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ANALYZING MANAGERS' PERCEPTION OF CREATIVITY IN TOURISM

Empirical
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Abstract

The past decades brought new meanings to creativity as the decline of mass tourism created impetus for the emergence of creative behavior as a major source of competitive advantage in the tourism industry. This led, in turn, to the development of a new type of tourism – creative tourism – which translates into new products and services, new collaboration and partnership structures, new forms of organization and ultimately into new experiences for consumers of tourism services. However, there is still no consensus on how creativity manifests itself in tourism and how it can be encouraged in order to generate value-added for the customers. To this aim, a qualitative research was carried out, based on a structured interview applied to managers of tourism operators from various segments of the tourism value chain. Results reveal the differences in approach to encourage creativity among employees, bring value-added to the customers through creative services, and build a culture based on creative behavior and practices.

Introduction

Creativity, knowledge and access to information are increasingly recognized as drivers of development and economic growth; in turn, tourism is one of the major drivers of creative economy worldwide together with technology and growth in demand for creative products and services (United Nations, 2008). However, the literature on creativity in tourism is scarce and the few authors that undertake research in the field focus on destinations, spaces and cities (Richards, 2011) rather than on individual operators. Thus, the mechanisms through which creativity manifests itself and is enhanced at firm level remain largely unknown. In this context, the current paper aims to shed light on how managers in the field of tourism – including tour-operators, travel agencies and companies in the hospitality industry perceive creativity and encourage it in their own organization. The results of the study presented in this paper offer valuable insight into the issues the private sector in the tourism industry faces in terms of creativity and the solutions to overcome these issues on medium and long term.

1. Creativity and the tourism industry – conceptual clarifications

Over the course of time creativity has been defined in a number of ways. Among the first researchers formulating a scientific definition of creativity is Wertheimer, according to whom creativity means decomposing and deconstructing knowledge regarding an object, person and phenomenon, followed by the reassembly of this knowledge in a completely new form (Wertheimer, 1959, cited by Proctor, 2010).

Research in the field of creativity gain its momentum in the 1950s and 1960s, when J. P. Guilford and E. Paul Torrance started their research into the nature of creativity; they elaborated the first definitions of creativity from a scientific perspective, while looking for new solutions to the evaluation and measurement of creativity (Sternberg, 2006). Torrance (1965) defines creativity as a process consisting of several phases: developing abilities to identify problems, deficiencies and knowledge disparities; identifying these problems, deficiencies and disparities; looking for and finding new methods, means and instruments for solving these problems; testing new solutions and communicating the results to the public.

Two decades later, in 1985, Rickards (cited by Proctor, 2010), defined creativity as a process that implies a personal discovery, partially involuntary, which generates new and relevant observations and knowledge. However, this knowledge should have a specific utility as creativity implies generating ideas which are new, useful, have a specific economic and/or social

value and satisfy a series of needs (Weisberg, 1993; Amabile, 1996). United Nations (2008) provides two perspectives on creativity: on one hand, creativity means formulating new ideas and applying them to produce original works of art and cultural products, functional creations, scientific inventions and technological innovations; on the other hand, creativity also refers to an inner characteristic of individuals to be imaginative and to express ideas which ultimately represent the essence of intellectual capital.

According to Florida (cited by Cruz, 2013), in order to enhance economic growth, places should develop, attract and retain creative people who can stimulate knowledge, technology and innovation, people who belong to the „creative class“. Creativity depends on the ability to generate new, and to organize thoughts, opinions and perceptions in a new manner, making new connections between existing elements, which may generate a different and even better understanding of a situation or subject (Proctor, 2010). The ability to gain new perspectives on things and to find new solutions to problems does not emerge by chance, but is associated to specific cognitive traits such as flexibility, tolerance to ambiguity and lack of predictability, or the propensity to discover things others have little knowledge of (Franken, 1994). Beyond the numerous definitions, it appears that creativity is associated to traits and abilities which differentiate between creators and the rest of the world. According to Addis (2009), creative persons distinguish themselves from the majority of individuals through three characteristics: expertise, including specialized or technical knowledge on a certain field or subject (1), creative thinking illustrated by flexibility and imagination in problem solving (2), and intrinsic motivation (3).

However, creativity also depends on external factors. According to Addis (2009), there is a greater probability to manifest propensity for unconventional “out of the box” thinking in a flexible and open environment, in which the leader rather provides support to creators than dictating a certain way of action. Lubart (cited by Candy and Bilda, 2009) also considers that the creative process is influenced by a multitude of external factors including local culture and value system. For example, creativity is most likely encouraged in individualistic cultures that provide incentives for individual accomplishment. Florida (2002, cited by Cruz, 2013) considers that external factors with a positive influence of creativity are openness, diversity, street culture and environmental quality.

