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Fast-Thinking and Slow-Thinking: A Process Approach to Understand Situated Tourist Experiences

Abstract

Situated tourist experiences are encounters among tourists and experience-providers that occur at specific places and times. Such encounters are ordinarily staged by providers to optimize the probability of positive tourist experiences. Interpretive talks, dining experiences, sporting events, theatrical performances, concerts, and museum visits are examples. We propose a process-based, “Situated Tourist Experience” (STE) framework to describe the flow of tourists’ immediate conscious experiences during these encounters. Our framework is grounded in interdisciplinary literature on attention, immediate conscious experience, tourism experience, engagement, mindfulness, motivation, emotion, and satisfaction (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Deci and Ryan 2002; Izard 1993; Kahneman 2011; Langer 1989, 1992; Moscardo 1996, 2009; Plutchik and Hope 1997; Reeve 2009; Russell and Mehrabian 1977; Oliver 2010; Weiner 1986, 2000). This paper proposes ways to “turn insights into actions” through monitoring process outcomes and designing contexts for memorable situated tourist experiences.

Keywords

situated tourist experiences (STE), fast-thinking, slow-thinking, engagement, immersion, absorption

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Experiences

Introduction

Experience is the quintessential product of the tourism industries (e.g., Kim, Ritchie and McCormick 2012; Mossberg 2007; Smith 1994). For organizations in those industries, understanding the essential characteristics of experience is the foundation for designing encounters that meet tourists' needs and enhance success in highly competitive environments (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Considerable research has thus involved crafting and evaluating models and frameworks that characterize tourist experiences (e.g., Cutler and Carmichael 2010; Mannell and Iso-Ahola 1987; Prebensen, Chen and Uysal 2014). These models and frameworks invariably focus on post- trip "evaluated experiences" (Cutler and Carmichael 2010). In evaluated experience models, the quality of service encounters or tourist activities is generalized across diverse tourist behaviors and sectors based on recall of an entire visit to a destination or event (e.g., Aho 2001; Kao, Huang and Wu, 2008; Mossberg 2007; Otto and Ritchie 1996). With few exceptions (Kao, Huang and Wu, 2008; Privette and Bundrick, 1987) research has not systematically addressed the contents, properties, and relations among elements of on-site, real-time, "situated" experiences that may occur during specific activity encounters (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Kleiber and Dirkin 1985; Mannell 1980; Mannell and Iso-Ahola 1987). Experience facilitators, such as tour guides, interpreters, curators, hospitality service providers, theme park operators, and others strive to co-create situated tourist experiences, yet such experiences are not well understood from the perspective of behavioral science.

Thus, we propose a process-based framework that describes how situated tourist experiences may operate. Our "Situated Tourist Experience" (STE) framework is founded in Kahneman's (2011) notions of "fast-and-slow thinking." Fast-thinking is a mode of experience in which actions occur rapidly and automatically, without deliberate thought. One form of "fast-thinking" is akin to

such concepts as “optimal experience” (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), “peak experience” (Maslow, 1971), and origin state (DeCharms, 1968). These heightened experiences occur in situations that are of a) intrinsic interest to the participant and b) are situated with optimal levels of novelty, complexity, incongruity or conflict (Berlyne, 1960; Ellis, 1973). Heightened levels of experiences are integral to STE, and we refer to them as “intrinsically motivated fast-thinking experiences.”

STE also embraces traditional service encounter outcomes: affect, attribution, value judgment, and satisfaction (e.g., Oliver 2010). These outcomes follow from immediate, slow-thinking evaluation of the quality and character of situated experiences. STE is thus an integration of an interdisciplinary base of literature: immediate conscious (“situated”) experience, tourism experience, and human motivation, emotion, and satisfaction (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1988; Deci and Ryan 2002; Kahneman 2011; Langer 1989, 1992; Izard 2009; Moscardo 1996, 1999; Plutchik and Hope 1997; Oliver 2010; Reeve 2009; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Russell and Mehrabian 1977; Weiner 2000, 2012). In this paper, we propose the theoretically grounded, yet eclectic STE “process framework,” which integrates previous research to inform management and advance understanding of situated tourism experiences.

Overview of the Situated Tourist Experience Framework

STE (Figure 1) is a process model that depicts that nature of immediate conscious experiences during situated encounters. STE defines “experience” as “the integration of environmental stimuli with motivation, emotion, cognition, attention and behavior during a defined period of time.” “Environmental stimuli” may include “situating” strategies the travel industry providers intentionally use to engage, absorb, or immerse tourists in experiences. “Defined period of time” is also inherent in the definition. As such, our definition is akin to Dewey’s (1934, 35) description of a “completed experience:”

We have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and only then is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience.”

