



The emergence of home-based accommodations in Iran: A study of self-organization



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This paper examines the emergence and development of the Iranian home-based accommodation sector.
- Initial interaction with the accommodation operators revealed their conformity with self-organization.
- Aim of study: to identify a set of organizing values and principles internal to the sector and shared by its members.
- These principles are: collective identity, balanced legitimacy, local embeddedness, mindful market, networked finance.
- They are proposed to constitute the framework of self-organization of the Iranian home-based accommodation sector.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Iranian home-based accommodation sector using the theory of self-organization. With the aim of identifying the sector's organizing principles, interviews were conducted with the accommodation operators, providing 117 statements which were linked based on their key ideas and/or words. Using UCINET6, a network diagram of five organizing principles were identified: collective identity, balanced legitimacy, local embeddedness, mindful market, and networked finance. While the combination of these organizing principles is interpreted within the Iranian context, broad assumptions can be inferred. It is speculated that a collective aiming to organize itself needs to be considerate of its interactions with members of the collective, the authoritative body, the local community, the market, and capital. Additionally, each separate organizing principle might have relevance for small businesses in various industries. The study contributes to the commercial home and home-based accommodation literature while also providing insights into tourism development in Iran. Furthermore, the method used to identify organizing principles is considered novel and can be used with other collectives.

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1. Introduction

Traditions of hospitality in Iran can be traced to ancient times (O'Gorman, 2007), but a new form of accommodation represents an innovative, recent development in this modernising country. This paper examines the emergence of the home-based accommodation sector within the Iranian tourism industry with a focus on the functional practices of the operators. The home-based accommodations in this study exhibit characteristics in common with

commercial homes which have been defined as 'types of accommodation where visitors or guests pay to stay in private homes, where interaction takes place with a host and/or family usually living upon the premises and with whom public space is, to a degree, shared' (Lynch, 2005, p.534). Attributes such as sharing of space and interaction with the host and/or family, which are linked to the concept of 'home', distinguish commercial homes from other similar forms of accommodation (Lynch, 2005; Lynch, McIntosh, & Tucker, 2009a). Although key researchers in the area of commercial homes see these enterprises incorporating a wide range of motives, with income generation in some cases of secondary importance (Lynch et al., 2009a), the term 'commercial' does connote the predominance of business transactions and profit-making. However, profit-making was not a high priority for the accommodation

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operators in Iran and therefore the term 'home-based accommodation' was considered to be more appropriate for use in the context of this study.

The study was motivated by a desire to understand more about the way the Iranian home-based accommodation sector was organized, as an initial examination suggested its adherence with self-organization theory. The absence of research in the field of small tourism businesses and the connections and relationships among such businesses also reinforced this decision (Chiles, Meyer, & Hench, 2004; Lynch, McIntosh, & Tucker, 2009b; Novelli, Schmitz, & Spencer, 2006; Thomas, Shaw, & Page, 2011). Moreover, Chiles et al. (2004) remark on the lack of research on the emergence and operation of organizational collectives such as communities, industries and in the case of this study, a sector of an industry. As will be discussed, self-organization entails having a set of organizing principles around which individual activities can be coordinated and organization can occur at a collective level. Therefore, the aim of the study was to identify a set of organizing values and principles internal to the sector and shared by its members. At the collective level, these principles should represent the shared sense of purpose and logic for the sector and explain how it is operating.

This paper contributes to the commercial home and home-based accommodation literature by providing a collective level of analysis, while also offering rich insight into tourism development in Iran. Moreover, the process used here to operationalize self-organization is considered novel and can be used with other collectives of individuals aiming to organize.

