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The Expression Of Perceived Social Status Through Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is not only seen by tourists as an opportunity for recreation, relaxation and way to visit some other distant areas and peripheries, but also as a mean to express their social status. They actually use their travel as a pathway to reconfirm to friends, relatives and colleagues their social positioning, and they usually perceive it as an interconnection between their social class and the distance of voyage they do. Using a conducted research in air travelers from three different nationalities, this paper examines the connecting parts towards distance, trip cost, and origin versus destination similarities in culture and human behavior, and tourists' expression of perceived social status. It finally proposes a model dealing with the expression of social status through tourism voyage and cultural differentiation.

Keywords: leisure tourism, social status, trip, cost, destination culture, human behavior

INTRODUCTION

It is essential for governments, tourism organizations and tourism operators to understand the processes that determine tourists' destination choices, while competition for economic gains and tourist numbers increases (Ng, et. al., 2007). The destination image has become a very important issue in the marketing research in the tourism industry, since many countries use promotion and global marketing to support their image, and to gain competitive advantage against other destinations (Lin & Huang, 2009). Such research is increasingly important because the image of a destination is an essential factor in influencing tourist satisfaction and choices (Castro et. al., 2007). The literature of destination choice is centred on the direct impact of destination attributes such as distance and prices. The underlying logic is that tourist motivations can become the main generators of utility when visiting distant or expensive destinations (Nicolau & Mas, 2006). As Kim and Lee (2002) state tourist motivations are characteristics of individuals that influence the choice of destinations, since they act as push factors leading to the realisation of tourist travel.

Tourism can be used as a mean for the increase of self-esteem, at least in the medium term (Minnaret et. al., 2009). Mathieson and Wall (1982) insist that prestige is a very important factor for tourists as a motivation for travelling. The increase of social status is a very important oft-cited reason for travel and is accomplished by fostering associations with people, places, or events. Social status enhancement may be through the pursuit of hobbies, continuation of education, ego enhancement, and even sexual indulgence (Tiefenbacher, et. al., 2000).

Mcindosh and Goeldner (1984) classify four motivations according to the following typology: physical, such as relaxation; cultural, such as discovering new geographical areas; interpersonal, such as socialising and meeting new people, and prestige, such as self-esteem and self actualisation. This study examines the interaction between attributes of destinations (price and distance), the need for discovering different way of thinking (culture) on tourist destinations, and the fulfilment of social status (prestige) than can produced by a destination. Through the correlation of literature review and primary research it aims to propose a model dealing with the expression of social status through tourism voyage.

ACCESSIBILITY, VOYAGE DISTANCE, AND MONETARY COST

Almost always, the behavioral and perceptual patterns differ for groups of tourists with different origins and varying levels of familiarity with the destination (Hwang et. al., 2006). Actually, the perceived accessibility has a substantial impact on destination behaviour. Accessibility has been a well-known concept in the transportation planning field since the 1950s when it was defined as the ease of reaching desirable destinations (Hansen, 1959). Access to destinations is critically important because they strongly influence various dimensions of travel behaviour such as trip frequency, destination choice, mode choice, and trip or tour complexity (Iacono et. al., 2010). The importance of accessibility in decisions dealing with multi-destinations is directly related to the idea of economic rationalism and actually explains tourists' choices as a strategy for minimizing cost. When the accessibility is higher to one location, it is less likely to lead to multideestination tourism because opportunity costs associated with postponing visits to additional ones are smaller than in the case of poor accessibility (Hwang et. al., 2006). According Bornhorst et. al. (2010) the location and accessibility of a destination play a very unique and important role for its success, which is most of the times associated with greater geographical distances, hence longest travel trips. Greater costs decrease perceptions of accessibility and also represent fixed costs that can be

better leveraged by visiting multiple destinations (Hwang et. al., 2006). Furthermore, as Oppermann (1995) states the effect of distance decay, which describes people's tendency to visit more places within the destination as they travel farther, is known to exist, especially for pleasure trips.

