Towards a taxonomy of tourism products

Bob McKercher

School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

HIGHLIGHTS

- Proposes a taxonomy of tourism products.
- Integrates more than 50 other studies that have sought to categorize or classify products.
- Adopts a marketing focus to tourism products.

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a seven tiered taxonomy of tourism products in an effort to add some structure to the vast array of offerings available today. The paper adopts a phenetic method to group products hierarchically, using a modified version of the marketing-oriented product hierarchy system. Five broad Need Families are identified including: Pleasure, Personal Quest, Human Endeavour, Nature and Business. They incorporate 27 Product Families and 90 Product Classes.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is a fragmented and disjointed activity (Benckendorff & Zehrer, 2013; Echtner & Jamal, 1997; Laws and Scott 2015) typified by multiple communities of discourse with historically little cross fertilization between communities (Gibson, 1998). The result is weak theory development (Mazanec 2009, Tribe, 2006). Two main factors contribute to this situation. The first is the seemingly endless expansion of the field through ever finer subdivisions of tourism products, with each new type presented as a discrete form that is worthy of extensive research. In reality differences often represent minor variations on a theme rather than new themes (Franklin and Crang 2001). The second issue is the historical evolution of tourism studies as an area of inquiry explored from a wide array of disciplines (Ritchie, Sheehan, & Timur, 2008). Each discipline has staked a claim to certain areas of enquiry (Jafari & Ritchie, 1981), conceptualized them, examined them and, as Tribe (2006) argues, constrains research from within that discipline's knowledge force field. The end result is that tourism studies lacks a common language under which objects are defined and explored

(Gibson, 1998; Kennedy-Eden and Gretzel 2012). The same terms are used to connote different ideas, while different terms are used to refer to the same thing. Definitions are often conflated (Connell, 2013). Ultimately, Pritchard (2012) argues that because of these systemic issues, the field remains beset by many ontological, epistemological and methodological shortcomings.

Perhaps one area where this fragmentation is most evident is in the identification and classification of products. Classification systems have been developed in other aspects of tourism, such as the travel trade, transport and accommodations sectors, as part of the process of developing Tourism Satellite Accounts (UNWTO, 2008a, b). Yet no such system exists for products. Indeed, the UNWTO avoids addressing this issue by asserting the "notion of "tourism product" is not related to the concept of "product" used in economic statistics" (UNWTO, 2008a: 30) and therefore sees no need to undertake such a task. However, it later infers that the real reason is that such as task is placed in the 'too hard' basket, for it notes "because "products" are still not sufficiently characterized in a uniform way, there is no international recommendation for the use of this type of classification (UNWTO, 2008a: 30)".

The UNWTO identifies two further issues. On the one hand, it notes that traditionally 'products' have tended to be identified by

E-mail address: bob.mckercher@polyu.edu.hk.

the travel trade as a marketing instrument for gearing supply to specific markets interested in particular aspects of the places visited (UNWTO, 2008b: 33). On the other hand, the same document highlights "tourism products should not be confused with the SNA (System of National Accounts) concept of products nor do these products belong to any associated codes or classification of goods and services, such as the Central Product Classification system, the Classification of Individual Consumption According to Purpose (COICOP) or the Harmonized Commodity Description System uses in most national statistical agencies. [Plus] "Types of tourism products" should also not be confused with "tourism characteristic products" which are identified through COICOP. The concept of tourism products does not fit within existing [frameworks] (UNWTO, 2008b: 33) ".

The need for some broadly based classification system is well recognized though (Mehmetoglu, 2004a), with the UNWTO (2008b:33) even acknowledging "it cannot be denied that there is a need to create some kind of parameters to define and segment the different types of tourism products". Moreover, a large number of sector specific studies have been conducted proposing typologies and/or taxonomies. These works tend to be conducted independently, with little reference to other studies. Different methods are used and the concepts of product, travel style, tourist type and destination attributes are melded. In addition, because each system has been developed by advocates of a specific sector, boundaries often overlap, or are defined in an arbitrarily narrow manner based on value-laden criteria. Many gaps exist. The result is a rather confused mélange of ideas typified by lack of coherence that entrenches fragmentation rather than works towards the development of a holistic, collective whole.

This study represents the first attempt to address this issue by proposing a comprehensive tourism product taxonomy. It adopts a modified version of the marketing-oriented product taxonomic classification system (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Velardi, Cucchiarelli, and Petit (2007) argue that building a taxonomy is considered the first step in creating a formal ontology of a domain, with Coccossis and Constangoglu (2008) suggesting such a system can help better understand the structure of destinations and to assist in more effective policy and planning.

