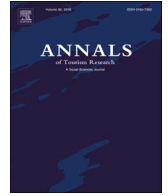


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Annals of Tourism Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/annals

‘What’s on your Bucket List?’: Tourism, identity and imperative experiential discourse



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Authenticity
Bucket List
Cultural Capital
Experience
Identity
Selfhood

ABSTRACT

The concept of the Bucket List has achieved rapid and widespread recognition. This article makes an original Critical Discourse Analysis of the Bucket List as a cultural phenomenon that provides important insights into the interrelation between identity and tourism. The Bucket List is used to communicate specific suggestions of desirable tourism experiences and uses what can be termed the experiential imperative discourse, where the language, tone and framing of the text positions the experience described as essential and obligatory. Ultimately, the Bucket List discourse serves to prescribe culturally specific ideas of what constitute ‘good’ tourism experiences and is imposed on individuals who are prompted to desire a constantly renewing range of tourism experiences.

Introduction

Since its first use in the 2007 motion picture *The Bucket List*, the concept of a list of experiences and achievements an individual wishes to complete before they die, or ‘kick the bucket’, has become widely accepted in common usage. Illustrated by the movie narrative which sees two elderly American men diagnosed with terminal cancer travel to Rome, Egypt, India, and the Himalayas, the concept has, from its inception, espoused the notion that travel experiences offer self-fulfilment and are a measure the success or meaningfulness of one’s life. The phrase entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013 as an informal noun meaning ‘a list of things that a person hopes to experience or achieve during his or her lifetime’ and gained further cultural cachet in September 2014 when USA President Barack Obama staged an impromptu visit to Stonehenge following a NATO summit in Wales and announced to gathered journalists that, with his visit to the site, he has now ‘knocked it off the Bucket List’.

Inspired by the film’s narrative, a number of individuals responding to terminal illness with their own efforts to complete a Bucket List of things to do before they die have either received considerable media interest or seen their own accounts published via blogs and books¹, while websites such as www.bucketlist.org and www.www.bucketlist.net allow users to compile Bucket Lists by making selections from a range of suggested activities or experiences. The content of such lists is revealing in that the majority of Bucket List items focus on leisure and touristic experiences as life goals such as to ‘See the Northern Lights’, ‘Swim With Dolphins’, ‘Go On A Cruise’ or ‘Go Scuba Diving’. As such, there is a notable correspondence between the rapid emergence of the Bucket List concept and recent scholarly work exploring how tourism and travel are used to construct selfhood and identity (Bosangit, Hibbert, & McCabe, 2015; Cohen, 2010). Thus, tourism can provide an individual with ‘a density of good memories’ that can be read as evidence of ‘having lived life to the full’ (Desforges, 2000: 936) and can be understood as part of ‘an existentialist narrative of *freedom* to become

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¹ Examples include British journalist Helen Fawkes (www.helenfawkes.wordpress.com), British teenager Alice Pyne (www.alicepyne.blogspot.co.uk), American Susan Spencer-Wendel (author of 2013 memoir *Until I Say Good-bye: My Year of Living With Joy*), and British cancer patient Stephen Sutton, who has raised over £5m for The Teenage Cancer Trust (www.facebook.com/stephenstory).

oneself' (van Nuenen, 2016: 200).

This article asserts that Bucket Lists are an emergent format for enacting the apparent links between tourism experiences and identity. In a more general sense, Bucket Lists represent a new way of telling ourselves and others about our lives and aspirations. Based on a Critical Discourse Analysis of a set of recent Bucket List texts drawn from a range of media platforms (Fairclough, 2001, 2003, 2010), the analysis adds to understandings of the intimate links between identity and tourist experience by suggesting that an imperative experiential discourse underpins the Bucket List ethos and positions the acquisition of meaningful experiences through travel as a central facet of processes by which identity and selfhood is formulated, performed and mediated. As Wang and Alasuutari (2017) have recently argued, this process of 'experientialisation' is one of the central trends in contemporary tourism. More specifically, therefore, it is argued that this discourse has been readily adopted by the tourism industry and associated media actors in order to present the accumulation of specific tourism experiences as a *necessary* task. Importantly, however, the combination of destinations and activities that constitute many Bucket Lists are not available to all but, rather, rely on the possession of appropriate levels of economic and cultural capital. As such, the article will explore how the widespread use of the Bucket List concept must be understood as part of an emergent 'experience economy' (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) where individuals are exhorted to define themselves and their worth through meaningful and valued experiences.