2. Literature review

2.1. Commercial homes

A fusion of the social, private and commercial domains of hospitality (Lashley, 2000), commercial home enterprises are known as an alternative to both the hotel and the private home and a bridge between pure forms of each (Lynch, Di Domenico, & Sweeney, 2007; Lynch et al. 2009a). Commercial homes cover a range of accommodation types including farm stay accommodation, host families, some small hotels and B&Bs (Harris, McIntosh, & Lewis, 2007; Lynch, 2005; Lynch et al. 2009a; Sweeney & Lynch, 2007; Tucker & Lynch, 2004). Different criteria have been used to classify commercial homes. Based on the importance of the accommodation to the overall desired tourist experience, a continuum is proposed. At one end, the commercial home acts as standard accommodation and offers a support service for a holiday, and at the other end are those forms of commercial homes that can be considered the destination and central focus of the desired tourist experience (Moscardo, 2009). According to the degree of host–guest separation, three different groups of commercial homes have been identified: a) a private home where the owners live on the premises and public space is shared, b) a home where the owner lives on the premises and the unit is also the family home but where public space for the visitor is separated from that of the family, and c) self-catering where the home owners live off the premises and the home is usually a second home (Lynch & MacWhannell, 2000; Lynch et al. 2009a). In another categorization, commercial homes have been classified as: a) traditional commercial homes (cultural home stays, farmhouse stay, small family run hotels, etc.); b) virtual reality commercial home where the significance is the borrowing and developing of the home concept purely for commercial advantage (serviced apartments, timeshares, boutique hotels, etc.); and c) backdrop homes where the challenge is to retain the sense of home whilst managing and promoting commercial activity (Lynch et al. 2009a).

Lynch and MacWhannell (2000) maintain that the significance of home as the physical unit of hospitality provision has largely been overlooked in the research arena. The main reason, apart from the practical difficulties of research, is what these authors call hospitality management research myopia; that is the negative images of poor service, family disputes, and tacky furnishings attributed to such accommodation establishments. According to Lynch et al. (2009a), the commercial home paradigm has emerged to challenge the primacy of the hotel paradigm and it constitutes a significant research paradigm in its own right. Commercial homes make a significant contribution to local economies (Lynch, 2005), can act as a catalyst for tourism development, and are regarded as a key economic development tool in rural regions (Kastenholz & Sparrer, 2009; King & White, 2009).

The role of commercial homes or home-based accommodations – as the term used in the context of this study – may be particularly significant in countries such as Iran with a long tradition of tourism and hospitality. More information about the characteristics of the Iranian home-based accommodations will be discussed in subsequent segments.

2.2. Self-organization

Organization is defined as an attempt to order and give shape to the flux of human action through institutionalizing certain meanings and rules (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). People organize to deal with ambiguity and make sense of equivocal inputs (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Whenever we observe behaviour that seems coordinated and organized, we tend to assume that there is a guide or a centralized control that choreographs the movements of individuals. It has, however, been argued that patterns of activity can be accomplished through interactions internal to the system and without external order and control (Ismael, 2011). This theory, known as self-organization, is used to explain organization in a variety of systems from collections of cells or insects to societies. Indeed, Romme (1992) believes that what distinguishes social systems from other systems is self-organization which involves collective sensemaking and the creation of shared meaning.

While the concept of self-organization has grown out of many different disciplines within the natural sciences including biology, chemistry and physics (Fuchs, 2003; Heylighen, 2002; Mahmud, 2009; Romme, 1995), it is not considered a new phenomenon in organizational science. Nonetheless, due to the focus on seeing organizations as machines, it has been difficult to observe. By describing organizations as living systems, self-organization becomes easily visible as a primary and chief concept (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996). It has been suggested that instances of self-organization are evident in the first few hours after a disaster when people and resources organize into coordinated purposeful activity without prior planning, or when people in informal organizations ignore formal structures and reach out for resources and relationships they need, or when in communities of practice, people organize themselves based on their perceptions of needs and desires to accomplish (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996). De Wolf and Holvoet (2005) also state that the idea of spontaneous, dynamically-produced organization is not new and was called self-organization after the Second World War in communities connected with cybernetics and computing machinery.

Coleman (1999) views self-organizing behaviour, where individuals in a system are free to network with others, as a natural default behaviour. According to him, freedom of activity is the key to enabling such behaviour. Through the process of self-organization and as a result of interactions and sharing of knowledge between elements, the system acquires and maintains structure (Boons, 2008).

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