

DESTINATION MARKETING ORGANISATIONS' USE OF HUMOUR AND CO-CREATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY FROM CROATIA

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DOI: 10.7906/indecs.16.2.4
Regular article

Received: 9 December 2017.
Accepted: 27 January 2018.

ABSTRACT

Tourists are more active, experienced and picky, eager for new, unforgettable experiences tailored to their needs. Innovations are imperatives, especially in tourism where new ideas can be easily copied. What better solution could there be than to engage tourists in the creation of the tourist product of their dreams?

The principles of co-creation, along with the appeal of humour in tourism are still under-researched topics as well as rarely used in practice. Especially in the case of Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) in Croatia, publicly funded entities that do not create tourism products, yet are responsible for the valorisation of unmanaged tourism attractions.

An exploratory study was carried out whose main contribution was to assess current practices of DMOs and their tendencies towards using humour and co-creation in their marketing agendas. The purpose of this study is to raise awareness of the benefits of applying those two concepts in the marketing activities of DMOs.

A case study project, aimed at tourism attractions in the destination, to inspire DMOs is also presented.

KEY WORDS

co-creation, humour, tourism attractions, DMOs

CLASSIFICATION

JEL: L83, Z32

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INTRODUCTION

The factors that affect tourism now will affect it in the future too, but with a few changes. These are the demographic changes, aging of the population, declining fertility and increasing life expectancy. Changes are expected in economic growth, higher income in the developed countries, increased mobility, more spare time, as well as higher sensitivity towards sustainable development and environmental protection. Tourism shows that in the future it will depend more and more on innovations, particularly those involving ICT. Hedonism rises, but not only as a physical manifestation, but also a spiritual retreat – beauty, peace, tranquillity, happiness, health and joy are sought after. The 3E acronym (“entertainment, education and experience”) is more and more present. It implies humour as its integral component. The element of humour can easily be added to various marketing instruments, especially in the representation of tourism attractions and in marketing communication in general. The concept “value for money” is no longer enough to express these aspirations from travel, it might be more adequate to refer to it “experience for money”, which is in line with the experience economy.

Co-creation implies the process of inclusion of customers in developing tourism products which is initiated by the “producer” [1]. In unmanaged tourism attractions, this role is taken over by the DMO, applicable also to this article. 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 [2; p.10]. Co-creation is viewed as a joint value-realising process that occurs as the organisation and its customers interact [3]. 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 [4; p.9].

This research aims at answering DMOs’ notion, perceived benefits, disadvantages and threats regarding the use of co-creation, their experience in the application of both co-creation and humour and their future plans to act upon. It discloses the vision of DMOs regarding their future role in co-creation. How many will mainly identify themselves as providers who could initiate the creation of new tourism products?

Other similar researches have been conducted in Europe: in Finland and in Estonia. In the Estonian research co-creation was linked to service design and humour in accommodation establishments’ marketing communication and service processes [5]. In Finland, co creation, as experience innovation, used humorous video clips to co create experiences with customers [6]. The contribution of this article lies in the assessment of attitudes and perceptions of DMOs in Croatia engaging tourists in laughter and co-creation.

In this article, composed of six sections, the literature review deals with the topics of tourism attractions, humour and co-creation. The third section explains the research methodology whose target population were DMO representatives, followed by results. The example of the application of humour in the valorisation of tourism attractions in the town of Vodnjan is given in the fifth section entitled *Appeal to humour – a case study from Vodnjan, Croatia*. The last section provides concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