Tourism, experience and selfhood

The question of how a person can live their life in a fulfilling and meaningful way has long fascinated philosophers, theologians and academics (Eckstein, 2002). Sociological scholarship, in particular, has developed a preoccupation with the idea of individualization where, as Giddens (1991: 9) formulates, self-identity is something worked upon by the individual as lifestyles are chosen and monitored as part of a 'reflexive project of the self'. According to Beck (1992: 137), such has managed to 'open the human biography up' in that the individual social agent is increasingly called upon to make choices about their life and about who or what they should be and become. This freedom or, as Bauman (2000) would assert, 'liquidity' allows individuals to craft their own biographies in a manner increasingly free from the traditional ties of community, locality, family and kinship. This trend has readily been portrayed as offering increased freedom and personal agency in allowing individuals to actively choose how they shape their identity and lives in what Giddens (1991) terms a 'life project'. Others, however, such as Rose (1989: 10), have warned that with such pressure 'to act upon our bodies, souls, thoughts, and conduct in order to achieve happiness, wisdom, health and fulfilment' comes increased anxiety and pernicious influence from other actors such as government agents, marketing gurus and lifestyle experts.

The emergence of the Bucket List can be understood within this wider cultural trend. The notion that tourism provides meaningful experiences that promise to in some way enrich and enhance the life of the tourist have long been central to analyses of tourism and tourist practices (Tung & Ritchie, 2011). With varying degrees of scepticism, the seminal theorists of tourism studies envisaged tourism as a search for personal meaning in a context of increasing alienation with modern life. While Boorstin (1961) diagnoses modern tourism as a largely superficial extension of the artificial 'pseudo-events' of modern culture, MacCannell (1976) sees tourists as spurred on by dissatisfaction with the safety and predictability of modern life in seeking out the 'authenticity' of people and places yet tainted by the deleterious influence of modernity. To varying degrees, tourists are said to relate to tourism experiences as a means to define and, for some, redefine the self (Cohen, 1979). Tourism is seen as 'a vehicle for transmitting identity' (Edensor, 2001: 74) and as involving 'spaces and times of self-making' which 'allow latitudes, freedoms and experimentations' (Franklin, 2003: 2) where 'the parallels between people's internal and external journeys' bring about transitional life moments and 'new beginnings' (White & White, 2004: 202). Tourism experience can be represented as transformational, as a moment of epiphany leading to self-actualisation (McClinchey, 2015) and as demonstrating how the self is worked upon, developed and evolved (Bosangit et al., 2015). Tourism is therefore often seen as a site of renewal and transformation where individuals can seek fulfilment and the 'reinscription of the self' (Johnson, 2007: 162).

Importantly, this relationship between tourism and identity has to be narrated and performed. Desforges (1998: 176; 2000: 935), for example, draws on Bourdieu and Giddens to describe how young travellers bring 'experiences back home to use in the narration of identity' and how they use 'the relatively unique experiences provided to narrate a new individualized identity'. This has been most readily observed in studies of young independent travellers or 'backpackers' (Richards & Wilson, 2004) and young British travellers undertaking a 'gap year' before or after university, who have been shown to seek out of 'worthwhile experiences' as a means of creating and performing a particular new or enhanced identity (Snee, 2014). Travel experiences are told and retold as 'well-stylized travel narratives, which culminate in the telling of a profound self-change that their narrators have undergone' (Noy, 2004: 96) with certain activities and particular valued destinations being used to narrate an 'adventurous self' (Bott, 2014). Narratives of selfhood and travel often involve 'the trope of self-discovery' (Johnson, 2007: 154), and utilise 'a developmental vocabulary' (Cohen, 2010: 129) where phrases such as 'learning about the self' and 'getting to know the self' foreground the intimate links between travel and selfhood.

There is, therefore, an apparent consensus that tourism is, or can be, 'an important human experience' (Pons, 2003: 48). However, there is considerable debate as to what constitutes a genuine, authentic, travel experience (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006; van Nuenen, 2016; Wang, 1999). Tourism destinations can be valued for a combination of physical, geographical, social and cultural qualities (Kuby, Wentz, Vogt, & Virden, 2001) or because specific places become associated with historical events (Ringgaard, 2010). Further still, as Lew (2011) suggests, attributing status to specific tourist locations can be done on either an objective level, in measurable qualities of the location itself, or on a subjective level, in the specific feelings that one is able to feel when immersed in the setting and any associated activities. While Urry's (1990) concept of the tourist 'gaze' proved influential, a recent trend has seen a shift from 'gazing' to 'experiencing', with tourism theorists stressing a desire for physically and intellectual immersion in tourist locations

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