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An investigation and reconceptualization of flow in the context of a skiing holiday

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ABSTRACT

The paper looks at the concept of flow in the context of a holiday. Flow is conceptualized as a mental state which develops when an individual, performing an activity, is fully immersed in a feeling of focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in its activity. The paper presents the results of a study conducted in French mountain resorts, and identifies how and in which instances flow occurs. The results have implications for the conceptualization of satisfaction, bring a deeper understanding of what lies at the heart of the holiday experience and provide guidance for managers.

Keywords: *flow, immersion, mountain tourism, satisfaction, experience*

INTRODUCTION

For decades experiential marketing researchers have investigated the heart of the consumer experience in specific consumption domains such as art, leisure and culture (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Carù and Cova, 2006; Pine and Gilmore, 1998). This evolution is particularly relevant for tourism researchers since tourism is by definition an experiential activity where symbolical and emotional dimensions are central to its consumption (Kim, Ritchie and McCormick, 2012; Otto and Ritchie, 1995; Urry, 1990). While experiential theories have investigated various stages of the experiential consumption process, one area that needs further attention is the actual experience itself. Many researchers have identified that consumers are motivated to purchase tourism products with expectations that are mostly of an experiential nature rather than utilitarian (Arnould and Price, 1993; Crompton and Love, 1995; Hosany and Drew, 2012; Mannell and Iso-Ahola, 1987). Therefore the experience is evaluated by consumers in terms of its congruence to those experiential motivations. When analysing the range of motivations at stake, the need to relax, to get away from it all, to cut free from everyday burdens are the motivations most commonly encountered among tourists. However, how those motivations translate into day to day behaviour and expectations during the consumption of a holiday remains a complex issue.

In order to investigate this question further, the researchers have referred to the concept of flow which analyses how individuals live an experience of an intense nature. The concept of flow is similar in nature to the peak experience (Maslow, 1968). It is

conceptualised as a mental state which develops when an individual, performing an activity, is fully immersed in a feeling of focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in its activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Flow is a holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement: “How people describe the common characteristics of optimal experience: a sense that one’s skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-Consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p. 142). Carù and Cova (2003) refer also to a notion of immersion which they define as “a feeling of well-being, development and satisfaction” (page 60).

Whilst those notions are particularly interesting for tourism studies, they remain to be more clearly defined. For instance, while the concept of flow applies mostly to intense sport activities, it is not known if it also applies to the whole duration of a holiday.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted by individual interviews with tourists in three French ski resorts in the winter 2011 on a sample of 90 individuals. The data collected was analysed using content analysis with the objective to identify: occurrences of flow, what are their main characteristics of flow and under which conditions does flow occur.

RESULTS

The results show that flow occurs on several occasions during the holiday but is only associated to the practise of sport activities (mostly skiing or snowboarding). Therefore, individuals will experience deep feelings of joy and involvement while practising their activity. The characteristics identified of this flow process are very similar to those recognized by Csikszentmihalyi. However, when stopping their activity, tourists reverse to a milder state of being that is less intense than flow and more linear. The authors of this study called this process the “on-going flow” which can be characterised by a constant sense of disconnection from everyday life, a level of detachment from “real life” (functional aspects of the holiday are undervalued) and a conscious willingness to stay in that state (enjoyment, relaxation, etc.). Individuals seem to be reunited with all their senses describing their experiences and surroundings through various senses but the notions of focus, deep and intense involvement are absent. The ongoing flow is a holistic state which appears to represent the main goal to the holiday.

Most importantly, the results identify that three main elements are associated to the occurrence of flow: immersion in a totally different environment (theming plays a major role in that process, especially if it interacts with different senses); service convenience is also a main element since it allows individuals to remain in their on-going flow; and any entertainment/decorations/activities that will allow individuals to travel in a hyper-real/magic universe will contribute to the on-going flow. The practice of a sport activity will bring flow on some occasions and these flow episodes will feed into the on-going flow experienced during the holiday. Overall, not many negative service incidents are picked on by consumers. However, elements that push individuals to step out of their flow are noticed by consumers. In other words, elements that they consider as minor will be ignored while elements that truly impact on flow become major (several of those incidents are identified in the study).

CONCLUSION

The results have implications for the conceptualisation of satisfaction, it brings a deeper understanding of what lies at the heart of the holiday experience and provides guidance for managers.

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