A study conducted by Azoulay et al. (2010) shows that the positive motivation of individuals through tolerance to failure, incentives for individual results and freedom to experiment leads on long term to better results. In contrast, an environment in which individuals are subject to

strict assessments and monitoring discourages creativity since it does not allow failure (Azoulay et al., 2010). This indicates that experiment plays a crucial role in the creative process since initial failures allow individuals to learn from mistakes and find better solutions than those initially proposed. This is not surprising however as, according to Addis (2009), creative ideas appear when misconceptions are eliminated and the creator experiments methods and solutions previously regarded as unlikely, awkward or even unimaginable.

The role of creativity has been discussed by Florida (2002, cited by Cruz, 2013), who considers human creativity as the basis of economic advantages in a territory and a factor of economic growth. A concept related to creativity and that has recently gained attention in the scientific literature is that of creative industry. Caves (2000) defines creative industries as those sectors of the economy that provide products and services following a process of creation. The first state that adopted the definition of creative industries in its national legislation and developed public policies addressed to the creative sector is the United Kingdom. According to the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sports (2008), creative industries are “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property”.

Creative industries are based on talented entrepreneurs and employees, as well as enterprises which exploit the opportunities created by the digital revolution (Amman and Lange, 2013). According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2008), the creative industries are “at the crossroads of the arts, culture, business and technology” and represent the creation, production and distribution of goods and services using intellectual capital as their primary input. There is still a debate over the range of industries that may be regarded as creative, but academics generally consider that creative industries include publicity, architecture, trade with art work and antiquities, design and fashion, film industry, IT applications, television and radio programs. However, some scholars feel that other industries should also be taken into consideration, particularly those that enhance the valorization of cultural heritage, such as tourism (Cunningham, 2002).

As the demand for tourism services became more segmented, specialized and sophisticated (Novelli et al., 2005), companies in tourism were confronted with the challenge of permanently changing their offer of services, redesigning their operations and procedures, improving their organizational structure and

business model and finding new ways of communicating with clients and other stakeholders. Research showed the need to orient service providers towards new types of tourism, based on satisfying consumers’ individual needs and transforming the provision of services in an active process of discovery and learning (Weiermair, 2004). What results is the “new tourism” characterized by the emergence of new segments of consumers, technologies, production practices and management techniques (Poon, 1994).

The increasing employment of creativity in the tourism industry (Richards and Wilson, 2006) stems from the desire to meet specific consumer needs. Creativity in tourism means the creative use of destinations assets (inherited and created) to provide creative experiences for tourists (Richards and Wilson, 2006). Companies in tourism need creativity in order to maintain their competitiveness because satisfying the ever growing needs of consumers has become more difficult (Pikkemaat and Peters, 2006). The demand for tourism is already saturated by conventional services; what the „new tourists” defined by Poon (1994) desire is creativity and experience, which are basic components of creative tourism (Richards and Wilson, 2008), a type of tourism that counterbalances the commodification and serial reproduction of tourist experiences (Richards, 2011). A United Nations report (2008) defines creative tourism as being based on an engaged and authentic experience and involving participative learning in the arts, heritage or special character of a place, while providing connection with the local community. Creative tourism is thus a new generation of tourism, which includes more access to culture and history while authentically engaging in the cultural life of a tourist destination and, ultimately, living a creative experience (United Nations, 2008). Unlike other forms of tourism, creative tourism significantly depends on the active involvement of tourists, who do not simply “watch a spectacle”, but become part of the spectacle itself (Richards and Wilson, 2006). Creative tourists, the consumers of creative tourism products, are actually engaged in a process of self-development that ultimately leads to transformation (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, cited by Richards and Wilson, 2006). Thus, creativity in tourism should not only be part of the production process, but also of the consumption process. United Nations (2008) indicates that the demand for creative goods and services by tourists supports the development of creative industries and ultimately the overall economic and social development of society.

According to Richards (2011), creativity can be used in a number of ways in tourism including: developing tourism products and experiences, revitalization of existing products, valorizing cultural and creative assets, providing

economic spin-offs for creative development, using creative techniques to enhance the tourism experience, creating buzz and atmosphere.

Although tourism is not traditionally included in the creative industries sector, there are growing relationships between tourism and the creative sector, with creative industries such as advertising, crafts, IT, publishing, museum and galleries, music, performing and visual arts (UK DCMS, 2014) being key-components to the development of tourism products. The interaction between tourism and creative industries has led in fact to the emergence of related concepts such as creative spaces, creative events, creative relationships, and creative networks (Richards, 2011).

