



Exploring *agape*: Tourists on the island of love

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H I G H L I G H T S

- Extant findings on the distinct specie of love, “agape” are incomprehensive.
- Tourists experience love, yet it may be argued whether they experience “agape”.
- A “love enhancements” table is presented, for tourism stakeholders' consideration.
- Egocentric tendencies may impair the offering and experience of “agape”.

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This study explored the extent to which tourists take part in a distinct type of love, agape, which is described as sincere and not selfseeking. Findings from 80 semi-structured interviews in Cyprus reveal that tourists acknowledge the constructive effects of love in general, at a personal and societal level, despite no consensus being reached on the interpretation of the term. Even so, love seems not to be solely the outcome of human transactions. It is also determined by the cultivation of a caring culture towards the facilitative and natural setting in which social dealings take place. Although responses betray the conveyance of offerings that are in line with agape's dogmata, one might argue whether what tourists experience, is agape in its essence. Nonetheless, managerial implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Agape, from a psychological perspective, was introduced to academia by Lee (1977), who viewed it as a form of 'love' coming from an emotionally matured person towards everyone. As he stated (p.180), the concept is better explained in the words of Paul of Tarsus in one of his epistles to the Corinthians. Amongst other adjectives, he portrayed it as kind, tolerant, protective, not easily angered and not self-seeking. Such form of love seems to be the result of human transactions of offering and receiving founded on a rather psychological and spiritual experience, rather than a secular one. Of course, this does not imply that *agapic* expressions are not accompanied by physiological comfort; for instance, in the form of provision of materialistic elements, such as shelter and food. These offerings are also located within a love giving-receiving human transaction context, particularly manifested in social exchanges, such as within the tourism arena.

The largely secular (non-human) component governing love relationships seems to be the focus of attention in recent studies exploring touristic experiences, such as the case of place brand love (Swanson, 2015). This strong affinity of people with places, also known as *topophilia* (Tuan, 1974), is the result of the subjective and emotional attachment (Creswell, 2004) people have to place. This tourist *philia* towards the *topos* – to the extent of a 'love' relationship – has been explored from a rather earthy perspective. For instance, tourist experiences that were found to embrace emotional relationships with countryside settings (Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). Despite such physical attributes, human dealings embracing giving-receiving tangible and intangible elements may also lead to strong emotional bonds. In other words, through *agapic* expressions and offerings people may strengthen guest-hosts bonds, and consecutively guest/*topos* affiliations. Pertinent in this case is the notion of *philoxenia*, which is defined as the affectionate behavior for others, particularly guests (Paravouniotissa, 2011). Nonetheless, such offerings are not restricted to flesh (as a consequence of lush) contacts, nor are restricted to physical offerings (for example, food). Instead, they extend to intangible philanthropic manifestations;

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these appear to be in accord with *agape* principles, such as warm hospitality, benevolence and compassion. Such offerings appear to stimulate (obviously positively) the emotional state of guests, add value to tourists' emotional experiences and strengthen relationships (Chiappa, Andreu, & Gallarza, 2014; Lashley, 2008; 2015). In the study by Ariffin (2013) for instance, 'warm welcoming' was pinpointed as a significant contributor to predict guest satisfaction.

However, since *agape* is the outcome of channeled offerings from one human being to another, one may argue about whether tourists experience *agape* consciously or otherwise; especially within a field which is highly impacted by modernity revolutions, such as automated processes (Weed, 2013) and profit-oriented attitudes, which may credibly impair human relationships. More specifically, there is no such evidence to suggest that tourists experience *agape* within a contemporary tourism context. All the same, the tourism research community has largely overlooked the broad notion of 'love' from a social standpoint. In fact, the majority of the literature is located within a romantic/sex and lust perspective (see Ryan & Trauer, 2005). The flesh-based and secular element as such, within this human transaction experience, seems to prevail in such studies. Motivation and experiential love-related research themes have focused mainly on travellers in pursuit of romantic affairs with locals (Pruitt & LaFont, 1995), on sex tourism (Cabezas, 2004) and 'love motels' (Alexander, Chen, MacLaren, & O'Gorman, 2010).