STE distinguishes between intrinsically motivated fast-thinking experiences and slow-thinking experiences (Kahneman 2011) and it acknowledges the vital role of both tourists and experience facilitators in co-creating experiences (Andersson 2007; Andrades and Dimanche 2014; Ellis and Rossman 2006). STE proposes intrinsically motivated fast-thinking or slow thinking states are a function of a) affordances that are introduced into the setting by providers (e.g., themes, aromas, props, and interaction patterns) and/or b) their own decisions to co-create an experience. Tourists who decide to co-create their experience may enter into one of three “intrinsically motivated fast-thinking” states: engagement, absorption, or immersion. “Disruptions” ultimately interrupt the flow of intrinsically motivated fast-thinking. These disruptions may be natural endings of an activity (e.g., a win/lose outcome of a game, an intermission of a theatrical performance, the end of a theme park ride), or they may be evoked by excessive novelty, complexity, dissonance, or conflict (e.g., Berlyne 1960; Ellis and Rossman 2006; Oliver 2010). Disruptions may be followed by a “slow thinking” period in which the participant evaluates options for continue to participate. A decision to continue may lead to another fast-thinking experience. A decision to discontinue

participation or a natural ending of a situated experience is followed by slow-thinking processes, as depicted in Figure 1.

If tourists initially decide to not co-create, perhaps due to sub-optimal facilitation (e.g., an immediate service failure), their mode of experience becomes “slow thinking.” They notice their hedonic state and decide whether or not to persist in participation through extrinsic processes of self-regulation: external, introjected, identified, or integrated self-regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When the situated experience terminates, attributions to the causes of outcomes, affective responses, satisfaction judgements, and judgments of value follow.

Experience industry providers may stage affordances to facilitate co-creation. Pine and Gilmore (1999) propose several such affordances. Among these are existence of a pervasive theme; multisensory stimulation; absence of disruptive, negative cues; customization to the level of the individual; and unanticipated value-added elements. A foundation of service quality (e.g., Parsuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988) must also be present (Ellis and Rossman 2006). A key direction for research on the STE is identification of strategies and techniques that providers can use to facilitate each of the four fast thinking experiences and the relative strength of those facilitators. Research on servicescape (e.g., Bitner 1992; Mossberg 2007; Urry 2002), atmospherics (e.g., Bonn Joseph-Mathews, Dai, and Cave 2007; Ha and Jang 2010; Turley and Milliman 2000), and experience staging (e.g., Rossman and Schlatter 2011; Ralston, Ellis, Compton and Lee 2007; Ellis and Rossman, 2006) are representative of research of this type.

Fast-Thinking States

STE defines three fast-thinking states: *engagement*, *absorption*, and *immersion*. These states share fundamental characteristics: rapid, automatic, frequent, emotional, stereotypic, and subconscious reactions (Kahneman 2011). Yet, important distinctions also exist. Engagement and immersion are both closely related to the concept of mindfulness (Brown and Ryan 2003, 2007; Langer 1992;

Langer and Moldoveanu 2000; Moscardo 1996). STE defines engagement as a transitory state characterized by extraordinarily high focus of attention on a limited stimulus field portrayed in a story or unfolding narrative, activation of emotions, cognitions, on-task behaviors, and agentic inclinations (Reeve 2009; Douglas 2007; Langer 1992; Moscardo 1996). Examples of activities that might tend to facilitate engagement are spectator events, such as movies, sport events, theatrical performances, interpretive talks, concerts and lectures.

Engagement stresses an accentuated state of being situated in the present (Langer and Moldoveanu 2000). When tourists are engaged in a situated, embodied encounter, they are aware of their “inner and outer worlds” including thoughts, emotions, and situational factors (Brown and Ryan 2003). For example, high-involved experiences in dark tourism sites may evoke strong connections between visitors and the narratives of history (Buzinde and Santos 2009). Tourists are engaged in the experiences as they constantly interpret representations of the past, as opposed to being passive recipients of cultural texts (Buzinde and Santos 2009). Tilden’s (1977) seminal “principles of interpretation” inform providers of specific strategies providers (e.g., tour guides, heritage interpreters) may use to enhance engagement. Prominent among these strategies are provocation, personalization, and coherence (theme).

