The use of Ethnography to explore Tourist Satisfaction Antecedents

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THE USE OF ETHNOGRAPHY TO EXPLORE TOURIST SATISFACTION ANTECEDENTS

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The purpose of this paper is to provide insights concerning the use of ethnographic techniques to explore the antecedents of tourist satisfaction; otherwise referred to as the needs and expectations which precede tourist satisfaction. By revealing the relevance of both needs and expectations in the tourist satisfaction process, the authors proceed in justifying the use of this approach for such exploration. This is based on a thorough review of the global literature as well as on a prolonged ethnographic study undertaken in Cyprus which aimed to investigate holistically the rural tourist satisfaction process. Based on the results of the study, the authors encourage future researchers in the respective tourism field to adopt and make use of the aforementioned approach for similar investigations.

Keywords: *Ethnography, tourist satisfaction, antecedents, needs, expectations*

INTRODUCING THE ANTECEDENTS OF SATISFACTION

Prior to the thorough analysis of the association between tourist needs and expectations with satisfaction, it should be noted that tourist needs and expectations are being referred to as antecedents of satisfaction due to the fact that they both precede tourist satisfaction. This statement actually rests on the fact that both needs and expectations are found to influence tourist satisfaction (discussed in the following sections). That being established, researchers such as for instance Becker and Murrmann (1999) and Kandampully (2000) make reference to the tourists' needs and expectations which should be considered in order for overall guest satisfaction to be achieved. Nonetheless, it should be noted that expectations are not synonymous with needs, given that people can have

expectations of things that they do not really need whilst on the other hand, they may have needs that they do not expect (Bergman and Klefsjo 2003).

The relevance of needs to tourism satisfaction

In order to establish the relativeness of needs with satisfaction, Lam and Zhang (1999) state that customer satisfaction is achieved once customer needs and wants are fulfilled. Bergman and Klefsjo (2003) furthermore support the relationship of needs with satisfaction. Researchers in the tourism field have attempted to understand the complexity of needs by employing either the Kano's model (Kano et al. 1984) or the well known Maslow's theory of motivation. Tikkanen (2007) made use of Maslow's theory in Finland in which the researcher conducted a review of secondary data and an interview in an aim to explore the personal food tourist needs and motivations. Others (e.g. Butler 1993; Yoon and Uysal 2005), who have examined, to some or to a greater extend, tourist needs, make reference to tourist motivations that include the desire to escape routine, rest and relaxation, prestige, health and fitness, adventure and the search for authentic experience. More specifically, Bergman and Klefsjo (2003) which may be regarded as members of this 'investigating tourist needs' research community acknowledged the aforementioned relationship between the customer needs and satisfaction. At the same time they stress the importance of their identification. As a matter of fact, the importance of understanding the tourist needs is furthermore stressed by a vast number of researchers such as for instance Jonsson and Klefsjo (2006) who basically come to reinforce the aforesaid fact. Basically, that the direct relationship between needs and consumer satisfaction is stressed out. Persisting on the importance of tourist needs due to their association with tourist satisfaction, worth noting is the fact that vacation travel is to be seen as a satisfier of needs and wants (Mill and Morrison 2002). Last but not least, Choi and Chu (2001) share similar views with the aforementioned researcher in regards to the importance of need identification. The researchers argue that in such a highly competitive industry such as the hospitality and tourism industry which provides homogeneous products there is the need to find ways to stand out amongst the others. Hence conclude that hoteliers must try to understand their customer needs and meet or even exceed these needs highlighting in this way, once more, the significance of identifying the tourist needs.

