

Cultural Value Perception in the Memorable Tourism Experience

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Introduction

Destinations around the globe are looking for creative solutions to common challenges in tourism development. It may be possible to identify broad and narrow types of creativity. In the broadest sense, everything that exposes one's identity to some kind of challenge or learning can be creative. In the modern risk society, creativity has become part of our everyday lives – a strategy for shaping multiple identities to cope with the fluidity of modern existence.

Tourism experience is embedded in the experience economy and many authors have argued that the central challenge facing tourism destination managers and planners is the design of effective tourism experiences (Ritchie and Hudson 2009). Creativity has been employed to transform traditional cultural tourism, shifting from tangible heritage towards more intangible culture and greater involvement with the everyday life of the destination. The emergence of 'creative tourism' reflects the growing integration between tourism and different placemaking strategies, including promotion of the creative industries, creative cities and the 'creative class'. Creative tourism is also arguably an escape route from the serial reproduction of mass cultural tourism, offering more flexible and authentic experiences which can be co-created between host and tourist (Richards 2011).

Tourism management curriculum, if its ultimate objective is to give an introduction to the modern trends in tourism management and marketing and to prepare future destination managers, must inevitably incorporate – together with all their theoretical and practical implications - the phenomena of experiential consumption and value co-creation

This chapter sought to provide some initial insights into the critical dimensions of the 'experience' and 'value creation' in tourism from the point of view of tourism management students. What is the essence of what makes certain tourism experiences special, spectacular, and memorable? What building blocks trigger and what are the theoretical underpinnings that facilitate the formation and retention of those memories? Can there be distinct categories of building blocks observed and established that contribute to the memorable experience?

The growth of creative tourism was first defined as an extension or reaction to cultural tourism inasmuch as cultural tourists, creative consumers as they are, are searching for more engaging, interactive experiences that can contribute to their personal growth. In the area of individualisation, identity can be best developed in the process of collecting unique experiences. This can then be extended to tourism destinations (Morgan, M. et al. 2009). Each and individual tourist perceives the destination and the experience offered by the destination in their very special, individualised way which is the summum of their past life experience, education, attitudes, in other words, a whole series of personal characteristics. The focus of the tourism experience creation is the individual, to fulfil the aspirations, wishes and expectations relating to his personal growth. Creative tourism has been posed as an

extension of cultural tourism—at once an adjunct and an antidote to mass forms of cultural tourism and the serial reproduction of culture (Richards & Wilson, 2006).

Consumer experiences have a beginning and ending point and typically are composed of a variety of environmental and internal components that trigger a multiplicity of emotional, physical and cognitive reactions to the consumption of goods and services. It is a blend of many individual elements that involve the consumer emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually (Shaw and Ivens, 2002). A consumer is not seeking for the fulfilment of his needs, but rather his aspirations, desires and dreams that can carry him further on in personal improvement and growth. Shared experiences can create close bonds between tourists, a sense of community, contributing to the better identification of attributes that make each person individual, thus to gain recognition, status or kudos. This means, in practical terms, that the consumer will experience a state of flow when, immersed in the process of creation (or transformation), certain challenges will be offered, but he is prepared to complete them. This transformation can be called the *creative process*, the *value creation* in tourism, and co-creation takes place when various stakeholders in the tourism experience are invited to participate in the process.

Creativity and tourist experiences

The idea that the tourist as well as the destination can be creative in their use of the basic building blocks of tourism experience also opens up new perspectives on the nature of tourism itself; in particular on two fundamental concepts in tourism studies – the concept of the tourist ‘gaze’ and the centrality of authenticity in tourism experiences. Allowing for multiple meanings in the tourism experience also leaves room for the creativity of the tourist to interact with the placing and staging by producers in the role of performer. Craft is a form of social capital: tacit knowledge and skill accumulated over time and passed on through social interaction. Tacit knowledge is not only more difficult to transfer, arguably also more difficult to commodify, as it resides in the skilled person that possesses it. The embeddedness of creative knowledge and skills is one of the arguments for developing creative tourism (Richards 2011.)

Survey methodology

The aim of the survey was to explore, in the framework of a pilot case study, the perception of tourism management students of the Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE). The survey was of exploratory nature as little previous research exists on the topic. This study is limited which means that the results should be seen as a basis for future research, e.g. a large-scale testing of the findings in other contexts. Students described a written narrative of their most salient and memorable experiences.

