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Exploring the Interaction Phenomenon of Tourist Experience: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of tourist experience in relation to tourism research cannot be understated. A tourist's experience with the destination is influenced, positively or negatively, by their satisfaction and quality of experience on site. The tourist experience occurs through an interaction between the individual and the elements of his/her surroundings, which include the physical environments, societies, and cultures. The meaning of certain events, people, and activities is generated from one's own interactions with various environments. As such, the significance of tourist experiences cannot be conceptualized, without considering the interactions between the individual and the environment

In this context, this study has two objectives. First, it explores objects, events and activities which are meaningfully experienced by tourists in a tourism destination. The purpose is to understand the impacts of interactions through tourist experience on tourist emotion and destination image. Second, this paper describes, classifies and categorizes the interaction phenomena in tourist experience using a qualitative research method. Through this process, this paper tries to deduct and identify the factors that influence tourists' tourism experiences.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Tourism studies up till the 1970s often focused on the nature of the industry because tourism was understood as an effective economic activity (Mavric & Urry, 2009; Jafari, 1990). Thus, many researchers, considering tourism as an industry that produces amenities and services, often study tourists from the supplier's perspectives (Squire, 1994; Smith, 1988). For example, research about 'why do people want to tour, where do they want to go, how they choose the place? etc.' (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2005) are usually conducted for tourism marketers and/or management to attract tourists for the purpose of achieving the financial goals of their businesses. This paper attempts to analyze tourist experience from an emic perspective (focus on tourists) and adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological method.

This paper is to explore the interaction phenomenon of tourist experience in a specific tourist destination, from the perspective of hermeneutic phenomenology invented by van Manen (1990). The study adopted a qualitative research paradigm to explore and analyze the essence and meaning of tourist experience in the context of a tourism destination. Symbolic interactionism based on Herbert Blumer's concept (1969) is the theoretical framework that guides the study. This framework focuses on interaction with other people or objects. The major proposition of the theory is that people act toward things, including each other, on the basis of meanings; and these meanings are "derived through social interaction with others; and these meanings are managed

and transformed through an interpretive process that people use to make sense of and handle the objects that constitute their social worlds” (Blumer, 1969, p.2). Symbolic interactionism perceives that peoples’ experiences consist of contextual structures which are based on their interaction with environmental factors (Heise, 2006a; Weigert, 1997; Wearing & Wearing, 1996). In other words, the meaning of actions from things, people and objects can be found by inquiring interactions between the subject and the various environments surrounding the subject. Therefore, the meaning of tourist experience can be conceptualized by looking into the interaction between people and various environmental factors they encounter.

In this context, Colton (1987) and Dann & Cohen (1991) argue that the symbolic interactionism view well explains the various phenomena in the tourism field. It can be used to depict the interactions among tourists, the meanings of human activity and the dynamics and complexity of the tourism industry. However, few studies have adopted the perspective of symbolic interactionism when understanding tourist interactions. Thus, the present study is needed to conceptualize a framework for understanding the tourist experience.

METHODOLOGY

The study’s participants included tourists who visited Nami Island, a popular Korean tourist destination from August (summer) 2009 to April (spring) 2010. A total of twenty tourists participated in the study over a one-year period. Five tourists per season were selected for the study in order to capture seasonality differences in the Nami Island. Research data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and e-mail communications. Qualitative research paradigm was adopted because it is helpful in identifying insightful subjects. Analysis of the data followed van Manen's four existential themes: lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality) and lived human relation (relationality or communality). “Spatiality is felt space” (van Manen, 1990, p.102). It includes both the internal feeling of the formation of lived space and the external feeling of being in relation to place. Corporeality includes emotional, psychological and physiological dimensions, and van Manen (1990) claims that “in our physical or bodily presence we both reveal something about ourselves and we always conceal something at the same time – not necessarily consciously or deliberately, but rather in spite of ourselves” (p.103). Temporality represents subjective time as opposed to objective time. This includes our time perception in relation to the past, present and future: a young person looks ahead while an older person sums up what has already happened. “As we meet the other we are able to develop a conversational relation which allows us to transcend ourselves” (van Manen, 1990, p.104) and it’s the relationality. These four themes of spatiality, corporeality, temporality and relationality can be differentiated but not separated, as “they all form an intricate unity which we call the lifeworld – our lived world” (van Manen 1990, p.105).

Van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological research aims to establish a renewed contact with original experience and pursues the following six procedures: “turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world; investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; balancing the research context by considering parts and whole” (van Manen, 1990, p.31).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed the following interaction phenomenon of tourist experience in the Nami Island:

Firstly, through the 4 existential analysis using the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the following 9 essential themes of experience emerged. Specifically, an essential theme of lived body is 'tourism value' (Escaping from daily life, Self-reflexivity through conversation with oneself, Rest and peace in body and soul and Source of my life), and the 3 essential themes of lived space are 'image's disconfirmation paradigm' (Expectation for typical Nami Island image, Experience of difference between expected Nami Island image and real Nami Island image, Experience of real Nami Island image in accord with expected Nami Island image), 'uniqueness of destination' (Mystique for secluded space, Special event on site, Unexpected meeting on site, Impressive trails in Nami Island and Feeling the beautiful nature) and 'lack of destination'(Small sites, Lack of contents to play, to eat and to enjoy and Encountering the negative events). Three essential themes of lived space are 'role of companions'(Expectation for tour with meaningful companions, Improving relationship with companions via sharing experience and Satisfaction of companions and myself), 'euphoria of others'(Kind other tourists, Lovely couples, Happy families and Joyful foreign tourists), and 'nonsense of others'(Disordered and mobbish group tourists), and two essential themes of lived time are 'flow & nostalgia'(Being unaware of the passage of time, Expectation for next visit with satisfaction), and 'seasonality of destination'(Impact of seasonality and Impact of weather).

In symbolic interactionistic phenomenon of tourist experience in the destination, the following four types of meaningful objects were identified as sources of tourists' emotion and behavior through analysis of data collected from in-depth interviews and participant observations: (list the four factors here). Tourist interactions with these four types of meaningful objects influenced their psychological state of being, behavior, and tourist experience. Specially, companionship in a tourism world is an important and powerful factor in influencing the tourist's experience, level of satisfaction, and their destination image.

CONCLUSION

This study has made a significant contribution to current academic research of tourist experience using an emic approach. The study, however, is not without its limitations. To secure generalizability and transferability of the study's findings, positivist research should be conducted in the future.

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