

An Exploratory Study of Co-Created Narratives in Marketing Research: The Case of Veszprem in Hungary

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Abstract

This paper explores the way that co-creation has become a focus of writing in marketing and is changing how marketing is thought. We look at the ways in which re-thinking the relationship in marketing theory has impacted on value creation. We then consider how it should impact on marketing research and the ways in which marketing research is structured. We use the case of the research conducted in the early part of 2011 into the destination image of the historic city of Veszprém in Hungary. We conducted the research utilising both traditional market research techniques and methods which were more open and allowed the emergence more co-creative avenues which extended the remit of the qualitative marketing research approaches. The conclusions demonstrate the complexity of the processes involved in the development of destination image and the collection of information to feed into and support these developments.

Key words: Co-creation, Market Research, Narratives, Images

Introduction

"Mercedes Benz"

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz ?
My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends.
Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,
So Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz ?
Janis Joplin verse 1

Our recent work has focussed on the applications of co-creation across the fields of leisure, tourism, hospitality and events (Clarke, 2011) and we draw on this approach here to consider the ramifications for market research as well as for marketing cities. We have witnessed a considerable interest in co-creation in the marketing literature (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008), where the emphasis on value creation and value extraction focuses on the result of the interactive processes between the companies and their consumers (Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Service-Dominant (S-D) logic is based around the central role of the active consumer in the co-creation of value. This fundamental belief is one that we can identify in many forms within our researches on the tourism experience and the value components within tourism. As Payne et al. (2008: 1) argue this is predicated on the "customer's active involvement and interaction with their supplier in every aspect, from product design to product consumption" Until these recent writings, the traditional concept could be defined as seeing value creation as taking place within a company and the product was viewed as the end of the consumer experience. In the S-D logic, as opposed to the good-dominant (G-D) logic, co-creation experiences are regarded as the basis for value creation.

A Conceptual Framework for Co-creation

Our Tourism Department, like many others around the world, is located within a Business School and presented us with one way into constructing an understanding of co-creation. The S-D logic and the study of services drew on the work of authors such as Ramaswamy (2008:9) who indicated that the capability for innovation and the capacity for growth came from the organization's ability to be “continuously interacting with its customers through engagement platforms, especially those centred on customer experiences”. This attention to the customer as the basis for the strategic capital for innovation impacted directly on the ways we began to reconsider tourism development and hospitality management with customer centred business models (Hassanien, Dale, & Clarke, 2010)

Moreover we were aware of several attempts being made in the marketing literature to develop a conceptual framework for co-creation by mapping the customer, supplier and encounter processes (Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008). These processes involve the interactions and transactions between customers and enterprises and the possibility to identify within this nexus the opportunities for co-creation and innovation. From the perspective of the S-D logic in marketing the customer is always a co-creator of value and this is a key foundational proposition of this logic (Lusch and Vargo, 2008:7). In effect, S-D logic suggests that the value starts with the supplier understanding customer value creation processes and learning how to support, encourage and enhance customers' co-creation activities. Until very recently, Li and Petrick (2008) were correct in their observation that little or no attention had been paid to these propositions or S-D logic in the tourism literature.

Our starting point has been, and continues to be, that it is precisely in tourism and its associated fields that we can uncover primary examples of co-creation. We can see the ways in which experiences play essential roles in the supply and the consumption of the products and services which make up the sector; the active involvement of the tourist will lead to a deeper experience, and as such, in the context of the S-D logic, to a higher value. Interaction between and with consumers and providers is the foundation for co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). For co-creation to develop effectively active customer involvement in the production of a good or service must be introduced, maintained and enhanced, thus ensuring that the final value of this good or service is increased because the customer can tailor it as they desire (Lusch et al., 2007). This 'co-creation experience', as Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) term it, is linked directly to the achievement of value creation as the result. For businesses, the days of autonomously designing products or developing production processes, tapping new distribution channels or engaging in other marketing activities without involving consumers, seem to have disappeared (Kristensson et al., 2008; Cova and Salle, 2008; Ramaswamy, 2008; Dahlsten, 2004; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). This tendency in the research suggests that co-creation not only leads to an increase in value creation, but may also contribute significantly to product innovation (Clarke, 2011). Tourism research has yet to fully explore all the possibilities offered by co-creation for innovative developments in tourism destinations, despite the central assertion that these innovations would increase competitive strength (Clarke, 2010).