According to Cruz (2013), creativity is now a central element of regional tourism development strategies and this is due to several factors among which the need to find new products that increase destinations' capacity to distinguish themselves in increasingly saturated markets, and the need to increase the attractiveness of destinations that do not possess strong heritage.

In tourism, creativity involves adding something new to existing products which ultimately makes it a source of innovation (Richards and Wilson, 2006). The same view is also shared by Amabile (1996) and Addis (2009), who consider that creativity is always at the starting point of innovation.

2. Research methodology

The main purpose of the research was to highlight the perspective of tourism managers of creativity in their sector of activity and on the main ways creativity is enhanced in their organization. The research was qualitative and consisted in structured interviews with young Romanian tourism managers. It was chosen to develop a qualitative study, as the researchers intended to obtain a deeper meaning on the way managers perceive creativity in tourism.

The instrument used in the study was the structured interview, computed of 6 questions, as follows:

- How and to what extent is creativity encouraged in your organization?
- What do you think is the role of management in developing employees' creativity?
- What do you think is the role and purpose of creativity in the organizations of the tourism industry?
- What characteristics should a touristic product/service have in order to be considered creative?
- Which are the most creative services your organization offers?
- To what extent is creative the market in which your organization activates?

The interview ended with 4 demographic questions.

The authors decided to use the judgment sampling method, contacting managers they already had met. As a result, the study focused on young tourism managers, who are members of Young Skål Bucharest, affiliated to Skål International Romania, Skål International being a professional organization of tourism leaders, the only international group uniting all branches of the travel and tourism industry (www.skal.org).

The authors themselves are members of Young Skål Bucharest, the contacts of the participants at the study being obtained through the organization's database. Out of the 28 active members of Young Skål Bucharest, 11 have at least a middle-management position in a tourism organization. All Young Skål Bucharest members with a managerial position have been contacted and received an invitation via e-mail to take part in the study. Furthermore, as one of the authors is a Board Member of the organization, the research initiative was discussed, approved and encouraged by Young Skål Bucharest Board.

Although nine managers responded affirmatively to the authors' research initiative to take part of the study, due to their busy schedule (with a several departures outside of Bucharest or Romania), only 6 managers were actually interviewed. The study was conducted in the period September 22nd – October 2nd 2014 in Bucharest. Although the sample size is not representative of the target population of the research, the qualitative research method was time-consuming and researcher-dependent, as each interviewee had to be contacted in person. The interviews were extracted in text and centralized in an Excel Worksheet, the results being interpreted through the content analysis method.

3. Results and discussion

As mentioned before, the data provided by the managers interviewed were processed and interpreted by way of content analysis. It has to be mentioned that the results cannot be generalized and are researcher-dependent, as it is known that in qualitative studies, different researchers may reach different conclusions based on the same study (Zikmund and Babin, 2010). Although the sample size cannot be considered representative of the target population of the research, the interviews provided a meaningful insight to the way tourism managers perceive organizational creativity.

3.1. Demographic profile of the respondents

The respondents (three male and three female) are aged between 25 and 31 years old, and activate in different segments of the tourism value chain: one interviewee has a position of General Manager in a Restaurants and Events Group, two interviewees are Managing Partners in a Travel

Agency, one interviewee is a Director of a Tour-Operator, one interviewee is a Tour and Events Manager in an Incoming Travel Agency, while the sixth respondent is General Manager in a M.I.C.E Agency (Meetings-Incentives-Conferences-Events). Unfortunately, no representatives of the hotel and transportation industry could be interviewed, although the researchers made efforts into contacting and persuading several managers in these sectors.

3.2. Tourism managers and organizational creativity

One of the main objectives of the study was identifying whether tourism managers encourage creativity in the organizations they work in. While five of the interviewees admitted that creativity is very important for the daily activities of their organization, one manager (who activates in the Food&Beverage and Events sector) clearly stated that creativity is very little encouraged in his organization, as the firm's associates and partners have a great resistance to change.

However, the other respondents, who manage travel agencies, mentioned that creativity is enhanced in their organization by empowering the employees and involving them in the decision making process, no matter their degree of experience or expertise. Five of the interviewees mentioned that their activity obliges them to be creative, as they need to develop new offers to clients, new promotional materials, new and unique touristic products on a daily basis.

All interviewees admitted that managers have a crucial role in developing employees' creativity, by constantly motivating, encouraging and inspiring their work team. All the managers that participated at the study stated that creativity is encouraged at all organizational levels, as experience has shown them that the employees at the operational level, who have constant contact with clients, tend to develop the most creative and valuable ideas, as they are "more connected to the market requirements". The interviewed managers stated that even the most unexperienced employees are involved in the development of new projects, products or sales strategies, as their firms constantly look to offer to their clients new and exclusive experiences.