The relevance of expectations to tourist satisfaction

Further to the importance of needs, Lam and Zhang (1999), acknowledge the significance of expectations in the satisfaction process. Accordingly, Arnold, Price and Zinkhan (2004) define expectations as anticipations/predictions of future events. By specifically referring to the hospitality industry, they regard these to be the perceived level of service that consumers expect to obtain from a hotel. Likewise needs, expectations are also related to tourist satisfaction. In fact, the direct relationship of expectations with satisfaction is being stressed by a number of scholars (e.g. Choi and Chu 2001; Rodriguez del Bosque, Martin and Collado 2006). Additionally, Arnold, Price and Zinkhan (2004) stress the need of understanding customer expectations and deliver accordingly in order to achieve consumer satisfaction. Yet, Oliver (1980) stresses the fact that the higher the expectations of consumers regarding the service level they expect to have the harder it is for the service provider to satisfy them. Similar views are shared by other researchers such as Bowie and Chang (2005) who basically note that high expectations can frustrate satisfaction achievement. Relevantly, tourists have initial expectations regarding the destination which are mainly formed through commercials, brochures, guides and finally word of mouth which in essence it is informal information from other people which eventually appends to the destination image (Beerli and Martin 2004; Gursoy and McCleary 2004; Molina and Esteban 2006). Even so, consumers' past experiences may also influence their future expectations (e.g. Oliver and Burke 1999). Indeed, studies (e.g. Fache 2000) postulate that previous experiences affect a person's expectation towards the next purchase. Hence, both external information (e.g. word of mouth, brochures, advertisements) as well as the personal tourist experience form the creation of a wide range of expectations a tourist may have for a destination.

Despite the wide attention given on the examination and identification of tourist expectations, recent studies (e.g. Radder and Wang 2006) reveal that hospitality managers wrongfully perceive the expectations of tourists. In their study, the researchers reveal that business travellers deemed secure parking and professionalism of staff as the most important attributes, whereas guest-house managers thought that the most important attributes were friendliness of the reception staff and efficient handling of complaints. In view of this, it should be noted that understanding the expectations of tourists is without any doubt an extremely challenging task. This is because expextations differ from

individual to individual. For example, tourist expectations may vary according to the tourist cultural background. If truth be told there have been studies in the relevant field (e.g. Atilgan et al. 2003) which prove that cultural norms after all affect tourist expectations. Let alone the fact that tourist expectations change over time (e.g. Torres and Kline 2006). Even so, despite the fact that numerous studies have attempted to investigate the concept of expectations (e.g. Walker and Baker 2000) recently Radder and Wang (2006) made reference to a gap in their understanding.

THE INVESTIGATION OF TOURIST SATISFACTION THROUGH AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Based on Henn, Weinstein and Foard (2006), 'researchers undertake ethnographic studies to see the world in a new way from the point of view of the people under investigation, not just to confirm their preconceptions about a particular issue or group that they are studying' (p.171). Ethnography is characterized as an in-depth research method (Gummesson 2003) and is employed if research focus on the human side is desired (e.g. Irvine and Gaffikin 2006). Moreover, ethnography is regarded to be the original form of the research tradition that today is categorized as qualitative research (Koh et al. 2005; Agafonoff 2006). Milliken (2001) makes reference to qualitative research which finds its formal and intertwined roots in the traditions of humanities, and particularly in anthropology and sociology. Additionally, Othman (2004) makes reference to the ethnographic method which firstly includes participant observation (researchers joining the culture being studied), secondly, observational research (watching users/participants in their environment) and finally, contextual inquiry (asking the participants questions in the natural setting).

In specific regards to the implementation of ethnographic techniques in order to investigate tourist satisfaction there are some relevant studies which prove its employment and associated results, such as for instance, the studies of both Bowen (2002) and Sorensen (2003). Worth noting is also the fact that researchers such as for instance Swan and Bowers (1998) propose ethnographic methods as a means of learning how consumers experience satisfaction. Case to the point, Bowie and Chang (2005) made use of an ethnographic approach in order to evaluate tour-tourist satisfaction. The researchers carried out participant covert observation by combining observation of participant's actions and conversations with tourists being engaged in tour trips while they were

