

Who's on the tourists' menu? Exploring the social significance of restaurant experiences for tourists



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ABSTRACT

Taking a Consumer Culture Perspective, this paper explores the co-production of meaning among participants in tourists' restaurant experiences. Responding to criticisms that interpreting consumer behaviour should focus both on the individual and also on the collective context of consumption (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011), our research explores the social significance of these experiences and how they feed into the tourist's identity project. 34 ethnographic interviews are led with a view to exploring how tourists co-produce meaning within their group and also with staff and other patrons in the context of restaurant experience and these are followed up with a further 57 semi-structured interviews. Restaurant experiences are shown to be both rich and complex in social meanings. Thematic analysis leads to the identification and discussion regarding four contexts where social meanings are co-produced, namely sharing experiences, family togetherness and transmission, cultural guidance and customer-to-customer interaction.

1. Introduction

While tourism is recognised as a key sector for the exploration of customer experience, limited attention has been given to the co-production of symbolic value creation or meaning among participants in the tourism context. Just as companies create experiences by using services as a stage to engage customers in a memorable way (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), customers use services to co-create symbolic experiences that lead in turn to economic value (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Previous contributions have focused largely on individual experiences and little is known as to how meaning is co-produced among tourists, tourism professionals and other participants. Tourism has always been about exchange (Richards, 2013) and it is therefore important to observe how this exchange among participants leads to the creation of meaning for tourists.

While Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) has previously unveiled multiple meanings for river-rafting- adventure tourism experience in the case of Arnould and Price's renowned article (1993), other tourism experiences need attention too. Indeed, given the importance of restaurant experiences as a regular or a special activity for tourists, more attention should be given to them, especially when we consider their economic importance. For example, in France in 2015, tourism consumption resulted in the creation of 363 000 jobs in the traditional

restaurant sector and a further 187 000 jobs in the fast food sector (<http://economie.gouv.fr/vous-orienter/entreprise/commerce/tourisme-10-chiffres-cles-secteur>).

This paper focuses on the co-production of social meanings through tourists' restaurant experiences. While previous research draws attention to the fact that social actors are important in the restaurant environment (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004; Hansen, 2005), little is known of their experiential and symbolic value nor of how they contribute to the tourist's identity projects. This paper aims to unveil the symbolic meaning of this human interaction as experienced by tourists in restaurants through listening to, interpreting and analysing tourists' own narratives. Through this process, it will fill a gap by answering the question of the symbolic role of other people in tourists' restaurant experiences, how they contribute to the co-production of meaning and identity for the participating tourists, and the challenges that this interactive process involves. We aim to make a contribution to the tourism experience literature, and in particular to tourism and food-related CCT research, by furthering understanding of how tourists construct personal and collective identities through exchange and through engaging with others in developing meaningful restaurant experiences. A variety of tourists' restaurant experiences and contexts will be explored with a view to uncovering multiple meanings. The paper is organised around four parts. Section 2 provides a literature review.

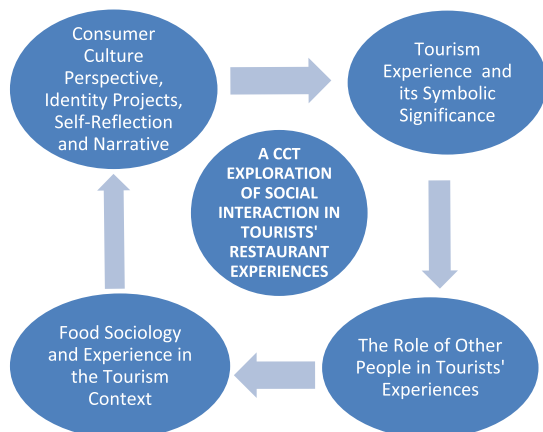
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Section 3 explains methodological choices and ethical considerations. Section 4 provides findings and discussion around four key themes and section 5 highlights the theoretical and managerial implications of the research, as well as its limitations, conclusions and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

Schematised below is the literature situating this research within four major bodies of research: The Consumer Culture research tradition and its relevance to identity projects, tourism experiences and their symbolic significance, social interaction in the tourism experience and finally food sociology and experiences in the tourism context.



2.1. Taking a Consumer Culture Theory perspective

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is a sub-discipline of consumer behaviour research (MacInnis & Folkes, 2010), that responds to the need to get closer to consumers and investigate their lived experience (Askegaard & Linnett, 2011) along with its contextual and symbolic dimensions (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Because CCT researchers have traditionally come from a sociology background with the shared objective of studying consumer experience as a cultural and societal phenomenon, this approach can offer an alternative from the largely positivist consumer behaviour research, traditionally associated with the marketing and psychology disciplines (Jensen, Lindberg, & Østergaard, 2015) and which does not generally provide in-depth explorations of experiences. The CCT discipline encourages researchers to enter into the consumer's life world, to seek to understand inner experiences (Jantzen, Fitchett, Østergaard, & Vetner, 2013) from the consumers own point of view and to analyse these through interpretive methods rather than through an objective description of reality.