2. Taxonomies

A taxonomy is a specific classification scheme that expresses the overall similarity between organisms, entities and/or things in a hierarchical fashion (Rich, 1992). The system classifies items in an ordered way to indicate natural relationships, and in doing so, to help understand the evolutionary connection between them (Fenneman, 2013). Items sharing similarities are first grouped into like populations. These populations are then nested in a hierarchical manner into a series of progressively broader and more general categories. Taxonomic frameworks, therefore, progress upward from the specific to the general and/or downward from the general to the specific. As Hedden (2010:6) states "a hierarchical taxonomy is a kind of controlled vocabulary in which each term is connected to a designated broader term (unless it is the top-level term) and one or more narrower terms (unless it is a bottom level term), and all the terms are organized into a single large hierarchical structure". Within a tourism context, Tweed (2005) argues the principal aim is to add structure to the space of tourism that otherwise appears to consist of a chaotic and undifferentiated offers all competing with each other.

The terms taxonomy and typology are often used synonymously even though their philosophical and methodological bases are quite different (Smith, 2002; Young, Corsun, & Baloglu, 2007). Taxonomic systems are empirically based and classify items using observable and measurable characteristics. Typologies, on the other hand, tend to be conceptually based and separate items multi-dimensionally, based on the notion of an ideal type. As such, typologies are mental constructs that deliberately accentuate certain characteristics that may not be found in empirical reality.

The modern concept of a taxonomic system was developed by the Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus in the 18th century to standardize the naming system for animal and plant species (Linnaean, 2015). The classic Linnaean taxonomy uses seven tiers with increasing specificity, beginning at the top with the Kingdom and progressing downward to include the Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus and Species. The Genus represents organisms with similar morphology, structure, and, importantly, evolutionary history, while Species are comprised of all related organisms capable of interbreeding, while members of the same Genus cannot (Fenneman, 2013). Most taxonomic systems end at the Species level, however, it is now generally accepted that the Species taxa can be sub-divided into Subspecies or Varieties (Mallett, 2007). A Subspecies represents geographical variation of a species based on morphological characters (Braby, Eastwood, & Murray, 2012), while Varieties are a smaller subdivision, where the entity differs from other varieties in only certain minor characteristics.

A similar structure is also used to classify products (Howard, 1983) where they can also be classified into a hierarchical structure based on their relatedness. Dar, Shocker, and Srivastava (1979:10) argue it is better to think in terms of levels in a hierarchy of products within a generic product class that represent all possible ways of satisfying a consumer's need or want. They illustrate that different product types satisfy significantly different needs, while within the same product type, individual products can either satisfy specific needs, or can be substituted to satisfy similar needs. Kotler and Keller (2012) expand on this idea by indicating a product hierarchy stretches from basic needs to particular items that satisfy those needs. While the number of levels can vary depending on the breadth and complexity of needs and the variety of alternatives to satisfy that need, Kotler and Keller (2012: 336), suggest the use of a six tier hierarchy as shown in Fig. 1. The Need Family represents the core need that underlies the product family. The Product Family includes all the product classes that can satisfy a core need. The Product Class that represents a group of products that have certain functional coherence. The Product Line includes closely related products that perform similar functions. The Product
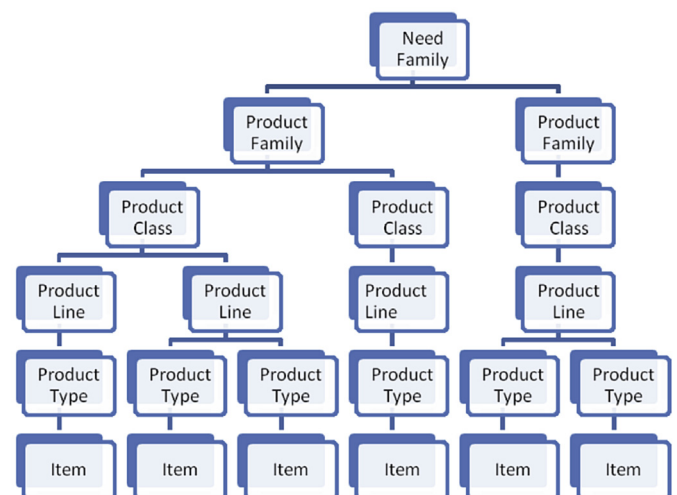

Fig. 1. Product hierarchy.
Source: From Kotler and Keller (2012).