Tourism Experiences and Co-creation

If we believe our colleagues (and our own research), it can be argued that today's

group of consumers have quite a different attitude towards consumption than those of previous generations. In addition, tourists and consumers in general are not only better educated and wealthier, but also have access to more information than ever before. Tourists are looking for unique activities, tailored experiences, special interest focus, experiences in a lifestyle destination setting, living culture, creative spaces and creative spectacles (Gross and Brown, 2006). The need for authentic experiences, not contaminated by being fake or impure, is also growing increasingly (Gilmore and Pine, 2007; Yeoman et al., 2007). Tourism destinations in particular can offer visitors experiences that they do not normally find in their everyday lives. Oh et al. (2007:119) posit that “The benefit chain of causality view of tourism motivations tends to position tourist experience as a construct that transforms destination settings and activities into ultimate benefits and value that tourists obtain by visiting the destination.”

In research on tourism behaviour, experiences do appear to play a significant role (Oh et al., 2007; Morgan and Watson, 2007; Gross and Brown, 2006). “Tourism has been at the forefront of staging experiences” and “Tourism’s central productive activity is the creation of the touristic experience” (Sternberg, 1997 in Oh et al., 2007:119). According to this research, tourists are in fact and by definition looking for experiences. Pine and Gilmore (1999, 2002a, 2002b, in Oh et al., 2007) distinguish four types of experiences: the aesthetic experience, the entertainment experience, the escapist experience and the educational experience. Experiences determine the value of destinations and Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) are increasingly using this in positioning their destinations in the market. “The demand is growing for travel that engages the senses, stimulates the mind, includes unique activities, and connects in personal ways with travellers on an emotional, psychological, spiritual or intellectual level” (Arsenault and Gale, 2004 in Canadian Tourism Commission Research Report 7:21).

So far, little attention has been devoted to the possibilities and forms of co-creation in tourism research and particularly the potential influence of these possibilities and forms on the tourist experience. Canadian research (Arsenault and Gale, 2004), for instance, shows that contacts with the local communities, such as cooking, visiting farms, and being welcomed into the homes of locals, are particularly appreciated. This also holds true for all sorts of experimental, practical and interactive activities. Tourists do not just want to be spectators. They want to participate, roll up their sleeves. Not only view the gardens, but also do some gardening. They want to take a peek behind the scenes, not only go to a concert, but also meet the musicians afterwards. Learning experiences, such as photography workshops, going to a wine university, learning to understand the ecosystem of an area of natural beauty, are also growing in popularity. Furthermore, the sharing of experiences, the social dynamics connected with travel, getting to know new people, reinforcing old friendships and making new ones, and spending time with relatives, are also considered important (Arsenault and Gale, 2004).

Destination Image And Destination Branding

There has so far been little attention in the brand management domain for brand relationships, customer experience and co-creation (Payne et al., 2009). Prahalad (2004: 24) proposed an experience-centred, co-creation perspective where the brand becomes the experience and we wish to explore this further in this paper. According to Stanković and Đukić (2009: 25), “Destinations are some of the most difficult entities to manage and market, due to the complexity of the relationships of local stakeholders. Managing and marketing

destinations is also challenging because of the variety of stakeholders involved in the development and production of tourism products.” Given this fragmented nature of the tourism industry, some attention has been focussed on the local destination organizations (DMOs) to represent destinations in general (Wang, 2008), with a focus on collaborative destination marketing as the representation of supplier processes in tourism. However, if we wish to optimise the destination brand experiences perspective, we have to recognise that significant two way dialogue between tourists and the private and public experience stages is essential.

