Researching destination experiences: Themes, perspectives and challenges

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Abstract:

This paper reviews and synthesises multi-disciplinary research on destination experiences and outlines some of the future challenges facing researchers and practitioners. The paper is split into four main parts: the first reviews social scientific conceptualisations of consumption and consumer experiences; the second considers marketing and management perspectives; and the third focuses specifically on consumption experiences in destination settings. The final part examines the challenges for future research and identifies three critical sets of issues: the first concerns matters of scale and focus when conceptualising and examining destination experiences; the second deals with the various and seemingly incompatible conceptual and methodological approaches required to explore destination experiences; and the third concerns the increasing necessity to recognise complexity in terms of understanding the various stakeholders, processes and practices and their interactions, which shape destination experiences.

1. Introduction

Academics over the past two decades have paid considerable attention to tourism and leisure experiences, examining its different dimensions (Quinlan, Cutler & Carmichael, 2010; Uriely, 2005; Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011), diverse approaches to its study (Morgan, Lugosi, & Ritchie, 2010; Ryan, 2010; Sharpley & Stone, 2011, 2012) and the relevance of the experiential paradigm for conceptualising tourism (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009; Scott, Laws, & Boksberger, 2009; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). Researchers have also begun to examine the relevance of this approach to the marketing and management of destinations (Hudson & Ritchie, 2009; Morgan, Elbe, & de Esteban, 2009). Arguably, the notion of experience creation and promotion has always been central to destination marketing practices; however, it has also been suggested that there are opportunities for greater engagement with the experiential paradigm in terms of considering touristic experiences in destinations (Morgan et al., 2009; 2010; Morgan, 2010).

The aim of this special issue is to broaden current understanding of the potential interactions between the experiential paradigm and the marketing and management of destinations. More specifically, the authors have sought to examine how different processes and actors interact to shape destination experiences. This editorial sets out to provide the conceptual context for the special issue as a whole, whilst also raising a number of areas of contention that may influence future research on destination experiences.

2. Conceptualising consumption experiences

There is an established body of work that considers experiential consumption, including various conceptions of experiences (Carù & Cova, 2003) and its different dimensions (Knutson, Beck, Kim, & Cha, 2009). It is generally agreed that experiences involve the stimulation of multiple senses (Agapito, Mendes, & Valle, 2013) and the body may be caught up in the process in multiple ways, for example as people physically see, hear, feel, smell, and taste. The display of tourists' bodies, or their labour, may also contribute to the experiences of the individual concerned and of others in the consumption environment (Andrews, 2005, 2009; Crouch & Desforges, 2003; Everett, 2008; Lugosi, 2008, 2009, 2014). Experiences involve a flow of feelings and thoughts (Carlson, 1997) that take place during encounters with and thus responses to experience dimensions, which may include physical surroundings, social surroundings and other consumers.

At the heart of experience is emotion and hedonic, rather than simply rational, consumption. This is linked, in part at least, to the decision-making process, which may involve, but cannot be reduced to, the pursuit of utility; nor can it be considered a purely cognitive process (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The sensations and feelings that evoke affective responses are understood to be central to consumer decision making, experiences, and the outcomes of those experiences (Addis & Holbrook, 2001). Therefore, the consumer experience is not necessarily driven simply by utilitarian motives, in that it intended to meet some particular need, but may also be associated with feelings of desire and joy (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). At the same time, it is also important to recognise that some experiences may be negative and may provoke negative emotions (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994).

The hedonic and affective nature of consumption is linked to involvement and investment (Arnould & Price, 1993; Ryan, 2010). Consumers become personally and emotionally engaged in consumption experiences: constructing and articulating notions of individual and collective identities through their consumption (Firat & Dholakia, 1998; Lugosi, 2008). Consequently, experiences also offer ways to generate and express feelings of belonging to groups, networks, or communities. Consumers may also be required to invest in developing particular skills and competencies in order to participate in the consumer experience (Ford & Heaton, 2001; Lugosi, 2008, 2009), and the experiences themselves may be transformative, in that they offer scope for growth. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all experiences, and not all aspects of experiences, are extraordinary or memorable: any experience is likely to include elements that are mundane and functional (Carù & Cova, 2003; Quan & Wang, 2004).