We used a multi-method research approach to triangulate on the *nature of the Memorable Tourism Experience*. Students were 3rd year BSc graduates from the Budapest Business School, Department of Tourism and Hospitality, and from the International Business School, Department of Tourism Management. They had been asked, by means of open-ended questionnaires, and subsequent focus-group interview, to reflect upon three themes: the nature and process of the formation of the Memorable Tourism Experience, without any prior elucidation on what is exactly meant by it. It was also the objective of the survey to find out how they distinguish between ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’, thus memorable tourism experience. Data were collected in sequence from two sources: open-ended questionnaires and depth interviews. Content analysis was then applied to the narratives of their most salient and memorable experiences.

Each subsequent data set was selected to offer different perspectives and hopefully convergent interpretations. Thus, as patterns emerged from the analysis of the observations, questionnaires and interviews, we sought data to corroborate our provisional interpretations.

Although the task possessed a degree of artificiality due to researcher-imposed instructions, it more precisely chronicled interpretation. In sum, each data set had advantages that together permitted a more complete view of the nature of the experiential-decision process. They were then questioned on the theme of value creation or co-creation during the Memorable Tourism Experience, and finally, on how they perceive the value co-creation in social media. Responses containing perceptions were first coded using a data reduction process and then mass descriptive codes were reduced to fewer, conceptually abstract codes. Next, descriptive codes were reduced to interpretative themes according to whether they were qualitatively similar or dissimilar in character. In case of Theme 1, the Memorable Tourism Experience, Dimensions were identified representing aspects of experience that enable them to be particularly memorable. Cluster technique was used to assemble a set of categories best describing the various perceptions of the MTE processes. Most characteristic cluster opinions are listed below. Results were then compared with experience economy writers.

Findings

Introductory remarks : The questionnaire and interview topics had not been discussed before in the framework of the Tourism management courses, thus encouraging students to reflect on the topics based on their past tourism experience, acquired knowledge from external sources such as social media sites and peer networking. Questions were formulated in a way that they were directing at concise and in-depth reflection on the topics. These topics, although pertaining to modern trends in tourism management and marketing, are not included in the curriculum of the higher education institutions where the interviews took place, therefore it required some creativity and innovative thinking from the students to reflect on them.

Value creation and co-creation were specifically terms that are not widely discussed in these courses so that students had to make a mental effort to work out what the terms mean and how to interpret these terms in the framework of tourism experience. By the same token, memorable tourism experience was a term that they had to reflect on without any prior introduction or elucidation on its meaning. The survey was in this respect exploratory and innovative: future tourism managers will have to use the intellectual capabilities of innovativeness and creativity to relate to the terms. It is exactly this relation to the 'solution' of this problem that we were interested in. The way and approach the students select in solving this problem will be reflected in their problem-solving when facing the necessity for experience creation for their visitors at the destination.

Theme 1: the Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE): definition of framework, description of the phenomenon and its components

This theme was directed at finding out the perception of the components, possible definitions, and description of the processes and outcomes of the experience. What makes a tourism experience extraordinary (memorable) as contrasted to an 'ordinary' one?

Categories

The tourist's mental processes

'The memorable experience is starting from the phase when we get information about the destination, it continues throughout the visiting period, and the final phase comes slowly, after 1-2 months of the real visit, because of all the impressions and memories reach a mature stage by that time'

'It's the interpretation of universal symbols at the destination.'

'I think the stories that happen to us during the experience are the most important elements.'

'MTE is basically a marketable story.'

It is not so much the physical environment or the activities themselves, than the mental process of transforming the impressions that account for the experience. The tourist leaves on a certain kind of mental, psychological journey that is made of transformation, absorption and thus, value creation. Tourists create stories during their experiences and they present these stories to the others as memories of their trip. Storytelling acts to both consolidate and recover experiences from memory, and an appreciation of storytelling provides listeners with a deeper understanding (Tung, Ritchie, 2011). Physical and intellectual activities during the experience are often at the same time exercises of the imagination, with the participants seeing themselves as acting out roles.

Tourist's physical challenges, sensory experience

'Tourism is about experiential consumption where all the five senses take an active role in the absorption of new impulses'

This cluster, by its characteristics, is complementary to the previous one, inasmuch as it reflects on the physical aspects of the experience.

