

Tourist Guide Role and Performance – Element of Visiting Experience at a Tourism Destination

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Abstract

The constant development of the tourism industry was accompanied, both, by positive and negative effects. The increased number of visitors generated substantial revenues for tourism companies and other firms which offer tourist services. Also, destinations' overcrowding is the source of different conflicts which may arise between locals and visitors. One solution is to support visitors' confidence in the services of local tourist guides. The article presents the results of a quantitative marketing research organized among students and master students from the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration, Transilvania University of Brașov. The sample included 306 respondents, and the findings pointed out that visitors appreciate tourist guide's competence, its oratorical and amusement qualities. At the same time, by fulfilling several roles the tourist guide can enhance visiting experience, can contribute to avoid conflicts and, at the same time, could postpone visitors' intentions to replace its services by a smartphone application.

Key words: tourist guide, tourism destination, smartphone applications, visiting experience.

J.E.L. classification: M31, Z32

1. Introduction

Tourism trips faced a continuous, ascending and, especially, constant evolution. Congestion and overcrowding due to excess of visitors, especially at the most popular tourism destinations, can generate conflicts between tourists and residents. The tourism guide could be one of the solutions to solve these issues. Not long before, it was considered that mainly the groups of tourists should be accompanied by tourist guides. In the last years things changed, the proliferation of tourist guides' services being a natural phenomenon. Nowadays, numerous individual tourists choose to visit a city or a region accompanied by a local, independent tourist guide. Many locals, able to speak foreign languages, and especially young people, choose to become tourist guides, mainly during holidays. Taking the decision to spend their free time guiding tourists brings them many satisfactions, such as the ability to practice foreign language skills, to capitalize on the fact that they live in a city with continuous flows of national and international tourists, to know new people, to earn money and make new friends, etc. At the same time, this activity needs certain skills, the capacity to communicate, resistance to effort, and so on.

The aim of the article is to analyze the roles and responsibilities of tourist guides as part of visiting experience at a tourism destination. Considering the fact that the evolution of information technologies has greatly influenced the tourism industry, the paper highlights which are the main characteristics considered relevant for the tourist guide's performance taking into account the fact that a smartphone application could be replacing its services.

2. Theoretical background

Tourist guides are the mediators between visitors and local facilities and cultures and their activities could be summarized to conveying information, offering explanations, and developing narratives (Gelbman *et al*, 2012, p.117). Guiding is considered a highly individual and creative art, the specific tasks being accomplished under complex stresses and strains (Gelbman *et al*, 2012, p.119). At the same time, tourist guides bear a great responsibility in this regard, the accuracy of information transmitted to visitors and their general knowledge being prerequisites to undertake this activity. A tourism destination's image depends on primary and secondary images (i Agusti, 2018, p.103). Primary images are those formed by the visitor's and they tend to be seen as impartial and highly credible. Visitors' interactions with the tourist guides represent a decisive part of these perceived images. Secondary images are created by the various tourist agents, precede the visit and aim to be objective or to meet commercial criteria (i.e. tourism brochures, travel guides, commercials, etc.) (i Agusti, 2018, p.103).

The tourist guide's role is complex and comprises the following components: (a) the instrumental component; (b) the social component; (c) the interactional component; (d) the communicative component (Cohen, 1986, p.10). Each of these components encompasses several vectors or activities. For instance, the instrumental component, which determines the accomplishment of the tour, consists in assuming the direction, granting access, and exerting control in order to take responsibility for a secure, safe, and pleasant tour. The social component relates to the tourist guide's responsibility for the cohesion and morale of the tour group and embraces several concrete elements, such as tension-management, integration, morale, and animation. The interactional component relates to guide's role as a middleman between the members of the group and the local population, sites, institutions and touristic facilities. The two principal elements of this interactional component are representation and organization. As about the communicative component which is often considered to be the principle component of the guide's role, it comprises four principle elements: selection, information, interpretation, and fabrication, elements which enhance tourist guide's position as a local "cultural broker" (Cohen, 1986, pp.11-16) or a "translator of the culture" (Gelbman *et al*, 2012, p.108). It was argued that tour guides' role has evolved from facilitating the experience which is the logistical aspect of the job, from the pathfinder to the mentor role (Cohen, 1985, p.21). Authenticity – one of the most appreciated features of tourism destinations, is dependent on many aspects, among which the "commodification" of the local culture, building images to produce touristic performance, etc. (Wijngaarden, 2016, p.140). In the interaction between hosts and guests, visitors' images of local people are greatly influenced by their tourist guides, and their performance influences visitors' perception on destination's authenticity.

