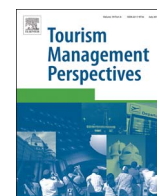


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Cultural tourism: An analysis of engagement, cultural contact, memorable tourism experience and destination loyalty[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the interplay of visitor engagement, cultural contact, memorable tourism experience (MTE), and destination loyalty in cultural tourism. The research was conducted with 320 individuals who have visited cultural tourist destinations within the past five years. Results, employing structural equations modeling, showed that visitor engagement positively influenced cultural contact and cultural contact positively influenced MTE. In addition, MTE had significant positive effects on loyalty. Furthermore, cultural contact was found to fully mediate the relationship between visitor engagement and MTE. Findings underscore the importance of cross-cultural interactions in creating MTEs in cultural tourism. Avenues used to engage tourists must address the cultural tourists' need for deeper cultural experience in order to successfully create MTEs.

1. Introduction

Tourists, who have participated in cultural activities on their most recent trip or within the past three years, represent almost 54% of the US adult population (Mandala Research, 2013). As much as 76% of all U.S. leisure travelers engage in cultural activities, representing a market size of 129.6 million adults in the U.S. who spend approximately \$171 billion annually (Mandala Research, 2013).

Scholarly research in cultural tourism has been aplenty. Among others, topics can be site-specific such as museums (e.g. Stylianou-Lambert, 2011), and heritage and/or historical sites (e.g. Gnoth and Zins, 2013); event-specific such as festivals (e.g. Akhoondnejad, 2016), visitor specific such as visitor perceptions (e.g. Chen and Chen, 2010), segmentation (e.g. Jansen-Verbeke and Van Rekom, 1996), and motivation (e.g. Matheson, Rimmer, & Tinsley, 2014); host-specific such as residents' perceptions (e.g. Bachleitner and Zins, 1999); management-specific (e.g. Russo and Van Der Borg, 2002) more niche areas such as religion (e.g. Nyaupane, Timothy, & Poudel, 2015) and gastronomy (e.g. Kivela and Crofts, 2006), etc. Despite the abundant focus on cultural tourism, a few ambiguities exist in the extant literature. Firstly, the concept of cultural tourism is represented by different taxonomies (Hughes, 1996). Secondly, most of the existing studies are site-specific, which makes it hard to generalize findings. An important concept, memorable tourism experiences (MTE), which received overarching attention in recent years has not been studied, to our knowledge, with

the backdrop of cultural tourism as yet. Although general antecedents to memorable tourism experiences have been studied before (e.g. Kim, 2010; Kim, 2014), its potential influencers in the context of cultural tourism such as cultural contact and visitor engagement have not been looked into extensively.

In order to better manage a cultural tourism site, it is important to understand the cultural tourist. The primary focus of many such sites is often retaining existing tourists due to the lower costs associated with this strategy (Chen and Chen, 2010). Moreover, those tourists are more likely to recommend their friends, relatives and other potential tourists to a cultural tourist destination by disseminating positive word-of-mouth (Shoemaker and Lewis, 1999). In order to attract repeat visitors, it is important destinations go above and beyond to ensure that tourists are highly satisfied with their experience (Prayag and Ryan, 2012). However, satisfaction alone might not be enough to make a tourist revisit a destination. Memory and remembered experiences need to be studied to further understand tourists' behavioral intentions (Lehto, O'Leary, & Morrison, 2004; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2010). This underscores the importance of memorable tourism experiences and their effect on tourist retention. Additionally, depth of experience and visitor engagement are integral to the cultural tourist (McKercher, 2002). In this regard, we must study cultural contact and visitor engagement's influence on memorable tourism experience and visitor engagement's influence on cultural contact.

The purpose of this study, then, is to examine the interplay of MTE,

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visitor engagement, cultural contact, revisit intentions, and intention to recommend in a cultural tourism context. In particular, we focus on developing a model that examines the influence of visitor engagement on cultural contact, cultural contact on MTE, and the corresponding influence of MTE on destination loyalty which is represented by revisit intention and intention to recommend. In addition, the study tests the mediating effect of cultural contact on the relationship between visitor engagement and MTE.

The current study will fill the gap in literature by investigating the influence of visitor engagement and cultural contact on cultural tourists' MTE. Findings of this study can provide cultural tourist destinations implications of how to increase cultural tourists' MTE and destination loyalty through engagement and cultural contact. All of these can be expected to contribute to the competitive advantage of the cultural destination.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural tourism

Since the early 1980s cultural tourism has been recognized separately from recreational tourism. However, there has not been a single universally accepted definition of “cultural tourism” (Dolnicar, 2002; Hughes, 2002). Reisinger (1994) defined cultural tourism as a form of special interest and experiential tourism based on the search for or participation in new and deep cultural experiences of an aesthetic, intellectual, emotional or psychological nature. Previous researcher suggested a broad definition of cultural tourism: “visits by persons from outside the host community motivated wholly or in part by interest in the historical, artistic, scientific or lifestyle/heritage offerings of a community, region or institution” (Silberberg, 1995, p.362). Thus, cultural destinations can include sites as diverse as museums, festivals, architecture, heritage, and tourist attractions related to food, language, and religion (Stylianou-Lambert, 2011). Richards (1996) suggested two different definitions of cultural tourism. His conceptual definition refers to “the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs” (Richards, 1996, p. 24) while the technical definition states “all movements of persons to specific cultural attractions, such as heritage sites, artistic and cultural manifestations, arts and drama outside their normal place of residence” (Richards, 1996, p. 24).

