

Does one size fit all? Using the same Memorable Tourist Experience (MTE) Scale to measure MTEs across divergent major tourist attractions

Berendien A. Lubbe Prof
University of Pretoria

Felicite Fairer-Wessels Prof
University of Pretoria

Anneli Douglas Dr
University of Pretoria

Elizabeth Ann du Preez Dr
University of Pretoria

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Does one size fit all? Using the same Memorable Tourist Experience (MTE) Scale to measure MTEs across divergent major tourist attractions

Introduction

Destinations around the globe are looking for creative solutions to common challenges in tourism development. Researchers have argued that the central challenge facing tourism destination development is the design of effective tourism experiences (Horváth, n.d:1). 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. Nowadays tourists are looking for more engaging, interactive experiences that can contribute to their personal growth. Each and every tourist perceives the destination and experience offered by the destination in their very special, personal way which is the sum of their past life experience, education, attitudes, i.e. a whole series of personal characteristics. The focus of the tourism experience is to fulfil the aspirations, wishes and expectations relating to the individual's personal growth. This study is about understanding those aspirations and expectations and determining what constitutes a memorable tourist experience and whether, given the uniqueness of each tourism attraction and each tourist's underlying motivations and expectations, the same MTE scale could effectively measure the experiential constructs across divergent tourist attractions. Five major tourist attractions in South Africa were identified, namely two cultural UNESCO World Heritage sites (the Cradle of Humankind consisting of Maropeng and the Sterkfontein Caves, as well as Mapungubwe National Park); one natural World Heritage site (iSimangaliso Wetland Park); a national park (Augrabies); and a national botanical garden (Walter Sisulu).

Literature Review

Saraniemi and Kylänen in Cooper and Hall, (2008) define a destination as a spatial or geographical concept, thus featuring both the geographical concept of space and the movement of people from outside to it. It is therefore primarily defined by visitors from outside the location and, by definition, exists by virtue of the people that visit it. Murphy, Pritchard and Smith (2000) link the destination with the tourism product by stating that a destination is an amalgam of individual products and experience opportunities that combine to form a total experience of the area visited. The attractiveness of a destination reflects the feelings and opinions of its visitors about the destination's perceived ability to satisfy their needs. The more a destination is able to meet the needs of the tourists, the more it is perceived to be attractive and the more the destination is likely to be chosen (Vengasayi, 2003:637). The ability of a destination to deliver individual benefits is enhanced by the attributes of a destination, i.e. those components that makeup a destination. The importance of these attributes help people to evaluate the attractiveness of a destination and make relevant choices. The attractiveness of a tourist destination encourages people to visit and spend time at the destination. Therefore, the major value of destination attractiveness is the pulling effect it has on tourists. Benur and Bramwell (2015) say that destinations depend on their primary tourism products as key pull factors motivating tourists to visit the destination and suggest that products such as accommodation, food services and transportation are less likely to provide a substantial tourist "draw" to specific destinations. Without the primary attractiveness of destinations, tourism

does not exist and there could be little or no need for the development of tourist facilities and services. It is only when people are attracted to a destination that facilities and services would be developed (Ferrario, 1979b cited in Vengasayi, 2003:637).

With the recognition of tourism destinations as amalgams of tourism products offering an integrated experience to tourists, the emphasis for tourism destinations should be to deliver unique, extraordinary and memorable tourism experiences (MTE) to target tourists in order to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013:177). Smith quoted in Benur and Bramwell (2015) asserts that “tourism products are fundamentally experiences”, with experiences seen as central to tourist choice and satisfaction. A tourist experience is not only affected by touchable products and experienced services, but also to the degree in which a specific experience is unforgettable and thus, memorable (Cornelisse, 2014:104).

According to Chandralal, Rindfleish and Valenzuela (2015) the significance of the theory of MTEs stems from the fact that memories about previous consumption experiences tend to have a significant impact on consumer decision-making situations (Kozak, 2001; Lehto, O’Leary, & Morrison, 2004; Marschall, 2012; Mazursky, 1989). For example, Hoch and Deighton (1989) demonstrate three reasons behind the significance of past experiences stored in the memory. Firstly, the product involvement and motivation to purchase the product are high when the information is drawn from their past experiences, secondly, consumers tend to perceive past experiences as valuable and credible information sources and, thirdly, there is a powerful influence of past experiences on future behavioural intentions. In the context of tourism, scholars have recognised that “memory is perhaps the single most important source of information [that a traveller] will use in making a decision about whether or not to revisit” a particular destination (Braun-LaTour, Grinley, & Loftus, 2006, p. 360). According to Tung and Ritchie (2011) research has commonly considered tourists’ positive MTEs with outcome factors such as revisiting a destination and spreading positive word-of-mouth (Woodside, Caldwell, & Albers-Miller, 2004). Managerially, destination management organizations have credited the delivery of MTEs as fundamental to competitiveness and sustainability (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Despite memorable tourism experiences, some travellers decide not to revisit a destination, since they view MTE as an once-in-a-lifetime experience that is purely unique and cannot be replicated. Many of these individuals explain that “things change so quickly that if you go back, you may ruin your memory of it,” and “don’t ever [want to] go back to ruin this once-in-a-lifetime memory (Tung & Ritchie, 2011:1380).” With reference to the impact of these memorable tourism experiences on future travel decisions, in a study by Chandralal and Valenzuela (2013) the majority of participants expressed that they neither revisited those memorable experience destinations nor will they revisit them again in the near future. The major reason they brought into the discussion was that they want to experience something new from every leisure travel. They expressed various opinions such as “there are many new places to visit before re-visiting places”, “the world is a big place”, “better to see as many as possible places during the limited lifespan”, may decide to revisit places when the list of “must see” comes to an end and “re-visiting places is wasting money”. Nevertheless, the majority of participants affirmed that they usually recommend such memorable trips and destinations to others (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013).

