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Published version

HAYNES, Natalie and EGAN, David (2019). The implications of 'miniaturism' for urban tourism destination futures – from micropubs to microbars. *Journal of Tourism Futures*.

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The implications of “miniaturism” for urban tourism destination futures – from micropubs to microbars

Natalie Claire Haynes and David Egan

Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to explore how the continued interest in the concept of “miniaturism” has seen the micropub develop into the new format of the microbar and examines the drivers of this trend. It then reflects on the possible implications of the rise of the microbar concept on the future of the urban tourism destination landscape.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This is a conceptual paper that is built on the natural curiosity of future studies to use an understanding of the present to predict what will happen next and what the implications of those developments will be.*

Findings – *The paper provides a clear definition of the microbar and identifies four distinctive drivers behind its conception, linked to changes in consumer behaviour. These cover the rise of the micro-break, the need for responsible urban regeneration, consumers desire for immediate and unique experiences and increasingly diverse populations. The paper predicts that these trends will drive an increase in microbars leading to greater tourist mobility in the urban tourism destination, more fragmentation and heterogeneity of products and services as well as an intensification in the need for authentic experiences and opportunity driven development giving rise to a hybrid form of guerrilla hospitality. Ultimately the authors predict that the venue will become more important than the specific location when consumers view the landscape of the urban tourism destination.*

Originality/value – *The focus of previous academic research has been on the historic development of the micropub and its impact on regeneration and communities, but very little literature has examined the rise of the microbar and the potential implications for the urban tourism destination.*

Keywords *Tourism destinations, Futures, Urban tourism, Microbars, Micropubs, Miniaturism*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Introduction

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (2019) define urban tourism as a type of tourism activity that takes place in an urban space encompassing a broad and heterogeneous range of cultural, architectural, technological, social and natural experiences and products for leisure and business. One such contributor to the urban tourism landscape that has emerged over recent decades is that of the miniature pub, the micropub, which reflects the broad trend towards “miniaturism” where there is a movement towards the compression of complex features within an increasingly small space. In 2005 there was only one. This was the Butcher’s Arms in Herne, Kent with its owner Martyn Hillier acting as the visionary (Hubbard, 2019). Now the UK has 620 micropubs which collectively turn over £60m annually (Persaud, 2019). There has been frequent academic interest in the microbrewery and micropub concepts, often with a focus on their impact on regeneration and local communities (Hubbard, 2019; Wallace, 2019). However, the natural curiosity of future studies leads immediately to the question of, now the concept of the micropub is established in the present (Sardar, 2010; Singh and Singh, 2017), what will happen next and what will be the implications of these developments? This paper looks to answer some

Received 21 October 2019
Revised 30 October 2019
Accepted 31 October 2019

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Form of contribution: trends paper for the Special Edition on Tourism Trends.

of these questions by introducing the microbar concept and considering its influence on the future development of the urban tourism landscape. The concept of the microbar is not currently well-developed in the academic and grey literature; however, this paper will explore the drivers that we predict will define this emerging trend.

Of course, answering these questions, as with futurology in general, should begin with developing an understanding of the concept of the micropub as we know it today – the “no-frills” concept which distinguishes itself not by what it sells but by the design of the space and the setting, which is often in off-centre locations, such as secondary high streets (Hubbard, 2019, p. 765). Cabras and Bamforth (2016) suggest that the current epitome of the micropub came about through three different waves. They cite the first wave as occurring during the 1970s and 1980s when organisations such as the UK grassroots organisation “The Campaign for Real Ale” was formed as a result of customer dissatisfaction with the choice of ales brought about through high levels of concentration in the UK brewing industry. Similarly, in the USA consumers turned to micropubs for access to more distinctive ales rather than the bland massed produced lagers of Budweiser, Coors and Miller (Schnell and Reese, 2003). However, in the UK, a second wave occurred in the early 1990s as a result of specific legislation that aimed to counter the growing monopoly and power of the large breweries both in terms of the production and the retail distribution of beer. When the Beer Orders of 1989 were introduced they forced larger breweries to free pubs from the tie opening up more competition. Further UK legislation caused a third wave in the 2000s which saw the rise of the microbrewery and micropub. The Progressive Beer Duty meant small brewers were given lower tax levies than the larger companies which combined with improved brewing technologies reduced barriers to entry. Also, in the UK, in 2003 the Licensing Act made it easier for individuals to obtain on-licences for previously unlicensed premises (Persuad, 2019). The micropub of today can be described most accurately by its own association as “a small freehouse which listens to its customers, mainly serves cask ales, promotes conversation, shuns all forms of electronic entertainment and dabbles in traditional pub snacks” (Micropub Association, 2019).

