Journeying into Tourist Psychological Matters

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ABSTRACT

The rationale behind this study is to explore psychological matters relative to the satisfaction process of rural tourists. The Mediterranean Island of Cyprus was selected for this study, in which an ethnographic journey was undertaken. Towards this end, active participation, informal interviews and casual conversations with rural tourists were employed. The study’s fieldwork findings reveal information of valuable importance to the tourism academic community and practitioners alike. The ethnographic techniques which attempted to gain insights into rural tourist psychological matters, such as motivation and expectations, shed clear light in the rather shady tourists’ inners.

Key Words: Tourist satisfaction, Tourist psychology, Ethnography, Rural Tourism, Cyprus

TOURIST SATISFACTION PROCESS AND KNOWLEDGE GAPS

Solomon (2002) suggests that satisfaction or dissatisfaction is determined by the overall feelings a person has about a product after he/she has purchased it. In specific regards to the tourism field, Pizam, Neumann and Reichel’s (1978) approach to conceptualize the term resulted towards defining tourist satisfaction as ‘the result of the interaction between a tourist’s experience in the destination area and the expectations he/she had about the destination’ (p.315). Arnould and Price (1993) challenge the abovementioned definition on the grounds that it assumes that expectations play a pivotal role in determining satisfaction while at the same time commenting that the most satisfactory experiences can be those which are least or not expected. Anton’s (1996) approach towards defining customer satisfaction resulted in a more comprehensive and contemporary definition as Choi and Chu (2001) regard it to be. The researcher suggested that it is a state of mind in which the customer’s needs, wants and expectations have been met or exceeded, resulting towards repurchase and loyalty. Even so, Parker and Mathews (2001) state clearly that satisfaction means different things to different people thus laying emphasis on the fact that satisfaction is a personal affair. As a matter of fact, relevant studies (e.g. Choi and Chu 2000; Poon and Low 2005) conclude that the way people perceive fulfilment, differs.

Achieving customer satisfaction is seen as the key to business success since empirical studies (e.g. Zeithaml 2000; Kanoe 2003; Kengpol and Wangananon 2006) confirm the positive correlation between customer satisfaction and profitability. Despite that, it is widely recognized as an extremely important factor leading to the
success of the hospitality/tourism sector (e.g. Kozak and Rimmington 2000; Akama and Kieti 2003; Arnould, Price and Zinkhan 2004; Yoon and Uysal 2005). Moreover, Fuchs and Weiermair (2004) state that satisfaction is considered by destinations as one of the most important sources of their competitive advantage. Deng (2006) and Ueltschy et al. (2002) acknowledge this as being a critical issue in today’s competitive global market and a major element needed to create and sustain a competitive business. Hui, Wan and Ho (2007) respectively declare that there is a higher probability of a satisfying guest to choose the destination again and to engage in positive word of mouth behaviour. Others (e.g. Akama and Kieti 2003) regard this as the cheapest and most effective form of hotel or destination promotion. Poon and Low (2005) agree that customer satisfaction most likely leads to purchases repetition and favourable word-of-mouth. In fact there is plenty of evidence (e.g. Taylor 1997; Kozak and Rimmington 2000; Gonzalez, Comesana and Brea 2006) to support the contention that satisfaction influences positively customer behaviour. In opposition, dissatisfied tourists may choose other alternative destinations or decide to continue visitation with no intention for further interaction with the service providers (Reisinger and Turner 2003; Arnould, Price and Zinkhan 2004). In a row, any decision on behalf of the guest to swap over to a different destination may create a negative impact on the abandoned one. This rests on the fact that more efforts to attract new guests have to be employed which is more costly than retaining the existing ones (Schlesinger and Heskett 1991). Further to this, Chon, Christianson and Lee (1995) conclude that dissatisfaction may lead to unfavourable word-of-mouth.

Researchers (e.g. Akama and Kieti 2003; Su 2004) state that providing and maintaining tourist satisfaction is one of the biggest contemporary challenges of the hospitality/tourism industry. Yu and Goulden (2006) stress the importance of understanding tourist satisfaction which is essential to destination managers in order to improve their products and services and to effectively promote to target markets for new and repeat tourists. Kozak (2001) postulates that an objective of tourism businesses and destinations should be to obtain tourist satisfaction.

