EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF TRAVELERS IN NATURE-BASED TOURISM: A STUDY BASED ON NETNOGRAPHY

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Abstract

The notion of customer experience management is important for every industry to achieve a competitive advantage. Especially in nature-based tourism, customer experience is playing a vital role with the development of technology since travelers are expressing their pure emotional experience via online platforms. Therefore, this study explores the travelers' recalled emotional experience in nature-based tourism in relation to *Knuckles* mountain range in Sri Lanka. In this qualitative research study, netnography approach is adopted and the data was collected from the TripAdvisor social media webpage. Researchers used open and axial coding in the analysis following the grounded theory approach and the dimensions were constructed for travelers' recalled emotional experiences. Accordingly, extrinsic positive emotional experiences were identified based on the categories of adventurous natural and delighted social settings. Also, the extrinsic negative emotional experiences were developed through repulsion with natural setting and built resources in the mountain range. Further, intrinsic positive emotional experiences were expressed by the travelers who encountered psychological and physical refresh with their journey whereas intrinsic negative emotional experiences were reflected by the travelers who were challenged with hiking, loneliness and lack of human interactions. Therefore, this study implies that the regulatory bodies need to facilitate the upgrading of nature-based tourism in Sri Lanka with basic infrastructure development without heavy tangible investments. Further, marketers need to address those emotional experiences expressed by travelers to develop memorable

journeys with focused promotional campaigns. Also, the academia needs to investigate more on this phenomenon to generate novel insights for the development of nature-based tourism in Sri Lanka.

Key Words: Emotional experience, Experiential marketing, Nature-based tourism, Netnography.

1. Introduction

The management of customer experience is paramount in tourism industry due to the fierce competition among hospitality industry providers to build a competitive advantage. Within the technological improvement, enhancement of customer experience is playing a vital role for a remark the long lives for the businesses. Creating excellent customer experiences has become a key objective in the contemporary hospitality and tourism industry. Practitioners acknowledge the limitations of traditional marketing approaches based on components such as price, product, and quality and note the importance of customer experience management (CEM) in achieving competitive advantages and developing customer loyalty (Gentile et al., 2007; Shaw and Ivens, 2005). Now consumers are engaged in the technical platform and they are believing customer word of mouth (WoM) rather than companies' marketing promotional campaigns. On the other hand, the capability to access web 2.0 and social media ubiquitously, as a result of the diffusion of smartphones and tablets, allowed the consumer to become impulsive generators of online content about what they experience during their daily life (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015).

Although the experience economy emerged in the business field, it has crossed its frontier to tourism, which has been identified as one of the pioneer examples of the experience economy (Quan & Wang, 2004). In tourism, however, the tourist becomes a consumer of place or culture as well as a purchaser of a tourism product. Therefore, the importance of experiencing a place must be recognized (Page & Connell, 2006). Furthermore, contemporary customers are familiar with all social media platforms and they tend to share their feelings, experience, values with others who are in the social communities. In the context of tourism and hospitality industry, some of the destinations are depending on their natural landscape. Therefore, tourism-based economies need to capture the experiential needs of the consumer to pull them to generate better revenue with loyal customers.

Sri Lanka as a tourism destination is blessed with attractive nature-based destinations as well as has the opportunity to develop the economy through destination marketing. Therefore, tourism marketers need to highlight the experiential need for their prospects. Within the higher technological integration, consumers are highly dependent on e- word of mouth (e-WoM) as well as previous comments which are posted by previous travelers. As a proactive marketer knowing the customer's ideas and value can provide an added advantage for redesigning the destination marketing. Therefore, knowing customer experience, values and attitudes are having substantial importance for uplifting the Sri Lankan tourism industry. Apart from that, capturing customer experience through social media platforms need to be one of the salient priorities in developing a customer centered strategic marketing approach for Sri Lanka.

1.1 Research Problem

The experiential economy play a vital role as present wave of economic history and it has reshaped the marketing practices in every industry. Further, consumers are more than ready to embrace novel way of thinking as experience and feeling rather than physical features and aspects of product or service. Consequently, now-a-days organizations started focusing on experience-based over service-based economy (Kim, Cha, Knutson, & Beck, 2011). As a human aspect of every customer, they tend to attach with feelings rather than physical aspects of offerings. In 2020, Kaur and Kaur have mentioned that, due to the Covid 19 pandemic, organizations are moving towards electronic experiential economy with digital platforms. Concomitant with this new economy, there are a number of implications of the experiential economy such as mass customization, authenticity, charging admission is the economic key etc. (Pine & Gilmore, 2013).