DESTINATION CULTURE

Every tourist has different behavior, which is associated with its national culture. This also includes its travel patterns (Cho, 1991; Dybka, 1988). There is also evidence to suggest internalized cultural values may influence tourists' destination choices. While tourism researchers have not specifically measured individual's internalization of culture, they have measured tourists' values for segmentation purposes (Ng, et. al., 2007). O'Leary and Dreegan (2003) studied culture as a destination attitude, and McKercher and Cross (2003) as an important reason for traveling to a destination, indicating that cultural differences might be a driver of tourism destination choice. It can be pointed out that the cultural distance concept is utilized to explain how culture affects tourist perceptions of a destination (San Martin & Rodriguez del Bosque, 2008). In the international business context, cultural distance has been conceptualized as the extent to which several cultures are similar or different (Shenkar, 2001). Within this frame culture can be defined as a destination's heritage (tangible and intangible), which includes its music, museums, historical places and traditional richness. Thus, while a destination's image includes such dimensions as local attractions, climate and scenery, also has a cultural aspect that can influence people's choice to visit (O'Leary & Dreegan, 2003).

DESTINATION IMAGE AND SOCIAL STATUS

In tourism research destination image is one of the most explored fields (Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000). The competition of destinations is mainly based on their relative perceived images in the marketplace (Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001). Destinations try to attract tourists through a promise that they will fulfil their emotional and experience expectations. Their aim is based on that individuals' emotions or feelings would be a part of their decision-making and behaviour processes (Decrop, 1999). Actually, the cognitive component of destination image is related to the individual's beliefs about a tourist destination, while a relationship between psychological motivations and affective image has been suggested in tourism research (Baloglu, 1997).

According to Fodness (1994), one of the five reasons for travel (a: "knowledge" function; b: "utilitarian" functions; c: "punishment minimization"; d: "reward maximization") is the "value-expressive functions", regarding self-esteem and ego-enhancement (or social status). Weissinger and Bandalos (1995) state that self-determination is characterized by awareness of internal needs and a strong desire to make free choices based on these needs. Since emotional and experiential needs are relevant in pleasure-seeking and choice behaviour (Goossens, 2000), the perceived expression of social status throughout tourism is actually a very important factor for destination selection.

SELECTION OF VARIABLES

The variance of the expressed opinions and the statistical significances that are formulated toward the expressed perceptions are directly connected with the individual characteristics of the sample population. Many studies reveal that nationality is the main factor of the perspectives' formulation in the respondents (Hough and Hassanien, 2010; Lynch et. al., 2010). Some others, such as the researches of Jang et. al. (2004), Trethway and Mak (2005), and Rozier-Rich and Sandos (2010) support that the differentiations of the respondents' age create very important alternations to their perceptions. On the other hand, the level of

education of the sample population is considered as a crucial factor for the creation of significant differences in the expressed perspectives (Teye et. al., 2002; Petrosillo et. al., 2007), even in destination's perceived image (Beerli and Martin, 2008). This paper takes under consideration all the above studies and researches, and examines the variation of perceptions toward nationality, age, and education level.

METHODOLOGY

Research Characteristics

The study was conducted from June till August 2010 at the International Airport of Heraklion, Crete "N. Kazantzakis". The most appropriate method considered in order to obtain the primary data, was the structured personal interview. It was undertaken the technique of personal interviewing in order to reach the objectives since it is "the most versatile and productive method of communication, it enables spontaneity, and also provides the skill of guiding the discussion back to the topic outlined when discussions are unfruitful" (Sekaran and Bougie, 2009). In order to select a sample frame, the process adapted was the following. A random starting method was selected in order to reach the respondents. Every fifth passenger passing from flight's check in was selected to participate in the sampling frame. The selected passengers had to be permanent residents of Germany, Greece or Australia. All the respondents had to be adults, coming on the island of Crete for tourism. The research sample is stratified since equal number of passengers per nationality was selected.