Complexity

'Every single aspect of the journey contributes to the totality of the experience that we gain, I can't single out any'

The totality of internal and external impulses, influences and emotions as well as physical environment details have an impact on the formation of the experience. Individual elements cannot be identified as they act in conjunction with other elements and at the same time, the psychological and emotional state of the visitor is the foundation for the absorption of the experience. That is what makes a memorable experience so unique and unrepeatable (Gentile, et al. 2007).

Surprise

'It is the aspect of unforeseen, unexpected events and happenings that are in the core of the MTE.'

'It is the component of surprise that is the best in a good trip.'

Unexpected events make the experience extraordinary, as contrasted to for example ordinary trip. Visitors' expectation of the memorable experience is the trait of uniqueness, something never seen or heard of that they can possess and thus distinguish themselves from the other tourists. Surprises make the trip not only unforgettable, but personalised inasmuch this unexpected and unforeseen event happened to them only.

Attitude and expectations

'Immersion to MTE is largely influenced by the visitor's attitude and expectations, so varies with the individual's emotional state, educational level and degree of preparedness.'

'The most important component of the MTE is the quality of the services at the destination that leaves us with a positive post-experience feeling.'

Prior to the commencement of the trip, tourists, on the basis of information that they have gathered, formulate a set of 'minimum standard' that they expect to be delivered during the experience. Now, the actual delivery may be above or below this level of standard, and this will have an impact on the evaluation of the experience – to a better or to a worse degree.

Theme 2: Perceived value creation during the process of the Memorable Tourism Experience

In a way, the sub-theme intended to reiterate the first theme, but this time focussing more on the value creation aspect. This theme wanted to deepen reflection on the experience and to find out the group's perception of value creation.

Utilitarian

'After the visit, we think back and evaluate and single out what aspect or experience was the most important – that will become the ultimate value.'

'Value co-creation is about receiving extraordinary service at the destination. Visitor, by their value expectations help destinations become better and better.'

This cluster represents a quality-driven, utilitarian perception of the experience whereby the overall experience is dominated and therefore determined by the quality of the experience. In their perception, the core of the experience is the delivery of quality. The experience is a type of quality service that the visitors expect from the visit (Scott, N. et al. 2009).

Contribution to the building of social capital

'It is the interaction with the locals at any particular destination that creates tremendous cultural value'

'Visiting places of national history enhance patriotism; add value to the social capital of that nation. The more citizens visit and the more visitors they attract by their narratives, the more developed the social capital becomes.'

Interaction with co-visitors or personnel of the destination or practically any human being who has an active role in the delivery of the experience serves as an enabler of social development. Shared experiences can create close bonds between people and a sense of community (Cova and Cova 2001) within which they can establish identity and gain recognition. Tourism experience can be a powerful building block in social capital.

'Serendipitous moment' – become one with the experience

'Value is created when you feel that somehow you are part of the destination, and by way of adding part of your personality, experience or education, you add to the colourfulness of the destination'

'During the experience, I let myself be carried away by a mixture of conscious and subconscious learning patterns, and all I have to do is to be exposed to it and absorb it.'

Drawing on Hom Cary's (2004, p. 68.) interpretation of the tourism experience, the term 'serendipitous moment' means a 'spontaneous instance of self-discovery and belonging' in which, 'the moment simultaneously produces and erases the tourist as a subject and where one goes beyond "being a tourist" '. Other authors explain the process of 'immersion' in the experiences as a distinctive feature of the memorable tourism experience. Being one with the experience helps growth and this in itself is an extremely important element. It is the very essence of the experience economy to enable the shift of emphasis from the rational to the emotional aspects where the value of the experience can be measured by the positive self-development.

Self-discovery: spiritual and intellectual growth

'I consider spiritual growth during a visit a tremendous value.'

'I gain value from unique experiences that leave an imprint on my intellect and set of values are enhances.'

This approach is most effective when it is based on shared values and allows the tourist to create their own experiences in a search for personal growth. Self-discovery and growth supposes a degree of consequentiality, that is some personally perceived importance from the outcome of the trip, in the shape of permanent changes in the respondents' state of mind. It is in the moments of immersion into to experience that the growth can start. Ultimately, experience offer intellectual stimuli. Creative tourism involves not just spitting, nor just 'being there', but reflexive interaction on the part of tourists. In creative tourism, the onus is on the tourists themselves to actively learn about their surroundings and apply that knowledge in order to develop their own skills (Richards, Wilson 2006).

