UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED ENHANCED TOURIST EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

The notion of consumers increasingly striving for experiences constitutes a prevalent concept, particularly in tourism, as one of the largest experience creating industries. The recent impact of information and communication technologies has profoundly changed the nature of tourist experiences, the understanding of which is crucial for creating and delivering competitive experiences in the future. However, there is evidence that experiences in a technology-mediated context are currently little understood. This led to the purpose of this paper to conceptualise the new phenomenon Technology-Enabled Enhanced Tourist Experiences to understand, manage and create these experiences in the future.

Key Words: Experience economy; tourist experiences; information and communication technologies; experience co-creation;

INTRODUCTION

Consumers are increasingly striving for experiences today (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) by not only buying into products and services but rather buying into the experience delivered by the consumption of products and services (Morgan et al., 2010). This was the seminal proposition by Pine and Gilmore (1999) who claimed that delivering competitive experiences has become indisputable, as products have become interchangeable, replicated and commoditised (Morgan et al., 2010). As a consequence, competitive advantage can only be achieved by providing consumers with unique and memorable experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

The increasing proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has had fundamental impacts on the tourist experience (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2007). The tourism industry has always been in the forefront of technology (Sheldon, 1997). However, the technological advancements of the past decades have not only changed business and industry but have also revolutionised the nature of tourism (Buhalis and Law, 2008). In particular, emerging technologies of the recent years have been changing the nature of the tourist experience distinctively (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2007).

Due to the major impact of technology on tourist experiences, current literature (e.g. Beeton et al., 2006; Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2007) postulates that there is a lack of understanding of the factor technology in the tourist experience. Considering that businesses in the tourism industry need to understand the tourist experience in order to be able to create and deliver competitive experiences (Zehrer, 2009), it is crucial to capture the changing nature of the tourist experience and understand the role technology plays in this process.

Based on this lack of understanding, this paper aims to explore the dynamic technological advances in the tourist experience in order to understand how ICTs can enhance the tourist experience throughout all stages, i.e. pre/during/post, of the tourist’s travel process. This paper contributes by conceptualising the new phenomenon called Technology-Enabled Enhanced Tourist Experiences and discussing implications the future creation and management of experiences.
TOURIST EXPERIENCES

The term experience, originally noted in the 1960s, covers a multiplicity of definitions (Moscardo, 2009). In general, experience can be regarded as a personal occurrence with highly emotional significance obtained by the consumption of products and services (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). In a tourism context, experience represents a complex construct, which has been postulated as distinct from everyday life experiences (Cohen, 1979). Since the early 1970s a vast body of literature has emerged (e.g. MacCannell, 1973; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Cohen, 1979; Mannell and Iso-Ahola, 1987; Ryan, 1997) establishing the theoretical basis of the experience concept.

Experience has always constituted an important notion in tourism research and practice (Uriely, 2005). In recent years, the concept has received a new current of attention, as consumers are increasingly striving for experiences delivered by services (Gretzel et al., 2006). This trend has been reflected in the amount of state-of-the-art literature (e.g. Darmer and Sundbo, 2008, Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009; Cutler and Carmichael, 2010; Morgan et al., 2010; Sharpley and Stone, 2010; Tung and Ritchie, 2011), attesting the cutting-edge character of this research topic.

At the beginning of the 21st century, experience has received a newly aroused interest, which is confirmed by Ritchie and Hudson (2009) who testify an on-going evolution in the field of experience. In a review of existing tourism experience literature, Ritchie and Hudson (2009) depict the evolution of this concept from the early seeds of the experience by Csikszentmihalyi (1975), SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) towards satisfactory experiences (Ryan, 1995), quality experiences (Jennings, 2006) and finally memorable experiences (Tung and Ritchie, 2011). By advancing the previously established notions, memorable experiences are regarded as the ultimate experience that consumers aim to obtain (Tung and Ritchie, 2011).

Despite the attention received from both academia and industry (Volo, 2009), a number of authors, such as Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2000) urge for further theoretical exploration, as experience still lacks in theoretical basis (Gupta and Vajic, 2000) and knowledge in nature and design of experiences, on both theoretical and managerial level (Zehrer, 2009). In addition to the existing gaps in experience research, there is evidence that tourist experiences are undergoing a significant shift.

Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2007) claim that due to the impact of ICTs on the tourist experience, the nature of the tourist experience is currently changing distinctively. This is supported by Gretzel and Jamal (2009) who argue that a whole new range of tourist experiences becomes available, as new types of technologies facilitate new activities. However, in order to successfully create experiences for and with the tourist consumer, first of all an understanding of the changing nature of the experience, i.e., how technology enhances the tourist experience, needs to be developed.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

In the 21st century society has been undergoing a number of fundamental changes. One of the most far-reaching shifts concerns the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The technological advancement of the past years has not only impacted on society but has determined the way many industries, including the tourism industry, work. The travel and tourism industry has always been in the forefront of technology (Sheldon, 1997). As a matter of fact, considering the characteristics of tourism as a service-dominant industry, ICTs have always played a major role (Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003).