Thus, the aim of this study is to explore whether tourists experience *agape* within a modern and industrialized society. This society, based on Lashley (2008), may no longer have strong obligations to channel such offerings to strangers for reasons such as increased interaction with tourists, and modernity procedures. In doing so, it contributes more generally to the understanding of the puzzled world of emotions (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000), and in particular, to the broad notion of love, and its *agape* type. The latter has been largely overlooked by the academic community, despite its conceivably important role in shaping relationships between individuals as well as between people, places and societies. According to Buda, Hauteserre, and Johnston (2014), considering emotions, opens up new research avenues for tourism studies. The study focuses specifically on a mature destination with a strong tourism industry. The destination has attracted visitors for millennia, and has been associated with the notion of 'love', both at a secular and at a psychological/spiritual level. More specifically, the particular destination is known as the birthplace and playground of the pagan symbol of love, *Aphrodite* (otherwise, *Venus*). Furthermore, islanders in the past persecuted yet eventually embraced the views of *Paul of Tarsus*, who preached and offered unconditional *agape* to others. Cyprus, addresses itself as the 'island of love' (BBC, 2016), and has been promoted as a destination in which *agapic* expressions (for example, through *philoxenia*) are offered for tourist consumption. Even so, it should be noted that any other destination could have been chosen, due to the nature of the study. That is, the study addresses a broad notion which may be felt by anyone, and anywhere. Although the results of this study may be generalized, further research in differing settings and destinations, to compare findings, is highly recommended. A qualitative approach was employed (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011) due to the exploratory nature of the study, and targeted both locals and international visitors on the island. Informal interviews were based on a list of 'grand tour' (McCracken, 1988) open-ended questions, which according to Patton (2014) yield in-depth responses about people's experiences and feelings. First, however, the paper presents the broad notion of 'love' and particularly of 'agape' within an emotional experiential context as a framework for the subsequent research. Study findings are sequentially presented and discussed to address the research aim, while theoretical and managerial

implications are also given. These provide guidance in regards to those particular attitudes which act as *pro-agapic* promoters, and those that undermine the notion and its offering.

1.1. Love within an emotional context

The word 'love' has been examined from various prisms, as well as used in differing narratives, such as romantic love (Cossart, 2015), or the love to work in a particular industry (such as tourism; Wu, 2013); Other examples also include love of one's job (Kelloway, Inness, Barling, Francis, & Turner, 2010), love for food (for example, Poelmans & Rousseau, 2016), love for a destination (Godrey, 1984), or towards an organisation (for instance, an airline; Thomas, 2015). Love has been characterised as the broad and everyday name for emotions related to the interrelated behavioral systems of attachment, caregiving and sex (Shaver, Morgan, & Wu, 2005). Indeed, certain researchers (for example, Lazarus, 1991) have classified 'love' as an emotion, despite the fact that many contemporary emotion theories have overlooked it (Shaver et al., 2005).

Based on Barbalet (2004, pp. 245–272), emotions are regarded as central to all human activities; for instance, we remember emotionally arousing information better than neutral information (Levine & Pizzaro, 2004). Furthermore, emotions have been shown as one of the most reliable predictors of human behavior (Gaur, Herjanto, & Makkar, 2014); they also adjust our priorities (Mathews & Mackintosh, 2004) and focus our attention on important information (Schupp et al., 2007). Comprehending deeper emotions in customer relationships is also highly valued. This rests on emotions' ability to influence satisfaction (Chiappa et al., 2014). In fact, emotions are regarded by certain researchers (for example, Servidio & Ruffolo, 2016), as the most relevant component of influence of the tourism industry and of the holiday experience.

However, the characterisation of the term 'emotion' is difficult (Kalat, 2011) and disputable. Researchers have obtained evidence for a central list of six basic emotions (Ekman, Friesen, & Ellsworth, 1972). Even so, 'love' seems to be absent from certain emotional lists as proposed by psychologists. In fact, psychologist Erich Fromm (2008) noted that 'love' is not an emotion; it is, instead, an interpersonal, creative ability, which we must actively develop as part of our personality. According to him, one of the most significant ways a person can avoid isolation is through his/her ability to love. On the other hand, Shaver et al. (2005) stressed that it fits basicness (emotion) criteria; Hence, they argued that it should be considered as a basic emotion, along with (for example) anger, sadness and fear. Adding to this rather emotional discourse of what qualifies as 'emotion' is the fact that emotions are subject to various cultural interpretations. For instance, the Japanese regard *amae* as an emotion, which is basically the feeling of comfort in another's acceptance (Niiya, Ellsworth, & Yamaguchi, 2006). Whether labeled as an emotion or not, 'love' seems to be directly linked to certain emotional reactions. In more detail, Cossart (2015) discussed the place of emotion in the 1500 letters of two adulterous lovers in Paris during the 19th century. Not being allowed to express their emotions openly because of society's disapproval of their love, the two did so through epistolary love expressions and the deep emotional turmoil being generated. The connection of 'love' with emotional states of individuals is apparently clear, and this is best illustrated by Sigmund Freud's (1930) famous quote on love: "we are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love" (p.29).

Nonetheless, love remains a subjective notion, highly dependent on its interpretation, which differs according to individual and

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