In terms of time framing, Gauri, et al. (2008) have mentioned that, the philosophy of customer experience management (CEM) is every time a business and customer interact the customer learns something about the company to the emotional and experiential benefit of the client, which determines the behavior of them. Therefore, CEM is a strategy that focuses on

operations and processes of a business around the needs of the individual customer by trying to understand the emotional and experiential combination through customer's lenses.

When it comes to the customer experience Gentile et al. (2007) and Verhoef et al. (2009) have defined as it is in holistic in nature, based on personal interactions between a customer and a brand, service provider or product that is composed from various cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses of this customer. Further, Frow and Payne (2007) mentioned that customer experience is also created by elements that are outside of company's control such as other customers or devices that customers use to get in touch with a company; suppliers even can, with a help of knowledge sharing processes, use their own customers as the support for the creation and delivery of the customer experience. The role of review sites must be perceived in connection with the importance of electronic WOM (eWOM) for tourism participants. Nam et al. (2020) have mentioned that, the influence of eWOM is undeniable, with 91% of individuals viewing blogs, product reviews or other online comments created by users before purchasing a product or service, 84% of respondents say they trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations, and 74% of consumers say they trust companies more if they have positive reviews. Within that, marketers need to address the user experience through buzzwords and the platform of social media with effective customer experience management.

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) explained that in their study, now customers are interact with firms through myriad touch points in multiple channels and media, and customer experiences are more social in nature. Therefore, it enhances the complexity of understanding and the holistic customer experience than ever. At the same time, The Marketing Science Institute in 2014 and 2016 viewed that, customer experience as one of its most important research challenges in the coming years due to its complexity. Consequently, it has required an in-depth exploration or empirical attempt to understand the complex customer experiences which increasing gradually.

When it comes to the tourism, hospitality and travelling industries that customer experience is far more complex of the nature and the industry composition. Apart from that, customers also using different modes for deciding the travel destinations and travelers' experiences with modern world with touch of tech savvy. Zervas et al.(2021) have reinforced that idea as review sites are important, not only for decision-making by potential users of tourism services and visitors to destinations etc., but also as sources of valuable information about the way of thinking and satisfaction or dissatisfaction of tourism participants. Further, Zelenka et al (2021) have mentioned that, review sites are significant for the implementation of marketing of tourism services, attractions and destinations. Further, tourism industry is basically using different aspects for marketing a particular destination such as historical value, location, cultural and social events and natural and agricultural aspects. When keeping eye on Sri Lanka, it is a tourism hub for the travelers and tourists who are enthusiasm with natural beauty. The incredible experience of tourist is far more important to create sustainable nature based tourism. Therefore knowing the customer experience which strongly combine with digital platform is essential to covert the nature based tourism as one of the higher contributed pillars into Sri Lankan tourism industry. Meanwhile, this research area has not been addressed in the existing literature particularly, in Sri Lankan context. Hence, this study has significant value on the effort of uplifting Sri Lankan tourism industry. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how the emotions are recalled by the travelers in online platforms with respect to a nature-based tourism destination.

2. Literature Review

Scholars have defined experience marketing as the capacity to create a memorable impression on a consumer's mind and as a result it is called living marketing (Oliver, 1999; Gilmore, 1999; and Khaled, Kwek, and Anas, 2013). Haeckel et al. (2003) have defined experience as the 'takeaway' impression held by the consumers when they are encountered with products, service, and business. Hauser (2007) reinforced the idea given by the above scholars as experience marketing or live marketing identified the consumer as a person who lives, experiences, and gets emotional as well as involved with what is happening. Then it leads to

creating a live experience related to the brand. Le et al. (2019) have emphasized that experience marketing is highly influenced by tourist behavior since most tourists are choosing their travel destination related to fantasies and positive emotions. A study done by Holbrook in 2006 has highlighted that product not only consists of economic value and it has cupped hedonic, social, and altruistic value, depending on consumers' orientation. As Le et al. (2019) have emphasized, the amazement experience is the most important factor in tourism to connect with the traveler's perceived surroundings and satisfaction. Therefore, tourism experiences designers need to be concerned about this factor when they are creating excellent experiences for their tourism products (Volo, 2021).

When it comes to the use of experiential marketing, Datta (2017) has mentioned that conventional marketers are considering their consumers as rational decision-makers who consider the functional features and benefits of the products, the experiential marketers have converted the meaning of consumers as emotional aspect who concern on pleasurable experience. Now it uses as a kind of marketing strategy that can directly connect consumers to develop the brand. Further Boa (2020) stated that marketers use emotions in their marketing campaigns including advertisements to resonate with their customers in order to attract their interest in the context of business marketing. After the identification of the target audience, the marketers are using the senses and it will lead to consumer decisions (Panchal, 2018). This use of emotions in marketing is called emotional marketing which can combine the main three stages of approaching, interacting, and influencing by the use of the aspect of emotions (Decker, 2019).

