Social tourism participation: The role of tourism inexperience and uncertainty

Lynn Minnaert*

Preston Robert Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism, and Sports Management, New York University, 7 East 12th Street, New York, NY 10003, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Social tourism initiatives take many forms and offer various tourism products (day trips, group/individual holidays).
- How these types should be tailored to the needs of beneficiaries has not been researched.
- Tourism inexperience and uncertainty play a key role in travel decisions of social tourism users.
- Tailoring tourism products better may lead to improved social outcomes and potential cost savings.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Social tourism initiatives tend to facilitate access to tourism for groups who would otherwise be financially unable to participate in holidays. The tourism products offered in social tourism vary between individual and group holidays, and day trips. This paper presents the findings of an exploratory, qualitative study with social tourism beneficiaries and social support workers, which explores via interviews and focus groups how these different tourism products can be tailored most effectively to the needs to the beneficiaries. The findings of the study highlight the important role of travel inexperience, and associated uncertainty, in travel decisions made by this target group. The findings show that (public sector or charitable) providers of social tourism can offer the most tailored and potentially most cost-effective tourism product to each beneficiary by closely considering previous travel experience and uncertainty levels before departure.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Leisure tourism is often seen as 'gratuitous' and 'hedonistic' (Urry, 1990), and participation in tourism is considered by many to be a luxury, a discretionary activity. There is however also an alternative view of tourism: as a transformative power, or a social force (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006). Charities, and in some countries national or regional governments, subscribe to this latter view of tourism when they aim to facilitate participation in tourism by low-income groups, because of the perceived social (and in some cases, economic) benefits attached to holiday making. This aspect of tourism, also referred to as social tourism, was long relatively neglected by the academic literature in English, but has become the focus of an increasing number of studies in recent years (e.g. McCabe, 2009; McCabe, Minnaert, & Diekmann, 2011; Minnaert, Maitland, & Miller, 2009; Sedgley, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2012).

Although the body of research concerning social tourism has grown, little attention has been paid so far to the tourism products that are offered to achieve these perceived benefits. These vary widely, ranging from all-inclusive group holidays (e.g. IMSERSO in Spain), over independent holidays for individual families (e.g. the main type offered by the Family Holiday Association in the UK) to day trips for individuals or groups (e.g. offered as a choice by the Tourism Participation Centre in Flanders, Belgium). The question arises how it can be determined which tourism product is likely to most suited to which beneficiaries – this question is important as it may have important cost implications. (Day trips for example are likely to be less expensive than longer holidays involving accommodation.)

This paper presents the findings of an exploratory, qualitative study with social tourism beneficiaries and social support workers. In interviews and focus groups, both groups explored if there were any particular characteristics of a number of tourism products (day trips, group holidays, individual holidays), that make them more or less appropriate for certain social tourism users. The findings of the study highlight the important role of travel inexperience,

* Tel.: +44 212 998 9137.
  E-mail address: l.minnaert@nyu.edu.

and associated uncertainty, in the travel preferences of many beneficiaries. These findings have several implication for (public sector or charitable) providers of social tourism.

2. Social tourism

Social tourism refers to initiatives that aim to include groups into tourism that would otherwise be excluded from it. In the English-language tourism literature, social tourism has developed from a subject that was addressed but sporadically, to an area of increased research interest. The earliest definition of social tourism by Hunzicker (1951) defined social tourism as "the relationships and phenomena in the field of tourism resulting from participation in travel by economically weak or otherwise disadvantaged elements in society" (1951:1). Minnaert, Maitland, & Miller (2007), Minnaert et al. (2009) and Minnaert, Maitland, and Miller (2011) define social tourism as *tourism with an added moral value, of which the primary objective is to benefit the host or the visitor in the tourism exchange.* In practice, social tourism usually refers to budget-friendly holidays in the own country, either individual or as part of a group, or in some cases day trips to theme parks, museums and attractions, that are funded or made available at highly reduced rates, by charities or agencies in the public sector.