Few studies have examined the relationship between destination attributes, tourism performance, and tourism experiences (Assaf & Josiassen, 2012). Although this area of study has begun to receive attention, our understanding of these determinants of tourism experiences remains poorly developed. Assaf and Josiassen (2012) indicate that the destination attributes of MTEs

include the following 10 dimensions: local culture, the variety of activities, hospitality, infrastructure, environment management, accessibility, the quality of service, physiography, place attachment and superstructure (Kim, 2014). However, Benur and Bramwell (2015) say that destinations depend on their primary tourism products as key pull factors motivating tourists to visit the destination and suggest that products such as accommodation, food services and transportation are less likely to provide a substantial tourist “draw” to specific destinations. Without the primary attractiveness of destinations, tourism does not exist and there could be little or no need for the development of tourist facilities and services. It is only when people are attracted to a destination that facilities and services would be developed (Ferrario, 1979b cited in Vengasayi, 2003:637). Kim, Ritchie and McCormick (2012) focus on the experience that relate to personal growth and enrichment and propose 16 experiential constructs as the components of a MT (see table 1). From these constructs they developed an MTE scale consisting of seven dimensions and 24 indicators (see table 1).

Table 1: Seven dimensions of MTE

Dimensions	Indicators
Hedonism	Thrilled about having a new experience
	Indulged in the activities
	Really enjoyed this tourism experience
	Exciting
Novelty	Once-in-a-lifetime experience
	Unique
	Different from previous experiences
	Experienced something new
Local culture	Good impressions about the local people
	Closely experienced the local culture
	Local people in a destination were friendly
Refreshment	Liberating
	Enjoyed sense of freedom
	Refreshing
	Revitalized
Meaningfulness	I did something meaningful
	I did something important
	Learned about myself
Involvement	I visited a place where I really wanted to go
	I enjoyed activities which I really wanted to do
	I was interested in the main activities of this tourism experience
Knowledge	Exploratory
	Knowledge
	New culture

Source: Kim *et al.* (2012)

In this study a revised version of the Kim *et al.* (2012) MTE scale was used to test the differences in memorable tourist experiences at varied major tourist attractions in South Africa. The MTE scale was shortened to avoid repetitive questions as some of the items of the scale were also asked in a separately developed on-site scale.

Methodology

While the overall aim of this study was to identify gaps between the expectations of tourists and their experiences at the major tourist attractions based on the criteria of what constitutes a

memorable tourist experience in order to make recommendations on site-specific interventions and plans to facilitate/deliver a memorable tourism experience, the focus of this paper is to determine if the same MTE scale could effectively measure the experiential constructs across divergent tourist attractions. Two phases made up the empirical part of the study. The first phase covered the analysis of the selected sites in terms of their core tourism product offering and the second phase covered an analysis of the tourists' expectations and experiences at the selected sites. The first phase consisted of a research site overview, the purpose of which was for the researcher to gain an understanding of the tourism potential of the site by reviewing background documentation to familiarise themselves with the site, completing a "Tourism Attraction Assessment Indicators" sheet as developed by McKercher and Yo (2006) on the tourism potential of the site and interviewing appropriate managers (e.g. the CEO and/or Marketing Manager) for their assessment of each indicator. At least two researchers also independently completed observation sheets relating to the quality of the physical layout and facilities at the site as well as to form an idea of the movement of tourists around the site. The second phase consisted of a Tourist Post-Visit Survey using a self-completion questionnaire to measure their overall memorable experiences by means of the modified MTE scale as well as specific on-site experience constructs. As mentioned previously, the MTE scale was shortened (refer to Table 2) to avoid repetitive questions as some of the items of the scale were also asked in a separately developed on-site scale.

