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Humor and Co-Creation as Levers of Valorization of Tourism Attractions: Case Study from Vodnjan, Croatia

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Abstract

Tourists are highly selective, they are looking for the unforgettable experiences and they want to familiarize with the tradition and the culture of the local residents, which represents a great challenge for the tourism products and service providers because they constantly have to create new and interesting activities, because tourists are no longer interested in sightseeing of the cultural and the historical heritage, but they also want to be a part of it. The purpose of this case study is to affect the perceptions of visitor of Vodnjan (Croatia) by enriching their cultural experience. The goal is to propose a model of collaboration of tourists in the creation of such experiences. The appeal to humor, as a still under researched topic in function of tourism, as well as the principles of co-creation, rarely used in tourism, were combined to help revalorize Vodnjan's tourism attractions and the destination itself.

Keywords: co-creation, humor, innovation, tourism attractions, valorisation of tourism attractions, interpretation of tourism attractions

JEL classification: L83, O31

Introduction

The tourist attractions are the main reason for every single trip, and although they represent a spatial category (Kušen, 2002), they are also a subject to the experience of the viewer. As the competition is becoming tougher, it is necessary to differentiate in this field in order to achieve a competitive advantage.

In recent years in the Republic of Croatia the development of cultural tourism became a dominant form of selective tourism, and humor is easily applicable. Today, the number of holidays, whose central motive is culture, is constantly increasing. There are many different successful programs and facilities ie. cultural and historical events which, by implementing humor elements contribute to the enrichment of the cultural tourism offer e.g. the Croatian festival "Days of Humor" (special evenings of poetry and humor), or a typical example are carnivals that combine different humor elements, culture and traditional heritage of a tourist destination such as the worldwide famous carnival in Rio de Janeiro. In general, humor elements as the topic of research in tourism studies are quite neglected and unknown.

Co-creation implies the process of inclusion of customers in developing tourism products which is initiated by the „producer“ (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). In unmanaged tourism attractions, this role is taken over by the DMO, applicable also to this case study. In recent years, the rise of co-creation has gathered considerable attention across a broad range of fields, including information systems, economics, management, and marketing (O'herm, and Rindfleisch, 2010, p. 10). The core principle of co-creation is engaging people to create valuable experiences together while enhancing network economies, and there are four elements that have been suggested for co-creation: experience mindset, context of interactions for collective intelligence, engagement platform and network relationships (Lee, et. al., 2012). Co-creation is viewed as a joint value-realising process that occurs as the organisation and its customers interact (Payne et al., 2008). Dialog is an important element in the co-creation view, because markets can be viewed as a set of conversations between the customer and the firm (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 9). Co-creation is rarely used in tourism, which represents an immense opportunity, as exactly in their spare time, people want to be engaged into something they care about (Binkhost & Dekker, 2009). Tourists co-create value by integrating their personal skills (operant resources) with the challenges (operand resources) posed by the service providers which includes the social aspects of that setting in the sense of customer to customer (C2C) interactions (Rihova et al., 2015, p. 359). Co-creation of experiences, as a theoretical construct, considers the consumer an active agent in the consumption and production of values and deems customer involvement as essential for defining and designing the experience (Prebensen, et. al., 2013, p. 241). Co-creating experiences during a vacation involves the interaction with other people like the interaction between hosts and guests. Finally, with the idea that co-creation is a consequence of active participation in producing tourist experiences such as involvement, resources and time use are modelled as predictors of attraction (Prebensen, et. al., 2013, p. 252).

Event the 3C humor model implies collaboration with tourists:

- Comfort (creating a relaxing atmosphere)
- Concentration (making tourists mindful)
- Connection (building rapport between tourists).

The tourism underdeveloped town of Vodnjan, Croatia, was searching for low cost ways to valorise its cultural attractions and wanted to distance itself from the macabre and spooky - both professional (e.i. Lonely Planet) and community - reviews that suggest avoiding visitation, affecting thus its image and tourism flows. Its top visited attractions are mysteriously well conserved body remains of saints, although no mummification was applied. The whole town core is under protection as remarkable landscape, giving thereby the impression of being stuck in the beginning of the past century.

It was suggested to apply humour to the valorisation of its cultural attractions, as it was in line with the low budget restriction and repositioning as an interesting destination worth visiting. Namely, positive emotions generated by humour, increase positive brand associations. In the era of the social media where messages spread quickly, this might help the destination recover from its unwated etiquette. Therefore, the main hypothesis states that: The combination of co-creation and humor might be a low cost fit to valorise cultural attractions.

In the paper, composed of three chapters, it will be shown an example of adding humor as a low cost element in the valorization of the cultural facilities of the city, which will be available on-site, in the form of an informative, but an entertaining table. The process of co-creation of the modified tourism product of the Mural of the

city is given in the chapter named "Case Study and Model". The last chapter provides concluding remarks.