Experiences also have a significant spatial dimension, which may be conceptualised in a number of ways. More specifically, we may think of the interaction of the consumer with the physical environment (Bitner, 1990, 1992), but we may also recognise that spaces may be virtual, symbolic, or a combination of the three (Griffin & Hayllar, 2009; O'Dell, 2005, Li, 2000; McClinchey & Carmichael, 2010; McIntyre, 2009). Consumers also engage with different spaces in diverse ways at various stages of their experiences. Places are presented to consumers, prior to physical encounters, as experiential contexts not only for escape, liminoid consumption and discovery, but also for experiencing familiarity, safety, home and hospitality (O'Dell & Billing, 2005; Shields, 1991). Within consumption settings, consumers encounter a range of sensations and emotions, informing decisions to approach or avoid (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) and invest in or detach from the experience (Aubert-Gamet, 1997; Lugosi, 2009, 2014). Places are also points of recall, and people attempt to reconnect with the experiences of them through photography (Lury, 1998), souvenirs (Ferdinand & Williams, 2010) and various forms of verbal and on/offline textual representations (Beaven & Laws, 2007; Morgan, 2008; Moscardo, 2010; Watson, Morgan, & Hemmington, 2008). Moreover, by engaging in acts of recollection and representation, particularly in virtual spaces, consumers engage with and create new experiential spaces where they can reflect upon, re-imagine and, to some extent, re-experience, whilst establishing new desires and motivations (Lugosi, Janta, & Watson, 2012; Morgan, 2008; Watson et al., 2008; Woodside, Cruickshank, & Dehuang, 2007). Most destinations see this played out through the taking of photos and videos, and the purchase of souvenirs. These coexisting notions of (physical, virtual and symbolic) space are particularly important when considering destination experiences because "destination" implies a location, which become the object of future desire and the context of actual touristic experience, as well as the subject of post-trip recollections.

The experiential perspective does not, however, focus exclusively on the consumption experience itself, treating it as a discrete event. Rather, it recognises that consumption may begin before the event, prior to consumer encounters with the service environment, organisation or destination, and may continue long after the event has ended (Arnould, Price, & Zinkhan, 2002). Consumers often engage in research and consultation with others prior to the event; they may have fantasies and desires that may be realised in future consumption (Cohen, 2010; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Kim & Jamal, 2007; Pearce, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). After the event, consumers reconstruct their experiences through stories (Moscardo, 2010) and visual representations (Prebensen, 2007), often with or to others (Hsu, Dehuang, & Woodside, 2009; Watson et al., 2008; Woodside et al., 2007).

Lastly, and importantly for any subsequent discussion of destination experiences, it is useful to consider the differences between consumer and consumption experiences. Researchers have distinguished between different consumption types (i.e. market, state, household or communal; see Edgall & Hetherington, 1996) and between market and non-market conceptions of consumption practices (Carù & Cova, 2003). In short, it has been argued that people may participate in a variety of consumption experiences, involving vastly different stakeholders and relationships, which are not directly market-driven or are defined through market relationships; nor are all aspects of consumption experiences subject to management and organisation by commercial agencies. Within a tourism destination, not all encounters with objects, places or people are market-driven or conducted within the realms of commercial transactions: indeed, consumption may be a form of resistance, as tourists seek authentic experiences. However, it is also important to acknowledge that consumption can rarely be considered completely in isolation from market relationships (Carù & Cova, 2003; Kozinets, 2002). This conceptual distinction is useful when considering why and how researchers attempt to examine destination experiences: whether it is from a social scientific or management/marketing perspective.

3. Consumption experiences: Marketing and management perspectives

As with notions of experience/experiential consumption, experience management (Gilmore & Pine, 2002; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999) and experiential marketing (O'Sullivan & Spangler, 1998; Schmitt, 1999) have also been examined in considerable detail. Experiential marketing and the related concept of consumer experience management emerged as a paradigm in response to a number of market forces and developments, which can be summarised as a more informed, sophisticated, affluent and, thus, demanding consumer base; the omnipresence of information technology, which drives competition and innovation; the growing integration of consumption practices with technology and entertainment; increased competition between leisure and service providers and the growing importance of brands and branding in this competitive environment (Knutson, Beck, Kim, & Cha, 2006; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999, 2003). These forces have driven organisations to avoid differentiating themselves with respect to factors such as price and to focus instead on the experiential aspects of their service offerings (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003, 2004; Schmitt, 1999, 2003).