While data analysis for each site was done in order to make recommendations on site-specific interventions and plans to facilitate/deliver a memorable tourism experiences, these results emanating from the second scale are not presented here as the focus of this paper is on assessing the performance of the MTE scale across the various sites.

Table 2: Shortened MTE scale

Hedonism	Thrill about having a new experience
	Indulgence in the activities
	Real enjoyment
	Excitement
Novelty	Once-in-a lifetime experience
	Uniqueness
	Different from previous experiences
	Something new
Refreshment	Sense of freedom
	Revitalisation
Meaningful	Meaningfulness
	Accomplishment
	Self-discovery
Involvement	Place where I really wanted to go
	Activities really wanted to do
	Main activity of great interest
Knowledge	Exploration
	Knowledge gain
	New culture

Dimensionality of the MTE scale was tested using principal component analysis (Varimax rotation with Kaizer normalisation). KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity indicated the data as suitable for the analysis. Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability of the newly formed factors. The composite scores of the new factors were then used to test for differences between the different sites using one-way ANOVAs (Scheffe's post-hoc test; Welch robust test for equality of means; significance tested at the 99% confidence level).

Results

Four factors emerged with Eigenvalues larger than 1, explaining 66% of the variance. Items with factors loadings >0.5 were retained where they had the highest loading (refer to Table 3).

Table 3: New factor structure

Hedonism	Thrill about having a new experience
	Indulgence in the activities
	Real enjoyment
	Excitement
Novelty	Once-in-a lifetime experience
	Uniqueness
	Different from previous experiences
	Something new
	Accomplishment
	Self-discovery
	Knowledge gain
Refreshment	Sense of freedom
	Revitalisation
	Meaningfulness
Involvement	Place where I really wanted to go
	Activities really wanted to do
	Main activity of great interest
	Exploration

The new scale was used to test MTEs of visitors across the five major tourist attractions. The table indicates the sites, sample sizes and Cronbach's alpha of the scale factors. As indicated, the factors achieved favourable scores across all the sites, providing support for the reliability of the newly formed factors.

Table 4: Four dimensions of MTE

Site	N	Hedonism (α)	Novelty (α)	Refresh- ment (α)	Involvement (α)
Overall sample (all sites)	630	.800	.892	.801	.853
Walter Sisulu Botanical Garden	215	.747	.895	.793	.828
iSimangaliso Wetland Park (WHS)	79	.847	.902	.897	.872
Cradle of Humankind (WHS)	200	.841	.882	.755	.865
Mapungubwe (WHS)	35	.861	.940	.877	.818
Augrabies National Park	107	.748	.809	.783	.867

The composite scores were used to test for differences between different visitor categories (using t-tests and ANOVAs) for each site.

Table 5: Differences across sites

Hedonism	Novelty	Refresh- -ment	Involvement
2.840	12.041*	10.497*	.500

* $p < .01$

In terms of novelty, iSimangaliso Wetland Park (n=77, M=3.44) scored lower than Auwabies National Park (n=106, M=3.93) and Cradle of Mankind (n=199, M=3.92); Walter Sisulu Gardens (n=213, M=3.48) also scored significantly lower than these two attractions.

In terms of refreshment, Walter Sisulu Botanical Gardens (n=213, M=4.25) scored significantly higher than iSimangaliso Wetland Park (n=76, M=3.92) and Cradle of Humankind (n=198, M=3.79). Auwabies National Park (n=106, M=4.10) also scored significantly higher than the Cradle of Mankind.

Conclusion and Discussion

As mentioned in the introduction the focus of the tourism experience is to fulfil the aspirations, wishes and expectations relating to the individual's personal growth. This study is about understanding those aspirations and expectations through determining what constitutes a memorable tourist experience. Given the uniqueness of each tourism attraction and each tourist's underlying motivations and expectations, the question raised was whether the same MTE scale could effectively measure the experiential constructs across divergent tourist attractions. The results offers support for the useability of the revised scale to test for differences in tourist experiences across different types of tourist attractions. It could indicate which type of site has the potential to offer more of a certain dimension of an MTE. Once the differences between sites under investigation have been established, the reasons for these differences can be explored further. For example, how do these sites score differently for different visitor categories based on travel behaviour (whose choice it was to visit, who made the arrangements, travel companions, the focus of the visit, time of last visit) as well as demographic variables (age, gender, racial group, education level, place of origin). It is then also important to contextualise the site with secondary data (collected in phase 1) and also take into consideration the conditions under which the research was conducted. For example, in this study the research at iSimangaliso was undertaken during a week of very bad weather (wind and rain) all along the coast of the Park and could have influenced visitor experiences.

The results challenge some of the underlying theory for the placement of the different items into the new factors (as opposed to where they were theoretically placed before). Further investigation into the underlying concept on why certain items were placed in other factor categories is currently being done.

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