As the requests of tourist guides' services evolved, the number of persons accomplishing the job evolved accordingly. As a consequence, the need to differentiate became a real pressure. Numerous tourist guides adapt themselves and their presentations contain an important humor side. Pabel and Pearce (2015) highlighted the benefits of tourism humor which has a calming effect on stressful travel situations and alleviates anxiety which some tourists might have with certain tourism experiences. As previously identified, the humor categories most appreciated by visitors were "amusing stories" as the number one way to deliver humor followed by the approach labeled "friendly teasing", the third most popular way to convey humor included the use of "funny exaggerations", while another major humor approach was the tour guides "target the humor at themselves" (Pabel *et al*, 2016, p.196).

Information Communication Technology has become a common element in our lives, and tourism industry has greatly been influenced by technology connectivity. Technology developments have changed tourism by revolutionising information gathering, communication, storage and dissemination (Buhalis *et al*, 2005). Nowadays, online social contact has become a norm among travellers and greatly influences tourists' travel behavior and experience (Buhalis *et al*, 2019, p.564). Starting from the reality that social contact, especially between tourists and hosts, is essential in the host–guest relationship (Fan *et al*, 2017), the tourist guides' roles and influences become more and more relevant. Tourist guides are inherent components of tourist social contact which essentially marks visitors' travel experiences (Fan *et al*, 2019, p.4). Technology

developments allow visitors to interact with a digital graphical interface, signaling major tourist attractions and the varieties of path to tour at a particular tourism destination. It was acknowledged that such means distract visitors in appreciating the city or destination they visit (Heuten et al, 2008, p.174). Developments in this area are boundless and new speech technologies have been created. Their ambition is to focus on the speech interaction in order to build a hands-free, eyes-free application that enable users to explore and be guided around a city (Bartie et al, 2018, p.111). However, visiting experience alongside a pleasant and charismatic tour guide, able to answer the various questions from tourists will, undoubtedly, enhance the authenticity and value of the tourist consumption.

3. Research methodology

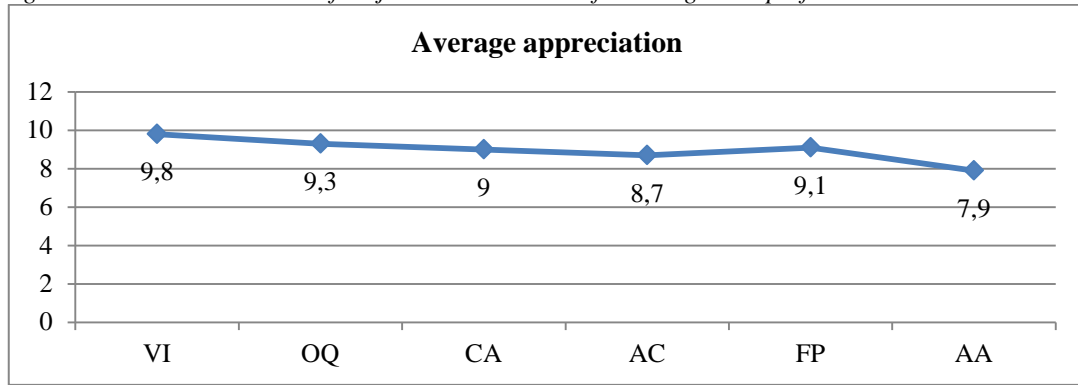
The findings presented in the article are results of a quantitative marketing research. The chosen method was the survey based on questionnaire, and the analysed sample included students and master students from the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration, Transilvania University of Braşov. The research was conducted between 1.10-10.10.2019. The questionnaire used in the research included a number of 8 questions, out of which 3 were identification questions. The questionnaire was distributed to all students and master students, being completed a number of 306 questionnaires. Female respondents represent the majority within the sample, i.e. 77%, the average age of the sample members is 22.6 years old and 97.4% of the subjects are Romanian citizens.

4. Findings

Subjects were asked about their preferences for collecting information about the major attractions they intend to visit and their actual means and solutions to visit the tourism destination. As multiple responses were allowed, 378 responses were obtained. 14.3% of the responses indicated that sample' members prefer to search for the Tourism Information Centre where they are explained which are the major attractions at the destination and where are these attractions located, they are given a tourism map with further indication about the characteristics of these attractions and they continue the visit on their own. The majority of responses, i.e. 47.6% out of total responses, indicated subjects' preferences to download, in advance, in their smartphones, different travel guides which they read previous to their arrival at the tourism destination. These are the visitors who visit individually the attractions and Google Maps application is their trusted advisor. 28.6% of the responses indicated that at the arrival, subjects buy maps and different travel guides, they also search for and download tourist information about the destination and visit the attractions on their own. Only 7.1% out of the responses pointed out the preference to search for an individual tourist guide and 2.4% indicated the preference to find an incoming travel agency and ask for its professional guidance.

