The Superior Destination Experience

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Abstract

Offering a desirable tourist experience is significant for destinations' success. Although tourist experiences have been analysed in different settings, there is still scant research on which experiential characteristics make a superior destination. This study compares superior and inferior destinations based on 20 experiential attributes. 500 respondents were requested to rate these attributes based on their best and worst destination experiences. Paired sample t-test results revealed that all attributes were rated significantly higher for superior destinations. Yet, the range of means suggests that some destination attributes might be considered more powerful than others in describing the experience continuum. Various suggestions for DMOs and stakeholders were discussed.

Keywords: Tourist Experience, Destination Management, Destination Benchmarking, Destination Competitiveness

Introduction

As destinations became increasingly accessible, the competition intensified and offering a desirable experience become a major competitive advantage for destinations (Crouch & Ritchie, 2005). Hence destinations would be more successful if they would be able to understand experiential components of their offerings. A stream of research has already explored experiences in different settings (hotels, attractions, theme parks, cruises, restaurants) however the overall tourist experiences in destinations have been neglected. Limited research analysed destination experiences from psychological, social or anthropological perspective and usually tried to describe tourists' experiences without clearly identifying the supply side of the issue (e.g. Kim, 2010). These outcome oriented measures used subjective scales and do not adequately represent a practical way of analysing travelers' destination experience. The data required for these measures are also not easily available without a sophisticated system for data collection.

Majority of these studies have considered positive experiences in destinations whereas negative experiences have also been overlooked (Cetin & Walls, 2016). Measuring positive and negative experiences in destinations and comparing the two for supra- and infra- destinations would be considered as a more holistic approach. This paper sets out to look at experiences from a broader and more holistic perspective by exploring characteristics of destinations, that relate to tourist experiences. While doing so it also aims to identify what differentiates a superior destination experience from an inferior one.

Literature Review

Various destination attributes (i.e. pull) and personal factors (i.e. push) might have an impact on quality of experiences in destinations (Gunn, 1988). Notwithstanding the crucial role of all destination features and the 'sensescapes' they provide (Agapito, Mendes, & Valle, 2013),

visitors play, in fact, an active role in producing their own experiences (Kostenholz, Carneiro & Eusebio, 2015). Thus interacting with different elements in the destination tourists co-create their subjective experiences. Mill and Morrison (1985) list attractions, facilities, infrastructure, transportation and hospitality as basic pull components of a destination. According to Huang and Hsu (2009) the nature of participation, emotions and personality also affect the way the experience is lived and remembered in destinations. Corroborating with this, Kim (2010) for example identified involvement, hedonism, happiness, pleasure, relaxation, stimulation, refreshment, social interaction, adventure, personal relevance, novelty, escaping pressure and intellectual cultivation as basic experiential push factors for tourists.

According to Arnould and Price (1993) the peak experience emerges when experiencing something unique, unexpected and has a surprise dimension into it. Quan & Wang (2004) however argues a positive experience is only possible if the peak experience is accompanied by supporting experiences. Hence the total experience quality in a destination depends both on peak and supporting experiences. Destination image, infra-structure, quality of tourism services, local food (Quan & Wang, 2004), natural and cultural attractions (Kim and Brown, 2012), safety and security, cleanliness, climate, value for money, accessibility, crowdedness (Haywood & Muller, 1988), availability of information, variety of activities and liveliness (Kim, 2014), authenticity, quality of service staff, hospitality of locals (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2016), shopping alternatives, relaxation, entertainment and night life (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009), are identified as main factors affecting quality of experiences, emotional attachment (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001), and positive tourist behaviors in destinations (Ozdemir et al., 2012).

Despite valuable contributions on destination experiences no study so far attempted to measure these items based on a comparison between supra- (superior) and infra- (poor) destination experiences. Comparing the differences between desirable and undesirable destinations based on travelers' perspectives might offer important findings to identify the significant qualities that make a positive destination experience.

Methodology

This paper compares experiential characteristics of favorable and unfavorable destinations. Respondents are asked to rate various destination qualities both for their superior and inferior destinations based on previous experiences. A pool of experiential items has been created based on the literature (30 attributes) and were refined during an expert panel of three scholars. Seven attributes were either removed or merged with other items during this phase. For example scenery was considered under natural attractions and prices were merged with value for money. Information provision was also merged with quality of tourist services; night-life with entertainment; peacefulness with relaxation during the peer discussion. The instrument was then pilot tested on 30 respondents to improve validity of items used. Three attributes were further removed or merged based on their loadings during this stage. For example, crowdedness received a lower rating with a large standard deviation, meaning this item is perceived both positive and negative by the respondents. Transportation network and public transportation were also perceived under accessibility and created confusion. Thus removed from the item pool. At the end of these refinement processes the final version of questionnaire included 20 destination attributes.

Data collection took seven weeks in September – October 2016 in Istanbul, local tourists were approached at well known attractions of the city as well as domestic arrivals of two international airports. The screening criteria used for the surveys were being older than 18 years and to have visited at least one destination within the past year for leisure purposes. A total of 500 surveys were collected. 29 surveys were eliminated because of missing data and "ja" saying bias and a total of 471 surveys were included in data analysis. Respondents were requested to rate their best and worst leisure destinations based on their experiences on a Likert scale. Some demographic (e.g. gender, age, marital status) and tripographic (e.g. frequency of travel)

information were also requested. In order to identify which experiential attributes have significant differences between supra- and infra- destinations a paired sample t-test was utilized. The findings are discussed in the next section.

