



Tourism experiences: Core processes of memorable trips

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is an activity that can provide different experiences to customers, but there is still a lot to know about the factors that contribute to a memorable journey. This study aims to propose a theoretical framework by identifying the core processes that are sense-making and meaningful in a Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE). The method is exploratory and qualitative, using travel narratives of Brazilian tourists. Data analysis was based on grounded theory and followed the steps of open, axial, and selective encoding. The results contribute to the formation of a substantive theory and point out three dimensions (personal, relational, and environmental), which appear to be crucial to memorable experiences. Besides, the tourist who has a memorable experience goes through the stages of: 1) Ambiance, 2) Socialization and 3) Emotions and Reflection. The findings also indicate that it may be more enriching to investigate MTEs components of experience in general rather than consider what makes a particular experience more memorable than others.

1. Introduction

Products and services are no longer enough to generate economic prosperity. Therefore organizations and the hospitality industry use the experience as a management tool for differentiation (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Experiences are subjective, highly personal and intangible phenomena (O'Dell & Billing, 2005), hence, difficult to define and to grasp their essence.

At the individual level, researchers associate the experience with intrinsic aspects such as memory, perception, learning, and previous experiences (Li, 2000). The tourist experience remains in the memory, preceded by motivations and expectations, and result in satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Quinlan-Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). It also reflects the traveler's assessment after the interaction with the visited destination (Quinlan-Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). However, there is much to know about what is crucial to turn a common experience into a memorable journey. For instance, researchers should emphasize more the emotional aspects of tourists' experiences (Knobloch, Robertson, & Aitken, 2014).

Regarding the experience in a broader view, some authors consider several concepts and models in the relationship between environmental influences and individual psychological influences (for example, Quinlan-Cutler & Carmichael, 2010 and Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011; Walls, 2013). The tourism experience outcomes have also

gained prominence. For example, Brunner-Sperdin and Peters (2009) highlight the subjective personal reactions and feelings, while other authors refer to changes in the individual (Anderson et al., 2013; Bruner, 1991). Despite the different approaches, there is a consensus on the importance of the relational and environmental dimensions for the formation of the experience offered to tourists (Komppula, Ilves & Airey, 2016). On the other hand, given the lack of an empirical analysis of these models, more research is needed for theory consolidation.

There are advances in the concept of tourism experience, and this has brought about various perspectives on all kinds of experience. Ritchie, Tung, and Ritchie (2011) point out some experience typologies: great experience, quality experience, extraordinary experience, memorable experience and, more recently, the creative experience (Ihamäki, 2012; Richards, 2011; Tan, Kung, & Luh, 2013). Although relevant in the literature, these terms are being used without a commonly agreed definition and interchangeably (Knobloch, Robertson, & Aitken, 2014, 2016).

The memorable tourism experience (MTE) appears to have more defined importance for its proximity to Pine and Gilmore's (1998) experience economy which influences studies in the tourism field. "An MTE is selectively constructed from tourism experiences based on the individual's assessment of the experience" (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012, p. 13). Thus, MTE depends on at least two elements: 1) the tourism experience in a given space and time; and 2) a process of

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generating memories related to the experience or its consumption. The memory generation process permeates a cognitive and physiological process (Tung, Lin, Qiu Zhang, & Zhao, 2016) that we will not emphasize here.

Elements such as the memorability of experience and travelers' evaluation of it have caught the attention of researchers and have been the subject of academic literature since Turner (1974), Pine and Gilmore (1998), up to more recent studies such as those by Kim and Ritchie (2014), Pearce and Wu (2014), and Brown and Reavey (2015). However, knowing which aspects give meaning to the memorable tourist experiences remains uncertain. What has already been observed, in turn, is that understanding the importance of emotional engagement and its effect on assigning meaning may enhance products and services offered by tourism operators (Knobloch et al., 2014).

Researchers of the Memorable Tourism Experience (MTE) propose key dimensions such as affect, expectations, consequentiality, recollection (Tung & Ritchie, 2011a), identity formation, family milestones, relationship development, nostalgia reenactment, and freedom pursuits (Tung & Ritchie, 2011b). Also, memorable tourism experiences tend to be positive (Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Tung & Ritchie, 2011a) and seem to relate to abundant service options and shared experiences (Morgan, 2010).

Few authors have studied the MTE's dimensions (Kim, 2010; Tung & Ritchie, 2011a, 2011b) or tested a MTE scale (Kim & Ritchie, 2014). Therefore, it is possible to investigate whether other unexplored variables could contribute to memorable tourist experiences. Hence, advances in the theoretical background can be of great conceptual value. Also, there is no track record of recent studies in leading tourism journals attempting to understand Brazilian consumers and their tourism experiences.