It was also a consensus on the fact that managers themselves have to demonstrate their creativity in the organization, as they have to set an example to their employees. Moreover, the managers interviewed stated that they encourage communication in their firm and encourage all their employees to express their ideas, as "there are no bad ideas and sometimes, the best ideas come from the most unlikely sources".

3.3. Expressions of creativity in the tourism industry

All the managers interviewed agreed that creativity is extremely important in the tourism industry, especially in the current post-crisis business environment, when tourism organizations have to constantly develop and adapt their products and services to the market's requirements. Travel agencies managers stated that creativity should be used in developing new touristic products targeted to new and specific market niches that have not been addressed yet.

Furthermore, all the interviewees mentioned that tourism organizations should be creative in developing unique activities and experiences for their clients, in managing clients' problems, in promoting touristic products and services, all these actions conducting to a creative way of achieving customer loyalty. One interviewee actually stated that tourism is one of the industries with the greatest chances to develop in a creative way, as it encompasses a great variety of products and services.

The study also intended to identify tourism managers' opinion regarding the specific characteristics touristic products or services should have, in order to be considered creative. All the interviewees clearly stated that a touristic service or product is creative if it is original and brings added value to customers by offering an extraordinary experience. It was identified a consensus on the fact that tourism companies can differentiate themselves from competitors by offering a great diversity of activities to their clients, by creatively combining activities in a touristic product, by focusing on authentic suppliers and, probably most important, by surprising their clients with unexpected services.

The research also aimed at identifying the most creative products/services the interviewees' organizations offer to their clients. The respondent who activates in the Food and Beverage sector stated that his organization focuses on offering creative and surprising entertainment services for the events organized by his team.

The travel agencies managers interviewed affirmed that their organizations try to develop new products, as: gourmet events at spectacular places, teambuilding activities such as Bucharest Quest-City Tour or other city tours with an out of the ordinary theme. In their activity, they focus on targeting less advertised destinations that offer spectacular landscapes or exceptional local events. It was also discovered that travel agencies try to develop creative ways of gaining customer loyalty, by finding creative way of constantly communicating with them or by offering unexpected complimentary services. The interviewee that activates in the M.I.C.E industry actually stated that his organization looks to

develop products that “get clients out of their comfort zone”.

The last specific question of the interview aimed at identifying the extent to which tourism managers perceive their activity sector as creative. Not surprisingly, considering his previous responses, the interviewee that manages a Restaurants and Events Group stated that in the events industry, creativity is not a basic characteristic, as change is hardly accepted and the industry’s leaders still offer standardized products and services.

The situation seems to be different in the travel industry. The interviewed managers consider that travel agencies are most creative in offering exotic and adventure touristic products, but are less creative in their offer of city tours or M.I.C.E.

Furthermore, it was mentioned that travel agencies tend to be more creative in the incoming sector that offers the opportunity of developing niche or tailor-made touristic products. The outgoing sector is seen as less creative, as it is managed by a small group of large tour-operators, which sell their standard products to smaller travel agencies. The outgoing sector, as one of the interviewees stated, has little space for creativity and rather tends to focus on novelty, as tour-operators try to bring, for each season, new destinations or new accommodation facilities for the usual destinations present in their offer.

Conclusions

The article presented a meaningful insight on the way young tourism managers perceive creativity in this specific sector of activity. In the context of globalization of markets, tourism managers consider that creativity is essential in attracting clients and gaining customer loyalty. Although the paper presented an exploratory study, the results offer a substantial image on how creativity is perceived, encouraged and managed in tourism organizations.

The participants at the study acknowledge the importance of creativity in the development of their organization, as they constantly look to enhance their employees’ creativity by involving them in all the organization’s activities and decision making processes. The research revealed that travel agencies tend to be more creative in what regards incoming tourism products, unlike the outgoing tourism products, that tend to be standardized.

Furthermore, the study highlights that the restaurants and events sector is perceived as uncreative, as the leaders of this market offer standard services packages and continue to manifest resistance towards change.

The study presented in this paper, based on a qualitative research, using a structured interview, has, as expected, several limitations.

First of all, the sample did not cover all tourism sectors, focusing mainly on the travel and events industry. Second of all, the respondents are young managers of rather small organizations, which may have influenced the results of the study. Another limit is the fact that the interview focused on few aspects and did not aimed at developing a complex investigation on the way creativity is perceived and managed in each sector of the tourism value chain.

However, these being said, it might be considered that this study’s results may form a strong starting point for future research that may focus on a single, specific sector of tourism, involving both young and experienced managers.

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