The fourth wave

Based on the historic development of the microbrewery into the micropub charted above, this paper predicts a fourth wave in the form of the development of the microbar, which is beginning to provide a new hospitality product for the urban tourism destination. Like micropubs the microbar concept is also based on small space and low turnover but is more complex in its offering and moves away from the no-frills concept of the micropub into a more sophisticated and varied offering catering to a new generation of consumers whose behaviours are predicted to change. There will be a continued focus on place and setting as with the micropub, but the microbar will extend its product range to trendy food and drink options such as gin, tapas style food offerings or even themed experiences such as the micro-sports bar seen in Sheffield, UK. The microbar will continue to develop around the concept of “miniaturism” which is related to the criterion of small (Krasniqi, 2018). Interestingly, Sutherland (2013) commented that an associated word, downsizing, had often been seen as a negative term but that actually businesses now see it as positive vision to follow with downsizing conducted not through necessity but through intent, as a unique business model. However, in contrast to the micropub it will also embrace another facet of the concept and that is detail, which Meskell (2015) believes is central to the concept of “miniaturism” due to the inherent qualities of compression that lead to more features being represented in a smaller space and with it an increased complexity in setting, experience, product and clientele. It is likely that the experiences and products they offer will change more rapidly and be less seated in tradition than the micropub as they are fashion-led and cater for the Instagram generation. Hubbard (2019, p. 777) also stresses that micropubs are not designed to be “on-trend”, which is believed to be a quality unique to the microbar.

We believe that this microbar concept has been driven by a series of key societal trends and changes in consumer behaviour, as outlined below.

The rise of the micro-break

Mintel (2018) has predicted the growing concept of the micro-break where younger generations are adopting new patterns of holiday-taking, dividing their leave entitlement into smaller, more frequent units of time. This cultural trend will lead to the need to provide consumers with a greater variety of short, intense, experience-packed breaks described as one- or two-night mini-adventures. This means that urban tourists have less time and need more concentrated experiences. They require the ability to explore multiple authentic small spaces in a tight timeframe that gives them a quick taste of the wider destination. The concept of the microbar allows them to do this. Gregory (2016, p. 343) agrees that miniaturisation enables people to “physically to grasp immensity”.

Responsible urban planning and regeneration

Increasing consumer trends towards health consciousness and premiumisation where consumers are increasingly spending more on things that matter to them and cutting back on those that do not (Euromonitor International, 2019), are driving the trend for responsible urban planning policy around the night-time economy in particular that which also marries with responsible urban regeneration. There is a drive towards the reduction in binge drinking and increased safety and security in the urban tourism destination. Microbars, with their focus on quality over quantity support this trend and therefore are likely to be supported through planning more easily than other larger on-licence retailers. Key is that rather than promoting the conspicuous consumption of large amounts of alcohol, which could have a potentially damaging impact on the reputation of an urban tourism destination, they instead promote experiences over the physical consumption of alcohol. According to Torrance (2016, p. 44) local government are more likely to grant licenses to business that do not create a “generic place where people would get drunk and have fights” and that once these licenses have been given the local government are more likely to then support investment in pavements and streetlights in those areas leading to regeneration. The type of unique locations often promoted by the microbar, such as derelict industrial buildings also leads naturally towards urban regeneration (Yorkshire Post, 2019).

Uncovering and sharing the undiscovered

Generation Z have a constant need to be doing something different and are motivated to uncover the undiscovered before anyone else, something that in part is driven by the desire to share experiences via social media platforms. Mintel (2018) confirms that consumers are willing to push themselves to the limit with new experiences and use social media to compete with and offer inspiration to their peers. Euromonitor International (2019) agree that a megatrend exists around behavioural patterns shifting from possessions to experiences and that brands are adapting by prioritising social advocacy through Instagram. This results in hospitality experiences having to change frequently and be visually impactful but also to reflect the local environment. The “neolocalism” described by Schnell and Reese (2003, p. 46) in relation to microbreweries is still relevant today, as is their observation that people desire to break away from the smothering homogeneity of popular, national culture, and “re-establish connections with local communities, settings and economies”. This “neolocalism” forms part of uncovering the undiscovered. This localisation process is also part of the trend away from the high street by micropubs and microbars to neighbourhood locations, with some referring to themselves as neighbourhood bars. These neighbourhood bars will focus on providing a service to the locals, however, conflict with tourists is unlikely due to the types of tourists attracted being small in number and actively seeking a “real” local experience and therefore they will be more respectful of that community. Running parallel is the increasing fluidity of tourism experiences as identified by Yeoman and McMahon-Beatte (2016) in their paper considering the future of tourism. The paper talks about the need for exclusivity and describes the future of food tourism as fluid and shaped by authenticity and hedonistic experiences.

