	126 (85.7%)	182 (80.4%)
Total	113 (100%)	147 (100%)	224 (100%)

Test results

The research question, *which factors most influence brand loyalty to craft breweries?* was examined using multiple regression analysis. Of the five factors, only three were significantly related. The factors that most influence brand loyalty were the *CLC*, the *DUCP*, all significant at the $p = .01$ level. The beta weights of each were examined to determine that *CLC* had the highest influence ($\beta = 0.2768$), followed by *DUCP* ($\beta = 0.24$), and *satisfaction* ($\beta = 0.19$).

To discover more about brewery patrons, sociodemographic variables including gender, age, and education were examined using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) and a *post hoc* Tukey test to isolate the significant relationships. In addition to the sociodemographic variables, *enthusiast* status and repeat patronage were also explored. Females ranked higher ($M = 4.28$; $SD = 0.565$) than males ($M = 4.13$; $SD = 0.519$) in terms of *CLC* ($p = 0.025$), but no statistically significant differences were found on the other loyalty factors. In terms of age, 21–30-year-olds ($M = 2.85$; $SD = 1.019$) were less loyal to the breweries than respondents aged 51–60 years ($M = 3.48$; $SD = 1.051$). Respondents aged 21–30 ($M = 4.13$; $SD = 0.516$) were, however, more concerned with *DUCP* than those in the 41–50 group ($M = 3.71$; $SD = 0.617$; $p = 0.013$). There were no differences among respondents with various levels of *education*.

There were several significant differences regarding *enthusiast* status including *loyal* ($p < 0.001$), *access* ($p < 0.001$), *DUCP* ($p < 0.001$), and *satisfaction* ($p < 0.001$) variables. Respondents who claimed to be beer enthusiasts were more loyal than those who are lesser beer enthusiasts. Similarly, respondents who desired unique consumer products were more likely to be beer enthusiasts. Respondents who felt access to the brewery was important also considered themselves more avid beer enthusiasts. Satisfaction with the beer, tour, and brewery itself also increased as respondents claimed to be beer enthusiasts. Generally as *enthusiasm* increased, so did *loyalty* and *satisfaction*. In regards to repeat patronage, respondents who patronized the breweries multiple times were more *loyal*, and had higher *satisfaction* than those who visited the breweries less frequently.

Discussion

This study investigated the factors that influence brand loyalty to two craft breweries in North Carolina. Little academic research on brand loyalty exists in the craft beer industry; therefore, the current study contributes in several ways. First, the results of the study can be used to support marketing strategy for craft breweries. It improves the understanding of brand loyalty for local, niche, culinary products, which in turn enhance the discussion on neo-localism. This study also expands on rural tourism development by exploring two locally owned businesses in rural communities that attract both residents and tourists. Part of the appeal of rural tourism is the fact that more people are living in urban areas, and they are, therefore, losing their cultural identities and individuality (George et al., 2009). This desire can lead to “increased desires for ‘escapism’ and ‘search for meaning’ in one’s life; people seek experiences to satisfy these desires” (p. 7); urban areas provide an important market for proximal rural tourism destinations. Breweries can satisfy this need by allowing patrons to connect with the community they are visiting and by consuming a unique product. Additionally, this study emphasizes the need to consider rural tourism and rural development as complementary endeavors. The two breweries in this study, while certainly contributing to sustainable tourism development in their rural environs and increasing destination competitiveness (Plummer et al., 2005; Renko et al., 2010),

equally serve local and regional residents living within a 50-mile radius, and create employment. In particular, this contributes to entrepreneurship (Frochot, 2003), agricultural industry expansion and contributing to sustainability (Everett & Aitchison, 2008), and rural development strategies (Henderson, 2004) within their region. The results might also suggest future product development directions if a brewery were to act on the importance of the community connection for craft drinkers. And certainly, it serves as a foundation for future research directions regarding beer and tourism.

One concept employed in this study was enthusiast status, which allowed respondents patronizing the brewery because a friend or relative wanted to go to be separated from patrons who are interested in the brewing process and tasting craft beers. Overall, the mean response to this question was 3.7 out of 5, and more males considered themselves enthusiasts than females. Self-proclaimed enthusiasts were between 21 and 40 years old and made less than \$30,000 annually.

Access referred to the accessibility to the product and company by measuring consumers' ability to tour the brewery and buy products at the brewery. When responding to questions regarding access to the company, respondents reported a mean score of 4.44, the second highest mean score of the five factors (behind *Satisfaction*). The experience of a microbrewery allows consumers to learn about the product and have a unique experience with that product. While *access* was not a significant finding in the multiple regression analysis as it relates to brand loyalty, contrary to Mitchell and Orwig's (2002) and Brown's (1989) findings, it does seem to leave patrons with a better understanding of the product, the brewing process, and a closer bond with the brand. As the only brewery in downtown Kinston, the convenience of access to Mother Earth Brewery could still be a factor in influencing brand loyalty. Similarly, Aviator has a taproom in downtown Fuquay-Varina and is one of the few bars in downtown making it convenient for people living in or visiting Fuquay-Varina.

