



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Tourism Management

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

Co-creating animal-based tourist experiences: Attention, involvement and memorability



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Conceptualization of on-site co-creation experience.
- Co-creation is an antecedent of attention and involvement in the animal-based experiences studied.
- Application of the SEM technique shows the positive influence of antecedent constructs on experience memorability.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 January 2016

Received in revised form

30 January 2017

Accepted 1 June 2017

Keywords:

Co-creation
Active participation
Interaction
Attention
Involvement
Memorability

ABSTRACT

In this study co-creation, defined as a tourist's subjectively lived on-site experience involving actively participation and interaction, is found to enhance attention, involvement, and memorability. A conceptual model of on-site co-creation is proposed and empirically tested in the context of two experiences with dolphins in a marine life park. Results were analysed using SEM and reveal that co-creation significantly influences attention and involvement and also that the higher levels of attention and involvement generated are associated with memorability.

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1. Introduction

Long lasting vivid memories are generally acknowledged as a desired outcome of tourism experiences (Campos, Mendes, Valle, & Scott, 2016; Kim, 2010; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Tung & Ritchie, 2011a). Recently, it has been suggested by tourism researchers that co-creation affects the memorability of the experience (Andrades & Dimanche, 2014; Bertella, 2014; Campos et al., 2016; Hung, Lee, & Huang, 2014; Prebensen, Vittersø, & Dahl, 2013a). The concept of co-creation has received wide recognition in the management and marketing literature

(Cova & Dalli, 2009; Vargo & Lusch, 2008) and is gaining increasing attention from tourism scholars (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009). In tourism research, co-creation has been advocated, discussed and empirically studied in diverse contexts, such as rural destinations (Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012), nature- and animal-based experiences (Bertella, 2014; Mathisen, 2013), hospitality (Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2013a), resorts (Kreziak & Frochot, 2011; Prebensen & Foss, 2011), destination experience networks (Binkhorst, 2007), customer-to-customer (Rihova, Buhalis, Moital, & Gouthro, 2013), and heritage tourism (Minkiewicz, Evans, & Bridson, 2013).

The tourism literature characterizes co-creation as the tourist's active participation and interaction during an experience (Bertella, 2014; Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Campos, Mendes, Valle, & Scott, 2015, 2016; Ek, Larsen, & Hornskov, 2012; Ihamäki, 2012; Mathisen, 2013; Mkono, 2012; Prebensen & Foss, 2011; Sfantla & Björk, 2012; Tan, Luh, & Kung, 2014). Active participation and interaction play an important role in attentional responses and

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involvement in experiences (Kuhl & Chun, 2014; Mathisen, 2013) and contribute positively to memorability (Chun & Turk-Browne, 2007; Kim, 2010). Both attention and involvement are considered intrinsically interwoven with the tourist experience (Andrades & Dimanche, 2014; Dimanche, Havitz, & Howard, 1991; Ooi, 2010, pp. 51–68). However, little is known in tourism about the relation of co-creation and memorability, and particularly how active participation and interaction may facilitate memorability.

The present research addresses this gap, in the context of animal-based experiences, by empirically testing the influence of on-site co-creation on attention and involvement and the memorability of the experience. Theme parks, adventure, nature- and animal-based tourism are increasingly popular (Buckley, 2009; Milman, 2008). Experiences with animals in the wild or semi-captivity settings (Burns, 2006) capture tourists' attention and activities involving proximity to animals, interplay, and sensory contact (e.g. through touching, feeding or playing) are part of a natural relationship (Holopainen, 2012). Such interactive experiences are appealing, exciting (Bulbeck, 2005), and memorable (Bertella, 2014; Mathisen, 2013; Moscardo & Saltzer, 2005).

Therefore two main research objectives are set for this study. The first objective is to test a model of the influence of co-creation on experience memorability, mediated by the tourist's attention and involvement. The second objective is to examine whether the constructs of the model present different magnitude depending on the level of co-creation. Two experiences involving animals characterized by different levels of co-creation were chosen for analysis: the *Dolphin Emotions Experience* (DEE) and the *Dolphin Show* (DS). The first is an encounter between participants and the dolphins in a pool, requiring from them an expected high level of active participation and interaction; the second consists of a show in which participants watch dolphins and trainers performing acrobatic behaviours.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

