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Chris Roberts
DePaul University

Mary Jo Dolasinski
DePaul University

Joel Reynolds
DePaul University

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Tourist Behaviors During Tourism Activities – Part Three

Chris Roberts, Ph.D.
Mary Jo Dolasinski, Ph.D.
Joel Reynolds, Ph.D.
DePaul University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This series of three reports was developed to discuss tourist behaviors in three key areas of the hospitality industry: lodging, dining, and activities and events. A primary purpose was to provide insights from the user's perspective, as the majority of content comes from the provider's point of view. One paper focused on tourist's behaviors in lodging and another focused on tourist's behaviors while dining. This paper focused on tourist's behaviors in activities and events. The goal was to provide valuable insights to assist practitioners in better understanding tourist's behaviors and to develop strategies to provide the best experience possible.

INTRODUCTION

Activities are often the reason we leave our homes and venture to other places for a short period of time. Informal activities as well as more structured events bring people to destinations, create collaborative and meaningful experiences, and are often major economic drivers for the cities and places where the activities or events take place. Over the years, these activities and events have played a major role in people's lives. Activities create memorable fun experiences, life long memories and in more structured events support opportunities to come together for sharing, learning and collaborating, enable gatherings that celebrate milestones, provide opportunities to share common interests, and commemorate social and societal shared experiences. From an outside observer's perspective the type of activity or event can be considered radically different from each other. But in both informal activities and more structured events, there are common characteristics including the purpose of the activity or event, the location and setting, and the participant's expectations of the activity or event.

Tourists traveling to create new experiences and participate in activities and events is not a new phenomenon. People have been doing it for a long time and have a significant history. As early as the late 18th century with the invention of the steam engines, a travel boom began. By the end of World War II, mass travel had arrived and studies in the field of tourism had begun and with them the study of behaviors of people traveling. While the field of events is a relatively new field of study, first appearing in publications in the 1970's, gatherings have existed and been documented dating back to the first century (Dolasinski, Roberts, Reynolds, & Johanson, 2020).

Research on participant behaviors and motivations while taking part in activities or various types of events is well documented (Lamir, Kuflik, Sheidin, Yavin, & Leiderman, 2017; Lee & Back, 2009; Kitchen, 2017; Ruiying, Lu, & Gursoy, 2018; Servert, Wang, Chen, & Breiter, 2007). There are several studies that have explored the emotional aspects of the participant and their connections to how they behave and interact during activities or events. Self-image often drives people to act a certain way.

Ryu and Lee (2013) suggested that people act out or express themselves based on their own self-image. By acting a certain way, they enhance their self-esteem and further validate their self-image. How they perceive the activity or event often informs how they define themselves and ultimately drives their behavior. A sense of social identity encourages individuals to participate and behave in ways that result in shared identity and purpose with others taking part.

Behaviors can be driven by the type of activity or event, the location or setting of the activity or event, and the participant expectations and engagement in the activity or event. Behaviors can include how people dress, act or act out, relate to others, and engage in the activity or event.

TYPE OF ACTIVITY OR EVENT

Experiential activities allow the participant to immerse themselves in the destination more fully rather than experiencing it superficially. For example adventure activities might include physical activities like mountain climbing or zip-lining yielding very different behaviors

than wine tourism where activities might include workshops or wine-tasting. Regardless of the activity, the behaviors driven by the experience may be very different than the normal day to day behaviors of the participant.

Structured events often bring individuals into a group with a shared purpose and focused environment. The type of event is a motivator of how people behave. If you are at a conference with people you know, you may act differently than at an event where you don't know anyone. For example, a person may exercise more constraints at a professional event where co-workers or colleagues in their field are also in attendance. Conversely, a person may display less constraints at a personal event like a family wedding. Less constraints may also be evident at a group event, like mega concert, where the participant will never see any of the other participants again.