Over the last few decades, a substantial number of researchers in the hospitality and tourism field alike focused their attention in the investigation of tourist satisfaction (e.g. Oh 1999; Su 2004; Bowie and Chang 2005; Truong and Foster 2006; Stradling, Anable and Carreno 2007). Yet, the investigation of the rural tourist satisfaction process is limited to a few noteworthy studies (e.g. Reichel, Lowengart and Milman 2000; Saez, Fuentes and Montes 2007). Frochot (2005) agrees that there has been relatively little consideration of the rural tourists. That said, the survey of Fleischer et al. (1994) amongst guests in rural accommodation in Israel determined that the nature of relations with the owner and/or the manager was an important determinant of customer satisfaction. Likewise, the importance of the relationship between the guest and the service providers (e.g. hosts) in regards to the rural tourist satisfaction has been underlined in other studies (e.g. Reisinger and Turner 2003; Reichel and Haber 2005). Reichel, Lowengart and Milman (2000) make reference to three strategies which may be used to achieve acceptable levels of rural tourist satisfaction: a) adjustment of expectations which basically involves the appropriate and correct advertisement and information of rural tourists from the entrepreneurs in order to generate only realistic expectations, b) raising the level of service quality and c) utilization of both strategies simultaneously.

Even so, the lack of a holistic examination of the rural tourist satisfaction process appears evident. Actually, such endeavours to examine the general tourist satisfaction process; by acknowledging what precedes and what follows tourist satisfaction/dissatisfaction are restricted to isolated studies (e.g. Chen and Tsai 2006). While acknowledging the impacts of tourist satisfaction, any attempt to investigate the tourist satisfaction process would have most likely brought to surface findings of great significance to both the tourism academic community and tourism stakeholders.

GAINING TOURIST INSIGHTS THROUGH ETHNOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES

Even though literally speaking ethnography means ‘a portrait of a people’ (Harris and Johnson 2000) it may be taken based on researchers (e.g. Stevenson 2002; Medina 2003; Bryman 2004; Schofield 2004; Ciaran 2007) to mean, a prolonged research method in which the researcher attempts to understand social meanings in terms of what is meaningful to members of a social group being studied and the behaviour of people in a given setting, situation, context, through regular observations, listening and conversations. Henn, Weinstein and Foard (2006)
approach the subject of ethnography from a rather philosophical point of view by stating that ‘researchers undertake ethnographic studies to see the world in a new way from the point of view of the people under investigation, not just to confirm their preconceptions about a particular issue or group that they are studying’ (p.171). Ethnography is characterized as an in-depth research method (Gummesson 2003) and is regarded (e.g. Fetterman 1998; Dey 2002) to be both the art and science of understanding, interpreting and describing a group or culture such as for instance a small tribal group or even a classroom. Mariampolski (2006) makes reference to its development at the turn of the 20th century as scholars began to study social life and institutions on a scientific basis. Even so, during the 1960’s, in the work of sociologists and anthropologists (e.g. Gans 1967; Liebow 1967) ethnography began to shed light on cultural issues. By the 1980’s, ethnographic techniques and related cultural perspectives were increasingly applied to consumer and marketing research (Mariampolski 2006).

Ethnography, as applied to tourism research based on Veal (1997) ‘seeks to see the world through the eyes of those being researched, allowing them to speak for themselves, often through extensive direct quotations in the research report’ (p. 140). Bryman (2004) states that ethnography is not exactly synonymous with observation since it refers to more than just the process of observing, given that it also embraces informal plain chats/conversations or even conducting in-depth interviews with individuals. Others (e.g. Palmer 2005; Daengbuppha, Hemmington and Wilkes 2006) concur on the fact that the abovementioned informal conversations put people at their ease, thus enabling the researcher to obtain information that may indicate the underlying feelings of the respondents. Besides the process of conducting an ethnographic research involves formal interviews and/or informal conversations which enable the researcher to check for verbal and nonverbal expressions of the participants’ feelings (Ryan 1995a; Kawulich 2005). In fact Ryan (1995b) claims that direct interaction with respondents by the tourism researcher playing a real part, rather than simply acting as a detached observer, generates rich and significant data. In an attempt to understand in-depth the travel culture of backpackers, Sorensen (2003) gained rich data while employing ethnographic techniques whereby he employed semi-formal and informal interviews in the shape of extended conversations at (e.g.) accommodation venues and restaurants. Bowie and Chang (2005) adopted an ethnographic approach in order to evaluate tour/tourist satisfaction whereby they carried out participant covert observation by combining observation of participant’s actions and conversations with tourists being engaged in tour trips, during the meals and their leisure time. Bowen (2001b) with the opportunity to study customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the tourism field concluded that the most appropriate method to use was participant observation, backed up by semi-structured tourist interviews.