To bridge the gap between the new tourist and the more traditional marketing-oriented DMO, the new marketing thoughts should provide a different conceptualization of the whole tourism consumption experience (Li and Petrick, 2008). According to Li and Petrick (2008), co-creation between tourists and providers should be the answer. Co-creation involves tourists' active involvement and interaction with their supplier in every aspect, from product design to product consumption (Payne et al., 2009). DMOs all over the world are confronted with major changes in the tourism industry and rapidly changing tourism consumer, against the background of far-reaching social, political and economic developments (Gretzel et al., 2006). In addition to natural disasters and terrorist attacks, the tourism industry is also faced with sweeping climate changes and the consequences of this for tourism and tourism regions in particular (Ehmer and Heymann, 2008). Many DMOs face significant dilemmas: stakeholders with different interests, major changes in external environmental factors, tight financial budgets and last but not least DMOs face a red ocean of bloody competition (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005).

Gretzel et al. (2006: 116) formulated a number of challenges for DMOs in order to “adopt 'co-opetition' strategies that allow for various degrees of collaboration and competition in different areas and at different levels”. For instance, DMOs will have to keep themselves updated on technological changes and incorporate these, where possible, into their operations. To be able to do so, DMOs will have to evolve from marketing-oriented organizations into management-oriented organizations. With reference to communication, DMOs should realize that in branding a destination, image creation plays a crucial role in improving interaction with tourism consumers and as a result tourists' expectations could be better managed.

Branding A Tourism Destination and Co-creation

Recent tourism market research increasingly focuses on the experience of tourists and the cultural context of a destination. Lichrou et al. (2008) assert that a destination must not only be regarded as a physical space. Places have intangible, cultural, historical and dynamic aspects too. They are experienced by tourists in a dynamic context of social interaction with a common cultural meaning and with a collective memory (Stokowski, 2002 in Lichrou et al., 2008). According to Murphy et al. (2007), the traditional destination branding approach emphasizes mainly the physical attributes and activity opportunities which means that the destinations are accordingly simply considered as locations. Lichrou et al. (2008) believe that visiting a tourism destination is about a process of experience, the dreams and fantasies of consumers, the meeting of people, interaction between hosts and visitors and other tourists. It concerns a dynamic context in which destinations are simultaneously produced and consumed. Tourists have an image of a tourism destination even though they have never been there, which is why Lichrou et al. (2008) develop the

opinion that destinations should be seen, metaphorically, as narratives rather than products. This perspective urge us to work in a way which leaves room for the recognition of interaction, co-creation, and for the notion of the tourist as participant instead of spectator.

One of the challenges of a DMO is using, following Ramaswamy (2008:9) the “global network resources and thematic communities to continuously identify and act upon new innovation and valuecreation opportunities” to “strengthen the competitiveness of the tourism destination.” Competitors are becoming partners and co-opetition and co-destiny are becoming increasingly important (Prahalad and Krishnan, 2008; Li and Petrick, 2008). This means that DMOs will have to cooperate interactively with other partners in the destination through a process of exchanging ideas and expertise and linking together financial and human resources (Wang, 2008). Govers and Go (2009:255) argue that brand positioning “should be built on a value match between place identity and the type of audience the place is attempting to attract.”

Market Research in the Narratives

Figure 1: Map of Hungary: Courtesy of the Veszprém Tourism Association



We were fortunate to be asked/tasked by the DMO in Veszprém to take part in a major piece of destination image research about the historic city, in the Central Transdanubia Region of Hungary, a popular destination with both domestic and foreign tourists, benefiting from a unique architectural heritage, cultural offer and its magnificent natural settings. The map (Figure 1) illustrates the location of the city within Hungary: 15 minutes drive away from the second most popular tourism destination in Hungary, Lake Balaton – the largest fresh water lake in Europe- the Bakony Hills surround the city and it is close to the capital Budapest (roughly 90 minutes drive). (www.veszpreminfo.hu) Veszprém's centre is the shop

window for the whole progressive historic city, and it is crucial to the city's future that the centre remains economically strong. Though Veszprém attracts many day-visitors yearly, it does not generate more than 100,000 overnight stays (2009).