Definitional ambiguities exist with scholars contending that distinctions should be made in regard to the motivations of tourists visiting a cultural destination whether the motivation is primary, secondary, or incidental (Hughes and Benn, 1995). Others contend that cultural tourism should be treated as a form of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1996). Others expressed concerns over its coverage (Hughes, 1996). The purpose of this study is *not* to investigate the definitional shortcomings prevalent in the extant literature. In this regard, we would like to follow the typology mostly used (Hughes, 1996), whereby the concept is seen more as an activity and visitation by the tourist to cultural destinations (e.g., Silberberg, 1995; Richards, 1996; Reisinger, 1994) and the emphasis is on the overall *experience* the tourist receives from the visit.

2.2. Memorable tourism experiences

It is difficult to define the *tourism experience* because of its multifaceted nature. Clawson and Knetsch (1966) demonstrated that the tourism experience should include the influences and personal outcomes both before the trip and after the trip. Pine and Gilmore (1998) stressed the emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual impressions that are felt by individuals during the trip. Stamboulis and Skayannis (2003) indicated that a tourism experience is generated through the act of visiting a destination away from the tourist's home, learning about its attributes, and enjoying its activities. Tung and Ritchie (2011) defined

tourism experience as “an individual's subjective evaluation and undergoing (i.e., affective, cognitive, and behavioral) of events related to his/her tourist activities which begins before (i.e., planning and preparation), during (i.e., at the destination), and after the trip (i.e., recollection)” (Tung & Ritchie, 2011, p. 1369).

The components of tourism experience are complicated and vary widely in research. Gomez-Jacinto, Martin-Garcia, and Bertiche-Haud'Huyze (1999) demonstrated that tourist experience includes intercultural interaction, tourist activities, service quality, and holiday satisfaction. Stamboulis and Skayannis (2003) indicated that tourism experiences have four realms, which are education, aesthetics, escapism, and entertainment. On the other hand, some studies pointed out emotional (Otto & Ritchie, 1996), social (Morgan & Xu, 2009), cognitive (Gopalan and Narayan, 2010), and sensescape (Dann and Jacobsen, 2003) as the common dimensions of a tourism experience.

A memorable tourism experience (MTE) is defined as “a tourism experience remembered and recalled after the event has occurred” (Kim et al., 2010, p.2). The significance of the theory of MTE originates from the influential power of past memory on consumer decision-making (Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2013). In fact, past memory is considered to be the most valuable source of information when a tourist makes a decision to revisit a particular destination (Chandralal and Valenzuela, 2013). There are three major reasons for the importance of past experiences stored in memory (Hoch and Deighton, 1989): the motivation to purchase is high when the information is drawn from consumers' past experiences; consumers tend to perceive past experiences as valuable and reliable information sources; past experience has great influencing power on future behavioral intentions. Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2012) were the first researchers to develop a quantitative scale to measure MTEs. They developed a 24 item scale consisting of seven domains: hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty. The scale was later validated cross-culturally using Taiwanese tourists by Kim & Richie (2014).

Each individual has various tourism experiences due to different backgrounds, values, attitudes and beliefs brought to the environment (Knutson, Bonnie, Jeffrey, Kim, & Cha, 2007). Through in depth qualitative interviews administered to 208 participants, Tung & Richie (2011) identified four dimensions of tourism experience using grounded theory approach: affect, expectations, consequentiality, and recollection. Tsaur, Lin, and Lin (2006) indicated that the expectations of memorable experience motivate tourists to be involved in the tourism activities. Thus, it is important for cultural destinations to provide tourists with memorable experiences.

Falk and Dierking (1990) investigated the memories of museum professionals in their young adulthood and found the social dimension of their experience as the most memorable aspect of their trip. Kim et al. (2010) suggested that tourist destinations should pay attention to tourists' MTEs. MTEs are constructed by tourists on their individual assessment of subjective experiences (Kim, 2010). Therefore, the role of destination management organizations (DMOs) is to “facilitate the development of the destination that enhances the likelihood that tourists can create their own MTEs” (Tung & Ritchie, 2011, p. 1369). Cultural destinations are no exceptions. Therefore, it is important for cultural destinations to understand how they can create a positive memorable experience for the tourist.

2.3. Visitor engagement

The concept of engagement includes aspects of attachment, emotional connection, commitment, and devotion (Taheri, Jafari, & O'Gorman, 2014). While involvement refers to the interest of the consumer in a product or service, engagement represents a deeper level of commitment and interest (Abdul-Ghani, Hyde, & Marshall, 2011). The level of engagement can be affected by prior knowledge, cultural capital, recreational motivation (Taheri et al., 2014), and consumption frequency (Mollen and Wilson, 2010). While engagement

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