Findings

258 of the respondents were male, 228 were between 22 to 31 years of age. Most of them were single (240) and had a university degree (437). They might also be considered as experienced travelers taking a leisure trip at least twice in a year (283). Concerning the results of the paired sample t-test comparing the mean ratings of supra- and infra destinations; supra destinations scored significantly (p<0.01) higher on all attributes identified with varying degrees. These are depicted on table 1.

Table 1. Differences between supra- and infra- destinations

Attribute	Supra destination [x̄]	Infra destination [x̄]	Supra[x̄] – Infra[x̄]
Tourist services	4,26	2,64	1,62**
Variety of activities	4,11	2,63	1,48**
Service staff	4,02	2,59	1,43**
Entertainment	4,17	2,75	1,42**
Infra-structure	4,30	2,92	1,38**
Cleanliness	4,37	3,03	1,34**
Lively environment	4,12	2,93	1,19**
Natural attractions	4,45	3,36	1,09**
Cultural attractions	4,17	3,08	1,09**
Local food	3,94	2,89	1,05**
Safety & security	4,32	3,30	1,02**
Authenticity	3,74	2,76	0,98**
Reputation	4,59	3,61	0,98**
Shopping alternatives	4,00	3,05	0,95**
Relaxing environment	4,18	3,26	0,92**
Climate	4,43	3,60	0,83**
Local hospitality	3,92	3,16	0,76**
Value for money	3,65	3,15	0,50**
Accessibility	3,69	3,31	0,38**
Behavior			
Loyalty	4,58	2,07	2,51**
Recommendation	4,53	2,22	2,31**
Overall experience	4,50	2,41	2,09**
Satisfaction	4,40	2,43	1,97**

** Significant at p<0.01 level

As displayed on table 1, all items rated higher for supra- destinations than infra- destinations. Yet the mean differences of some items are noteworthy. Tourist services (1.62), variety of activities (1.48), service staff (1,43), entertainment (1.42), infra-structure (1.38) and cleanliness (1.34) had the highest mean difference among supra- and infra- destinations. On the other hand, the gaps between accessibility (0.38), value for money (0.50), local hospitality (0.76), climate (0.83) and relaxing environment (0.92) were the lowest between supra- and infra- destinations. As expected, respondents were also significantly more likely to be loyal (2.51), recommend (2.31), have a positive overall experience (2.09) and satisfied (1.97) from supra- destinations than infra- destinations.

Discussions

Tourist experiences do not occur in a vacuum and requires a great deal of planning at the destination level and within the individual services in the destination. This study explores the experiential attributes of destinations based on a comparison between travelers' experiences in supra- and infra- destinations. Previous studies do not offer such a distinction. Understanding what makes superior destinations different than inferior destinations have important implications. By comparing superior and inferior destination experiences this paper offers valuable empirical findings as to the experiential dimensions that create the difference.

All experiential destination attributes identified in this study received significantly higher mean ratings for supra- destinations than infra-destinations. Thus these items might be used by destination managers and individual service suppliers to offer a holistic experience and to benchmark other destinations. Scholars might also use the experiential items offered in this study for future research on destination competitiveness and tourist experience. The findings might also be used in positioning and design of marketing communications for destinations. Although all of them were significant; the difference was higher in some attributes than others. Tourist services, variety of activities, service staff, entertainment, infra-structure and cleanliness had the highest mean difference and can be interpreted as the most important items that differentiate superior from poor destinations. Importance of tourist services, variety of activities (e.g. Kim, 2014), service staff, entertainment, infra-structure and cleanliness (e.g. Haywood & Muller, 1988) have also been discussed in the literature.

Accessibility, value for money, local hospitality, climate and relaxing environment were identified as items with the lowest difference. Literature also confirms that tourists are willing to travel far and pay more for desirable experiences (e.g. Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). The climate in the destination might also be ignored by tourists for positive experiences (i.e. Ice Hotel in Kiruna). Although local hospitality and relaxing environment were also mentioned as important items in the literature (e.g. Kim, 2010) and there were significant differences among supra- and infra- destinations on these attributes, the range of difference were among the lowest. This might be attributed to structure of the sample which were local travelers. Local hospitality and relaxation might be rated higher by international travelers.

Concerning tourist behaviors, intention to return and recommend, level of satisfaction and quality of experience were rated significantly different and higher for supra- than infra-destinations. This, supports current literature that regards experiences as antecedents of loyalty and recommendation (e.g. Lugosi & Walls, 2013).

Tourist experience might differ based on individual characteristics and spatial environment. Thus experiences are personal and context specific. Although respondents were asked to rate their best and worst destinations, the structure of the sample might have influenced results. A cultural tourist might look for different experiential clues in a destination than a sunlust tourist. According to Ooi (2005) subjective nature of experiences and difficulties with standardizing environmental factors makes it challenging to create same level of experiences for everyone at each time. Yet a general diagnostic tool such as attributes offered in this study might still be used to measure the experiential potential of a destination.

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