



EXPLORING THE ESSENCE OF MEMORABLE TOURISM EXPERIENCES

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Abstract: The concept of the tourism experience has become a focal point for current tourism research and management. While academic studies are increasingly examining tourism as a function of memorable experiences (ME), more research must be done to uncover the essence of what exactly makes certain experiences special, spectacular, and fittingly, memorable. This study sought to explore the essence of MEs based on research from the field of psychology, with a view to understanding the cognitive processes that impede individuals from paying attention to their experiences, as well as the conceptual processes of memory formation and retention. In-depth interviews revealed four key dimensions of MEs: *affect*, *expectations*, *consequentiality* and *recollection*. Finally, we propose several avenues for future research on MEs. **Keywords:** memorable experience, tourism experience, psychology, memory, grounded theory. © 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved

INTRODUCTION

A recent editorial by the Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Hospitality Management* has driven home perhaps the most fundamental characteristic of the phenomenon we call “tourism”; namely, the delivery of positive experiences to tourists. Pizam has gone one step further, when he stated that “creating memorable experiences is the essence and the *raison d’être* of the hospitality industry” (2010, p. 343). Given the importance that foregoing statement attributes to memorable experiences (ME) in hospitality and tourism, it is encouraging that previous research has been done to provide an in-depth understanding of this key concept. For example, Gunter (1987) identified a variety of properties common to leisure experiences based on written reports of MEs. Additionally, research has commonly considered tourists’ positive MEs with outcome factors such as revisiting a destination and spreading positive word-of-mouth (Woodside, Caldwell, & Albers-Miller, 2004). Managerially, destination management

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organizations have credited the delivery of MEs as fundamental to competitiveness and sustainability (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

Despite the widespread focus and acknowledgement of the importance of MEs, more research must be done to uncover the specific elements—that is, the essence—of what exactly makes certain experiences special, spectacular, and fittingly, memorable. For instance, although many studies have examined memory as the outcome of experiences, what exactly are the basic building blocks of memory itself? Furthermore, what are the triggers for those memories and the conceptual underpinnings that facilitate the formation and retention of those experiences? What are the methodological challenges in memory research? Managerially, how can industry practitioners facilitate tourism experiences that are particularly memorable?

It was with these concerns in mind that we pursued the following objectives. In the present study, we began by summarizing the wealth of literature on tourism experiences. This is divided into three subsections: first, research on tourism authenticity is explored as we considered this area as an appropriate entry point into tourism experiences given its prominence as a reoccurring theme in the last several decades. Next, scholarship on satisfactory tourism experiences is discussed as we deemed it to have initiated considerable academic interest in many other facets of the experience literature. Finally, the link between management and experiences is described with a focus on industry applications.

In the next part of this study, extant literature on MEs is examined from a psychological standpoint. We began with an investigation of the link between tourism experiences and memory in the context of various research and methodological considerations (i.e., storytelling and memory-work). Next, we examined core psychology on mindlessness which provides a foundational basis in understanding the cognitive processes that impede individuals from paying attention to their experiences. Finally, we explored the conceptual underpinnings of autobiographical memory—its formation processes and factors that affect memory retention.

By integrating research in psychology with our understanding of tourism experiences, we sought to understand the essence of what constitutes an experience that is especially memorable, and to ultimately consider the difficult, yet highly important issue of how to facilitate MEs. While there is currently no consensus in the academic literature as to the exact definition of tourism experiences, many scholars have provided insights into various definitional components. For example, Pine and Gilmore (1998) focused on the emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual impressions that are felt by individuals during an event. Clawson and Knetsch (1966) incorporated the influences and personal outcomes that begin before the trip and after the tourist returns from the destination. Still, others focused on the roles of authenticity (Wang, 1999) and serendipitous moments (Cary, 2004). In consideration of these different definitional approaches, in this study, we defined tourism experiences as:

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