However, the latest technological developments have not only changed the industry but have greatly revolutionised the nature of tourism (Buhalis and Law, 2008). Stamboulis and Skayannis (2003) confirm that tourism has been facing significant changes in recent years, besides new forms of tourism, the proliferation of ICTs has had a huge impact on the creation, production as well as the consumption of the tourism product. One evolution of this kind regards the changing nature of the tourist experience (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2007). Crouch and Desforges (2003) claim that technologies have not only become adopted in people’s everyday lives but have become increasingly implemented in tourist experiences.

As literature indicates, a vast range of technologies are implemented throughout various stages of the tourist experience (Cho et al., 2002, Green, 2002, Mossberg, 2003, Gretzel et al., 2006, Huang et al., 2010). However, many studies up to date have only touched upon technology in the tourist experience by naming single scenarios of technology use or refereeing to examples of technology adoption in the tourism industry. Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009) for instance, recognise that technologies have an influence on the tourist
experience by citing the Internet, virtual communities or Second Life as examples. However, Darmer and Sundbo (2008) go beyond the mere acknowledgement of ICTs in the tourist experience and argue that emerging technologies will actually give rise to new types of tourist experiences.

Considering that the tourist experience in a technology-mediated context is currently little understood in literature (Beeton et al., 2006; Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2007), thus leads to the claim that a conceptualisation of a new phenomenon called the Technology-Enabled Enhanced Tourist Experience is imperative. This paper makes an attempt to fill an existing gap by developing a preliminary understanding of how ICTs can enhance the tourist experience throughout all stages, i.e. pre/during/post stage of the tourist’s travel process and how this new type of experience can be created and managed in practice.

UNDERSTANDING TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED ENHANCED TOURIST EXPERIENCES

Today, consumers expect marketers to deliver personalised experiences by meeting the latest technological standards to engage with them (Gretzel et al., 2006). Considering that tourist experiences are multidimensional in nature, various services are involved along the customer journey, including a before, during and after phase of the trip (Stickdorn and Zehrer, 2009). Mossberg (2003) confirms that experiences, especially in tourism, are not restricted to the simple service, respectively experience encounter but begin much prior the trip with the creation of expectations. To conceptualise the Technology-Enabled Enhanced Tourist Experience, it is thus crucial to understand the role that ICTs play in all stages of the tourist experience.

According to Gretzel and Jamal (2009), the pre-phase is characterised as an actively involved and socially intense phase. In the context of virtual reality systems, Cho et al. (2002) claim that due to the emergence of the Internet, tourists are now able to virtually experience and assess a destination before their physical travel. In this regard, Huang et al. (2010) mention the social network service Second Life, which offers a virtual environment that has become attractive for the tourism industry by representing products and services in a three-dimensional online world (Huang et al., 2010). Moreover, Gretzel et al. (2000) argue that destination websites with a high level of interactivity constitute a great experience enhancement for consumers. This is in line with Huang et al. (2010) who state that tourism marketers nowadays explore and use the possibilities of immersive virtual environments to enhance and enrich consumer experiences.

The actual physical travel phase to the destination is characterised by the tourist being on the move. The increased mobility and availability of ICTs have in particular rendered mobile technologies key tools of the 21st century (Egger and Jooss, 2010). Due to the ubiquity of mobile services enabling access to information, videos or recommendation sites (Green, 2002) and information retrieval anywhere and anytime (Balasubramanian et al., 2002), these services entail great potentials to enhance the experience at the tourism destination. Green (2002) outlines that mobile devices, such as smart phones, allow tourists not only to take a picture for themselves but immediately share their experiences while experiencing them and thereby reconstructing and changing the nature of the experience (Green, 2002).

Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) state that technologies, such as shared images or pictures are of particular importance in the pre- and post-travel stages. In the post-stage, the sharing of experiences through technology supports tourists in their recollection and remembrance of the previously undergone travel. In addition, Fotis et al. (2011) outline that post-travel stage simultaneously marks the beginning of the dreaming stage of the next travel, in which ideas and inspiration for future travels are collected. As a consequence, Gretzel and Jamal (2009) urge that the pre-experience phase for the travel preparation as well as the post-experience stage for the reconstruction of experiences are critical phases which need to be taken into account in the overall enhancement of the tourist experience.

