

## Conceptualising Adventure Tourism from a Consumer Perspective

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## **TTRA 2019 Extended Abstract: Conceptualising Adventure Tourism from a Consumer Perspective**

### **Introduction**

The adventure tourism sector has been growing strongly over the last two decades and is forecasted to continue to expand (Adventure Travel and Trade Association [ATTA] & George Washington University [GWU], 2013; Cheng, Edwards, Darcy & Redfern, 2018; World Tourism Organisation [UNWTO], 2014). Whereas adventure tourism already represents an important part of the overall tourism industry in numerous Western countries, emerging nations, such as Brazil and China are also seeing increasing demand (Buckley et al., 2014; Cheng et al., 2018). However, despite the importance of adventure tourism globally, what characterises adventurous travel is still unclear and adventure tourism remains ill-defined (Cheng et al., 2018; Sung, 2004). This is further conveyed through a wide range of definitions and conceptualisations given by researchers and organisations that differ in terms of proposed elements of an adventure tourism experience and which not only lack consensus but also consumer centricity (cf. ATTA, GWU & VWC, 2011; Buckley, 2006; Swarbrooke, Beard, Leckie & Pomfret, 2003; UNWTO, 2014). Ultimately though, what constitutes adventure tourism comes down to the individual travellers' perceptions, as indicated by the ATTA and GWU (2013), Buckley (2006) and the UNWTO (2014). Thus, any feasible conceptualisation should be based on the consumer-notion rather than being imposed by academics or the industry. While defining this sector holistically may be impossible, because adventure tourism has "perhaps more fluid boundaries than a single definition could capture" (Weber, 2001, p. 374), a consumer-based conceptualisation that illustrates the essential characteristics of an adventure tourism experience is called for. As such, this paper reviews the literature to identify such prospective characteristics and introduces a new consumer-based conceptualisation of adventure tourism as a tool to identify and visualise the essence of adventure tourism.

### **Literature Review**

To date, defining adventure tourism and differentiating it from other sub-sectors of the tourism industry has proven to be extremely difficult, mainly due to the subjective nature of what constitutes adventure and the overlap with other sub-sectors, such as ecotourism (Buckley, 2006, 2010; Swarbrooke et al, 2003). So far, there have been numerous attempts to define adventure tourism, of which only a few have gathered recognition in the literature. Some of those definitions place more importance on physical aspects, such as activity, wilderness, remoteness and equipment (cf. Buckley, 2006; Hudson, 2003; Lee, Tseng & Jan, 2015; Sung, Morrison & O'Leary, 2000), whereas others highlight psychological aspects of an adventure tourism experience, such as excitement, fear and self-development (cf. Muller & Cleaver, 2000; Swarbrooke et al., 2013). Furthermore, the element of risk, whether real or perceived, is often included as a cornerstone of adventure tourism classification (Page, Bentley & Walker, 2005). However, this viewpoint has been challenged (Walle, 1997; Schlegelmilch and Ollenburg, 2013; Sung, 2004). Moreover, existing definitions are often intentionally narrow to fit the respective researcher's perspective or extremely broad. For instance, the Adventure Travel Trade Association classifies a tourist activity as adventure tourism if two of the three elements 'interaction with nature', 'interaction with culture' and/or 'a physical activity' are involved (ATTA, GWU & VWC, 2011). This definition leaves a lot of leeway for labelling all kinds of experiences adventure tourism. Accordingly, if a tourist

rents out a bicycle and rides it through a forest, this could be regarded as an adventure tourism activity, because the components of physical activity and natural environment are given. While this might indeed constitute an adventure tourism experience for some consumers, it arguably does not for others.

The various definitions illustrate certain facets of the adventure tourism realm, partly overlap and partly complement each other which is in line with a finding by Rantala, Rokenes and Valkonen (2018) who talk about the “‘blurring’ between continua” (p. 2). However, these continua as well as existing definitions still do not convey the gist of adventure tourism from a consumer perspective in a meaningful way and it becomes apparent that the sector is wide-ranging and abstract. Rantala, et al. (2018, p. 10-11) state that “[w]hat specifically makes certain tourism activities adventurous travel and services has been little studied” and they pose the question “what are the essential features of various kinds of adventure tourism activities?”. Accordingly, adventure tourism has yet to be conceptualised in a meaningful way that considers the intrinsic components of an adventure tourism experience. Triantafillidou and Petala (2015) convey that the adventure tourist experience is complex and refer to it as an “amalgam of different emotional and cognitive dimensions” (p. 1). As such, it seems sensible to identify those associated, underlying dimensions of an adventure tourism experience from the consumer’s perspective for conceptualisation purposes. Through reviewing adventure tourism literature, the most commonly mentioned, and thus most likely associated features or *dimensions* of adventure tourism can be identified.