The experience management paradigm draws on the principles of theatre and drama in its attempts to conceptualise the staging and orchestration of consumer-organisation encounters (Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2002; Gilmore & Pine, 2002; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). Berry et al. (2002) outlined two sets of cues that are necessary for managing consumers' "experience journeys". One set concerns the actual functionality of the product or service; the other comprises emotional cues, which stem from things or people in the environment that are perceived by the senses. Furthermore, Carbone and Haeckel (1994) described two types of context cue that can and should be managed by the service or experience providers: mechanics and humanics. Mechanics are generated by things such as sights, smells, tastes, sounds and textures: for example, landscaping, textures, lobby music, etc. It has been argued that a wide variety of consumer behaviours and evaluations are influenced by atmospheric variables (Bitner, 1992; Hoffman & Turley, 2002; Turley & Milliman, 2000). In other words, physical environments impact upon employees' and consumers' behaviour, including their interactions and behaviour toward each other (Schmitt, 1999, 2003).

In addition to mechanics are humanics, which Carbone and Haeckel argue 'are engineered by defining and choreographing the desired behaviour of employees and customers involved in the customer encounter (1994, p.13). In other words, humanics portrays how employees make consumers or tourists feel. Often, this process is not managed or is implicitly delegated to employees who have not been selected for or trained in the highly perceptive skills needed to anticipate and react appropriately to customer needs and desires in a service encounter (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994). Arguably, these skills, often required of the least well-compensated employees, are critical to creating positive and memorable consumer/tourist experiences.

The experience management perspective stresses that the mechanics and humanics of organisation-consumer and consumer-consumer interactions should be carefully designed, integrated and managed to ensure an emotional connection, loyalty and satisfaction (Pullman & Gross, 2004; Schmitt; 1999, 2003; Yuan & Wu, 2008). According to Gilmore and Pine (2002), the key to creating memorable encounters lies not in improving the functionality of a service, but rather in layering an enjoyable experience on top of an existing service. Stated another way, memorable guest, consumer or visitor experiences are achieved when an organisation engages individual customers in an inherently personal way.

Over the past decade, experiential marketing and experience management perspectives have faced a number of critiques and been subject to revision. These perspectives have been critiqued for their uncritical cultural hegemony, for their production-centricity, which places excessive emphasis on staging and orchestrating, for their standardising discourse and for their tendency to treat consumers as passive (Holbrook, 2001; Morgan, 2010; Ritzer, 2004). Revised perspectives have placed greater emphasis on acknowledging and harnessing consumer co-creation (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Morgan, 2010; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003, 2004) and emphasising the uniqueness and authenticity of organisations and their experiential offerings (Pine & Gilmore, 2008). These principles of experience management are increasingly being adopted by academics working in the fields of tourism (Ek, Larsen, Hornskov, & Mansfeldt, 2008; Mossberg, 2008; MacLeod, Hayes, & Slater, 2009; Pikkemaat, Peters, Boksberger, & Secco, 2009), hospitality (Lugosi, 2008, 2009, 2014; Shaw, Bailey, & Williams, 2011), leisure (Morgan et al., 2010) and events (Morgan, 2008) as a way to conceptualise consumer experiences and the processes involved in their management.

4. Consumption experiences in destination settings

Tourism destinations face challenges that are similar to those of other service organisations, i.e. increased competition both from other destinations and other forms of leisure/non-leisure expenditures, the growing dominance of branding and the growing role of technology leading to innovation and greater competition (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011; Pike, 2004, 2008; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Wang & Pizam, 2011). These challenges operate within and interact with a broader set of market, social, economic, political and environmental forces (Fyall, Garrod, & Wang, 2012; Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica, & O'Leary, 2006). Moreover, tourism, like many other service sectors, is characterised by purchases of the intangible, along with heterogeneity and the inseparability of production and consumption (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). Destination experiences are composed of purchased tangible components, such as hotel accommodations and transportation. However, the tangible component is not actually purchased in the traditional sense; instead, tourists use the product for a period of time. This interaction between tourists and the tangible place, as well as the interaction between tourists and the destination's inhabitants and fellow tourists, provide the core of tourist experiences.

It is important to recognise that a destination cannot wholly orchestrate visitor experiences: at best, destinations and those charged with destination marketing and management can influence only a relatively small part of the overall environment and the circumstances in which consumers can have experiences (Ek et al., 2008; Mossberg, 2007). It is the consumer or tourist who brings together the resources to produce the tourism experience (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Morgan et al., 2009). The experiences that consumers encounter occur inside the person, and the outcomes or consumption experiences depend on how the consumer, based on a specific situation or state of mind, reacts to the staged or non-staged encounter (Csikszentmihályi, 1990; Mossberg, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Wang, 2002). Importantly, consumers are co-producers, who actively build their own consumption experiences through the interaction between the environment, organisations, employees, locals and other consumers (Andersson, 2007; Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2003, 2004; Lugosi, 2008, 2009, 2014).