When it comes to the need for a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding tourism and destination marketing, Ghazail et al, (2021) have mentioned that, tourism connection with the destination environment is crucial to the service-based industry. Therefore, it is anticipated that the cognitive and emotive dimensions would play a role in the tourism experience. Emotions related to consuming that are induced by the experience serve as a prelude to cognitive assessments of the service. Since it affects cognitive and behavioral outcomes, the significance of emotion in perceiving a destination is seen as a crucial component of the service-consuming

process (Zins, 2002). Hwang & Seo (2016) reinforced the above idea as creating a great customer experience is even more important in hospitality and tourism research due to the experiential nature of that industry. A recent study by Bharwani and Jauhari (2013) developed a scale for the hospitality experiential intelligence of employees that consists of four dimensions as centricity of guest experience, creativity and innovation, generosity and professional behavior asserting that employees with high experiential intelligence can provide a positive customer experience. Based on the existing research (Kim et al, 2012; Wei, 2019) on memorable tourist experiences there are four factors, namely hedonism, novelty, meaningfulness, and social interaction, were considered to be important psychological factors that shape memorable tourism experiences, and their impacts on tourists' positive emotions and behavioral intentions. According to Sharma and Nayak (2019), memorable tourism experiences are designed to reinforce and consolidate the recollection of pleasant memories of experiences.

Thus, the creation of unforgettable or memorable experiences is valuable for the sustainable development of tourist destinations. Recent hospitality literature has vigorously investigated online customer experience (Lee et al., 2010; Pantelidis, 2010; Rageh et al., 2013), which is justified by the fact that the largest online spending category is tourism, and online transactions account for an increasingly large share of all transactions in related to the hospitality and tourism industry.

3. Methodology

This study is conducted using the qualitative research design. Accordingly, as per the ontological stance, researchers believed and used the subjective view point that were based on respondent's age, knowledge, experience, understanding and assumptions. Under the epistemological stance, researchers need to develop very closer and trust full relationship with their respondent to gather rich data for the research (Creswell, 2013). This qualitative study investigated under the ethnography approach in digital platform where digital ethnography or Netnography study. According to the Kuznets (1997) Netnography is a qualitative research

approach based on cybercultures and cyber communities over a medium of computer-mediated. Bartl et al., (2016) have reinforced Kuznets's idea by emphasizing the research application in digital mode in line with behavior of concurrent consumers via digital platform as expressing themselves implicitly and explicitly by sharing their desires, belief, experiences and their expectations.

In this study data was collected through the online platform of TripAdvisor in relation to the travelers' experiences in nature-based tourism with respect to the *Knuckles* mountain range in Sri Lanka. The data is analyzed using the grounded theory approach with the support of NVIVO in order to propose the typology of emotional experience with respect to nature-based tourism. Accordingly, researchers have initiated analysis with open coding with a careful reading on comments provided by the travelers to come up with the codes to represent the data. Thereafter, the axial coding process was conducted to convert the initial codes into the categories. Finally, the researchers carried out the selective encoding in order to propose the plausible links between the categories to form a theory grounded on the data collected (Strauss & Cobin, 2008).

4. Findings and Discussion

The grounded theory based analysis conducted to find out the emotions recalled by the travelers related to nature-based tourism provided the findings presented in table 1. Accordingly, researchers have identified four main dimensions for the emotional experiences recalled by the travelers as extrinsic positive and negative factors and intrinsic positive and negative factors.

Table 1: Codes, categories and dimensions of traveler emotional experience

Codes (Open Coding)	Categories (Axial Encoding)	Dimensions
Adventure experience in hiking, Adventure experience in waterfalls, Amazing camping experience with nature, Amazing experience with natural view, Amazing with clouds and mist, Enjoy delicious wild fruits, Enjoy food in natural setting, Enthralling experience with hiking, Excited with wild life, Happy with unique weather conditions, Refreshing at water fall, Tranquilized on unspoilt countryside, Undisturbed natural enjoyment	Adventurous natural setting	Extrinsic positive
Delighted with inherent rural practices, Delighted with tourist guide	Delighted social setting	
Disappoint with bad weather, being uncomfortable with creatures, fear of wild animals	Repulsion with natural setting	Extrinsic negative
Disappoint with weak infrastructure	Repulsion with built resources	
Full of thrilling, refreshing mind, calming mind, mindfulness of self, escaped from busy life, mental fatigue removal, improve mental health, sense of meaning in life	Positive internalized emotions	Intrinsic positive
Challenging hiking experience, loneliness in the night, lack of human connectivity	Negative internalized emotions	Intrinsic negative

Source: Researcher's construction

The four key dimensions generated through the analysis is explained below with evidence.

