



Beyond subjective to confirmatory personal introspection: Interpreting events and meaning of a long-term visit in Sweden



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ABSTRACT

This study goes beyond subjective personal introspection and applies multiple methods to accomplish a confirmatory personal introspection (CPI) of a long-term stay in Sweden, during a university exchange program. The utilization of old pictures of the experience is one of the key aspects of the research. This study aims to show the importance of confirmatory personal introspection and assess the meaningfulness of CPI for travel industry related marketing research, exploring further than the ordinary tourist vacations and investigating a broader spectrum of the travel experience, in this case a long-term travel. Demonstrating the significance of photography relating to travel experiences is an additional objective of the study.

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1. Introduction

The act of constructing stories is a natural human process that helps individuals to understand their experiences and themselves. This process allows one to organize and remember events in a coherent fashion while integrating thoughts and feelings (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Pennebaker and Seagal's (1999) idea captures the essence of asking, "How do I know what I think until I hear what I have to say? How do I know what I've done until I tell aloud what I did?" (Weick, 1993, paraphrased by Woodside, 2010). Personal introspection plays a key role in analyzing traveling experiences, and in particular epiphany traveling experiences. Muller and Woodside (2012) state, "Epiphany travel includes (1) engaging in virtual or real-life travel to seek an intuitive leap of understanding or transformation in psychological well-being and (2) the felt occurrence of intuitive leap of understanding or transformation in psychological well-being associating with virtual or real-life travel—whether sought through such travel or not." The research of the reasons why people undertake travel experience is extremely important for tourism market related activities. Through introspections of different people it is possible to explain the significance of travel experiences and help the tourism industry to delineate some trend and to focus, not only on the services provided during the tourist activities, but also on the traveler's experience itself.

Subjective personal introspection (SPI) is a basic method of doing introspection that is a reflection on a certain consumer occurrences

and aims to give a subjective point of view of the consumer experience, in this case the travel experience. In order to make the SPI more valuable, Holbrook (2005) recognizes that SPI "requires inputs of the author's memories—recollections that are potentially susceptible to mental lapses. Because such memories are inherently suspect, they gain enhanced trustworthiness if they can be supported by relevant historical materials—memoirs, memorabilia, and mementos of various kinds. The need for such support elevates the importance of photographs and other archival artifacts that bear on the topics, themes, ideas, and issues of interest." To develop this research study I will make an extensive use of this kind of historical materials, especially using pictures of the traveling experience. The importance of photography in tourist activity is explained by Garlick (2002), photography images play an inescapable part in the way the world is experienced for most people today. Sontag (1977) also asserts that travelers use their cameras as a way to have power over new places and unfamiliar spaces in order to give shape to the traveler's experiences.

In spite of the fact that photography plays an important role to carry on an SPI, some authors have raised some concerns about SPI. SPI has a huge limitation due to the fact that it lacks objectivity and that it does not take into consideration the unconscious bias that the researcher might have. Zaltman (2003, p. 9) states that "as much as 95 percent of consumers' thinking occurs in their unconscious minds" and that this unconscious thinking greatly influences the consumers' perception of their experience as consumers.

Woodside (2006) recognizes that "the informant has limited access to his or her own unconscious thinking the informant is able to retrieve, interpret and report (to herself and others) only a limited amount of relevant knowledge and insights when answering question

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and pondering a specific topic". Keeping into consideration these important features of human minds, SPI is insufficient to provide a complete and unbiased overview of a particular experience. Woodside (2010) suggests, therefore, to go beyond subjective personal introspection and explore different ways to undertake Confirmatory Personal Introspection (CPI). Woodside (2010) proposes a combination of multiple techniques in order to render the introspection of an experience more valuable and to achieve a deeper perceptiveness on the travel destination decision and the motivations that push individuals to move from their own home place. In the process of developing a CPI individuals other than the customer, or in this case the traveler, contribute to the introspection by helping to explain the choices or the behavior of the interviewee. I personally agree with Woodside's point of view that states the necessity of the involvement of third party people in the development of a personal introspection and in this study I will use some of these techniques in order to make the description of my own traveling experience the most free of bias as possible.

2. Method

In this study I will hold a CPI on my semester abroad in Sweden during my undergraduate course. First of all I decided to use the Zaltman metaphor-elicitation technique (ZMET) in order to understand the unconscious links related to my travel experience. Following the methodology used by Christensen and Olson (2002) I will choose 7 pictures that are the emblem of my experience in Sweden. Utilizing pictures is already a way of creating an objective view on the experience. Garlick (2002) states that "photography, too, can be understood in terms of the desire for a form of vision free of subjective impurities" and that "the photos later "stand-by," ready for (re)presentation to viewers as evidence, both of the holiday, and that the holiday experiences have been adequately catalogued. The pictures of this experience here serve both as a means to carry out my own subjective introspection with the help of an objective and physical support and also as a means to go beyond the subjective introspection and also carry out with the help of other auditors a confirmatory personal introspection.