Finally, any consideration of destination experiences has to acknowledge that, due to the broad range of experiences that tourists encounter travelling to, from and within destinations, they engage in numerous non-market-related interactions (Carù & Cova, 2003; Edgall & Hetherington, 1996; Walls & Wang, 2011). For example, tourists partaking in local cultural activities or engaging with multiple spatial contexts and other tourists have experiences that operate outside of market-related practices. Those responsible for destination marketing and management may have few opportunities to control and influence these aspects of the destination experience, a fact which reinforces the limits of adopting an overly narrow experience management perspective in conceptualising them.

5. Challenges and issues for destination experience research

It is within the context of the issues outlined above that this special issue is located. The papers raise several sets of issues. The first concerns matters of scale and focus when conceptualising and examining destination experiences; the second deals with the various and seemingly incompatible conceptual and methodological approaches required to explore destination experiences; and the third concerns the increasing necessity to recognise complexity in terms of understanding the various stakeholders, processes and practices and their interactions, which shape destination experiences.

The notion of scale refers, here, to two related issues: the scale at which certain phenomena exist (e.g. from the micro realms of tourists visiting a particular destination and interacting, to the macro level of global flows of tourists moving between places and destinations) and the scale at which researchers conceptualise phenomena (which is sometimes portrayed as existing on a continuum, moving from the micro level of the human body at one end to the globe at the other) (see Gregory et al., 2009; Marston, Jones, & Woodward, 2005). Arguably the first conception of scale is determined by the second, and many contemporary theorists have sought to move beyond this divide and see space relationally: in terms of flows and networks (Jones, 2009; Jones, Woodward, & Marston, 2007; Marston, Jones, & Woodward, 2005). However, for the moment, it is useful to consider existing research of destination experiences, which often operates at specific scales and adopts vastly different foci.

A related set of questions concerns the focus and underpinning conceptualisation of both the notion of destination and tourism experiences, which varies in the literature (see Quinlan Cutler and Carmichael, 2010 for a lengthier discussion of differing conceptions of tourism experiences; and Bødker and Browning, 2012, Framke, 2002, Saraniemi and Kylänen, 2011, regarding destinations). Broadly, the focus of inquiry may be on the agents, agencies and processes involved in the construction of touristic experiences. This may be from a production-centric, marketing and management perspective (Larson, Lundberg & Lexhagen, 2013; Walls & Wang, 2011) or a consumption perspective (Andrews, 2005, 2009), although social scientists recognise that this divide may be somewhat misleading, as the consumption of space and experience is in itself a form of production (Andrews, 2005, 2009; Cuthill, 2007; Lugosi, 2009, 2014). Research focus may consider antecedent factors influencing future experiences (Ryan, 2002), which may again be considered from a number of different disciplinary perspectives, for example psychology (Larsen, 2007), sociology (Cohen, 2010) or economics (Andersson, 2007). Research may also focus on the outcome of specific aspects of transactions, for example, on meaning (Ziakas & Boukas, 2013), evidence of emotional components (Hosany & Gilbert, 2010), satisfaction (Chen, Lehto, & Choi, 2009; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005; Räikkönen & Honkanen, 2013) or various aspects of future behavioural intention (Prayag, Hosany, & Odeh, 2013).

Much of the literature on servicescapes and experience management is aimed at the level of individual behaviour and organisational practice (Berry et al., 2002; Bitner, 1992). Arguably, many studies of destination experiences operate at this level (see Garrod, 2008). Within this special issue, Houge Mackenzie and Kerr (2013) consider how interactions and relationships among guides shape their willingness and ability to perform guiding work and Ziakas and Boukas (2013) explore how individuals engage with and interpret their experiences of the Limassol Carnival. By focusing on the nuances of personal experiences through qualitative methods, these studies offer marketers and researchers invaluable insights regarding the emotional, psychological and interpersonal dimensions of experience co-creation.

In contrast, Räikkönen and Honkanen (2013) and Prayag et al. (2013) adopt depersonalised, quantitative approaches and conceptualise experiences through different levels of abstraction to Ziakas and Boukas’ (2013) and Houge Mackenzie and Kerr’s (2013) phenomenological studies. Prayag et al. (2013) consider destinations as a combination of services and organisations as they examine the relationship between satisfaction, emotional experiences and behavioural intentions. Räikkönen and Honkanen (2013) consider tourist experiences in terms of an assembled package of components and examine how different components influence satisfaction. In short, these studies conceptualise destinations and the factors shaping tourist experiences as amalgamations:

essentially, broader and more clearly delineated, concrete entities than experiences as processes and agencies of creation.

