

Blogger's Tourist Experience

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Background of the Study

Experience

The tourist experience has been defined as:

- (a) "the culmination of a given experience" formed by tourists "when they are visiting and spending time in a given tourists location" (Graefe & Vaske, 1987);
- (b) "a complex combination of factors that shape the tourist's feeling and attitude towards his or her visit" (Page et al, 2001);
- (c) "an example of hedonic consumption" (Go, 2005, p. 81).

Cohen, in his phenomenological approach, saw tourist experiences as opportunities for differentiation from everyday life (Cohen, 1972, 1979) and he identified "different modes of the tourists experiences" (Cohen, 1979, p.180).

"there is no single theory that defines the meaning and extent of tourist experiences, although a number of authors have made attempts to formulate models by generalizing and aggregating information" (Chhetri et al., 2004, p.34).

Tourism is essentially a marketplace of experience, and tourists are the "mental places" where the tourist experience happens, therefore accessing these freely written storages of information represents an occasion for tourism marketers to "view" the tourist in his natural mental environment.

Background of the Study

Storytelling

Weick 1995, p.127

People think narratively rather than argumentatively or paradigmatically”.

Schank, 1990

People store, retrieve and talk to others in story contexts.

Woodside et al., 2007, p.171.

“Stories do move people profoundly...provide clues to unconscious as well as conscious thinking”.

Pudliner, 2007

Story-telling conveys “a common language of experience”. Visitors describe their experiences and often conclude with recommending or advising against visits by others or declaring their own future intentions.



Background of the Study

Travel Blogs

Blogs combine texts, images, videos, audios, links and a collection of tools to share authors' commentaries or news while they are travelling (Leu et al. 2005).

Blogs are about expressing the inner experiences of travellers and sharing them with others who have the interest and “who care enough to read an account of persons' thoughts and feelings” (Conhaim, 2003, p. 27)

Sharda and Ponnada (2007, p.2)

driven by their desire to share their experience with their family and friends, as well as other prospective tourists

Pan et al. 2007, p.36

“uncensored and rich expressions of visitor's travel experience”

Crotts, 1999.

likely to become a preferred travel information source



Study objectives



Methodology

Tourist destination: South Tyrol

Data collection

Google search "blog + South Tyrol + good/bad" (Woodside et al. 2007)
Google search "blog + South Tyrol + good/bad" + experience + travel/vacation
Google "travel blog" (Pan et al. 2007)
South Tyrol official tourism web site (in Italian)

Analysis

Characteristics of bloggers and blogs, comments on blogs.
Map => Heider's balance theory 1958 (Woodside and Chebat, 2001; Woodside et al. 2007)



Mapping the experience using Heider's balance theory

Entities : persons, places, acts, outcomes, beliefs

Linkages:

- unit relation: U (cognitive unit) and notU (entities are segregated)
- sentiment relation : positive/negative feelings to an entity

Balance : automatic thinking

Imbalance: active mental steps occur – controlled thinking, people acquire information and activate to resolve dilemmas (purchase decision/brand decision)

Assumption: individuals seek to maintain psychological balance and to overcome states of imbalance when psychological imbalance occurs in their lives



International (travelblog-travelpost)

Bloggers Profiles

- 21 authors
- Female 10
- Male 7
- Couples 4
- 3 US
- Age and profession were not disclosed
- 11 authors were first time visitors
 - 1 was return tourist
 - no information on the others

Blogs Profiles

- 29 Blogs
- Words range 28 – 1754
- Comments 19 had zero - 2 had 8
- Photos 11 had zero – 10 had up to 10 photos, 8 up to 50 photos
- Video 1

Italian (South Tyrol official tourism website)

69 blogs in 2008 => 55 tourists (43 female) => all 55 had a positive assessment of their vacation!!! 37 were return tourists



Towards the balance state...

Blog 8 TB Bolzano, which is bilingual (Italian and German).
 Blog 10 TB we decided to get a hotel room right in the main square, *Piazza Walther*, or *Waltherplatz*, depending whichever language you speak.
 Blog 9 TB We left for Bolzano on a Tuesday because we felt like drinking a hot chocolate (the consistency of warm pudding, mind you) in the snow.
 Blog 1 TB This region in Northern Italy is so far north that half the population speaks German, which is great as it means you get Italian style and cafes, hand in hand with great salamis and fabulous cheeses.
 Blog 5 TB As most locals in Bolzano speak both German & Italian you could be forgiven for thinking you had Italy where it is better to be a tourist rather than an Italian, and if you are German
 Blog 7 TB It's bustling and cute little alpine town, where most of the residents speak both Italian and German, although German is more commonly used as they believe they're more Germanic than Italian. All the proper names of the towns and sites have both the Italian and German names. Most Italians think that the Bolzanesi are traitors, because they speak German.

In the end there was no hot chocolate and no snow. But I learned some German and breathed some clean mountain air. I think Bolzano is one of my new favorite places. If you have some time to kill in Italy and don't feel like trekking to Austria or Switzerland I most definitely recommend Bolzano. The food is good, the surroundings are beautiful and the people, even the so-called traitors, and very welcoming—just don't speak Italian.



The Italian name made it sound like an uplifting soul-freeing pathway in the mountains while the German name seemed to describe an intense session of exacting, analytical progress. Both I decided, are correct.



Concluding Observations...

Tourists' experiences can be investigated through Heider's balance theory and maps provide an easy way to capture the essence of bloggers' narratives

however

- **no clear evidence of systematic influence on decision making of readers**
- **evidence of fabricated experiences in destination sponsored blogs**
- **objectivity of bloggers in question**
- **biased sample and lack of objectivity threatens validity of Heider analysis**

...future research agenda should look at...



Reflections...

Bloggers probably are not representative of all tourists...we don't know!

- **Why do bloggers blog? Why do non bloggers not blog?**
- **Why are bloggers eager to share experiences with unknown individuals?**
- **How should we treat professional writers potential marketing influence on tourists?**
- **How do the psychographic profiles of bloggers differ from non bloggers?**
- **Is blogging an activity motivated by imbalance?**

comments and questions are welcome

