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PHOTOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES AND THE MEASUREMENT OF IMPACT AND IMPORTANCE ATTRIBUTES ON TRIP DESIGN: A CASE STUDY

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Introduction

Photographs are one of the most treasured reminders of people's vacations. Photos provide memories whereby experiences can be relived with individuals who were on the trip, or with friends and relatives who were not. Photographs, thus, are an end product of the travel experience. In addition to stimulating memories, photographs are a physical representation of the important dimensions and trip attributes that individuals experience while traveling.

Pictures have the potential to provide data and a methodological basis for assessing both positive and negative aspects of a trip. They can offer insight into how a trip should be structured or, more importantly, how a trip performed against the attributes and criteria of consumer satisfaction. The key to this assessment process is not only attributes, like in an Importance Performance (IP) analysis, but also a perspective on the impacts that a quality has upon travelers. While attribute assessment methodologies are traditionally based upon a breaking down, or segment-ation, of the experience, photographic methods are based upon convergence and bringing attributes together to understand holistic impacts upon individuals. This does not suggest that the divergent methodologies are ineffective in determining impacts. Rather, it suggests that photographic techniques allow researchers to study the interactions of real-world variables and how they impact individuals. This type

of holistic approach is important in trip/tour planning because it allows planners to determine the types of results that can be achieved from the interaction of trip characteristics. If a trip is manipulated in a longitudinal study with different individuals and different attributes in different configurations, then an effective methodology can be determined to study the spectrum of possible responses among travelers, which can assist in maximizing participant satisfaction.

Photographs have long been an important data source for social scientists (Collier and Collier, 1986). However, there is limited literature on tourist photographs, their meanings, and what they can explain about the travel experience (Albers and James, 1988; Cohen, Nir and Almagor, 1992; Haywood, 1990; Markwell, 1997). There is, however, a growing literature of a similar conceptual nature in the area of postcards and other visual images (Cohen, 1995; Gordon, 1986). For example, using a frame analysis, which is a method of studying photographs of human subjects according to their pose in choreographed shots, Sirakaya and Sönmez (2000, p. 356) analyzed tourist brochures published by state tourism agencies in the United States. They concluded that subtle meanings in printed advertising might indeed perpetuate gender stereotypes. Likewise, Buck's (1977) work on the brochure portrayal of Amish in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania (USA), was one of the earliest studies to examine the cultural stereotypes created and maintained by print media in tourism.

Postcards are another important source of data that is directly linked to tourism. Cohen (1995) examined the portrayal of Jews and Arabs on postcards from Israel and concluded that both groups are represented in stereotypical fashion, although the Jews seemed to be depicted more as modern and futuristic, the Arabs more traditional – sheep herders and people constantly engaged in divine supplication. Such a portrayal, Cohen (1995, p. 219) argues, seems to deny that Jews and Arabs could be put on an equal footing, culturally or politically. Likewise, he suggests that the postcards imply a pluralistic society composed of different groups living harmoniously but separately side by side – a way of disguising the profound conflict between the two groups.

The research on these forms of visual imagery suggests that individuals associate meanings with these items in relation to their travel experiences (Hitchcock and Teague, 2000; Love and Sheldon, 1998). Such visual media can be reflective of values, personality, and expectations. The literature also indicates that individuals assign importance or value to selected items and images. This personalizes the experience and emphasizes the ones that travelers want to remember most.

Photos seem to have a similar role among tourists. Pictures are a transitional representation of tourist experiences. They tell the story of a journey and its impact upon the traveler. They are also an end product that can be shared. One primary advantage of using photographs for research is their ability to divide a journey into

time periods and illustrate the values and meanings of each segment of the trip. The purpose of this study is to develop a holistic methodology in which trip attributes can be assessed to determine their impact upon travelers. This is critical in developing tours that satisfy clients' needs and desires.

Methodology

The method used here was a thematic content analysis wherein photographs were seen as a moment in time captured by travelers. Such pictures have meaning, and understanding this meaning can be important in determining which elements of a trip are most satisfying for tourists. Understanding the photograph based upon its central content in relation to the experience is key in this exercise.

A group of student tourists traveled to Quebec City, Canada, from Bowling Green, Ohio, in June 1999. Following the trip, each participant was asked to select ten pictures from among those he/she took to represent the most meaningful elements of the trip and which helped develop a quality experience. Each participant reviewed the selected photos and explained why each one was important to him/her from the perspective of trip characteristics. Using a Thurstonian judging system, trip content experts reviewed the participants' photographs and written statements and Q sorted them into categories. This grouping exercise allowed the trip to be understood in terms of its component parts or critical junctures and how these together created a quality experience on this organized tour.

A thematic content analysis was used to examine the nature of the photos, as has been widely done in the context of other visual media (Turley and Kelly, 1997; Wheelan and Abraham, 1993; Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992; Timothy and Groves, 2001). This entailed a multistage review of the photos to isolate the dominant theme or context. The material of concern is that which is important or meaningful to the traveler. To maintain a consistent perspective, the following criteria were used in four stages by the researchers in reviewing the photos and client (in this case, student) importance statements (Collier and Collier, 1986):

First Stage

  – Holistic review of data, observe connections, and contrast data patterns
  – Identify responses to data patterns
  – Isolate points of inquiry
  – Cultural and contextual analysis

Second Stage

  – Content inventory
  – Contextual analysis
  – Formation of categories

Third Stage

– Structured analysis
– Detailed informational analysis
– Comparative analysis
– Matrix formation
– Development of a typology

Fourth Stage

– Identify significant events with causal influences
– Review context based upon primary and secondary influences
– Full context analysis and the formation of conclusion