There seem to be three dimensions that are predominantly appearing in the literature as key elements of adventure tourism. *Physical Activity* is a basic, inseparable part of any adventure tourism experience (Hudson, 2003; Reynolds & Hritz, 2012; Swarbrooke et al., 2003). While sometimes contested (cf. Buckley, 2012; Schlegelmilch & Ollenburg, 2013), *Risk* also appears to be an inherent part of the adventure phenomenon and a primary motivation for participation (Cater, 2006; Schneider & Vogt, 2012; Patterson & Pan, 2007; Carnicelli-Filho, Schwartz & Tahara, 2010, Varley, 2006; Beedie, 2016). The emersion into the *Natural Environment* seems to be another cornerstone of the adventure tourism experience (Lee, Seng & Jan, 2015; UNWTO, 2014; Giddy & Webb, 2015).

Besides those three seemingly inherent aspects of adventure tourism, additional prospective dimensions include but are not limited to: *Challenge* (Triantafillidou & Petala, 2015; Tsaur, Jin and Liu, 2013), *Excitement* (Cater, 2006; Schlegelmilch & Ollenburg, 2013), the *Development of Personal Skills* (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010), *Hedonism* (Triantafillidou & Petala, 2015), *Novelty* (Chang, 2011), *Uncertainty* (Walle, 1997; Williams & Soutar, 2005), *Fear* (Cater, 2006; Carnicelli-Filho, Schwartz & Tahara, 2010), *Involvement* (Beckman, Whaley & Kim, 2017; Jin & Sparks, 2017), *Rush/Flow* (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1995; Triantafillidou & Petala, 2015), *Fitness* (Bauer, 2014), *Mental Challenge* (Swarbrooke et al., 2003), *Tranquillity* (Bentley & Page, 2008), *Thrill* (Schlegelmilch & Ollenburg, 2013), *Emotion* (Rantala et al., 2018), and *Sensation Seeking* (Pomfret, 2006). Of course, the identified dimensions are not mutually exclusive and arguably inter-related.

Moreover, associated dimensions are likely to rest upon rather personal, intrinsic roots, such as values, attitudes, behaviours, past experiences, skills, attitudes to risk, etc. which can result in differing underlying ‘dimensions behind the dimensions’, or *indicators* of adventure tourism. Tsaur, Jin and Liu (2013) emphasise this theory on the example of the challenge dimension. They argue that a generic description of the term challenge does not explain the sustaining construct and

they pose the question “Where does the sense of challenge come from?” (Tsaur, Jin and Liu, 2013, p. 85).

## Results

As conveyed above, adventure tourism could be conceptualised via dimensions - characteristics as perceived by the consumer - and underlying, personal indicators that influence this perception. Figure 1 illustrates a new theoretical concept of how an individual’s perception of adventure tourism rests upon dimensions, which are in turn based on indicators:

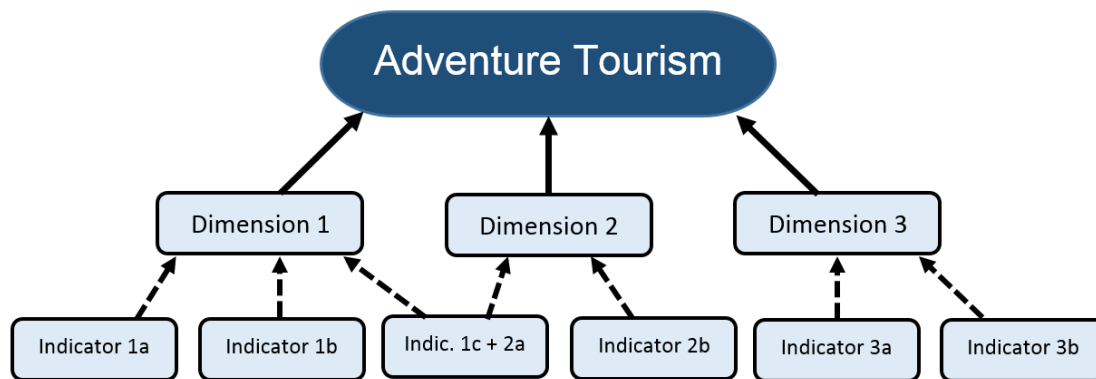


Figure 1. Consumer-based conceptualisation of adventure tourism.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The above conceptualisation serves as a blueprint for future research on the consumer’s perception of adventure. It represents a basic framework of how the sphere of adventure tourism can be conceptualised in a meaningful way. What makes this conceptualisation valuable for contemporary adventure tourism research is the novel consumer focus which can be applied to either an individual or a group of people and enables to reflect their perspective of what the sector constitutes, divided into directly associated dimensions of adventure tourism (core components) and indicators (influencing factors) of those dimensions. If applied to a group, the depicted result will be a compromise, as individual perceptions most likely differ. Depending on the method of research and analysis, indicators may be directly attributable to specific dimensions, as indicated by the dashed arrows in the illustration.

Empirical research is needed to identify the actual dimensions and indicators in order to fill this framework with information. For instance, consumer perceptions could be assessed through either quantitative (e.g. survey) or qualitative (e.g. interviews) research, either with consumers who have conducted adventure tourism activities or inexperienced consumers who may be presented with images or videos of such activities. They may be asked to indicate their level of association of a multitude of dimensions (e.g. physical activity, risk, challenge, fun etc.) with respective adventure tourism experiences and further assessed regarding their skills, previous experience, physical ability, age, cultural characteristics, gender, risk perception, sensation seeking attitude or any other possible indicators which may influence their perception.

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