Photography is not only helpful to have a more objective picture of the experience, but it also has a great significance for memory due to its intrinsic relation to time (Garlick, 2002), in fact thanks to pictures we can create a connection to our past experiences. According to Garlick (2002), photography not only associates events to a time sphere in our lives, but "when we look at a photograph we reopen a particular space of experience, there is a relation existing through both time and space to the moment encapsulated in the picture. This moment is at one eternal, and at the same time ephemeral, it has passed and yet it continues to exist in the present." This concept is extremely important because it is mostly through pictures that I can retrieve the feelings and memories of my Swedish experience. The possibility to observe old pictures is a key point of this study, since "interpreting the meaning of any particular photograph involves a dialogue with the past, but with a past that is connected to the present through the photograph." My travel experience has profoundly changed my life and therefore the observation and the analysis of those pictures are affected not only by the past experience, but also from the person that I am now thanks to that past experience that I had the opportunity to live. Another good point arisen by Garlick is that the creation of memories is vital whether that travel is a tourist activity or not. Many people consider long-term stay (more than 3 months) different from a tourist activity. It might be true that a long stay journey has different features compared to vacation time staying, but CPI might be even more important in long-term stay since it is more likely to experience a moment of catharsis and record it as an epiphany travel, rather than for ordinary tourist holidays.

After the accomplishment of my SPI I asked to two external auditors to provide some feedback on the pictures I chose to describe my experience and whether they would give the same interpretation to the same picture or not. These two external auditors are an "inside auditor" to whom I asked to confirm or disconfirm the interpretations of the pictures chosen. The "inside auditor" is a friend that was living the same kind of experience, but in a different part of Europe and to whom I have been constantly in touch before, during and after the travel experience.

The choice of this person to be "inside auditor" for my CPI is driven by the fact that she also knows and experienced the program I was enrolled in and that I was open to talk to her about anything that was happening to me. The second person that will help me go beyond my personal subjective introspection toward a confirmatory personal introspection is a "cohort auditor". My "cohort auditor" is a friend that did not know me before leaving for Sweden, but to whom I shared the same environment and the same experiences. She left Italy together with me, she was my roommate during our stay and she became my friend. This kind of auditor may be relevant in retrieving memories or feelings that might have been forgotten or purposely hidden by the researcher.

3. Background information

Despite the fact that the Erasmus program is not an ordinary tourism activity, it involves every year a great number of young people traveling towards many different European countries.

During the 2009/2010 academic year more than 213 000 students received an 'Erasmus' grant to study or train abroad in Europe. This number increased to 7.4% compared to the previous year and many efforts are made in Europe to increase this number. According to current trends the European Union aims to reach 3 million European students that will experience a year or a semester abroad. In addition to that, 38 000 grants were awarded to teachers and university staff to teach or receive training abroad, and also this number is currently increasing (European Commission Press Release, www.europa.eu). The Erasmus program in many cases is also an opportunity to travel Europe with new international friends, and an occasion for old friends and families to visit students that are attending an Erasmus program. Even if it is impossible to draw a correct estimate of how many people engage in travel activities related to the increase of the mobility within the European Union, understanding the forces that drive these travel experiences can be useful for the travel industry.

4. The decision: Sweden

I literally fell in love with the city of Gothenburg. Before applying for the Erasmus program I did not even know about the existence of a Swedish city called Gothenburg and I did not know anything about it. My choice towards a Swedish university was driven by my curiosity to explore a different country and a different culture. I have never been interested in Sweden before and all I knew from can be summed up in three words: IKEA, welfare and blonds. Very cliché, but I did not know anything else. I had the sense that in Sweden I could have lived in contact with a culture that is the opposite of the Italian one. Extremely cold weather, very short days, highly developed technologies, advanced universities, but also more reserved people and not very friendly environment. I chose this picture because it took me a second to feel at ease in the city, due to its large space, its green areas and the easy access to a means of transport (Fig. 1).

I remember the sense of loss when I arrived the first day combined with a sense of excitement for the new experience I was starting. I did not expect too much thinking that nothing would have changed in my life, but I was looking forward to live in a new country, experience a new culture and leave behind all that I had left in Italy. The picture shows one of the most central parts of Gothenburg, where tram snake

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