recording these observations and conversations in field notes on a regular basis. Similarly, Bowen (2001b) in his study of customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the tourism field decided that the most appropriate method to use was participant observation backed up by semi-structured tourist interviews. Gale and Beeftink (2005) also utilized ethnographic techniques in their attempt to investigate tourist satisfaction; in this specific case, college students engaged in a group travel package for one week in Florida-U.SA. In the latter presented case, the researcher conducted daily observations of participant behaviour, personal interviews with the participants and finally guided introspection, in which the participants were asked to think aloud about their feelings and actions through group debriefing sessions. Lastly, Daengbuppha, Hemmington and Wilkes (2006) attempted to examine the tourist satisfaction through the employment of ethnographic techniques at three different world cultural sites in Thailand in which the data collection phase was spread out over a six-month period. Of note is the fact that the researchers argue that their study offers useful guidance for similar investigations of tourist experiences which seek the emergence of new knowledge in tourism. Prosthetic to that, Bates (2005) highlights the fact that the ethnographer shapes an understanding of the experience and people under investigation. Ethnography and more specifically participant observation is referred to by Van Maanen (2006) as a softer approach than the harder approach presented by questionnaires while at the same time it maintains an almost obsessive focus on the empirical. Others (e.g. Saleh and Ryan 1992; Bowen 2001a) make reference to the customer satisfaction questionnaires which unlike an ethnographic approach return merely glanced over the surface. Palmer (2005) argues that the wealth of data generated and the level of detail from ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation could be created by neither quantitative nor qualitative customer satisfaction questionnaires. In addition, Squire (1994) calls for an extension of the use of qualitative techniques in the tourism field whilst at the same time, Hannabuss (2000) highlights the fact that qualitative research offers a unique insight into the behaviour and beliefs of the people studied. The fact remains that a positivistic approach based on researchers (e.g. Crossan 2003; Steward and Floyd 2004) may not accurately capture the complexity of factors involved in the satisfaction evaluative process of tourists. Furthermore, the same researchers suggest to move beyond the rational decision-making principles found in positivistic approaches, towards an interpretivistic approach. Such approach according to Henn, Weinstein and Foard (2006), is associated with predominately qualitative methods which after all have as a purpose

to build an understanding of the motives and intentions that underpin social behaviour.

JUSTIFYING THE USE OF ETHNOGRAPHY TO EXPLORE TOURIST SATISFACTION ANTECEDENTS

One of the major advantages of an ethnographic study is the fact that it allows the use of conversations which based on Kawulich (2005) provide an in-depth understanding of tourist satisfaction. Actually, the importance of conversations in the tourism field are being furthermore stressed as well as highlighted by Bowen (2001b). Worth noting is the fact that the latter mentioned researcher shifted the central core of his research to measure tourist satisfaction towards ethnographic techniques. Accordingly, the researcher revealed evident scepticism with regards to the precise usefulness and the ability of the previously mentioned customer satisfaction questionnaires to identify tourist satisfaction. Besides, Swan and Bowers (1998) and Bowie and Chang (2005) argue that the approach of participant observation, unlike other approaches allows the researcher to interact with the participants and minimize the distance between them (researcher and respondents). Consequently, this provides a deeper understanding of how consumers experience satisfaction, becoming in this way a key method to research particular phenomena such as tourism elements. Nonetheless some further strengths of ethnography compared to other methodological approaches are being stressed by researchers (e.g. Agafonoff 2006; Mariampolski 2006) who embrace the fact that it reaches the parts other research approaches cannot reach, as well as it offers insights and perspectives that other forms of qualitative research cannot possibly provide, given that it takes place within the context of respondent's lives, in their natural setting. Furthermore, the fact that it supplements consumer reports with direct observation by the ethnographer is also stressed out.