Sample Size Determination

The representativeness of the sampling size was a fundamental criterion in order to determinate the amount of the sample and the research time period. From more than four million tourists that visit Crete every year, the vast majority visits the island during summertime (G.N.T.O. 2010). Since the proportions of population were unknown, it has taken a conservative response format 50 / 50%, meaning the assumption that 50% of the respondents have negative perceptions of tourism impacts, and 50% have not. At least 95% confidence and 5% sampling error was selected. The sample size is:

$$N = \frac{(t - table)^2 (hypothesis)}{S^2} \Rightarrow N = \frac{(1.96)^2 (0.5)(0.5)}{(0.5)^2} \Rightarrow N = 384.16 \text{ Rounded } 400$$

The calculation of the sampling size is independent of the total population size hence the sampling size determines the error (Aaker and Day 1990). In every nationality selected 200 interviews were conducted. The total sample of interviews was 600. The statistical error for the total sample and per nationality is 4 and 6.9 percent respectively.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire consists of 27 questions. These questions were 24 Likert Scale (1 – 5) questions assessing passengers' perspectives toward perceived social status through tourism (six questions); destination cultural and behavioral differences and social status (seven questions); voyage and social status (five questions), and perceived exotic destination (six questions). There were also three socio – demographic questions (nationality, age, and level of education). For the analysis of the collected data, the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS, 16.0) was used. To identify the existence of statistical significances between the variables, the analysis used t-Test and ANOVA. The indication of statistical significance is at the 0.05 level of confidence. For the contradiction and presentation of the research findings, cross tabulations were also used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of the Sample

The sample through nationalities was stratified (200 per nationality). Respondents from 18 till 35 years old represent 39.7 percent of the sample (238 people), followed by those between 36 and 50 years old (38.5 percent / 231 respondents). Finally, the majority of the interviewed population was compulsory education graduates (54.5 percent / 327 respondents).

Social Status through Tourism, Culture and Behavior

Concerning the perceived social status through tourism (Table 1) all the statistical significances were produced through voyages, most of them under the analysis of the socio-demographic characteristic of nationality. In general terms the respondents agreed that an international travel (trip to some other country within the same continent) expresses a higher status than a national one, while a transcontinental travel (tripe to some other country situated in different continent) expresses the higher most social status. Their expressed perspectives can be considered more than clear (4.17 for National Trip/ 2.20 for International Trip / 1.84 for Transcontinental Trip). Dealing with national trip, the overall agreements for Greeks and Germans were only one percent (two respondents each) when no Australian agreed. On the other hand, in international travels, the overall agreements on Greeks were 71 percent (142 respondents), for Germans were 81 percent (162 respondents), and for Australians 81.5 percent (163 respondents). For transcontinental trips, the overall agreements for Greeks, Germans and Australians were 98, 86.5, and 84 percent respectively. Generally, the Australians seemed to be more familiarized with transcontinental trips (spatial position of Australia) because when they talked about an international trip they actually referred to a transcontinental one. Maybe that is why Australians had the highest agreeable trend on international trips, since their perceptions for those ones were almost equal with the transcontinental ones.

Dealing with nationality, a series of statistical significances were also produced through the difference of local's behavior on a destination, through cultural differences in neighbor countries and the expressed status of the present trip (in Greece). Dealing with local's different behavior, even all nationalities agree, Germans seemed to be more favorable, followed by Greeks, and finally Australians. The same trends were also expressed on the statements examining neighbor countries. On the other hand, dealing with the perceived status value of the present trip (in Greece), Australians were the most agreeable, followed by Germans and then the Greeks, where their overall agreements were 94, 56.5, and 0.5 percent respectively. All the above indicate that the distance from origin to a destination plays a crucial role for the perceived social status through tourism. In addition, the cultural and behavioral differentiations also reveal their importance on the perceived status, but they can not actually be considered as the variables with the highest impact on that. Toward age, most of the statistical significances appeared on statements dealt with local's culture and behavior. Focusing on culture, the older age group (over 50 years old) seemed to be less interested, having a trend in overall agreements of 34 percent (68 respondents). On the contrary, this age group had the highest proportion concerning local's behavior and local's way of thinking where the overall agreements in both reached 59 percent (118 respondents). The expressed perspectives on the statement that deals with the perceived social status on the present trip revealed that the younger the respondents were, the less they focused on the generated status through their trip. This can be explained by the alteration of values and beliefs through age, having younger people to seek out new challenges and opportunities when the older ones focus more on the expression of their self esteem.