HUMOUR AND CO-CREATION IN TOURISM

Encyclopaedia Britannica defines humour as a form of communication in which the stimulus produces diversion and it can be agreed upon that the stimulant here could be a joke, a smile, a funny act, or a funny comedy strip [7]. According to Peterson’s and Seligman’s classification

scheme, humour is defined as “an enjoying, non serious communication, maintaining a good mood, being composed and cheerful, even when adversity strikes and using wit to affect emotional states in others.” [8]. The concept of humour has been very extensively discussed by philosophers, psychologists and linguists but it still remains an under-researched topic in social sciences, especially in tourism [9; p.1]. The leading theoretical approaches to humour fall into two groups. One group consists of the psychological theories, concerned primarily with the reasons for humour; these include the so-called “supremacy theory,” which claims that humour arises from feelings of supremacy over others, and “relief theory” which sees humour as a “way to release energy generated by repression” [9; p.1]. Theories in the second group are concerned with the inner, logical, or linguistic structure of humour, and include the so called “incongruity theory,” which interprets humour as a “response to an incongruity, a term broadly used to include ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance and inappropriateness [10]. Although to this division even a third category can be added, the relief theory [11; p.423], which is very important in tourism because humour allows to redefine the situation and add an element which reduces the sense of having a disagreeable experience [12; p.249]. A very well-known example comes out from the aviation industry where the Southwest Air cabin crew encouraged to use humour during an in-flight emergency briefing [13]. Another example, related to Croatian heritage, are funny songs in Slavonia. The possibilities of using humour in the service sector are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Possibilities of using humour in different aspects of service [11, 15].

Different approach of humour	Possibilities of using humour in marketing communication and service processes
using humour at someone`s expense	communication has to be delicate and careful not to offend receiver, normally jokes would be at expense of someone that client does not relate to
a puzzle or hidden joke, that requires the receiver to think	a specially designed action or story that will culminate with a humorous solution
an unexpected result or surprise	explaining unique aspects of an accommodation establishment that visitor would not understand or notice otherwise
using humour as social control tool (mechanism and stabilizer)	a humorous sign or manual to explain how something should be done
using humour as relief tool for breaking the tension or to cope with difficult or unexpected situations	humour in an interaction to solve a problem
overcoming an unpleasant situation	explaining shortcomings with humour

Respondents appear to feel more involved in the “consumption of tourism’ products” that added humour as an ingredient, affecting thus positively their memories [14]. Humour is applied in storytelling in tourism lately including forms such as travel writers, blogs, films [15], also promotional and amateur tourism videos etc. It is related closely to a newly coined term – positive tourism, which brings enjoyment and positivity to the tourism experience [16]. It has been used widely for a long time in marketing in tourism, known as the appeal to humour, an attention grabber.

In communication humour affects the listener in a way to convince him/her to accept or to reject any idea or a proposal [17; p.67]. Humour, in tourism, can be studied like an essential element in sightseeing. For example, except to souvenirs, humour plays a major role in breaking the predefined stereotypes during sightseeing, because every time when a tourist guide tells a joke he/she breaks the monotony of recounting and highlights his presence and by doing that, he/she reacquires the attention of tourists [18; p.313].

The authors in [15] explored how humour can be used in tourism promotion. They further investigated the relationship between humour and tourism in terms of impact of humour on the tourist's experience, such as how comical events can become tourist attractions, and what is the impact of funny performances on tourism development [19; p.707]. Santos and Proffitt have studied how popular are humour and the usage of jokes in tourism when describing the multicultural communications between the tourists and the local population [20; p.51]. Humour and jokes, as one integral part, can be studied in tourism as an indispensable element of sightseeing.

Humorous stories have characteristic patterns of participation: in particular, co-narration is acceptable whenever it creates humour [5; p.24]. Familiar humorous stories regularly appear, and co-narration of such stories occurs quite commonly as well [21; p.397]. Co-creation is an important process in both service production and delivery of humour and „many companies allow customers to „play” with services and products, engaging them to service creation [22].

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 mind-set, context of interactions for collective intelligence, engagement platform and network relationships [23]. Customers are gaining power, therefore organisations have to include them in all critical phases from planning to control of services delivered. “The better a company's focus on the consumer context and their match with the individual's living environment, the more co-creation experience value increases” [24]. Organisational culture and communication quality are key ingredients to better relationships with the market [25].