Another element explored was the impact of *environmental consumption* on patrons to the breweries. Mother Earth Brewing Company has recently become a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) silver certified brewery in America; therefore, it was expected that some patrons of the brewery may be concerned with the environmental impacts of that brewery specifically. However, *environmental consumption* was not found to be a significant factor in influencing brand loyalty in this study. While it was not a significant factor in influencing brand loyalty, respondents did report a mean score of 3.91 of 5, when it came to environmental consumption, agreeing with Poitras and Getz (2006) as to its importance.

The *DUCP* is a concept that explores how consumers feel they define themselves by the products they purchase or consume (Ruvio et al., 2008). Craft breweries allow for consumers to drink a beer unique to the area. Flack (1997) states, "as with almost everything in this society of conspicuous consumption, the beer that a person drinks has become a sociological marker or symbol of self-definition" (p. 46). In line with Mitchell and Orwig's (2002) findings, *DUCP* emerged as one of the statistically significant factors that influences brand loyalty to craft breweries (*DUCP*, $M = 3.96$). This seems to agree with Oh et al.'s (2007) work which states that "in *experience economy*, consumers seek unique experiences beyond merely consuming products and services because the consistent, high level of product and service quality can no longer be used to differentiate choices for consumers" (p. 119). Additionally, results exemplify Mitchell and Orwig's (2002, p. 32) discussion of how breweries and brew-pubs are marketing the uniqueness of their product and company. "Further, the recent explosion in the number of smaller breweries and brew pubs seeks to capitalize on the consumer's interest in the manufacturing

process and the ‘chic-ness’ of the consuming of on-the-spot made beverages”. Additionally, it was found that younger respondents value uniqueness more than older respondents.

Satisfaction, quite possibly the most obvious factor, was measured by asking respondents if they were satisfied with the taproom, tour, and beer, while patronizing the brewery. *Satisfaction* was the third most significant predictor of *brand loyalty* (behind *CLC* and *DUCP*) and had a mean score of 4.516, indicating that respondents were very satisfied with all three aspects of their experience. This agrees with the investment model described by Li and Petrick (2008) in that consumers seek to maximize rewards (including satisfaction) and minimize costs perhaps by not spending money to try new products. Li and Petrick’s (2008) claim that “when customers have made an initial investment in certain services or goods, or when the costs of switching brands are expected to be high, it is reasoned that the customer tends to remain” (p. 26). In the case of loyalty to microbreweries, a low income could be one of the influential factors to why consumers repeat patronage to certain microbreweries. Perhaps then, respondents who are satisfied with the product are more likely to be loyal to that product.

The regression analysis showed that *CLC* (Schnell & Reese, 2003), *satisfaction* (Li & Petrick, 2008), and *DUCP* (Ruvio et al., 2008) most influenced *brand loyalty*. According to Vermeir and Verbeke (2005), price, quality, convenience, and brand familiarity are the most important criteria when forming a decision in terms of consumption. However, this study showed that, in the case of craft breweries, making a *CLC* is the most important of the factors explored. Mother Earth uses local landscapes in their labeling and in several beer names. When asked to provide a description of the brewery, one respondent reported of Mother Earth, “this is Kinston? [The taproom is] trend-setting”. Residents to Kinston and those familiar with the area are generally happy to see Mother Earth making a positive change in community struggling to increase its vibrancy. This connection with the local community draws locals and visitors (including those originally from the region and those from nearby urban areas). Visitors returning to the area and visitors from surrounding urban areas are vital for the survival of breweries in rural areas.

Schnell and Reese (2003) suggest that one reason for the rapid increase in the craft brewery movement is “in part from the desire of people to break away from the smothering homogeneity of popular, national culture, and re-establish connections with local communities, settings, and economies” (p. 46). The results from this study coincide with their finding in that the multiple regression performed indicated that the *CLC* was the relationship with the strongest weight ($\beta = 0.24$). Survey items exploring *CLC* asked questions regarding tourism activity associated with the brewery, economic impact of the brewery, the celebration of the local culture at the brewery, and the social benefits of the brewery.