Persisting on the aptness of ethnography to investigate tourist satisfaction and its antecedents, it should be emphasized that ethnography is not exactly synonymous with observation. Besides, this methodological approach refers to more than just the process of observing given that it also includes informal plain chats, conversations and/or even conducting in-depth interviews with individuals. In point of fact, according to Bryman (2004) much of the richest data that can be captured is derived from these interviews/casual conversations. In view of this, a number of researchers (e.g. Palmer 2005; Daengbuppha, Hemmington and Wilkes 2006) agree on the fact that these informal conversations put people at

ease therefore enabling the researcher to obtain information that may indicate the underlying feelings of the respondents. Similar views are shared by both Ryan (1995) and Kawulich (2005) who agree that the process of conducting an ethnographic research also involves formal interviews or/and informal conversations. Above and beyond, these conversations between the ethnographer and the participants enable the researcher to explore important and relevant aspects of the tourist satisfaction process such as the previously discussed antecedents of satisfaction, or more specifically the tourist needs and expectations.

Be that as it may, an ethnographic methodological approach aiming to investigate rural tourist satisfaction was employed and applied to the Mediterranean Island of Cyprus. The study involved active participation, observations, several informal interviews and dozens of chats with agritourists (rural tourists). All these took place in the Island's countryside, in randomly selected hosting venues, keys points of interest (e.g. national parks and monasteries) and during special events (e.g. festivals). After a prolonged time in the field which lasted more than a year, the researchers undoubtedly conclude that the antecedents of rural tourist satisfaction have been thoroughly explored as well as brought to the surface previously unknown information. Accordingly, the study's findings emerge to reinforce the relationship of both tourist needs and expectations with satisfaction. At the same time, the fieldwork findings acknowledge the existence of several sub-groups of rural tourists based on their main reason for countryside visitation. In this direction, and unlike previous studies, the ethnographic findings support the fact that there are specific tourists who are driven to the Island's countryside due to (e.g.) their desire to engage in certain and differing activities offered in the rural setting (e.g. cycling or rock climbing). Others pay a visit to the rural areas mainly because they want to experience the authentic side of the destination (e.g., staying in traditional houses and picturesque villages, experience the village lifestyle, come in contact with locals, experience tradition and consume traditional delicacies). Others visit the countryside in order to study the endemic flora and fauna, and others in search for spirituality fulfilment.

Attention grapping is the fact that findings support an association of the rural tourists' expectations with the reason for countryside visitation. For instance, those which are driven to the countryside mainly in order to engage in a cycling experience are found to share similar expectations related to everything associated with the offering of the particular activity. In more detail, they share analogous expectations in regards to the availability and level of relevant infrastructure (e.g. cycling routes) and

services offered at the rural destination. Consequently, these findings aid in the creation of vital recommendations for those involved (e.g. hosts) in the rural tourist satisfaction process, primarily in terms of focusing on the quality provision of such products and services which will cover the needs and expectations of all (emphasis added) rural tourists, whatever the reason behind their countryside visitation. This will in turn result in the avoidance of any unfavourable impacts on tourist satisfaction achievement. Nonetheless, the same ethnographic study reveals the importance of those unexpected pleasing events/occurrences (e.g. hospitableness portrayed by hosts) in the process of fostering tourist satisfaction and positive future behavioural intentions. On the other hand, any uncontrollable external factors (e.g. climatic conditions) may interfere in the process of satisfying the guest. For this reason, the destination is advised to proactively inform (if possible) the guests on such occurrences. Such information will help adjust the guest's expectations before he/she engages in a countryside experience.

That said, the outcome of this particular study gives weight to the likelihood of novel information surfacing in regards to the tourist satisfaction process provided that similar ethnographic techniques are employed by other future researchers.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to examine whether ethnographic techniques may lend a hand to the exploration of the tourist satisfaction antecedents, otherwise known as tourist needs and expectations. For this reason the researchers reviewed case studies from different global settings as well as took into consideration the fresh findings of an ethnographic study undertaken in Cyprus which attempted to holistically investigate rural tourist satisfaction. The authors indisputably conclude that the aforementioned techniques may not only profoundly explore the antecedents of satisfaction, but most importantly bring to the surface unknown and novel findings with regards to the tourist satisfaction process. As a result, the authors encourage other investigators in the respective field to make use of such techniques to explore the tourist satisfaction process due to its associated rich and rewarding results.

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