Immersion and absorption are other intrinsically motivated fast thinking states modeled in the STE. Both of these were identified as pivotal products of the experience industries in Pine and Gilmore’s (1999) seminal book, *The Experience Economy*. Formal definitions, were not provided, but Pine and Gilmore did distinguish between these two concepts:

At one end of this spectrum lies *absorption*—occupying a person’s attention by bringing the experience into the mind—at the other end *immersion*—becoming physically (or virtually) a part of the experience itself. (p. 31)

Consistent with this distinction, STE defines absorption as a transitory state of mental activity involving an effortless flow of images and sensations, absence of demands for behavioral responses, communicative separation, and solitude. Co-creating tourists who participate in such activities as hiking, walking, cycling, lap swimming, reading, sun bathing, listening to relaxing music, and massage may tend to experience absorption. When tourists are absorbed in an experience, they lose self-consciousness. “The mind becomes quieter,” and “active thought” does not dominate consciousness (Langer, 2014, p. 80).

In contrast to absorption, STE defines immersion as a fast-thinking state synonymous with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975) highly impactful career of research on the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Wild, Kuiken and Schopflocher 1995). Flow involves behavioral action and reaction, as evident in Csikszentmihalyi’s original study of surgeons, rock climbers, chess players, dancers, and musicians. It is a state of optimal experience characterized by full involvement in the present moment (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Characteristics of flow include 1) intrinsic motivation, 2) attention concentrated on a narrow stimulus field, 4) automatic responses to demands for action and immediate feedback on the consequence of those actions, 6) merging of action and awareness, 7) loss of self-awareness as a social actor, 8) a sense of control, and 9) a distorted sense of the passage of time (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 1996; Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2009; Jackson 1995, 1996; Massimini and Carli 1988; Perry 1999). Exemplary activities during which people can be immersed in the experiences include both work (e.g., factory work, surgery, writing) and leisure activities (e.g., rock climbing, chess playing, dancing) (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 2003).

Perhaps the most unique element differentiating immersion from engagement and absorption is the demand for action and reaction that is inherent in the experience. If intrinsically motivated co-creation is present, situations that demand behavioral action and reaction, such as rock climbing, playing chess, dancing, playing music and performing surgery are likely to produce immersion. In

contrast situations such as viewing a landscape, relaxing on a beach, enjoying the sensory pleasures of a fine meal, or experiencing a massage can be expected to yield absorption.

Providers may seek to structure immersion experiences by arranging complexity to provide optimal challenge, narrowing the stimulus field, minimizing extrinsic rewards, arranging for immediate feedback, and minimizing the individual's awareness of and focusing on the outcomes of involvements (e.g., Ellis, Witt and Aguilar 1983). To situate absorption experiences, providers must also narrow the stimulus field, promote awareness of immediate sensory experiences, and use “savoring” strategies (Bryant and Veroff, 2007) to keep visitors’ attention “in the present” and focused on the immediate sensory stimuli.