2.1. Co-creation tourism experiences

Recent tourism research has highlighted the importance of activity, i.e. performing roles (Mathisen, 2013), doing things, and learning (Poulsson & Kale, 2004) in experiences. Pleasurable feelings emerge by means of performance of activities that engage people sensorially, physically, intellectually/culturally, emotionally and socially (Arnould & Price, 1993; Kastenholz et al., 2012; Morgan, Elbe, & Curiel, 2009; Richards, 2011). Mansfeldt, Vestager, and Iversen (2008, pp. 1–212) coined the term *performance turn* to indicate that tourists are no longer passive sightseers consuming sites in prescribed fashions (Ek et al., 2012) but are increasingly motivated by creativity (Richards & Marques, 2012), feelings of personal competence and achievement in face of challenge (Kastenholz et al., 2012), desire to learn through engaged observation of others belonging to the local culture and the experience environment (Mathisen, 2013; Prebensen & Foss, 2011; Richards, 2011), exploration and application of personal skills in the design, production and consumption of experiences (Hung et al., 2014; Mkono, 2012; Perkins & Thorns, 2001; Richards, 2011; Tan, Kung, & Luh, 2013; Tan et al., 2014; Wikström, 2008).

There is evidence of a growing interest in new kinds of tourism (Buhalis, 2001) and alternative gazes (Woodside & Martin, 2015) that involve enactment *in loco* (Mathisen, 2013), physical participation in nature, adventure, extreme sports and animal-based experiences (Bertella, 2014; Hung et al., 2014; Mathisen, 2013; Minkiewicz et al., 2013; Nordbø & Prebensen, 2015), or attendance at science, arts or crafts workshops (Richards & Wilson, 2006). Tourism has progressively evolved into *hands-on*

experiences (Richards, 2011) requiring use and development of an array of tourist resources. Physical activity or physically challenging activities have been associated with the desire for experiencing nature (Bertella, 2014) and participating in sports or adventure events (Ihamäki, 2012; Minkiewicz et al., 2013; Nordbø & Prebensen, 2015), engaging in active play (Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2004), mastering of skills and abilities (Morgan & Xu, 2009), conferring to *the tourist gaze* an active rather than passive “*from-afar*” meaning. Touristic performativity thus becomes an exercise of reflexivity grounded in a sensing and active body (Perkins & Thorns, 2001).

Minkiewicz et al. (2013) defined co-creation as the experience that is created by the customer through active participation in activities, engagement and personalization of the experience. Following a literature review, Campos et al. (2015) suggested that on-site co-creation is “the sum of the psychological events a tourist goes through when contributing actively through physical and/or mental participation in activities and interacting with other subjects in the experience environment”. Mathisen (2013) found co-creation combines body and mind through the physical work involved in exploration, play and role-play during the experience activities. In a dog-sled race and a Northern Lights hunt, tourists performed roles of hunting heroes or dog-sled drivers. Ihamäki (2012) considered geocaching as an example of a transformative “learning by doing” experience embedded in skilled consumption and production. Geocaching comprises the dimension of play intertwined with physical exercise, studying and tactical thinking, in sum, the tourist active role and participation. Such active engagement leads to self-development and gaining new skills (Tan et al., 2014). Physical activities performed in adventure tourism, such as arctic trekking (Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2004), philanthropic adventure activities (Coghlan & Filo, 2013) or hiking (Nordbø & Prebensen, 2015) are markers of engagement in play and playful role-enactment and expose the interconnectedness between the physical and mental dimensions of experiences. Minkiewicz et al. (2013) found that the consumer's active participation in performance of heritage activities involves co-production, engagement, and personalization through allowing tailoring of the experience to personal needs. More recently though, Prebensen, Kim, and Uysal (2015) defined co-creation as the customer's physical and mental participation in the process of creation of the experience. One interesting fact noted in this definition is that it focuses on the *process* rather than on the consumption experience itself. In that study, the level of co-creation was assessed by the concepts of physical participation and interest as mental participation and it was concluded that co-creation has a moderator role in the relationship between the perceived value of the travel experience and satisfaction.

Social interaction is an important dimension of co-creation (Etgar, 2008; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Yi & Gong, 2012) and also of major significance in the context of tourism (Andrades & Dimanche, 2014; Bharwani & Jauhari, 2013; Dong & Siu, 2013; Hjalager & Nordin, 2011; Kastenholz et al., 2012; Kreziak & Frochet, 2011; Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011; Obenour, Patterson, Pedersen, & Pearson, 2006; Räikkönen & Honkanen, 2013; Tan et al., 2013). This is because tourism is a system composed of the tourist, other people and the varied environments pertaining to the overall travel experience, and characterized at any stage by a high level of interaction (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Choo & Petrick, 2014; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2013b; Ooi, 2003). Interactions form the set of social relations tourists develop before, during and after the travel experience (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011). Encounters between relatives and/or friends, other visitors, company's staff, and residents are elements, sources and influencers of the tourism experience (Choo &

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