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Research Paper

Extracting meanings of event tourist experiences: A phenomenological exploration of Limassol carnival

Vassilios Ziakas*, Nikolaos Boukas

Center for Sustainable Management of Tourism, Sport and Events (CESMATSE), European University Cyprus, Engomi 1516, Cyprus



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ABSTRACT

The common examination of the event and tourism experience can reveal the attached meanings that exemplify the valued characteristics of a destination in the perceptions of tourists. From this standpoint, this study employed a phenomenological approach conducting eight unstructured interviews to explore the experience and assigned meanings of tourists who attended the carnival in Limassol, Cyprus. Results indicate that the meanings of tourist experiences in the carnival were extracted as continuously evolving products shaped by the interaction of two interrelated dramaturgical states, namely the generalized sociality and perceived community metamorphosis, and the interfering dimension of obstruction referring to organizational aspects constraining the tourist experience. The findings of this exploratory phenomenological study bring into the fore the need for more effectively incorporating events into a destination's product mix by designing experiences that leverage event meanings in synergy with unique destination features, thereby enhancing their impact on tourists. On these grounds, it is argued that the phenomenological perspective applied on the study of event tourism can enable destination marketing and management to develop a joint framework for cross-leveraging events and destination assets, hence, synergistically optimizing both social and tourism ends for host destinations. To this end, the study highlights the need for future research to start exploring systematically the relationship between the meanings of tourist experiences and the characteristics of a destination's product mix.

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1. Introduction

Although the examination of the antecedents and characteristics of the tourist and leisure experience has received considerable research attention (Morgan, Lugosi, & Ritchie, 2010; Quan & Wang, 2004; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009; Ryan, 2002, 2010; Tung & Ritchie, 2011; Uriely, 2005; Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun 2011a, 2011b), there is little work on exploring the experience of tourists who participate in, or attend events. Events have the capacity to instantiate meanings for people and communities, and hence, intensify the experience of tourists at a destination. According to Getz (2008), the meanings attached to events and event tourism experiences are both an integral part of the experience and are antecedents to future tourism behaviour. The convergence of events with tourism therefore makes it imperative to understand the experience of event tourists in order to design and leverage

meaningful event tourist experiences. In doing so, as Getz (2008) noted, both the event and the travel experience have to be understood in concert.

In this regard, phenomenology is a seminal conceptual and methodological line of thought that can be used for examining in depth the event tourism experience. The goal of phenomenology is to enlarge and deepen understanding of the range of immediate experiences (Spiegelberg, 1982). Phenomenological inquiry is a direct description of experience without taking account of its psychological origin (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Phenomenology, therefore, is a critical reflection on conscious experience, rather than subconscious motivation, and is designed to uncover the essential invariant features of that experience (Jopling, 1996).

The purpose of the study is to examine the tourist experiences and meanings attached to the carnival of Limassol in Cyprus. A phenomenological research approach was employed to examine the representation of the destination in the meanings and experience of event tourists and how this affects their future tourism behaviour. Specifically, the study investigates the ways that meanings extracted from the carnival characterize the tourist experience. On this basis, it identifies the elements that instantiate the characteristics and qualities of Limassol/Cyprus and can be leveraged to build its tourism product mix and destination image.

* Correspondence to: Center for Sustainable Management of Tourism, Sport and Events, Department of Management and Marketing, School of Business Administration, European University Cyprus, 6 Diogenes Street, Engomi, P.O. Box 22006, 1516 Nicosia, Cyprus. Tel.: +357 2271 3202; fax: +357 22590539.

E-mail address: V.Ziakas@euc.ac.cy (V. Ziakas).

This exploratory research inquiry highlights the need to start exploring systematically the relationship between the meanings of tourist experiences and the characteristics of a destination's product mix in terms of their interaction effects and enhancement of synergies within the context of community and tourism development driven by events.

2. Locating dramaturgy and liminality in event tourism

2.1. Making sense of the formation and effects of event meanings

The core phenomenon of event tourism is the nature of lived experiences and the meanings attached to them (Getz, 2008). The characteristics and qualities of an experience shape the meanings for people. Even though an experience is the same for event tourists, it can be experienced and interpreted in different ways, hence, rendering different meanings for them that are imbued by subjective significance and consequently affect their consumption choices. This makes it essential to understand the ways that meaning is shaped as a result of the event tourists' interaction with the experience being offered by the event in a tourism destination. In doing so, the characteristics that make an experience meaningful for event tourists can be better understood so that event elements and activities along with associated destination attractions are effectively designed and leveraged to magnify the impact of an event experience.