Tourists co-create value by integrating their personal skills (operant resources) with the challenges (operand resources) posed by the service setting, including the social aspects of that setting in the sense of customer to customer (C2C) interactions [26]. Co-creation of experiences, as a theoretical construct, considers the consumer an active agent in the consumption and production of values and regards customer involvement as essential for defining and designing the experience [27]. While during a vacation, co-creating experiences involve 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 [27]. An example of co-creation is the application “Waiting for Van Gogh” induced by visitors faced with long waiting lines to access the artists' museum [28]. However 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 [24]. 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 [26; 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 [27; 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 [27; p.252].

Even the 3C humour model [15] implies collaboration with tourists:

- comfort (creating a relaxing atmosphere),
- concentration (making tourists mindful),
- connection (building rapport between tourists).

While co-creation in tourism can be organized and planned, using humour in interaction is often accidental. The best way to engage customers is through stories that “speak” to them [5].

TOURISM ATTRACTIONS

Visitor attractions lie at the heart of the tourism industry; without them there would be little point in anyone travelling and no need for the various accommodation and transport undertakings that make up the industry [29]. A tourist attraction is an every single unit, landmark or a small geographic area that is accessible to tourists who are interested in visiting it during their holidays [30; p.111]. In essence, tourist attractions consist of all those elements of a “nonhome” place that draw discretionary travellers away from their homes [31; p.575]. Attractions serve two key purposes in any destination whereas the most important one is to act as a demand generator that induces visitation or causes tourists to extend their stays. Alternatively, they can have utility if they provide high quality experiences that enhance satisfaction levels [32]. Tourist attractions basically are divided into natural and man-made attractions [33]. A more complex division of tourist attractions distinguishes the following:

- basic attractions – natural and man-made attractions,
- primary attractions - they create the main motivation for visiting and experiencing them,
- secondary attractions – they have a tourist attractiveness but they are not the main reason for traveling and visiting a destination,
- real tourist attractions – tourist attractions with a provided accessibility and
- potential tourist attractions – those are tourist attractions with no accessibility for tourists.

According to Leiper tourist attractions are part of the tourist attractions system along with just the tourists and the market [34; p.86]. According to Leiper there are three main groups of tourist attractions or nucleuses, and they are [34; p.15]:

- the first group – includes worldwide famous tourist attractions that represent the main reason for which tourists decide to travel to distant destinations in order to visit them,
- the second group – tourist attractions located near the worldwide famous tourist attractions. Tourists usually know them and decide to visit them only after visiting the attractions from the first group,
- the third group – attractions that are completely unknown to tourists until they arrive at the destination.

The tourism resources can be defined as natural or anthropogenic goods that can be exploited [35; p.762]. All the tourist attractions are also tourist resources, but at the same time not all tourist resources can become tourist attractions, which means that tourist resources may become tourist attractions only if it is noticed that they might have a usage value [36; p.62]. Furthermore, it can be explained in the following way: the essential difference between a tourist resource and a tourist attraction lies in the possibility of its management and valorisation. Every tourist resource that can be managed and which can generate income from the tourism activities becomes automatically a tourist attraction. Four different key groups of resources must exist if the destination wants to attract tourists [36; pp.62-63]:

- resources in the form of natural and anthropogenic attractions that encourage people to travel,
- resources in the form of facilities and services including human resources which will allow them to stay in the area,
- resources in the form of infrastructure and services that make the destination accessible as well as a variety of attractions, facilities and services within the same destination. The process of giving information to customers in order to inform them about the destination and its resources.