Diversifying tribes

The World Travel and Tourism Council (2019, p. 4) suggest that the tourist market is becoming focussed on creating experiences that act as differentiators as consumer groups become more diverse, so that they “resonate across demographics, ages, tastes and type”. They also argue that the new tourist will focus on self-direction and have an increasingly nomadic lifestyle. Consumers that are looking for increasing diversity of experience leads to the need for a diversity of products served, as well as a diversity of experiences, leading the microbar to become a more dynamic and varied experience than the micropub before it as it recognises the need to cater to and attract a diverse customer basis. The microbar can become part of the tourist designing their own journey through a destination, especially as sites such as TripAdvisor make it easier to find off-beat locations. This again fits with the argument made by the World Travel and Tourism Council (2019) that life is being restructured with a focus on “fluidity, autonomy and social engagement”.

Future implications for the urban tourist destination

So, what does the microbar and the increased focus on “miniaturism” in hospitality mean for the urban tourism destination/landscape. With microbars popping up in cities and towns across the UK how does this change the urban tourism landscape? Similar trends are emerging across Europe and the USA. In the USA in particular this is driven by the trend in microbreweries leading to the creation of brewpubs (Alonso, 2011). There are also an increasing number of guides to exploring the microbar landscape within European cities, for example “A Beer Lover’s Guide to Sofia” (Angelova, 2018). We suggest that the impact will be on changing the overall tourism landscape of an urban destination in the following ways.

First, there will be an intensification of authenticity required for products and services within the urban tourism landscape and that tourism and hospitality infrastructure will need to reflect the micro-local environment not the entire destination. As tourists seek new and undiscovered experiences they will be increasingly mobile across the destination and the spread of hospitality services will widen becoming more scattered and heterogenous. The focus will be less on the experience of an entire urban tourist destination and more on the individual experiences had within in it, often in secondary or even tertiary locations within the destination or as Wallace (2019) describes it the off-centre location. The urban tourism landscape will become increasingly fragmented and dispersed, especially as with digital mapping technologies hospitality providers are less reliant on footfall and more on people discovering them through social media sharing.

Second, we also predict that these trends will cause more opportunity driven development in the urban tourist destination as businesses are willing to focus on a more short-term business model driven by the constant search of consumers for something new. Against this backdrop it is likely that microbars may change themes regularly whilst still retaining a reflection of the local environs. This means that the urban tourist destination will face a greater pace of change with only a semi-permanence of hospitality services that will lead to a more dynamic destination. This is enabled by a form of guerrilla hospitality which reflects entrepreneurial cultures that thrive “by exploiting their physical and social ecology and by mobilising local networks and resources; operators draw on cultural forms and discourses they consider alternative to mainstream cultures, but the commercial hospitality enterprise is fundamental to their existence” (Lugosi *et al.*, 2010, p. 3081). We are suggesting that there is a hybrid guerrilla hospitality concept where the microbar concept is constantly renewed and refreshed using the same venue as a more permanent but dynamic, experience driven hospitality concept than the original concept of guerrilla hospitality. The micro is the enabler as less investment is needed for their relatively short-term lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion the rise of “miniaturism” means the venue and its current experience and micro-location will become tomorrow’s destination. A myriad of microbars will become the taster menu of the complexity of the destination allowing generation Z to experience the subtleties of the

destination thus requiring the urban tourist destination to embrace the power of small and a rebalancing of power within the tourist destination. In fact, Oskam and Boswijk (2016) predict “miniaturism” in other areas such as hotel chains focussing on micro-hotels that add bedrooms in key locations across lots of small hotels rather than one or two larger properties. The concept of the micro-destination within a destination. We have already seen this play out in the travel sector with the demise of Thomas Cook and the rise of Airbnb, where the small and unique won out over the large and commonplace. Ultimately there will be a rebalancing of power within the tourist destination. The smaller and more individual the more power will be held and the more attractive to the consumer. In some ways we predict that urban tourism destinations will need to down-size to scale up their overall pull. The guerrilla nature of the microbar business model means it will be difficult if not impossible for big business to try to emulate this dynamic concept.

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