Meaning is a fundamental and universal concept in the realm of epistemological and ontological inquiries. It is generally defined as the 'individual signification or the internal symbolization, representation, and conceptualization of the external world' (Gergen, 1994, p. 19). Meanings in events include all experiences, feelings and thoughts as well as the subsequent sense of salience that people obtain from their participation in, or attendance at, event-based activities. Events as cultural performances are often patterned by culture to manifest local values and meanings, as Geertz's (1973) classical account of the Balinese cockfight demonstrates. According to this account, the interpretation of the rituals and rites in an event can help people appreciate the local cultural structures through which natives of a host community shape meanings and manifest their beliefs and values. On this basis, it is suffice to say that behaviours of event tourists are influenced, motivated and expressed at the level of meanings that are structured by the interaction between tourists' cultural background and the manifestation of a destination's cultural context. In other words, event tourists interpret the meaning of event elements, and symbols as well as the destination's associated characteristics and attractions that express local values according to their own cultural frame. As such, an understanding of event meanings may shed light on the grounding cultural forces that determine event tourist experiences.

To understand the formation and effects of event meanings, Ziakas and Costa (2012, p. 32) put forward the concept of event dramaturgy, defined as 'the extraction of shared meanings enabled by the projection and/or performance of symbolic representations in an event's activities'. They based this definition on Goffman's (1959) notion of dramaturgy as a mode of symbolic action that explains social behaviour and Turner's (1969, 1974) conceptualization of event performances as forms of rituals and social dramas that are expressed on the collective level. Generally, dramaturgy is a theatrical metaphor of the expressive practices being performed by people based on cultural values, norms, and expectations revealing, thus that social interaction is dependent upon time, place, and audience (Goffman, 1959).

The conceptualization of event dramaturgy links performative behaviour with the making of social order. It exemplifies that the

performances unfolded in events are meta-commentaries, texts within metaphoric messages that respond to the problematics of public discourse and substantiate the symbolic foundations of social ordering. However, event dramaturgy can be criticized as making different events look homogeneous in the building of community, while, in fact, events may point to different directions such as maintaining the status quo in a host community or trying to subvert it. Furthermore, the interpretation of symbolic meaning inevitably bears subjectivity since it relies on abstract analysis of symbols, which may be interpreted in different ways. Nonetheless, a dramaturgical perspective is useful for studying the ways events and their elements or symbols exemplify expressive and dramatic dimensions (Schechner, 2003) that shape a symbolic context in which people interpret the order of conditions that make up their lived experiences.

Guided by this conceptual lens, Ziakas and Costa (2010) examined the case of the Water Carnival, an annual celebration in the rural community of Fort Stockton, Texas, which features synchronized swimming and theatrical acts in the format of a show all exclusively staged, produced and performed by local people. They demonstrated how the dramaturgic nature of the event enables its significance for tourists, particularly former residents, which thereby contributes to the event's value to the community by creating a symbolic social space characterized by identification with local history, heritage and values/beliefs and a sense of community reconnection, as well as acknowledgment and recognition. The authors noted that the organic interrelatedness of these mechanisms, enhanced by the sporting and theatrical elements present in the event, facilitates the regeneration and reinforcement of a heightened sense of community and a strengthening of the community's social capital. This example illustrates that community events can become pivotal symbolic social spaces that bridge and bond people when they have dramaturgic qualities that express the elemental grounds of local cultural fabrics and generate threads of shared meaning.

Within the context of tourism destinations, however, little is known about how the interaction between tourists and local residents shape dramaturgy and the resulting meanings that are extracted from an event. Since tourists and locals represent different cultural frames, stakeholder interests (e.g., producers vs. consumers), and associated viewpoints, their interaction engenders multifaceted outcomes that may easily change in the process of crystallizing the nature and content of event meanings. As Brissett and Edgley (2005) noted in their analysis of dramaturgy, meaning is a continually problematic accomplishment of human interaction and it is fraught with change, novelty, and ambiguity. For example, Crespi-Vallbona and Richards (2007), in analyzing the discourse on cultural festivals from the perspective of local stakeholders involved in traditional and popular culture events in Catalonia, found that stakeholders tend to differ in the meanings attached to concepts such as identity, with policy-makers exhibiting a greater emphasis on economic and political issues, whereas cultural producers are more concerned with social aspects of identity. The complexity and possible incongruity in the meanings attached to events may be increased if the tourists' perspectives are added in the multifaceted mosaic of event meanings.

The interaction of tourists and local people can be viewed from the perspective of globalization forces acting upon localization processes. In this regard, tourists through their needs and wants represent the homogenizing forces of globalization, while locals strive to meet tourism demands but at the same time maintaining their distinctiveness and authenticity that makes them attractive in the eyes of tourists and the global market. The extent to which there is polarization or a creative synthesis can be revealed in the meanings extracted from event dramaturgy for tourists and local

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