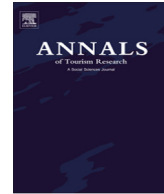




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The hybrid tourist



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ABSTRACT

Inspired by the recent emergence of the hybrid consumer in the marketing literature, the present article defines hybrid tourists and assesses empirical evidence of their existence. Results indicate that hybrid tourists—tourists whose segment membership for the next trip cannot be predicted from their segment membership of their last trip—are the norm, rather than the exception. Only one quarter of tourists remain in the same motivation segment across more than one trip. Results are similar for expenditure segments. Tourist hybridity exists both with respect to travel motivations and expenditure. Personal characteristics predict hybridity. New approaches of market segmentation are needed to cater for the hybrid tourist.

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Introduction

Market Segmentation is a critical component of strategic marketing planning and forms the basis of most marketing action. Market segmentation assumes that buyers can be categorised in groups—referred to as market segments—which contain people with similar characteristics while at the same time being distinctly different from people in other market segments (Smith, 1956). Similarities among segment members allow tourist destinations and businesses to customise their offer to best meet the market segment's needs. This also holds in cases where distinct market segments do not naturally exist in data, but are instead created via segmentation analysis (Dolnicar & Leisch, 2010).

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which is exploratory in nature. Customization increases the likelihood of consumers purchasing, enjoying and recommending the product. Customization also reduces marketing cost because marketing communications and promotions can be targeted. Given these benefits, it is not surprising that market segmentation is seen as “essential for marketing success” (Lilien & Rangaswamy, 2002, p. 61) and is widely adopted in commercial marketing, including tourism marketing.

The recently emerged concept of the hybrid consumer fundamentally challenges the value of market segmentation. The hybrid consumer, as described by Ehrnrooth and Gronroos (2013, p. 1793) “buys cheaper generics and low-end brands on some purchase occasions, and then on other occasions trades up to premium, high-end brands and happily pays for them. None of these consumers’ behaviours fit pre-specified consumer segmentation criteria”.

If hybrid consumers exist in tourism and if they represent a substantial proportion of the market, the value of market segmentation as the strategic cornerstone of tourism marketing is in question. Dependent or independent of their last purchase each consumer could fall into a different segment for each one of their trips, a phenomenon observed by Bieger and Laesser in 2002. In such circumstances, market segmentation based on static segmentation criteria would fail. Instead, either a more dynamic type of market segmentation would be required or organisations would be forced to return to mass marketing. Another possibility would be to take completely different segmentation approaches, such as segmenting visitor flows (Beritelli, Bieger, & Laesser, 2014 or Beritelli, Reinhold, Laesser, & Bieger, 2015).

The key aim of the present study is to offer a definition of the hybrid tourist and to determine whether there is empirical evidence of their existence. In so doing, the study challenges the currently implicit assumption in strategic marketing that regularly repeating segmentation studies using one off cross-sectional studies is an acceptable approach to accounting for consumer heterogeneity in the market. Findings have major implications for strategic marketing: they require tourism destinations and businesses to critically rethink the suitability of static segmentation studies as basis for marketing action. If hybrid consumers indeed exist and do not represent a neglectably small market niche, destinations and tourism businesses may need to fundamentally rethink their offers and the ways they communicate them to consumers.

Literature review

Industry has embraced the concept of the hybrid consumer. The Rabobank Group, an international financial services provider, published a report titled “Rise of the ‘Hybrid Consumer’ to polarise the food sector” which has formed the basis of the discussion of hybrid consumers in industry. Rabobank describes the hybrid consumer as “trading up to premium, high-end products that matter most from an emotional and social perspective, such as premium brands in supermarkets and fine dining” with money “saved by trading down on staples” (Rabobank, 2013).

Rabobank uses growth rates of retailers to support their findings, stating that retailers “geared towards the mid-market are showing lower growth rates over a longer period than their peers at the extreme ends of the spectrum. Between 2007 and 2012, above average performers in the US were either hard discounters, such as Aldi, or premium formats, such as Whole Foods and HE Butt Grocery. Similar trends exist in Western Europe. Growth rates at mid-market operators, such as Morrison’s, Tesco, Sainsbury and Asda, have been clearly lower than at discounters such as Aldi and Lidl as well as upmarket retailers, such as Waitrose” (Rabobank, 2013). The definition used in most industry documents relating to the hybrid consumer view is consumer’s hybridity with respect to their willingness to pay a wide range of prices as the key defining criterion.

Hybrid consumption has received surprisingly little attention in the academic literature. The original theoretical foundation can be traced back to household production theory (Becker, 1965; Betancourt & Gautschi, 1992; Muth, 1966). Household production theory postulates that households allocate income and other resources (such as time etc.) across different goods where different goods have different levels of utility. A vacation is one such good. As a consequence, the household must make resource allocation decisions which imply sacrifice. This has been illustrated in the tourism context for discretionary income (Crouch et al., 2007; Dolnicar et al., 2008; Laesser & Crouch, 2006).

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