Respondents assessed the quality of the tourist guide's services. Six characteristics were rated: volume of information communicated to visitors (VI), oratorical qualities (OQ), capacity to answer to the most diverse questions (CA), the ability to communicate in an amusing manner (AC), fulfillment of the announced program (FP) and the ability to adapt to visitors' preferences (AA). Each characteristic was rated with notes beginning from 1 (not important) to 10 (extremely important) and the results are presented in Figure no. 1.

Figure no. 1. The assessment of major characteristics of tourist guide's performance

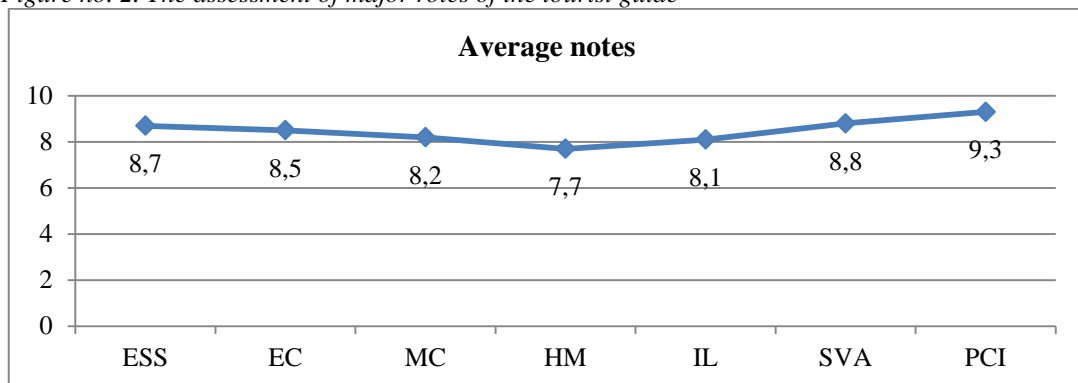


Source: Author's own research

The most valued characteristic was the volume of information transmitted to visitors which was rated with 9.8 points out of 10. The oratorical qualities were rated with 9.3 points, followed by the fulfillment of the announced program with 9.1 points. The capacity to answer to the most diverse questions also was considered very important, being rated with 9.0 points. Also, the ability to communicate in an amusing manner was considered relevant, with 8.7 points, and the least rated characteristic was the ability to adapt to visitors' preferences, element which obtained 7.9 points.

Another question identified the most important roles of the tourist guides. The rated roles were: ensuring safety and security during the visit (ESS), the capacity to ensure cohesion between the group members (EC), mitigating conflicts that may occur (MC), creating humorous moments (HM), facilitating interaction with the locals (IL), selecting the visited attractions (SVA) and providing complete information about them (PCI). The results are presented in Figure no. 2.

Figure no. 2. The assessment of major roles of the tourist guide



Source: Author's own research

Respondents considered that providing complete information about tourist attractions is the major tourist guide's role (9.3 average rating). The selection of the most interesting attraction at a tourism destination is the second rated role (8.8 average rating), followed by ensuring safety and security during the visit (8.7 average rating) and the capacity to ensure cohesion of the group (8.5 average rating). Mitigating conflicts that may arise (8.2 average rating), facilitating interactions with locals (8.1 average rating) and creating humorous moments (7.7 average rating) are the roles considered less important.

Finally, subjects were asked if they consider relevant to replace the tourist guide with a smartphone application. 29% out of the respondents appreciate that replacing a person with a smartphone application is an appropriate way to visit the attractions at a tourism destination, while the majority of subjects (71%) prefer to be accompanied during their visits by a tourist guide. An interesting result obtained highlights women preference to replace the tourist guide with a smartphone application, as 80% out of the subjects who chose this answer were women.

5. Conclusions

Taking into account the fact that the tourism industry is shaped more and more by information technologies development, one of practitioners' and academics' concerns depends on finding solutions to enhance quality and trust for tourist services traditionally performed by people.

Supporting visitors to find the most interesting tourist attractions, the best ways to visit them and to understand the authenticity and the "local flavor" of the destinations are few of the benefits visitors can have only if they are guided during their visit by a local, gifted and passionate tourist guide.

Moreover, conflicts that could arise between agitated and impatient visitors and exasperated residents due to overcrowded cities could be hardly avoided by visitors, with the smartphone application in one hand, the photo stick in the other hand, rushing to accomplish all indications offered by the downloaded travel guide.

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