TABLE 1: Variation of Social Status through Tourism

	Perceived Social Status Through Tourism					Differences & Social Status					
	Trip Cost	Price and Trip Combined	National Trip	International Trip	Trans-Continental Trip	Local Culture	Local Residents' Behavior	Local Residents' Way of Thinking	Neighbor Countries Culture	Neighbor Countries Behavior	S. Status Value of Present Trip
Means	3.59	2.75	4.17	2.20	1.84	2.37	1.90	1.92	2.79	2.95	2.68
Std. Dev.	.737	.795	.633	.576	.633	.666	.665	.545	.881	.945	1.008
Nationality											
Greeks	3.56	2.85	4.08	2.30	1.51	2.31	1.78	1.92	2.73	3.02	3.75
Germans	3.52	2.69	4.18	2.17	1.91	2.39	1.68	1.95	2.04	2.14	2.48
Australians	3.68	.271	4.26	2.12	2.10	2.41	2.24	1.90	3.61	3.69	1.82
F Ratio	2.649	2.512	4.371	5.277	54.076	1.315	45.749	.522	335.549	248.967	530.388
Signif.*	.072	.082	.013	.005	.000	.269	.000	.594	.000	.000	.000
Age											
18 – 35	3.62	2.77	4.17	2.23	1.82	2.32	2.08	1.89	2.71	2.88	2.95
36 – 50	3.62	2.71	4.17	2.21	1.91	2.31	1.81	2.01	2.88	3.02	2.57
Over 50	3.47	2.76	4.18	2.12	1.76	2.56	1.75	1.83	2.79	2.95	2.39
F Ratio	1.989	.350	.022	1.469	2.474	7.029	14.460	5.474	2.268	1.277	16.497
Signif.*	.138	.705	.978	.231	.085	.001	.000	.004	.104	.280	.000
Education											
Compulsory	3.46	2.74	4.17	2.26	1.85	2.53	1.87	1.94	2.72	2.87	2.76
Higher	3.74	2.75	4.18	2.12	1.84	2.18	1.94	1.90	2.88	3.05	2.59
T Ratio	-4.853	-.176	-.217	2.827	.230	6.600	-1.344	.832	-2.323	-2.409	2.047
Signif.*	.206	.976	.703	.008	.211	.026	.022	.295	.248	.806	.873

* The values shown in bold indicate a statistical significance at the .05 level of confidence

Social Status through Leisure Trips and Perceived Exotic Destinations

When the respondents were asked for the produced social status from a specific destination, their answers varied if they were examining their own country or any other destination dealing with the nationality of the rest two groups. Australians had the higher proportions on overall agreements for Germany and Greece (82.5 and 85 percent respectively), while the highest agreeable proportions of Germans and Greeks were for Australia (84.5 and 85 percent respectively). All respondents had the lowest agreeable trend when they referred to their own country (1.5 percent for both, Germans and Greeks, where no Australian agreed). The results (Table 2) revealed an extraordinary significance on trip destination and perceived social status. These findings were strengthened by the fact that for destinations like Africa and America all respondents (no matter the nationality) agreed that they offer a high social status. These destinations were considered from all the respondents as transcontinental ones.

Dealing with age, the younger the people were the more they perceived that transcontinental trips express a higher social status (Table 2). The statistical significances produced for Australia, Africa and America can be explained through the perspective that most of the respondents were from Europe. Australia had lower trend than Africa and America because 1/3 of the total sample perceived Australia as origin. Toward education, the statistical significances produced to the statements that focused in Greece and Australia. Even if the findings for both countries were near to the neutral Likert scale (point 3), higher education graduates seemed to be more agreeable for Greece (50.2 percent), while compulsory education graduates were more agreeable for Australia (59.6 percent).