Implications

With craft breweries rapidly developing as a niche industry in the United States, it is important to recognize why consumers decide to visit a brewery, as well as choose to visit one brewery over another. For smaller towns, breweries can be a main attraction for visitors and residents alike. Some cities are creating beer trails to facilitate a packaged experience for tourists. However, local residents who live in or near a brewery town are also key customers for a brewery in a rural setting. Much like the study of wineries by Alonso and O’Neill (2009), the majority of patrons of the breweries were residents living within 50 miles. This current research is beneficial for tourism academics, planners, and brewery

owners or managers when developing product and marketing strategies. For DMOs, it is important to see how many people are traveling to an area specifically to visit the brewery. If the brewery is a main attraction in the town, it needs to be at the forefront of the community's marketing strategy.

Attraction loyalty

Visitor motivations to experience breweries differ in many ways. For some, the visit to the brewery is their primary purpose for the trip to the town, while for others it is secondary to visiting friends and family. It is, therefore, difficult to separate patrons who are loyal to the beer (brand loyalty) from patrons who are loyal to the place (attraction or destination loyalty). Attraction loyalty is defined by Yoon and Uysal (2005) as "the degree of tourists' loyalty to a destination . . . reflected in their intentions to revisit the destination and in their recommendations to others" (p. 45). It could be argued that repeat purchasing of beer is brand loyalty whereas repeat visitation to a brewery is attraction or destination loyalty. The difference between brand and attraction loyalty presents itself when, after a visit, the consumer recommends the beer (brand loyalty) or the experience (attraction loyalty) of visiting the brewery to a friend. It also presents itself in whether the consumer buys the beer after their visit (brand loyalty) or if they return to the brewery after their initial visit (attraction loyalty). The tours and the taproom create an experience that is unique to that brewery and allows for the creation of place attachment. Once patrons have bonded to the brewery as a place, the brewery has created a brand for itself rather than just a brand loyalty for the beer.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study was implemented based on studies in different fields and therefore was open to various limitations. It was focused on two small-scale breweries in North Carolina and, therefore, cannot be generalized to larger breweries or similarly sized breweries across the United States. While email addresses were collected over the same period of time for the same number of days, they were not collected on the same days at both breweries, and were collected only during one season of brewery operation.

Prior research has shown that brand loyalty is strongly aligned with repeat patronage. While repeat patronage information was collected on the survey, the data was not used in this study as a measurement for the loyalty factor although it was examined as an independent variable tested with the five factors. Future studies might consider including repeat patronage as a measure of brand loyalty. Additionally, there are several opportunities for future research to better understand the driving factors in beer tourism including:

- Investigate factors besides the five mentioned here to establish the role they play in determining (1) brand loyalty to craft beer and (2) general visitation to craft breweries.
- Look into other similar issues examined in wine tourism, such as packaging (Barber, Taylor, & Deale, 2010b) and special interest tourism (Brown & Getz, 2005).
- Further investigate the differences in loyalty antecedents among resident, regional residents, and tourist patrons to breweries. Related to this, determine how far someone is willing to travel for beer or to visit a microbrewery.

- Examine the differences between customers who took the tour and who did not take the tour.
- Replicate the study in larger-scale craft breweries or compare among breweries with different amenities (e.g. tap room, restaurant, and tours).
- Compare breweries across the USA in various geographical regions, and in other countries.

Conclusion

Understanding what brewery patrons value in a craft beer brand will allow breweries to utilize their marketing budgets in a way that is supported by research. Not only might current patrons persuade new patrons to visit the brewery, having a good experience at a brewery may increase brand purchases outside of the brewery. Craft breweries are tourism attractors in small towns and can work as examples of sustainable tourism businesses. They can meet the triple bottom line of environmental, economic, and sociocultural sustainability, and have the potential to attract customers who would not necessarily know or understand that they are participating in sustainable tourism. They may address sociocultural sustainability through labels, context provided during the tours, and their expressions of the local community, history, and landscapes in the naming of beers. Environmental sustainability might be addressed by the breweries through the recycling of used grain from local farmers, use of renewable energy, and initiatives involving the promotion of canning beers. Finally, small-scale breweries are typically locally owned and, therefore, provide a positive economic impact on the town. They encourage sustainable tourism and typically employ locally, maximizing the induced financial impacts kept in the community. The results of this study will allow DMOs to better understand who visits breweries, and shed light on how breweries can be understood as sustainable tourism destinations. It examines how patrons view the breweries in terms of five loyalty factors and explores how Consumer Experience Tourism can bring consumer at breweries closer to the brand. Much more research must be done to fully understand the motivating factors behind brand loyalty to such establishments and to their brands. Breweries should use this information to tailor their tours and marketing efforts to reach out to their niche market and provide them with an experience unique to the brewery and pleasing to the consumer. Finally, the concepts and methodologies of this study should be used to study other rural tourism experiences, such as trails, farm restaurants and shops, heritage experiences, and many others.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Supplemental data

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed here.

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