Location and Setting of Event

The location or the setting for an activity or structured event can also play a key role in how people behave. Types of behavior expectations for a trip to London in the UK may be very different than that of a trip to Las Vegas in the US. The perceived image of a destination often shapes the feelings of the participant including their expectations on the type of experience they will have, how much fun it will be and if it can provide the activities wanted. Activities at the destination like visiting a museum can yield very different behavior than activities held at a local pub. Location plays a role in structured events as well. Pine and Gilmore (1998) suggested that participant experiences are influenced by the environment of the event. The uniqueness of the event location and the location's additional attractions play a role in participant behavior. For example, events held at a beach resort create a more casual environment with participants dressing very casually and acting in a much more laid back manner.

Conversely, an event in the middle of winter in New York City may convey expectations that cause participants to act and dress in a more professional way. Studies in both cultural and social sciences have explored the impact of setting on individual emotions, actions and behaviors. Environmental psychology also has a growing body of research exploring the relationship between people and their environment. Activities and events by their nature create settings where shared purposes and attendee participation are facilitated. The setting or design of the experience of the activity or event often provide the stage for participants to act differently than they may in their normal day to day lives. For example, a structured themed event may find participants wearing clothes appropriate for the theme that they would deem inappropriate to wear in everyday life.

Participant Expectations and Engagement

The tourism industry has been a pioneer in the experience economy phenomenon and the expectations for enriched experiences is in now at the forefront (Ruiying, Lu, & Gursoy, 2018). Participant expectations are driving the ways that they behave in shaping their experiences and their level of engagement. They are more involved, provide feedback and are more apt to share their experiences in a social media environment.

Participant expectations vary based on the type of activity or event. A cultural or historical destination activity may yield very different expectations than activities involving attendance of an amusement park like Disney World.

Norms or rituals are followed in most types of activities and events and act as a way further validate the reasons or purpose for participating in the activity and establishing the criteria for perceived value. Perceived value of the activity is achieved if the experience meets or exceeds participant expectations. Perceived value drives participant behavior. If the perceived value is positive, participants are more inclined to participate at a higher level and be more engaged. Often when visiting a Disney theme park, you will see both adults and children sporting funny hats, costumes and coordinating ensembles that they would never consider wearing in their everyday life. When expectations are not met, a behavior that is sometimes exhibited is retaliatory. For example, a participant who feels that their expectations have not been met may use their network to spread negative stories about their experience.

Perceived expectations based on the culture of a more structured event also plays a role in how people behave. A sense of event exclusivity or common shared beliefs can be a catalyst for the individual's behaviors at the event.

Being part of a group and coming together to participate in a structured event is often facilitated by the established culture of the event. The culture of the structured event often also includes norms or rituals. Consider attendees who participate in a political rally. Actions are dictated based on the beliefs of that party. Behaviors are consistent with norms established throughout the history of political rallies and are validated by the behavior of the other participants. They make act out and behave in ways that would be inconsistent in other circumstances. Conversely, attending a religious event could be a very conservative experience dictated by a very specific set of practices that have been repeated over many years and only practiced during that event.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT

Management should reinforce to staff the importance of customer satisfaction through immersive experience. This could be through a short 1-hour event, an afternoon, or even a multiple day experience. The location and setting of the event will often provide the customer with a preconceived notion of the event prior to arrival. It is crucial that staff understand this perceived image and work to ensure the experience is met.

CONCLUSION

Looking back in history, humans have travelled for various reasons from religious pilgrimages to current day adventures. Traveling introduced the need for places to sleep, eat, and be entertained. Participating in activities or structured events include the type of activity, location and setting of the activity or event, and the participant's expectations and engagement. These factors are drivers of behavior. Consistent throughout the tourist experience is that their behavior is often different when travelling versus being at home. Finally, with disruptors like the technology explosion and the 2020-2022 pandemic, future research will need to explore changes in customer expectations and behaviors to inform the future of hospitality and tourism practices and research.

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