Theme 3: perception of value co-creation in social media

Information, knowledge sharing as decision-making tools and networking

'the objective of the trip is not exclusively leisure, but also gaining new information, knowledge, and networking, letting the circle of acquaintances know about the destination'

'The role of social media is growing by the day. I can't see myself organising a programme without consulting one or more sites and discussing with my friends. On these occasions, we get information and share experience even without making a single step in the direction of the destination.'

Planning for experiential consumption is an experience itself, and positive emotions such as anticipation and excitement are a part of this process. Some consumers enjoy vicarious vacationing and experience not only positive emotions in response to product stimuli, but also *positive* task-related affect: pleasure in the planning, an emotional dimension of the decision process.

Trend setting and peer group evaluation

'I only trust the opinion of my peer group when making an experiential decision as I am aware that I am continually being harassed by media, advertisements'

'My age group (20-24) only trusts the narratives of peers. We do not accept any suggestions on leisure activities from elderly generations'

Social media is perceived as a trend-setting tool, the use of which is necessary if one wants to comply with the attitudes and behaviour patterns of the peer group. Interviewees often mention the fact of being harassed by offer on a multitude of marketing channels and they feel lost amidst this myriad of information. The most practical means of evaluating offers is by the social media that peer group favours, which provides a reliable set of information and evaluations on various consumption experiences, including memorable tourism experiences (Potts et al. 2008).

Intellectual processes

'Experience is shared by friends and family on the social media sites – the minute I see something exciting, I take a picture of it and load it on social media.'

'Social media is a tool for communicating the experience after it has been lived, absorbed and transformed in the traveller's mind'

Social media co-creation is perceived as an opportunity to instigate mental, intellectual work the product of which is then offered to the peer group members. Social media as a modern platform for information exchange often used as a marketing solution to create brand communities and awareness in the retail and services industries, has reached the domain of tourism. Tourism social media sites can have links to and from to other sites, for example professionals' communities attaching the industry to the tourists/visitors, and strengthening the connection between the two. This win-win situation leads to more useful content, more business opportunities and invites more members to the communities.

Challenges based on expectations

'Marketeers could learn from the narratives on social media sites – positive experience is the best advertisement!'

'Social media is sometimes deceptive as narratives of memorable experiences are extremely subjective, what is ok for my friends, may not be ok or satisfactory experience for me.'

Responses suggest that social media value co-creation is about providing narratives of the memorable experience that can inspire and instigate community reader members to consider and go through the same experience. Thus, social media functions as a marketing tool that destination managers could use.

Conclusion

The above research tried to provide new insight into the interpretation and understanding of the vast realm of memorable tourism experience by drawing on tourism management students' perception. It is essential to incorporate in the curriculum of future destination managers the concepts of tourism experience, value creation or co-creation and the role of social media sites in marketing the tourism experience.

What ensues from the research is that the interviewees had a very varied interpretation of the notion of the tourism experience, resulting from the fact that the experience is a very complex phenomenon and it is approached and lived according to the individual's emotional state, stimuli, education and a number of other factors. However, if it was possible to set up clusters of characteristic features that represent the interviewees' perception. The managerial implication of the variety of approaches is that most probably, these future managers will, when designing the memorable experiences, draw on their own aptitudes and

stimuli, therefore contributing to more colourful and exciting experience creation. The success of destinations depends on how they market experiences in order to entice an increasingly sophisticated visitor.

Pertaining to the value creation or co-creation, it is observed on the basis of the type of interpretations the tourism management students had limitations in the usage of the term and that they had not been used to the term. The clusters of value creation in the process of the memorable tourism experience and the social media value co-creation are almost identical which suggests that in the perception of the interviewees, contemporary and memorable tourism experience is largely based on the use of social media and that the value creation processes are similar, if not identical.

As to the educational and managerial implications, it can be said that tourism management higher education institutions must pay more attention to the incorporation of modern tourism marketing subjects into the curricula in order to prepare future destination managers to successfully design colourful memorable tourism experiences.

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