While stressing the likelihood benefits of ethnographic techniques Canniford (2005) postulates that an ethnographic approach allows naturalistic investigation into the host of influences that affect individuals’ day-to-day lives. Fielding (1993) makes reference to the ethnographic techniques which entail the study of behaviour in natural setting, ‘getting the seat of your pants dirty… in the real world, not the library’ (p.157). Others (e.g. Saleh and Ryan 1992; Bowen 2001a) make reference to Customer Satisfaction Questionnaires which unlike ethnographic techniques, return merely glanced over the surface. Likewise, Palmer (2005) notes that the wealth of data generated and the level of detail from the participant observation could not be created by neither quantitative nor qualitative customer satisfaction questionnaires. Kawulich (2005) notes that the usefulness of ethnographic techniques in terms of providing an in-depth tourist satisfaction understanding is the fact that it allows the use of conversations. Bowen (2001a) highlights the importance of conversations in the tourism field and forecasts that their relevance in the research of tourist satisfaction will soon become apparent. Others (e.g. Elliott and Elliott 2003; Agafonoff 2006; Mariampolski 2006) stress the fact that ethnography reaches the parts other research approaches can not reach, even compared to other qualitative methods. Probably this is the reasoning behind Bowen’s (2002) aspiration in regards to other researchers which should attempt to fully adopt the technique. Lastly, Daengbuppha, Hemmington and Wilkes (2006) suggest that their study which involved ethnographic techniques offers functional direction for analogous investigations of tourist experiences which seek the emergence of novel knowledge in tourism.

EXPLORING RURAL TOURIST PSYCHOLOGICAL MATTERS THROUGH ETHNOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES

Ethnographic techniques were employed in the Mediterranean Island of Cyprus in order to gain insights into rural tourist psychological matters (e.g.) motivation, expectations, satisfaction and meta-satisfaction behavioural
intentions. Besides, ethnography was employed because research focus on the human side was desired (Irvine and Gaffikin 2006). The study embraced, active participation, several informal interviews and dozens of chats with the participants (agritourists that chose to stay in traditional hosting venues in the Island’s rural areas). These tourists were mainly found in the countryside such as in villages and national parks, key points of interest such as ancient sites, museums, sacred places, as well as during festivals and special events held in the countryside throughout the year.

The study reveals that rural tourists’ needs differ according to the individual, leading to the conclusion that attempts to take a broad view on tourists, without acknowledging the uniqueness of the individual may not be wise. Indeed, such attempt to categorize tourists in broad groups seems not to take into consideration the fact that tourists have their individual needs, which they seek to satisfy while at the destination (in this specific case, the countryside). Therefore, even though tourists have been categorized in this study based on their similar/shared needs (to ease the analysis process), it is emphasized that each tourist is unique with his/her own personal requirements. Rural tourism is made up of differing niche sub-groups of agritourists which have been pin-pointed, whilst earlier studies tended to suggest bulky groups of agritourists. Examples of such niche/sub-groups of tourists which have been identified are the ‘walkers’, ‘cyclists’, ‘authenticity seekers’, ‘personal service/hospitality seekers’, ‘flora seekers’, ‘bird watchers’, ‘gastronomic’ seekers and ‘spirituality seekers’.

Rural tourists expressed their expectations regarding an array of aspects which they were expecting to view, experience and/or consume whilst at the rural setting. Expectations about the natural and artificial environment of the destination, hosts and locals, activities, food and beverages and other services (e.g. infrastructure) all varied. Expectations differed according to the individual due to dissimilar personal experiences and due to an array of sources of information which the tourist intentionally/unintentionally (e.g. through promotions) came in contact with through his/her lifetime. This highlights the importance of information in the expectation formation process. Consequently, the destination and venue owners should (through their promotional campaigns) provide accurate and truthful information and avoid any exaggerations. This in turn will help sell pragmatic expectations to prospective rural tourists in regards to their upcoming experience.

Notably, the emphasis given by each agritourist upon particular expectations differed from individual to individual based on his/her reason/occasion for countryside visitation. For instance, those which were motivated to visit the countryside due to reasons associated with the destination’s natural environment (e.g. ‘flora seekers’ and ‘fauna seekers’) expressed similar expectations in regards to the natural environment and related services they were expecting to view and consume whilst at the rural setting. Contrary to them, expectations in regards to the artificial environment were mentioned and stressed by (e.g.) the ‘archaeology seekers’. These were particularly interested in viewing and studying the country’s ancient sites, monuments and archaeological parks. Nonetheless, even though ‘bird watchers’ and ‘flora seekers’ both expressed similar expectations in regards to the natural environment, the latter placed emphasis on the flower species they were expecting to see while the others articulated expectations about the differing bird species they were expecting to come across.