As recent literature (e.g. Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009; Huang et al., 2010) indicates, diverse ICTs are implemented throughout different stages of the tourism experience consumption process. In contrast to traditional, that is non-technology-enabled, experiences, Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2007) claim that technologies enable tourists to create richer experiences. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) take this argument further and reveal that technology empowers consumers not only to consume but actually co-create their own personal experiences. As a matter of fact, with the increasing use of technology, tourist consumers have transformed from passive recipients of information to connected prosumers in a technology-mediated tourism experience environment (Andersson, 2007, Gretzel et al., 2006; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004).
MANAGING TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED ENHANCED TOURIST EXPERIENCES

Understanding the very nature and characteristics of an experience is central to the successful management of tourist experiences. The creation and delivery of experiences has become an important endeavour for businesses and the industry (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), as competitive advantage can only be achieved by providing consumers with unique and memorable experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and creating added value (Grönroos, 2000). From an experience economy perspective, Pine and Gilmore (1999) state that the natural progression of value is to stage experiences; “staging experiences is not about entertaining customers; it’s about engaging them” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, p.30).

This has particular implications for the tourism industry, as one of the biggest experience generating industries in the world (Binkhorst and Den Dekker, 2009). In the traditional experience economy, tourism was represented from a company-centric view, whereby tourist consumers have hardly been taken into account when creating tourist experiences (Ek et al., 2008; Binkhorst and Den Dekker, 2009). Today, tourists need to be conceptualised in a more active role as producers rather than passive consumers of an experience (Ek et al., 2008), which is in line with Mossberg (2007) who attributes tourists the role of the co-creator of the tourist space.

This is where technology as the key tool in the creation of the tourist experience comes into play. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) claim that technology has particularly encouraged the shift from the passively receiving consumer to the actively involved co-creator of his/her own experience. Binkhorst and Den Dekker (2009) underline that ICTs have become a major element in the co-creation of tourist experiences by allowing companies to engage with consumers through websites, mobile devices, portable city guides, travel guides, virtual life environments or enhanced hotel rooms. In conceptualising Technology-Enabled Enhanced Tourist Experiences, it is imperative to understand that tourist experiences cannot be staged and delivered to the consumers, but must rather be co-created together with the consumer. Technology needs to be regarded as the catalyst that functions as a means to co-create meaningful interrelations and experiences between the company and the consumer. Taking the argument into account that co-creating experiences generates value for the consumer (Binkhorst and Den Dekker, 2009), technology will thus become the key instrument for the enhancement of experiences by facilitating and empowering co-creation and thereby generating added value for the consumer. This is particularly relevant, considering the multi-phase nature of the tourist experience, i.e. prior/during/post travel. Technology does not only enhance the physical tourism space on-site, but also facilitates engagement and experience co-creation in the virtual space already before as well as after the travel in the tourist’s home environment. As a result, by conflating the two areas of tourist experience and technology, this paper proposes a holistic conceptualisation of Technology-Enabled Enhanced Tourist Experiences, which is crucial for understanding and managing this new type of experience in theory and practice.

Figure 1
Conceptual Model Technology-Enabled Enhanced Tourist Experiences
CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has provided a holistic conceptualisation of a novel concept, called Technology-Enabled Enhanced Tourist Experiences. A review of the existing body of literature on tourist experiences and information and communication technologies revealed that today tourist experiences are increasingly technology mediated (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009). Although there exist a number of studies (e.g. Binkhorst and Den Dekker, 2009; Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009) which have recognised the impact of technology on tourist experiences, there is a huge gap in understanding the Technology-Enabled Enhanced Tourist Experience as a novel and holistic concept. Given the necessity to understand the nature of an experience for the creation and delivery of experiences in theory and practice (Zehrer, 2009), this paper has contributed by developing a preliminary understanding of the Technology-Enabled Enhanced Tourist Experience and discussing implications for creating and managing this new type of experiences in the future.

This paper postulated that a profound understanding of the changing nature of the tourist experience due to the impact of technology needs to be developed, by recognising the prevalent role of technology throughout all stages, i.e. prior/during/post stage of the travel process. Considering the fact that consumers are increasingly empowered and have transformed to active co-creators of their own experiences, it is paramount to consider new perspectives for marketing and management of experiences. This paper concluded that with a whole new range of ICTs on disposal, firstly a new type of tourist experience, namely a Technology-Enabled Enhanced Tourist Experience has emerged and secondly, new ways of creating experiences, namely, not to stage and deliver but rather to co-create experiences together with the tourist consumer, are necessary. Technology thereby represents the key, as enabler and enhancer of experience co-creation between the company and the consumer throughout all stages of the travel process.

REFERENCES