As mentioned previously, a Thurstonian system of judgment was used in this exercise. This entailed common judging among content experts to develop consensus. The experts used here had in- depth knowledge about the structure of the travel industry, tour operations, and tourism research. Two dyads were used to judge the photo images and statements and to develop a classification system. Each content expert read the materials and developed a system of transcribing or summarizing it. Following this, the judges worked in pairs to reach an agreement on the meanings of the photos and to develop nominal categories in which the data could be analyzed. To check the judging reliability, each pair of judges was asked to determine if they agreed or disagreed with their partner on the basic characterization of the material and the development of the categories. The judges agreed on the placement of 96% of the photo images, resulting in a high level of consensus. After the themes were identified, a Q sort methodology was used to develop the classification systems. A Q sort is similar to a cluster analysis in that it is a deductive process used to interpret data into a conceptual framework. Judges are used to sort the responses and develop consistent categories based on expert consensus.

Results

The large majority (82%) of the pictures involved group members, which indicates the importance of people and interpersonal relationships while traveling. The trip in this context must be viewed as the development of relationships on an evolutionary basis because many of the statements about importance indicated the contribution of the trip in developing solidarity from common experiences and places. This appears to stress the importance of group dynamics during travel. This seems to be most closely related to small groups, which relate to one another building solidarity or in some cases dysfunctionality based upon their interactions. One dyad of travelers, for example, was essentially incompatible with another dyad on this test trip. There was congruity at some points during the journey and dysfunctionality at others. The

congruity appeared most evidently when participants were faced with problems they needed to solve (e.g. language barriers, finding their way back to the meeting points, etc). Dysfunctionality resulted when groups were not pressured to solve problems together.

From the Q sorted photographs five groups of attributes were identified. Natural scenery was the emphasis of the first group. The natural landscape seemed to be an important element of the trip, especially in relation to the uniqueness of places that participants had not visited before. Natural features were a structural element, or "wow" factor, in the uniqueness of this experience. The power and majesty of nature seemed to develop a peacefulness and serenity, which were essential to the pace and timing of the tour.

The second group of photographs included elements related to built structures of historical significance. The shots were taken primarily to demonstrate to family and friends what they had missed by not going on the trip, or the uniqueness of the area in relation to its telling a story about their experiences. Both of these elements indicate the importance of preserving and sharing during this particular trip. The individuals in this context identified with cultural attractions and were amazed by their uniqueness. The more a particular historical landmark characterizes an area, the greater role it plays in distinguishing this trip from other travel experiences.

The third group of photographs related to the social nature of the trip. Many were group shots with participants engaged in a variety of activities that were beyond their normal range (e.g., dancing around with a tambourine). This allowed individuals to escape from their mundane routines, making the experience unique and memorable. As a result, the travel experience became an important venue for developing new behaviors, some of which represented a degree of risk-taking.

The fourth category of photos represented a subjective symbolism to trip participants. The trip had an overall meaning, which was demonstrated in the symbols in each photo selected by tour participants. The two most common symbols in these photographs were the differences between the Anglo and French Canadian cultures and political borders. Changes in the linguistic landscape marked entrance into an unfamiliar culture (French Canadian). Several of the participants had never visited a different cultural region, so this experience in a few cases created a psychological barrier that restricted social interaction to some degree. This unfamiliarity caused anxiety and opened the travelers' eyes to the importance of the culture from which they came and the culture they were visiting. To some individuals the language and cultural change was restrictive while to others the experience was expansive, but either way they were viewed as important elements of the trip. The U.S.-Canada boundary and the Anglo-French cultural border symbolized an element of passage, or a milestone, on the trip. They were lines of demarcation that created anticipation of the experience to come, or the experience that had just been completed. The one

consistent picture among all participants was shots of people straddling the Canada-U.S. border. This indicates the power, or importance, of symbols and the role of the border as a threshold between places.

The fifth grouping is based upon the pace and evolution of the trip. The sequence of pictures and their importance were evident from the analysis. This defines the very nature of trips because each trip will have its own life cycle. Each trip is dynamic and must be understood in terms of the evolution of experiences. This journey evolved from an isolated (individualized) experience to a social experience, back to a state of isolation, although not to the same degree as in the beginning. Travel time to and from Quebec City was more a time of isolation, while the time at the destination was more of a social experience. The return trip, however, was much less socially detached than the drive to Quebec, as a climate of congeniality existed that represented a sharing of experiences and discussions about how these experiences would be integrated into everyone's everyday routines upon their arrival home.

As an additional analysis, the photographs selected were compared to all of the pictures taken on the trip. The primary difference between those selected and those not selected was the nature of the photograph. Those not selected were non-specific, while the selected ones had a clear central focus, such as an attraction or group of people. For example, many panoramic pictures were taken from a high rise building that overlooked Quebec City, but these photographs were not selected by anyone in the group. They were simply taken for orientation purposes instead of for their value as a focused feature.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this pilot study was to determine whether or not tourist photography could be used to isolate specific components of a trip that relate to overall satisfaction. Evidence presented here shows that tourist photographs might be an appropriate tool because they provide insight into people's travel experiences. The pictures tell a story, and the interpretation of the story can enlighten trip planners and designers. The focus is on the molecular building blocks of a trip, and the photographs are a primary representation of various aspects of the trip as the participant interprets them. In this case, tourist photographs were useful tools because they allowed people's feelings to be examined in a qualitative fashion, although the authors realize that because this is a case study, it has limited generalizability.

This study does not ignore photographic methods that have been used in the past to understand the travel experience. Instead, its purpose is to contribute to understanding the building blocks of trip planning. While the technique being introduced here has some apparent utility, it needs to be tested further and refined significantly before it can be adopted as a standard assessment tool.

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