Beneficiaries of social tourism are people who would like to travel but cannot due to a certain disadvantage: this could be the lack of money for example, or a health problem or disability that inhibits participation in tourism. In several countries of the European Union, social tourism is provided at either very limited cost to the state, or in ways which simultaneously stimulate the local economy and increase the income of the state via taxation and a reduction of unemployment benefits (Minnaert et al., 2011). Social tourism is often used as both an economic and a social regeneration measure. In terms of social benefits, Minnaert et al. (2009, 2010) and McCabe (2009) have conducted research into the social impacts of participation in social tourism by low-income beneficiaries, and have found evidence of benefits ranging from increases in self-esteem, improvement in family relations and widening of travel horizons to more pro-active attitudes to life and participation in education and employment. Sedgley et al. (2012) also highlighted the role of tourism participation as a factor in social inclusion: their study of London families living in poverty indicates that exclusion from tourism makes a clear contribution to their children's exclusion from everyday norms as holidays are regarded as part of contemporary British family life. In times of austerity, which has led to a number of governments reassessing their welfare programmes, the potential economic benefits of social tourism however have received increased levels of attention.

A much cited example of the economic benefits of social tourism is the IMSERSO programme in Spain, which offers domestic holidays for senior citizens in coastal areas during the shoulder season. The holidays are financed through contributions by beneficiaries (70 per cent) and the public sector (30 per cent). The public sector investment however yields cost savings and earnings: the scheme allows for longer seasons and increased employment in the coastal regions; and the tourist expenditure may lead to higher tax income. Around 300 hotels participate in the scheme, which has benefited around 1 million participants in the 2008–2009 season and has been estimated to generate or maintain 79,300 jobs. The Spanish government has allocated €105 million for the 2009–2010 season, and it claims that every Euro invested yields 4 Euro's in tax, spend and reduction in benefit payments (www.imserso.es). To stimulate similar initiatives throughout Europe, the European Commission for Enterprise and Industry launched the Calypso programme in 2008, which aims to produce social tourism exchanges between different European countries (Minnaert et al., 2011).

The concept of social tourism has been implemented in different ways to suit national contexts: several countries operate holiday voucher schemes (for example France and Hungary), other countries have established public–private partnerships (for example Spain, Portugal and Flanders, Belgium) (McCabe et al., 2011). In the UK and the USA social tourism is traditionally not part of public policy, and is mostly provided via charitable bodies. In 2011 however, a report was published by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Tourism, which explored the potential social and economic benefits of social tourism for the UK. The goals and moral justification for the provision of social tourism can also vary greatly. The development of the working classes, better health for inner city children, wider access to the benefits of tourism, loyalty to unions or companies, and economic development of regions have all been, and in some cases are still, seen as valid reasons for provision (Minnaert et al., 2011).

Another difference between social tourism initiatives, that has received limited attention so far, concerns the type of tourism experience that is offered to the beneficiaries. Some schemes offer only one tourism product, whereas others have a range of products to choose from. The IMSERSO programme in Spain for example has only one product: the scheme offers group holidays exclusively for senior citizens, including coach transport, accommodation, meals and activities (www.imserso.es). In contrast, the Family Holiday Association in the UK offers more holiday choices: it funds week-long holidays for individual families (usually in domestic caravan parks), and group holidays which may be shorter (www.fhaonline.org.uk). The Tourism Participation Centre in Flanders (Belgium) also offers individual and group holidays, but has an additional range of affordable day trips. The social tourism literature so far has tended to make little distinctions between these tourism products, and their respective suitability and attractiveness to different types of beneficiaries. This exploratory study aimed to uncover whether it is useful to offer a range of different holiday options, and whether the choice of tourism product can somehow be tailored to certain characteristics of the beneficiaries.

3. Initial data: focus groups with support workers

As this is an exploratory study, the decision was taken to ground the direction for the research in primary data — as a consequence, this paper will discuss the findings of a first round of fieldwork at this stage. The structure of this paper is thus slightly untraditional: whereas in most papers the literature review is followed by methodology and findings, in this study the literature search emanated from the first round of focus groups. A model was then developed and tested in a case study. This structure follows the principles proposed in grounded theory, which is 'based on the systematic generating of theory from data, that itself is systematically obtained from social research. Thus the grounded theory method offers a rigorous, orderly guide to theory development that at each stage is closely integrated with a methodology of social research. Generating theory and doing social research are two parts of the same process' (Glaser, 1978, 2). Grounded theory is 'based on comparative analysis as a strategic method for generating theory. In discovering theory, one generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence, then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept. The evidence may not necessarily be without a doubt […] but the concept is undoubtedly a relevant theoretical abstraction about what is going on in the area studied' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 23).

For the initial data collection, a series of nine focus groups with support workers of social tourism users was carried out in Flanders, Belgium. The focus groups took place between January and March 2010. Flanders is the Northern, Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, and social tourism is part of tourism legislation in this region via the