Slow-Thinking States

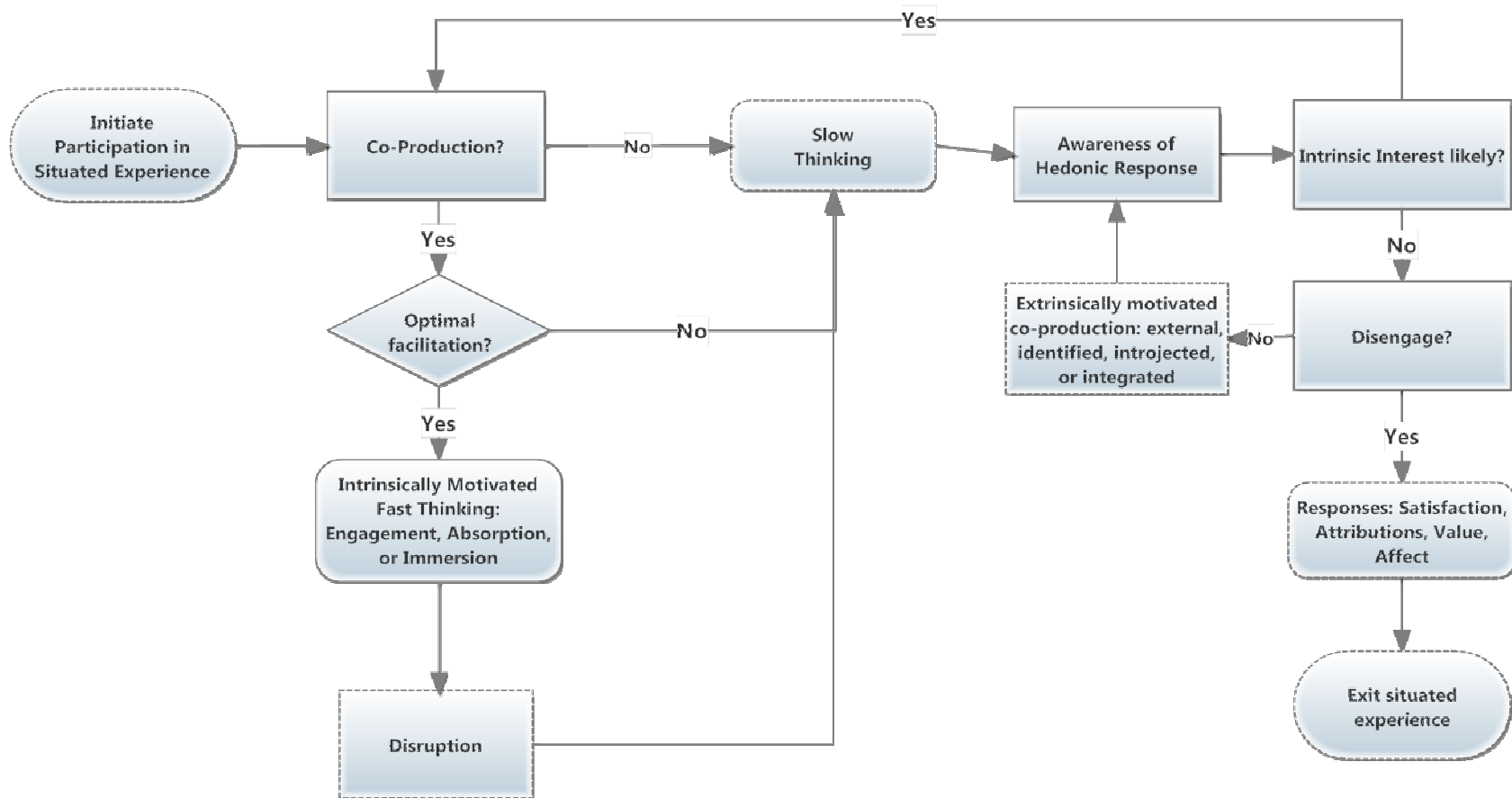
Slow-thinking is the second form of attentional process. Slow thinking involves allocating attention to effortful mental activities that demand a response (Kahneman 2011). This process is often associated with the conscious and deliberate thinking characteristic of subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration (Kahneman 2011). We categorize the slow-thinking process in the STE as (a) awareness of hedonic response and (b) a series of reactions that follow a decision to disengage from the activity: attribution, affective response, value judgment, and satisfaction/delight. A hedonic response is the immediate affective reaction to an event (Oliver 2010). Examples of immediate hedonic responses are the sense of pleasure that follows from a personally meaningful success, disgust that follows from a blatant and unforgivable service failure, joy that follows from being cause (White 1959), and pride that follows from witnessing a success of a friend or relative in a performance or competition. Attributions are explanations. People generate explanations for outcomes they experience (Heider 1958; Kelley 1973; Weiner 1986). Attributions can be classified along the dimensions of locus of causality, stability and controllability (Kelley 1973). Participants might, for example, blame the experience facilitators

(e.g., what they offer does not interest me) or other participants (e.g., there are too many people on site) for an experience that did not yield one of the desired and expected fast thinking states. Affect includes intense feelings that are associated with a specific referent (Cohen and Areni 1991). We adopt Mehrabian and Russell's (1977) three-dimensional theory of affect to account for tourists' responses to STE's: pleasure, arousal and dominance (PAD). The three dimensions are uncorrelated and bipolar (pleasure-displeasure; arousal-nonarousal; dominance-submissiveness) (Mehrabian and Russell 1977). Pleasure describes the degree to which people feel happy, delighted or satisfied with the circumstances. Arousal refers to the extent to which people are excited, stimulated or alert. Dominance measures the degree to which people feels in control of the situation. Tourists are delighted when they are so satisfied with their experiences that they feel a sense of pleasure and joy (Magnini et al. 2010; Patterson 1997; Torres and Kline 2011). Although elements accounting for delight might be different between individuals (e.g., domestic and international travelers, Magnini et al. 2011), a positive surprise has been found to be an essential component of delight (Crotts and Magnini 2010). Ultimately, delight is hypothesized to yield high consumption values (Oliver 2000).

Future Research and Management Applications

The STE may have potential to turn insights into actions that elevate tourist experiences and create a host of positive outcomes (e.g., delight, value, word of mouth advertising, loyalty). The first step in evaluating the usefulness of STE is to develop tools for measuring the process outcomes depicted in the framework (the fast- and slow- thinking elements). With quality measures available, experience encounter scenarios can be pre-defined, designed and executed to facilitate engagement, absorption, or immersion. Relations among intrinsically motivated fast- and slow-thinking outcomes can be evaluated. Subsequent research can then identify experience encounter designs and actions that most efficiently and effectively yield those process outcomes. Ultimately,

experience facilitators may reliably apply knowledge about STE to enhance situated experiences of the tourists they serve.



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Figure 1: Abbreviated Situated Tourist Experience Process Framework

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