The approach to the image research was multifaceted and multimethod, with different aspects of the research taking different methodological perspectives. In part this was driven by a desire to capture the complexity of the co-creative narratives within the situation and in part it was an act of appeasement to the more traditional elements in the DMO who wanted to see the statistics. The package therefore included a very traditional quantitative research questionnaire, administered to 800 people and analysed using SPSS; semi-structured key stakeholder interviews with 12 participants; 3 focus groups in three cities - Budapest, Győr and Pécs (these cities being seen as both potential competitors and potential generating areas); and a discursive analysis of the travel blogs commenting on Veszprém. This account concentrates on the focus groups and the image narratives which emerged from this consultation.

We believe this is important because the challenge of the co-creative perspective is not just about a shift from quantitative research accounts to qualitative ones, but about a commitment to open dialogue. The use of open questions is an important first step as it creates the space for what we have traditionally referred to as open answers but these answers are still driven by the questions. We see the need to open the space even further if we are to attempt to capture the dialogues involved in co-creation and offer open spaces in which the participants can contribute their own narratives to the research processes.

In many ways, the focus groups were constructed in a very recognisable form, with up to 10 people invited by telephone calls to a discussion about Veszprém as one part of a big image survey about the city. The focus groups were held in three other historic cities; Budapest, Győr and Pécs with between 8 – 12 attendants, all Hungarians. The sessions which were expected to run for between 90 – 120 minutes, with full tape recording and note taking, included a gender balanced audience and an age range spreading from 23 – 70 with a wide range of occupations and levels of education. Everyone had been before but two had just driven through and stopped for an hour – the first visits often related to school trips and/or visiting one of the festivals in the city. However the more informal celebrations surrounding the University Days were more significant for our groups than the established festivals.

The sessions included structured question and answer sheets to establish the terms of reference for the meetings, asking the delegates to highlight the five best things about Veszprém and, if we have captured the translation correctly, the five least good things about the city. This was followed by a series of established basic such as 'if Veszprém was a person would it be a man or a woman? What age would it be (age group brackets were offered)? What colour would it be? What sort of flower would it be? What sort of animal? And what sort of car?'

These questions led on to discussions of the responses and an attempt to arrive at a consensus. Perhaps the most surprising areas emerged around the gender of the city, which has long celebrated being the Hungarian City of Queens as predominantly masculine. The question about animals stubbornly refused to yield a consensus with only three animals mentioned twice. As these were a deer, a lion and a tortoise/turtle (the same word is used for both in Hungarian so it is impossible to derive a distinction in translation) it is difficult to allow conclusions to emerge. The responses from the others included everything from tiny animals to big ones, from powerful beasts to the weakest creatures. What animal is Veszprém seemed to pose a very difficult question, which as noted provoked very different answers may be because Veszprém tries to satisfy many market segment's needs and therefore has no

clear focus – indeed this was mentioned as a critique in one of the interviews and raises some challenging issues in our understanding of co-creation as we may be unlikely to ever suggest a single, unified image of a destination from the narratives arising from the experience reconstructions.

From the question about flowers it can be seen that 3 emerged strongly: the daisy, the sunflower and more surprisingly the tulip. In the discussions and consulting a Hungarian dictionary of symbolism, it was apparent that both the Daisy and the Sunflower represent a vibrant force and a sense of splendour. Some saw the sunflower as a symbol of openness. The tulips were said to represent the natural and to convey a sense of playfulness and happiness. We would also note that in medieval literature the tulip held the symbolic position often now associated with the rose as an emblem of love and affection but we did not explore this motif with the groups as we were listening to their constructions of the destination and not seeking to overlay their accounts with our own.

When we came to the question about cars, it emerged that Veszprém has more of a solid reliable image than an exciting elite one. What emerged was that the city was seen more as a Volkswagen estate car, something reliable, familiar, big enough and safe enough for families. The city was always described in terms of the mid-range reliable vehicles and although a Rolls Royce and a Mercedes were mentioned in the discussions, they were dismissed in favour of a consensus as more mid-range, achievable, attainable car. There was also an emergent theme that the vehicle, possibly the old VW camper van, despite being old was still reliable and it could well become fashionable again.