Heritage valorisation represents a social, economic and political determination. Heritage promotion dates back to the 1980s when the French government decided to publish a list of

the culinary heritage in the inventory of French traditional treasures, along with churches and castles [37]. The valorisation of cultural heritage in the context of the marketing approach has many possibilities for the improvement of the product or the service in the function of tourism development, and one of the primary elements of the marketing mix is the development of products or services that can be fully adapted to the needs and preferences of the consumers [38]. The elements of the intangible cultural heritage in tourism can be valorised in the following ways: the SWOT analysis, the Hillary du Cross method, the tourist valorisation of elements of intangible heritage as a part of the event tourism, etc. [39].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

DATA

Primary data were obtained by interviewing representatives of DMOs in person. The convenience sample consisted of 5 DMOs representing one Croatian destination each. Three DMOs' were interviewed in Zagreb on 30th November 2017, while they were attending a professional education for DMOs and agreed to approach the interview. The DMOs were representatives at the local level. The answers to the questions were annotated by the authors.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The research was carried out using semi-structured interview technique with predominantly open-ended questions. The interview was developed on purpose for this research in order to fulfil the goal of the article. It consisted of eight questions in total:

1. Do DMOs perceive the importance of co-creation for their tourism destinations?
2. What are the possible down-sides of applying co-creation?
3. What are the obstacles to the implementation of the principles of co-creation in their marketing activities?
4. What is the frequency of use of the appeal to humour in marketing communication? Please provide an example.
5. Do you plan to integrate humour in your marketing activities in the next 3-year period?
6. Have you ever taken part in the co-creation of tourism products? Please describe it.
7. Do you have any ideas regarding co-creation which could be implemented in your tourist destination?
8. What is the role of DMOs in order to trigger product development using co-creation principles?

METHODS

Given the novelty of the topic and related exploratory nature of the research, it was decided not to distribute the developed research questions in the form of a questionnaire, but have it answered personally. One of the first obstacles detected was the possible ignorance of the term "co-creation". The probable non-use of both concepts researched (humour and co-creation), might have been a reason for non-responding.

This qualitative research, besides the described interviews, features also a case study from Vodnjan.

The analyses of the collected data, is presented in the next section.

RESEARCH RESULTS

None of the selected DMOs has ever heard of co-creation. They have also asked for clarification of the concept. They were sceptical how they, as DMOs not involved in the creation of tourism products, could use this technique, therefore the authors provided them examples.

1. Once explained the concept of co-creation, DMOs stated the biggest importance of co-creation reflects in receiving the feedback from guests and shaping tourism products accordingly, as stated by DMOs: “getting to know tourists better”, “market research and product development” and “creation of new products” (3/3).
2. The main obstacle, as explained earlier, comes from their primarily role, as DMOs in Croatia are still more marketing organisations which was pointed out by 3/3 DMOs questioning how they could implement co-creation.
3. Question three, regarding obstacles to implementation of co-creation, remained unanswered, as respondents could not think of any other reason, beside the above mentioned obstacle (0/3).
4. Humour was not used at all (0/3).
5. One DMO said they would integrate humour in their marketing communication, without specifying examples, as they have not planned it yet. The remaining two DMOs did not know (1/3).
6. None of the respondents has ever taken part in the co-creation of products (0/3).
7. No ideas about the possible use of co-creation in their destinations were suggested (0/3).
8. Two DMOs did not yet thought about ideas related to co-creation implementation, but are positive towards finding something that could be done. The remaining one, showed no particular interest into the concept (2/3).

The most common reason to non-answering questions and non/providing ideas and attitudes, was related to the fact that participants have not thought of the issues of humour and co/creation earlier, as discussed with two DMOs after the interview.

One respondent was particularly interested in co-creation, deepening the conversation in order to learn more about it. Although humour was also not applied in their marketing communication activities up to now, another DMO stated humour was an unintentional output of a misprint.

Generally, it can be concluded that two out of three interviewees were inspired with co-creation and expressed their willingness to investigate more deeply how it could be applied in the future. One out of three is prone to integrate humour in their marketing communication in the next three years.