The challenge in respect of exploring destination experiences is, therefore, epistemological as well as methodological. A significant complexity is that the different scales of analysis and the differences in conceptions of both the destination and the components of the touristic experience appear incompatible. In part, this incompatibility reflects and reproduces well-established divides between different disciplines which rely on vastly different conceptions of the world (see also O'Dell, 2007). Overlaps and recurring themes do appear, but distinctions are reflected in differing conceptions of tourist experiences, for example, among those adopting psychological (Larsen, 2007), anthropological (Selstad, 2007), marketing (Mossberg, 2007), economic (Andersson, 2007) and geographical (Ek et al., 2008) perspectives.

The incompatibility of these approaches is also reflected in the eclectic methods and methodologies employed in tourism destination experience research. Studies utilise an array of approaches, including autoethnographic (Houge Mackenzie & Kerr, 2013; Scarles, 2010; Wright, 2010), ethnographic and observational methods (Andrews, 2005, 2009; Lugosi, 2008, 2009, 2014; Palmer, 2005), visual methods (Coshall, 2000; Garrod, 2008; Gilhespy & Harris, 2010; Prebensen, 2007), netnographic and various forms of investigative Internet research (Lugosi, et al., 2012; Mkono, 2012; Woodside et al., 2007) and a variety of elicitation techniques within qualitative and case study strategies (Chan, 2009; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2010; Guthro, 2011; Larson et al., 2013; Middleton, 2011; Ziakas & Boukas, 2013). This is in addition to more traditional survey-based, quantitative approaches (see Chen et al., 2009; Hosany & Gilbert, 2010; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007; Prayag et al., 2013; Räikkönen & Honkanen, 2013).

Researchers have begun to integrate a range of technologies, such as mobile communication devices, Global Positioning Systems and Geographical Information Systems, in examining tourist activities and mobilities in and across destinations (Bødker & Browning, 2012; Wang, Xiang, & Li, 2013; Zakrisson & Zillinger, 2012). Some studies have adopted a "pragmatic" paradigm approach using mixed methods (cf. Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Heimtun & Morgan, 2012; Pansiri, 2005; 2006), but fundamental epistemological differences persist in researchers' attempts to examine the multiplicity of destination experiences through qualitative and case study methods, or to measure the influence or impact of specific components within quantitative studies.

A key set of questions that should be asked concerns how researchers and those directly involved in destination marketing and management conceptualise the challenge of the complexity surrounding destination experience research and how they confront it. Regarding the conceptualisation of the problem and the issue of confronting complexity, it is important to acknowledge the differences in definitions of destinations. Marketing and management practitioners (which includes researchers working in this field) may have a much clearer idea of what geographical locations, services and attractions and businesses are included in their focus and are content with using "destination" as the unit of analysis (Fyall et al., 2012; Bødker, & Browning, 2012; Bornhorst, Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010; Framke, 2002; Morgan et al., 2009; Saraniemi, S. & Kylänen, 2011). This can be contrasted with social scientists, particularly those adopting spatial-performative conceptions with respect to tourist behaviour and to tourism destinations (Bødker & Browning, 2012; Ek et al., 2008; Framke, 2002; Saraniemi & Kylänen, 2011; Van der Duim, Ren, & Jóhannesson, 2012, 2013). More specifically, within this perspective destinations are defined through the movements, mobilities and practices of tourists and are therefore much more fluid in both size and complexity. Linked to this, researchers adopting an actor-network theory (ANT) methodology attempt to examine destinations and touristic experiences through the different (human and non-human) actors or actants, actions, processes and relationships through which things come into being. An ANT approach thus considers the different actors and actants; how the networks and interactions of actants produce knowledge and perform agency, leading to outcomes; how different human and non-human actors and actants are enrolled and the outcomes of those interactions, productions and performances (Latour, 2005; Lugosi & Erdélyi, 2009; Ren, 2010; Van der Duim, 2007; Van der Duim et al., 2012, 2013).