The highlight of the focus groups was the narrativity found in the request to create collages that represented the image of the city that is 'something they thought of as Veszprém'. This request came at the end of the meetings and the task was addressed in two groups. The groups were given piles of magazines but not ones with actual photographs of the city and definitely not the Veszprém tourism brochures. They were told that they had 15 minutes to select the photographs from the magazines and then to produce a collage by sticking those pictures on a blank piece of paper. In practice this part of the sessions took between 20 and 25 minutes because the participants were evidently enjoying the task and themselves.

The narratives developed some interesting versions of the 'images' that represent the city and some divergences from the original verbal assessments of the city itself. We include two of the collages here as exemplars of what the groups constructed – however our conclusions are based on a review of all the collages and not just the two included here. Firstly the collages challenged the notion of the city as a masculine domain as images of women not only dominated in number but also in location within the collages. We still saw little reference to the idea of the 'City of Queens' but clearly there are active and committed women in these narratives. Families are also featured. We found it odd during the analysis that the idea of gastronomy had not emerged in the verbal or written responses but then did come out strongly in the images in the collages.

The sense of the city's limitations (particularly the lack of things to do for young people) is overshadowed by invocations of the calm, peace and tranquillity of the setting and the infrastructure. We found the image of fishing, in Collage 1 below, very challenging as the lived reality of the city is that there is actually no where you could go fishing within the city. However this image, curiously the same image was selected in another collage as well, calls to the strategic location of the city, close to the Balaton, and captures the narrative of the attraction of the city as a place of space and opportunity in its surroundings as well as in and of itself. This is also structured into the construction of Collage 2 which moves from the

beach scene to the greenery of the hills and fields, which we were told captured the positive stories from the surrounding areas that seem to constitute a mental map of some sort of touristic greater Veszprém.

Figure 2: Collage 1





Please note that the ball in Collage 2 (top left hand corner) is not a beach ball nor a football, but was included by the group to represent handball and the importance of Veszprém's very successful handball team in the image of the city.

Narrativity and marketing

The DMO has commissioned a corporate design handbook for official presentations on the city. This stresses that the colour should be red, and in fact has been red for years. However the image narratives suggest that Veszprém is cast as blue, green and turquoise but it would appear definitely not as red. We feel that these colours emerge from the sense of setting and the peace and tranquillity of the landscape of the Bakony Highlands and the Lake Balaton. We feel there is need to further explore the dissonance between these two constructions of the colours of Veszprém to determine how best the city can be presented. There is perhaps a compromise that could include the red, which the DMO draws from the colour of the original coronation gowns and the suggestion that the blue could be Royal Blue. However the co-created narratives pay no attention to royalty and therefore we must question the relevance of this element in constructions of the city for these audiences in these times.

Conclusions

Everybody!

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?

My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends,

Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,

So oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz ?

That's it!

Janis Joplin verse 4

It may be that the DMO who commissioned the research had visions of the city being seen as a Mercedes Benz but they will have to deal with the representation of the city which emerged as an aging Volkswagen estate car. Like Joplin's implicit heroine, we must address how the city can make amends. We feel that by adopting a perspective that enshrines co-creation not only in the experiences of the city but in the market research about the city, we can use the narratives to move forward. It is not that a series of negative narratives emerged; rather we saw a variety of positive narrative elements constituting creations of collaged images of the perceived city. We believe that as researchers committed to practical application of theoretical developments, we must work with the DMO to help build these processes into the workings of the city in a broader and more reflexive series of ways. There are messages to be taken from this research and we must ensure that these 'soft' voices drawn from the co-creation perspective are treated seriously, at least as seriously, than those drawn from the more traditional, 'hard' forms of market research.

Co-creation can work as a defining perspective for market research, if the spaces can be opened and kept open for the expressions of images and perceptions. Here we have demonstrated how this was possible in one way for one city, but we hope that this is only a starting point as there must be other ways, experiences of other places, which we can learn from and utilise. Perhaps through this co-creation of tourism market research, we may indeed make amends and find our Mercedes Benz – although what that actually means will also have to be unpacked and deconstructed in terms of specific contexts, experiences and meanings.

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