Toward nationality, statistical significances appeared in all statements dealing with the “Exotic Destinations” perspectives. Even if all the respondents had agreeable expressed trends, Germans seemed to give a higher notice in all variables, followed by Australians. The most agreeable trend for Germans and Greeks was towards the combination of leisure cost and destinations’ cultural difference, where their overall agreements were 86 and 73.5 percent respectively. Controversially, the highest trend for Australians was the differentiation of local’s behavior, where their overall agreements reached 83.5 percent. The population responses actually revealed that except cultural and behavioral destination differences, and trip length, the moderating factor of cost variation also plays a significant role for the expression of social status through leisure trips. Maybe this can be used as an evidence of a partial determination of social class (available income for leisure purposes), something which is directly connected with social status and – as a result – its perceptual patterns.

The expressed responses of the sample on the perceived “Exotic Destinations” have also created statistical significances toward age. Concerning cost, the overall agreements for people aged from 18 till 35, 36 till 50, and over 50 were 68.5, 75.6, and 80.9 percent respectively. As it seems, the older the respondents were, the more they were affected by the cost variable in order to characterize a destination as exotic. For the same age groups under the comparative perspective of trip’s voyage and cultural differentiation, the overall agreements were 69.7, 78.3, and 82.4 percent. Moreover, for the comparative perspective of cost and cultural differentiation the age groups’ overall agreements were 72.3, 79.2, and 83.2 percent. As the results indicate, the older people were the more they were influenced by variables such as cost, destination’s cultural differentiation, and length of voyage. This can be explained under the prism that as people get older, they become more demanding and they seek out for a higher added value from the experience they are going to gain from a leisure trip.

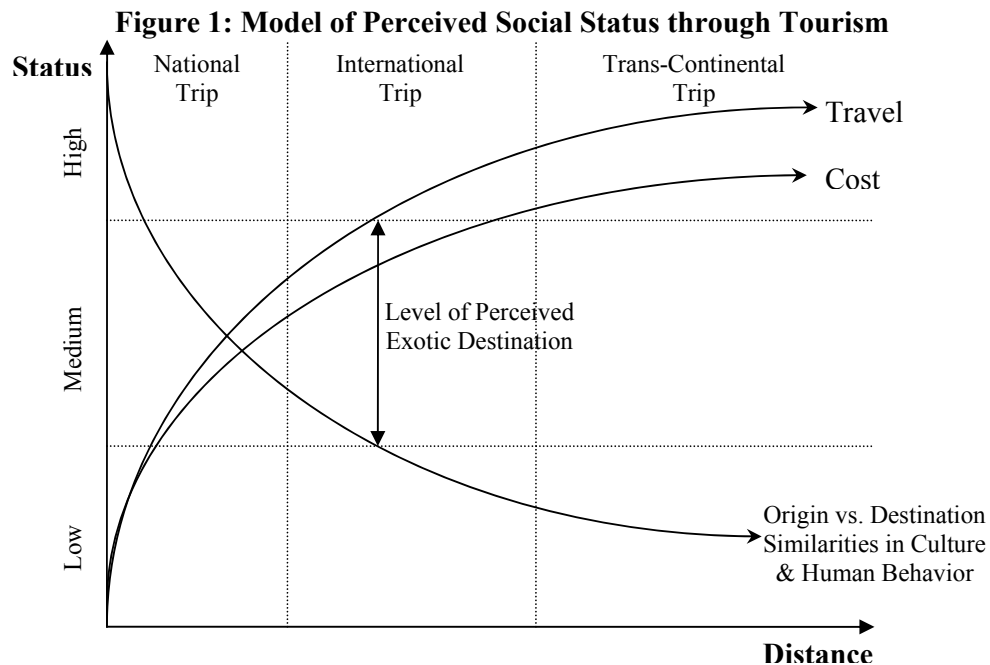
TABLE 2: Variation of Social Status through Specific Destinations & Perceived Exotic Destinations