CCT research takes the view that, as well as satisfying physical needs, products and services offer meaning and play a central role in the development of both individual identities (Ferriera & Scaraboto, 2016; Ostergaard & Bode, 2016) and collective identities (Askegaard & Linnett, 2011). This is also supported by Identity Investment Theory (Thompson & Loveland, 2015) with both perspectives pointing to the symbolic benefits associated with consumption, such as those achieved through brand communities (Thompson & Sinha, 2008; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001) and possessions (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). Investment Identity Theory also points to varied congruence between identity projects (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), whereby one identity, such as being an employee may take precedence over another, such as being an athlete and explains that social identities may evolve as a result of encounters with the symbolic environments (Kleine, Schultz Kleine, & Kernan, 1993). We draw on these perspectives to enrich our understanding of the symbolic social value of restaurant experience, which

incorporate various social encounters as explored in this research.

Another key strength of CCT research is to encourage consumers' self-reflection by listening to their own narrative of their experience, thereby achieving a deeper understanding of the meaning of their actions (Arnould, 2006). This implies a recognition of a distinction between an objective account of an experience and the consumers own representation of that experience (Cary, 2004). By paying attention to consumers' own narrative and representations, this process enables the researchers, along with the tourists themselves, to provide insights into how these feed into the construction of both their individual identities (Belk, 1988; Thompson & Loveland, 2015) and also collective identities in the case of group experiences (Askegaard & Linnett, 2011). Finally, of further relevance to the current paper, previous CCT research uncovers coping strategies that consumers use to deal with complications that can occur while they pursue their objectives (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Prebensen & Foss, 2011) and for an opportunity for understanding these issues in the context of tourists' consumption.

2.2. Tourism experience and its symbolic significance

Tourism experience finds its roots in Cohen's (1979) work and has largely been influenced by the works of Holbrook and Hirschman's seminal article (1982) and Pine and Gilmore's focus on experience since 1998. Given its particularly experiential nature, tourism is a highly appropriate arena for studying life experiences and how tourists can be transformed through travel ventures out of their home environments (Jensen et al., 2015). In exploring these issues, researchers have either concentrated on tourists' involvement at various stages in the experience (Lugosi, 2014) or on the service provider's role (Chathoth, Altinay, Harrington, Okumus, & Chan, 2013).

The literature recognises the dichotomy of a singular tourism experience, lived and observed individually, for example as a peak experience, and an overall tourism experience, taken holistically in the sense of a complete holiday. For example, Quan and Wang (2004) and McCabe (2002) argue for the need for the recognition of the whole tourism experience which often incorporates both peak and secondary experiences. It also recognises the importance of the sequential stages of experiences with tourists taking an active role through the pre-experience, during-experience and post-experience phases (Lugosi, 2014). Tourists use strategies, along with tools provided by professionals, to co-create unique experiences which are rich in personal signification (Kreziak & Fronchet, 2011). Their experiences can be spiritual and meaningful, allowing tourists to connect to the world and also to discover themselves (Daniel, 1996). Indeed, Kirillova, Letho, and Cai (2017) advocate the arrival of a new age in tourism experience where, beyond hedonic value, tourists seek out personal growth and symbolic meaning through their experiences. By taking the opportunity to discover other cultures, tourists can see their own lives from a new perspective and (re)connect with meaningful values (Korillova et al., 2017).

As with previous tourism observations, such as Arnould and Price's white river-rafting experiences (1993) where research uncovers meaningful relationships between humans and the world and more recently, for example in a reflection on Dark Tourism research (Podoshen, Venkatesh, Wallin, & Jin, 2015), CCT offers interesting perspectives for tourism experience research by drawing on the symbolic values and meaning of tourism experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993; Obernour, Patterson, Pedersen, & Pearson, 2006; Dunkley, Morgan, & Westwood, 2011; Jensen et al., 2015). Tourism experience is observed not only as something to enter into but also as a process that we find ourselves in, that we realise we have been through (O'Dell, 2005; Ankor, 2012) and that leaves us with memories (Sundbo & Hagedorn-Rasmussen, 2008). It also comprises challenges and difficulties in that tourists can face various obstacles throughout this process which they must learn to cope with (Lindberg & Askegaard, 2015). Importantly, these experiences feed into who the tourist is by becoming part of an identity project. For

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