Adopting an ANT perspective offers a number of opportunities. First, following from the points raised previously, it enables analysis to move beyond specific scales (Jones, 2009; Jones, Woodward, & Marston, 2007; Marston, Jones, & Woodward, 2005). Second, such approaches are directly informed by actual touristic practices; and third, they provide nuanced, context-specific understandings of the embodied practices, spaces and stakeholders involved in tourist experiences and how those practices construct notions of destination. However, it is important to acknowledge that such complex and dynamic conceptions of destinations and destination experiences may be unpalatable to practitioners or policy makers who require clarity in their decision making with regard to the geographic, economic and political boundaries involved.

Technology presents another set of challenges and opportunities regarding the conceptions and examination of destination experiences. Technology is increasingly being used to enhance destination experiences (Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2012), and can be used to gather information regarding tourists' movements and service usage within destinations, as well as touristic representations of destination experiences through social media (Bødker & Browning, 2012; Çakmak & Isaac, 2012; Wang et al., 2013; Zakrisson & Zillinger, 2012). Contemporary conceptions of and fixations with "big data" and its associated technologies can undoubtedly generate useful information for destination marketing and management organisations (Davis & Patterson, 2012; Wang et al., 2013). However, that raises ethical issues concerning consent, data protection, individual rights to privacy and the storage of information in large centralised data houses (Davis & Patterson, 2012). The use of technology-produced (big) data also raises questions concerning the availability of appropriate expertise among the broad sets of stakeholders, including small- and medium-sized enterprises, which are involved in constructing destination experiences to deploy technologies and to effectively analyse the information. The desire to utilise such technologies and techniques may encourage collaboration among destination marketing and management organisations, various commercial practitioners and academics. However it may also lead to certain forms of intellectual division among different stakeholder groups adopting contrasting approaches and to market exclusion for stakeholders unable to utilise such technologies and expertise.

The growing fascination with technology and associated gathering and interpretation of data also raises questions surrounding the legitimacy of "small data", which in this context is used to refer to qualitative data, often generated through inductive methods. There is a danger that commercial and policy decisions will continue to rely on large data sets and quantifiable indicators. As noted above, the notion of mixed methods research and a pragmatic paradigm has emerged as a legitimate way to integrate qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Heimtun & Morgan, 2012; Pansiri, 2005; 2006). However, the challenge for future research will be to maintain a sense of methodological pluralism and to recognise the value of diverse approaches in helping to examine different dimensions of destination experiences.

6. Conclusion

Researching destination experiences represents a series of challenges both for practitioners and researchers. Some of these challenges emerge out of well-established debates concerning the aim and scope, methodologies and stakeholders of any such research. For example, researchers may question whether enquiry is aimed at exploring processes and agents involved in experience construction and/or management, they may consider meanings attached to the marketing, management or consumption of experiences or they may attempt to measure antecedent factors and outcomes of touristic experiences. The challenge is to maintain a healthy sense of pluralism when examining, from both production and consumption perspectives, the different dimensions and components of destination experiences. Linked to this are emerging questions concerning how to conceptualise tourist experiences, the factors involved in those experiences and the destinations in which those experiences emerge.

There are also important questions concerning the appropriateness of specific methods and methodologies for considering different components, processes or outcomes of experiences. In addition to the utilisation of established research approaches, new techniques are being developed, particularly involving technology. These can help to address a variety of research questions and meet a range of academic and practitioner needs. The challenge for future research in this field will be to refine existing techniques of inquiry, develop new methods and, above all, critically appraise the various approaches as they are used either alone or in combination.

Decisions surrounding which techniques and methods should be deployed are largely determined by issues relating to the different stakeholders involved in destination experience research and their complementary and conflicting motivations and worldviews. For social scientists, examining destination experiences may be an academic, intellectual endeavour with limited practical applications. For practitioners, consultants, policy makers and management-centric academics, destination experience research will be driven by alternative desires: for example, the need to increase demand, generate and extract value, drive efficiency and, ideally, to contribute towards the development of (economically, socially and environmentally) sustainable practice. The different stakeholders and the (in)compatibility of their perspectives will shape destination experience research in the future. Furthermore, where destination experience research does require multi-method, multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder approaches, the challenge will be for these different stakeholder groups to translate the value of their own particular practices and expertise effectively into coherent attempts to understand the multiplicity of destination experiences.

The seven papers included in the special issue reflect one or more of these different perspectives and, thus, highlight more generally the tensions and opportunities involved in addressing specific issues, adopting specific approaches and engaging with different stakeholders. This special issue should, thus, be seen as a catalyst for encouraging further multi-disciplinary research on the multiple dimensions of destination experiences and also to fuel critical debates about the aims, methods and audiences for future research.

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