	Social Status through Destinations					Exotic Destinations					
	Germany	Greece	Australia	Africa	America	Distance	Culture	Behavior	High Cost	Trip & Culture	Cost & Culture
Means	2.75	2.76	2.63	1.75	1.92	2.14	2.28	2.09	2.17	2.09	2.02
Std. Dev.	1.050	1.098	1.250	.691	.841	.668	.770	.701	.660	.699	.726
Nationality											
Greeks	2.41	3.78	1.84	1.75	1.86	2.42	2.56	2.36	2.30	2.24	2.11
Germans	3.89	2.69	1.95	1.76	1.94	1.93	2.12	1.90	1.96	1.88	1.85
Australians	1.95	1.82	4.10	1.71	1.95	2.07	2.16	2.00	2.25	2.15	2.10
F Ratio	491.844	346.534	692.645	.293	.708	30.667	21.424	25.356	17.160	14.904	8.437
Signif.*	.000	.000	.000	.746	.493	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Age											
18 – 35	2.71	2.81	2.43	1.60	1.78	2.16	2.31	2.11	2.27	2.21	2.13
36 – 50	2.75	2.71	2.79	1.82	1.99	2.14	2.28	2.09	2.18	2.07	2.02
Over 50	2.82	2.77	2.71	1.89	2.05	2.10	2.24	2.05	1.97	1.91	1.83
F Ratio	.500	.456	5.143	9.768	5.706	.307	.352	.231	9.222	8.442	7.070
Signif.*	.607	.634	.006	.000	.004	.736	.703	.794	.000	.000	.001
Education											
Compulsory	2.86	2.83	2.53	1.81	1.97	2.15	2.28	2.09	2.14	2.09	1.98
Higher	2.62	2.68	2.75	1.67	1.86	2.13	2.27	2.08	2.20	2.10	2.06
T Ratio	2.807	1.697	-2.091	2.509	1.586	.339	.153	.130	-1.068	-.295	-1.304
Signif.*	.475	.012	.021	.431	.849	.752	.974	.155	.796	.709	.970

* The values shown in bold indicate a statistical significance at the .05 level of confidence

SOCIAL STATUS THROUGH TOURISM

As the research results indicated, in leisure trips the more distant a destination is from origin, the higher the expressed social status for the travelers. Concerning trip, transcontinental trips seem to have the higher impact for the tourists' expressed social status, followed by the international ones. Even if the respondents were originated from three different countries, their perspectives were similar under the variable of destination distance. In addition, the examined population perceived that leisure cost is directly connected with the voyage's length they have to make in order to reach the desired destination. Moreover, another expressed perspective was that the more distant a destination was, the lower the potential similarities were between origin and destination in terms of culture and human behavior. The respondents seemed to evaluate and determine an exotic destination as a fairly distant (from their origin) area with low cultural and behavioral similarities.



The expressed responses concerning travel, cost, exotic destinations, and cultural and behavioral differences from origin to destination are presented at the model above (Figure 1). Findings support that the longer the distance the higher the perceived social status. In addition, the lower the cultural and behavioral similarities from origin to destination and the voyage length, the more possible for tourists to perceive this destination as exotic. International trips can somehow create the exotic perception and the appropriate cultural differentiation. On the contrary, transcontinental trips can establish this link and create the appropriate conditions for tourists to express their desirable social class and status.

CONCLUSION

The understanding of a successful leisure trip is based on the perceived experience that tourists finally gain. It is also essential for tourists to have the opportunity to say that this trip really covered their emotional needs and wants, having their expression of social status as one of the important ones. Thus the destination they select, the local culture and behavior they want to meet, the overall cost they intent to pay, the voyage they are willing to undertake, and the combination of all the above are crucial factors for the final perceptions of their leisure trip. No matter the travelers' nationality, age, or education (also focused on cultural background), these needs and wants actually stay the same.

Significance to Industry

The main importance of this paper for decision makers is to predict the image of their destination to different tourist flows and to reform products and services (and the image itself) within a manner of delivering higher tourist experience. In addition, tourism and hospitality marketers can focus on different and diverse market segments having the opportunity to better comprehend tourists' needs and finally promote destinations and hospitality firms more successfully. Within this frame they can lure more tourist flows, increase destination impact to more demanding tourists, and finally succeed to have a higher profit generation. Furthermore, tourism and hospitality industry can better comprehend the alterations of modern tourist needs, and within a range of necessary innovations can succeed a higher competitive advantage, and – especially for mass tourist destinations – to minimize the market pressure and dependency from tour operators. All the above combined can finally give to nowadays tourism an additional momentum for the 21st century.

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