

4 Experiential components of tour guiding in package tours

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The objectives of this chapter are to:

- Identify experiential components of guiding in package tours and measure their impact on tourist satisfaction;
- Determine and examine the role of tour guides and the contribution of guide's interpretation to the tourist experience and satisfaction;
- Identify experiential items of guided package tours on satisfaction and experience based on survey data informed by a qualitative phase;
- Explore the most salient guiding attributes among 26 experiential guiding items;
- Suggest practical implications for tour operator operations, guiding associations' certification, educational institutions' curricula and theoretical implications for experience and tourism literature.

Keywords: Guide experience, customer experience, tourist experience, tour guides, package tours, professional guides.

Introduction

Customer experience has been discussed as an important factor for organizational success. Positive experiences have the potential to create loyal customers and hence are acknowledged as a source of competitive advantage (Cetin et al., 2014). Organizational strategies have also evolved aiming to provide customer experiences rather than merely selling products and services (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The evolution of customer experiences is more evident in the tourism industry (Karayilan & Cetin, 2016). Various research studies have confirmed that positive memorable experiences correlate with positive tourist behaviors (Buonincontri et al., 2017). Tourism is also defined as travelling for experiencing something different, escaping daily routines, living temporarily in a novel time and space, and a quest for the extraordinary (MacCannell, 1973).

Increasing welfare and growing economies make people financially richer but often poorer in time. Yet, fast changing lifestyles, intense work loads, the desire to award oneself and increasing expectations of people about using their scarce spare time more effectively result in travelers to seek experiential activities (Cetin, 2012). One of these experiential products in tourism are package tours. Guided package tours offer customers the chance to experience different destinations in a time effective and convenient way, and include major tourism services (e.g. lodging, transportation, sight-seeing, food and beverage). These package tours are also usually accompanied by a local (guide) who leads the way while informing the tourists (Mintel, 2010; Ryan, 1995; Sheldon & Mak, 1987). Mediated by a guide, package tours remove cultural and language barriers, striking a desirable balance between cultural exploration and familiarity. Experienced in the local way of doing things and familiar with the local itinerary, tour guides therefore are important front-line employees in organized package tours shaping tourist experiences in a destination (Wang et al., 2000). Guides' mediatory or interpretation roles and skills help tourists acquire unique and memorable experiences from the guided tour as well as from the destination. These positive experiences also play an important role in promotion of the destination through word of mouth (Cetin & Yarcan, 2017). As cultural brokers, guides also bring cultures together and minimize cultural distance.

Despite the importance of guides in the tourism system, their roles in creating positive tourist experiences have been neglected in the literature. Because package tours include various other tourism services they also offer a suitable background to study overall tourist experiences.

This study attempts to first identify experiential components of guiding in package tours through in-depth interviews with guided package tour participants. After these experiential items are identified, their importance and impact on satisfaction is measured using a questionnaire. The background of the study begins with defining the concept of customer experience and its importance, then tourist experiences are discussed and package tours and guides' role in tourist experiences are explored in the third section. Methodology describes the qualitative and quantitative stages of data collection, sampling and analysis. Findings and implications are discussed in the final two sections.

Customer experiences

Customer experiences have been approached from several dimensions in the literature. An experience can be defined as the fact or state of having been affected by an event or a stimulus which is subjectively unique, extraordinary, memorable, and that creates a desire to be shared by others (Aho, 2001; Arnould & Price, 1993; Merriam & Webster, 1993; Oh, Fiore & Jeoung, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999). Furthermore, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) discuss the concept of experience as personal events defined as "the state filled with emotion". According to Schmitt (1999), experiences are private events that occur in response to stimulation and that involve the entire being as a result of observing and participating in an event. Yuan & Wu (2008) defined the concept of experience as an ultimate outcome gained by consumers as a result of consuming the product and service. Experience is also defined as the positive emotional state of customers after having any sensation or knowledge acquisition resulting from some level of interaction with different elements of a context created by a service provider (Gupta & Vajic, 1999).

The markets are also discussed to be transforming from physical products and services to experiences. Pine & Gilmore (1999) offered the concept of the experience economy which replaced the delivery-focus of traditional rational approaches, with a customer-focused experiential hedonic perspective. Explaining the customer behavior better, experiential marketing became a popular approach in marketing literature (Tsai, 2005). As a result, trying to reach and keep customers with traditional marketing methods started to lose importance and experiential marketing gained popularity. Customer experiences were categorised into four realms: education, escape, entertainment and esthetics (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Organizations offering such features in their products and services create memorable experiences. These experiences in turn emotionally connect the customer to the brand and transform them into loyal customers (Williams & Buswell, 2003).