APPEAL TO HUMOUR: A CASE STUDY FROM VODNJAN, CROATIA

The town of Vodnjan counts 6 000 inhabitants and is situated in the inland of the peninsula of Istria. It is mainly a half-day 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 referred to it as a place to avoid, featuring only mummies in the local church. It also mentioned the town has the biggest Rom community in Croatia. Some of the terms included in the review were: “macabre, sleepy, decay/restoration”. This dark tourism connotation was the base to redefine the destination towards something more positive by applying humour to the valorisation and interpretation of tangible cultural heritage.

The appeal to humour will be adopted in the valorisation of the narrowest street in Vodnjan, where it is planned to add fun tables (instead of the classical educational tables). On the beginning of the narrowest street will be placed a challenging inscription “Skinny test – can you pass it without turning sideways?”. On the end of the street there will be a photo point with another inscription like a “Diploma” for passing successfully Vodnjan’s skinny test, perfect also for a selfie including in the background also the narrowest street.

Another planned project integrating humour, is related to street art [40]. More than 30 murals are painted on Vodnjan’s facades, most of them as a project output of Boombastick, an art

festival. The murals are not marked, the refigurations do not have any titles, artists' names or short description, as usually displayed in classical educational tables. Instead of these predictable tables, it is suggested to use funny quotes and comments of visitors and locals to the murals. It is planned to include tourists' quotes in the compilation of these fun tables, applying thus also co-creation. These educational tables are planned to be larger than the initial text insertion, enabling new phrases to be added.

Along with those, numerous other project initiatives and projects will be undertaken whereas in some, the principles of gamification, implying fun again, will be applied.

CONCLUSION

As tourism nowadays is an experience and knowledge creating industry [41], the roles of co-creation and humour should be particularly significant. Co-creation in tourism is a process in which value is co-created together with tourists, which often emerges over social media [42, 43]. Humour is one of the essential components of leisure time and in this context, laughter and humour can be of a great help and benefit, because both can affect the generation of many positive emotions during the trip and stay of tourists in a tourist destination, which directly affects the level of the tourist's expectations fulfilment. Besides assessing DMO's poor use of humour and co-creation, the theoretical contribution is concealed in the development of an original research instrument – the questionnaire used in semi-structured interviews.

The contribution to practice is reflected in the case study of Vodnjan, demonstrating how DMOs can add the element of humour to unmanaged tourism attractions. The theoretical contribution is reflected in linking humour and co-creation as marketing ingredients used to create unique experience for tourists. This is one of the first studies dealing with the issues of co-creation and humour in destination marketing in Croatia and wider.

By using co-creation, the interaction between tourists and DMOs could become more profound and more personal, adding up additional value in customer relationships. Tourist could also become more prone to recommend tourism destinations where they were engaged in the creation of tourism products or where the positive effects of humour were experienced. These stated implications could be the basis for future research along with widening the population of the presented study. Sample size represents its main limitation, thus its results cannot be generalised.

The interviewed DMOs were not familiar to the concept of co-creation, meaning that more attention should be stressed on educations of DMOs' employees. Humour as a known concept, whose benefits are perceived, is not widely used either, nor were respondents so prone to its use (except one DMO), suggesting that humour as a topic of research and a practical notion in tourism has remained quite neglected, underestimated and under-investigated [40]. Assessing its importance it is the first step towards the introduction of humour in marketing communication of Croatian DMOs. Current practices of DMOs do not support completely the application of co-creation, as DMOs in Croatia are not creators of tourism products. Therefore, the preconditions to remove these barriers need to be formed. Although, even now there is room for manoeuvre, in the case of unmanaged tourism attractions, where DMOs should adopt a more customer centric approach.

Other proposal for the future research could focus on the evolving role of DMOs and the implementation of new techniques and tools that would involve tourists in the creation of their unique and personalized experiences. There are numerous determinants of humour and co-creation such as language and cultural background, which are a call to engage in the

debate multidisciplinary researchers. A sporadic contribution is also represented by the phrase “value for experience” instead of the well-known “value for money” which is in line with the experience economy.

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