In this study, we examine the travel experiences of Brazilian residents trying to identify the main processes which are sense-making and meaningful in a memorable tourism experience, proposing a theoretical framework through grounded theory. This paper aims to unfold the core processes of memorable tourism experiences from the tourist's perspective, contributing to new ways of promoting engaging experiences.

The contributions of this paper are manifold. Despite several studies initiatives regarding memorable tourism experiences, the outcome of this paper brings them together in three major types of studies: 1) the expansive; 2) the managerial/economic; 3) the modeling perspective. Besides, the narrative data allowed the respondents to freely describe any experience, that is, not focusing only on positive experiences, for example. So, the study method was directed from an overview to a more in-depth approach to identify and represent only the core processes of MTEs.

Secondly, the research respondents help understanding other scenarios and cultural behaviors that might not have been achieved in previous studies, by studying the phenomenon in Brazil. Third, besides the central importance of the emotions to the MTEs, we provide information that MTEs are not only mainly positive but also evoke outside and inward emotions, meaning that one can perceive and provide opportunities for these feelings to be expressed. Inward emotions are those that affect the consumer in a more intrinsic way than the outward emotions, which tend to be perceived more easily by those who relate to the one experiencing the emotions of a consumption experience (Schmitt, 2000). Finally, the study highlights the need to explore experience outcomes such as personal transformation, eudaimonia, well-being, and learning.

2. Literature review

2.1. The tourism experience

In historical terms, the tourism experience has been discussed as a phenomenon since the 1960s and has become more popular in the

1970s, with the discussion of the phenomenology of experience by authors like MacCannell (1973) and Cohen (1979) (Quinlan-Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). An essential publication for the discussions around the tourism experience was the book by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) (Ritchie et al., 2011), which paved the way for research on the leisure experience.

In the seventies, when research on tourism experience began to emerge, this topic was treated either as something superficial, or as a search for authenticity, or an effort to escape from an alienated world (Cohen, 1979). Basic premises in the discussion of the tourism experience is the approach to space and time as well as the perceptions of individual tourists and actors involved in the activity, such as service providers, employees, and residents.

In the nineties, the emphasis within the scope of experience was to understand the thoughts and feelings of tourists, reported in diaries or interviews (Andereck, Bricker, Kerstetter, & Nickerson, 2006 *apud* Quinlan-Cutler & Carmichael, 2010). More recently, Pine and Gilmore (1998) and Schmitt (2000; 2004) have emphasized how service management through experiential tools can enhance the tourism experience. Therefore, the extent to which customers remember their transformation through an MTE is ultimate for promoting perceived value.

2.2. Memorable tourism experience (MTE)

Sensory experiences can highlight memories once events that appeal to senses tend to be most striking (Oh, Fiore, & Jeong, 2007). For some authors, memory is the most critical feature of the experience (Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2009; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 2000, 2004). Positively remembering a brand, service, or product can be determinant in consumer decision-making (Aroeira, Dantas, & Gosling, 2016; Kim, 2010).

However, the tourism experience has shifted from rationality and physical elements (aesthetics, tangible aspects of service quality) to the enhancement of subjective perceptions and travelers' emotional involvement (Uriely, 2005; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). Also, the concepts and models of experience literature (e.g., Quinlan-Cutler & Carmichael, 2010; Walls et al., 2011) include the relationships between environmental and individual/psychological influences. However, MTE studies have not adequately addressed these relationships.

Some experiences of consumption directly affect the tourism experience, and the feelings found in the literature of memorable tourism experiences include joy, pleasure, sociability, guilt, irritation, and concern (Kim & Ritchie, 2014). Also anger, displeasure, annoyance, sadness, fear, shame, loneliness, romanticism, love, peace, optimism, happiness, excitement, pride, anxiety and others (Schmitt, 2011). Negative emotions are rarely remembered, but they include fear, anger, and frustration (Ritchie et al., 2011).

One can notice three major types of studies on memorable tourism experiences: 1) the expansive; 2) the managerial/economic; 3) the modeling perspective (Table 1). The first type of studies is at the outset of MTE studies and includes a broader view of the phenomenon through

Table 1
Types of memorable tourism experience (MTE) studies.
Source: The Author

Types of MTE studies	Examples
1) the expansive perspective	Tung & Ritchie, 2011a, Tung & Ritchie, 2011b Ballantyne et al., 2011 Knobloch et al., 2016; Knobloch et al., 2014.
2) the managerial/economical perspective	Oh, Fiore & Jeong, 2007; Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013; Pezzi & Vianna, 2015.
3) the modeling perspective	Kim, 2010; Kim et al., 2012; Kim, 2014; Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Lee, 2015; Song et al., 2015; Aroeira et al., 2016; Kim & Jang, 2016; Manthiou, Kang, Chiang, & Tang, 2016; Tsai, 2016.

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