Case Study and Model

The town of Vodnjan counts 6000 inhabitants and is situated in the inland of the peninsula of Istria. It is mainly a half-daily excursion destination, a bit more crowded in case of rain, which prevents tourists from enjoying the beach. In 2016 it has gained a negative review from Lonely Planet which included terms such as: „macabre, sleepy, decay/restoration“. This dark tourism connotation was the base to redefine the destination towards something more positive by applying humor to the valorisation and interpretation of tangible cultural heritage. The town features 32 murals, most of them as a project outcome of Boombastick, a street art festival (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Example of murals in Vodnjan



Source: DMO of Vodnjan, photo archive, 2016

Figure 2

Example of murals in Vodnjan



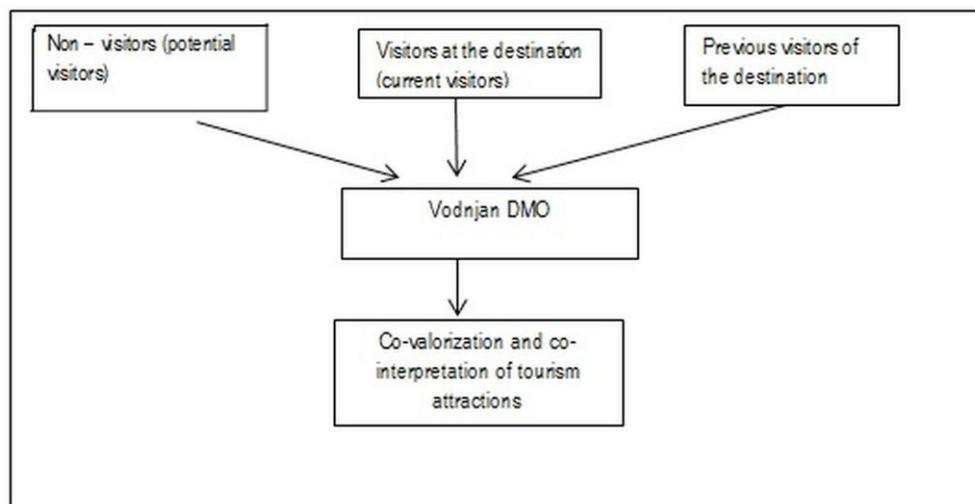
Source: DMO of Vodnjan, photo archive, 2016

The murals will be valorized by putting funny tables, instead of educational ones. The latter provide an insight into the artist's vision, while with funny tables, comments and reactions of other tourists about the experienced mural are displayed. During the first phase of the project the comments of the students of The Economy and Tourism "Dr. M. Mirkovic" about the murals were collected. The second phase of the project will involve the setting up of the mailboxes with the contact data of the DMO of Vodnjan (cell phone number, Skype, Viber, what's'up, e-mail) in order to collect for every single mural. During the third step of the project visitors impressions and associations of the murals will be virtually collected, through a campaign on the social networks. An additional effort will be put in order to get in touch with guests who did not visit Vodnjan yet throughout publications on the regional and the

national DMO. And finally, even the former tourists of the city of Vodnjan will be contacted from the Vodnjan's DMO customer base. The educational tables will be much larger than the collected comments will be, in order to amend the most interesting insights from year to year. The major cost of this project will be setting the feedback boxes, which will be later used for funny tables. All other communication with tourists in different buying cycle phases will be as cost effective as possible.

Figure 3

Co-creation principles in the valorisation and interpretation of tourism attractions



Source: authors' contribution

Along with students as testers of the model, three types of co-creating customers have been identified, classified accordingly to their relation to the tourism destination: non visitors, current visitors and previous visitors.

In this case study the principles of co-creation in tourism products have been applied to the valorisation and collective interpretation of cultural attractions. This has resulted in the introductions of the notions of co-valorisation and co-interpretation of tourism attractions, which imply modifications of the tourism products and additional experience-based value.

Discussion and Conclusion

The value of this paper is visible in the combination of two poorly implemented concepts in tourism: the implementation of humor and the principle of co-creation, which are both identified as trendy and desirable instruments in the battle of achieving a competitive advantage on the turbulent tourism market. Humor is an essential part of entertainment, the first component of the innovative 3E tourism experience concept (Entertainment, Excitement, Education). The implementation of humor in all phases of the buying process in tourism is mainly related with the creation of positive experiences. Humor can be of a great help and benefit, because it can affect the generation of many positive emotions during the travel and the stay of tourists in a selected tourist destination, which directly affects the level of the tourist's expectations fulfillment. Although humor and its component, as mentioned above, can have many positive impacts on tourism, the notion of humor as a topic of research and studies in tourism has remained quite neglected, underestimated and under-investigated.

In this paper the focus was on the experience of tourists in the destination, and tourists were engaged in all stages of the purchasing cycle. In addition to the obvious contribution to practice, the theoretical contribution is reflected in the use of co-creation (with customers) in the valorization process of the cultural attractions of Vodnjan, whereas two new concepts were introduced the co-valorisation and the co-interpretation of cultural heritage. These concepts allow extending the principles of the co-operation between tourists and the DMO. Both terms require more depth definitions. The case represents a collection of tourist's humorous quits, and in accordance with the socio-cultural context it brings questions about the adequacy of the comments, and consequently, the needs of editing or censoring. The designed project for the City of Vodnjan is a low cost program, thus confirming the main hypothesis. The inevitable costs refer to the setting of feedback boxes which are later used for (educational) tables. They were later renamed to "Fun Tables", instead of the conventional "Educational Tables". The case study is still in the implementation phase.

The proposal for future research should focus on investigating the effects of the implemented case study (eg. guest satisfaction), on destination image, the socio-cultural implications for both tourists and locals, the boundaries of having a good taste in humor and other application modalities of similar best practices. The implementation of humor represents a winning situation for both the supply and demand side, affecting positively the overall tourism system.

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