Findings support the view that rural tourists focus on different aspects of their experience which are found to be related to their main/primary reason for countryside visitation. Tourists are, in effect, visiting the country for different occasions and have different critical success through which to evaluate the success or otherwise of the visit (Lashley 2000; Lashley and Lincoln 2003). For instance the ‘soft/hard activity seekers’ focus their attention on the activities being offered in the rural areas, while the ‘gastronomics’ are found to be more interested in the food and beverage countryside offerings such as local delicacies and house made wine. Likewise, the ‘personal service seekers’ are found to emphasize on the service, personal attention and hospitality being provided by the venue’s host. The ‘nature seekers’ are found to be mostly interested in the natural environment of the destination.

In fact this study acknowledges the fact that tourists draw their attention on different quality aspects of their countryside experience. In a row, the quality focus on behalf of the destination should not only target certain services. Instead it should focus on all destination offerings in order to content all those who visit the countryside for...
whatever personal reason. Negligence on behalf of the destination to focus on the quality of certain offerings (e.g. food and beverages) will, above all, adversely impact on the satisfaction of those who value these offerings the most (e.g. ‘gastronomic seekers’).

Thus, the destination and entrepreneurs should aim towards the provision of an overall quality destination ‘package’ which will cover the natural/artificial environment, food and beverages, personal service, spiritual offering, activities, and authentic offerings. The marketing concept of occasionality will be helpful for both academic and tourism practitioners because it allows for actions which focus on the reasons why tourists visit a destination. From this stems an understanding of their expectations and factors which are deemed critical for their visit. A tripartite effort on behalf of the hosts, the entrepreneurs and the official tourism boards, should collectively work towards offering an overall quality rural tourist experience. This results in an extensive focus on the enhancement of the quality of all (emphasis added) destination offerings thus addressing the dissimilar needs and expectations of agritourists, achieving overall rural tourist satisfaction. In turn, this recognizes that not all tourists look for the full array of benefits; they are focused on the needs of the specific occasion and motive for the visit. Consecutively, both the academic community and practitioners may now become aware of a tourism market made up by individuals rather than bulk and blurred groups. Therefore, it is strongly advised that their future goals and action plans towards achieving/enhancing guest satisfaction should be amended and redirected towards addressing the needs of these occasions. Failure to content to the tourist, will undoubtedly restrain the quest of achieving overall tourist satisfaction.

Even so, the personal investments (e.g. financial and psychological) undertaken by the tourist in order to consume the aforementioned destination offerings, should also be taken into consideration. Besides based on the research findings, these personal investments may frustrate satisfaction achievement. The likelihood of this rests on the fact that the tourist may conclude that the experience was unworthy of the individual investments undertaken. While a tourist consumes the destination offerings, he/she experiences comparison/evaluative thoughts of what has been received (this case rural destination offerings) compared to what has been given in return (personal investments). The way the agritourist perceives the value of his/her experience is of utmost importance to the destination. Besides, it is in the interest of the destination that those evaluative/judgmental thoughts lean towards the guest’s ‘receiving’ rather than ‘giving’ side. This will eventually lead towards the tourist concluding that his/her experience was worthy of all those elements which were sacrificed in return (e.g. money, time, physical and psychological effort). Thus, it is stressed that the destination should not only strive in enriching/augmenting the quality of the destination offerings but to also take into consideration the personal investments in tourists. Towards this end, delightful intense and unexpected events seem to add to the guest’s experience, such as for instance ‘hospitableness’ which appears to pleasantly surprise agritourists and consecutively fosters guest satisfaction achievement and positive behavioural intentions (e.g. revisit intentions and positive word of mouth-recommendations).

CONCLUSION

In spite of the extensive attention given by the tourism academic community in the investigation of tourist psychological matters, it is clear that the rural tourist satisfaction process has its knowledge gaps. Even so, an ethnographic study undertaken in the Mediterranean Island of Cyprus resulted in findings which may be of great use for both tourism academics and rural tourism stakeholders. The study provides useful guidance for overall rural tourist satisfaction achievement and direction for fostering meta-travel positive behavioural intentions.

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