4.1 Extrinsic Positive

The dimension of extrinsic positive refers to the creation of favorable travelers' emotional experiences in nature-based tourism. Accordingly, the extrinsic positive emotions of travelers were created by the adventurous natural setting and delighted social setting. Further, it has emphasized that the attraction of natural setting encouraged travelers to express positive emotional experiences in the purely natural environment including waterfall, nature, clouds, natural views, mist, delicious wild fruits, natural setting, unique weather conditions, un-spoilt countryside, and undisturbed- natural setting. It has clearly highlighted that the majority of nature-based travelers' emotional experiences are positive in nature and they are motivated by the external factors which are available in the traveling destination. Other than that, these extrinsic positive emotional experiences were developed by the delighted social setting arriving from rural live experience. The following excerpts have provided the higher level of positive extrinsic emotions expressed by the traveler who had hiked in the *Knuckles* mountain range.

"We passed through a mountain village, crossed a river and a few waterfalls, and had 360 views over the village when we climbed up to the summit. The wildlife was also amazing! So many animals to see in their natural habitat".

Accordingly, the traveler has been positively motivated by the external factors that were available in the respective hiking such as the natural view on the summit, wildlife, and their behavior.

Further, travelers recalled their emotional experience with respect to the delighted social setting that they encountered and it is evidenced in the following excerpt.

"From our eco-lodge, we spent five hours walking in the foothills of the mountain range - through tea plantations and beautiful countryside. Interestingly watching the ladies picking tea leaves with such skill - will definitely appreciate my Ceylon tea more than I used to. It was lovely and peaceful with beautiful scenery and clearly, it is possible to be more adventurous and climb higher. An enjoyable experience especially as the weather was beautiful".

This excerpt has emphasized the delighted social setting which was experienced by the traveler in his journey at *Knuckles* mountain range which is expressed about the inherent practices of villagers.

4.2 Extrinsic Negative

Extrinsic negative dimension refers to the travelers' emotional experiences that were more negative in nature as a result of external factors related to nature-based tourism destinations. It has related to the negativity of natural setting and built resources and that was unfavorably observed by the traveler. Consequently, the travelers who were traveling in the *Knuckles* mountain range were dissatisfied with the built resources like roads and the other natural factors like bad weather. Simply, the unfavorable external factors in nature-based tourism in travelers' personal perceptions have led them to express negative emotional experiences regarding their travel experience. This dimension can be proven by the following excerpt which expressed the emotional experience of travelers who led to expressed negative emotions associated with their tourism experiences.

"The road is not a road but large rocks on gravel and mud"

Accordingly, the traveler got distressed with the traveling experience which was connected with an indirect hint that he never expect that type of challenging nature-based tourism experience. Moreover, the following excerpt reiterates the extrinsic negative emotions towards the nature-based tourism.

"We then started our ascent, it had rained the day before so it was quite slippery and uphill all the way. Apart from 2 beautiful waterfalls (should have stayed at them!), there was little else to see until the leeches appeared! We walked uphill for over 2 hours until we called it a day and made our descent, which was quite difficult due to the muddy terrain".

The above excerpt has elaborated on the extrinsic negative emotional expression which was attached to gloomy weather and the consequences of insects.

4.3 Intrinsic Positive

This dimension refers to the reveler's internal motivation which encouraged travelers to express positive emotional experiences in relation to nature-based tourism destinations. Further, travelers' emotional experiences were based on internalized positive emotions such as amazing, delighted, excited, happy, refresh, tranquilized, enjoyable and thrill associated with natural travel journeys. This dimension can be elaborated using the following excerpts expressed by the respondents in their journey to *Knuckles*.

"You will not feel to leave the place when you go there. So many things to see and experience. You will absolutely get disconnected from the busy city life and get connected with nature".

According to the idea of one of the respondents highlighted the higher level of internalized satisfaction attached to nature-based tourism with his argument of discouraging the busy urban life.

4.4 Intrinsic Negative

This final dimension has created an intrinsic negative emotional feeling that is evidenced the negativity of recommendations internal in nature which was associated with negative feelings and attitudes in nature-based tourism. Those negative emotional feelings or experiences were generated by the traveler himself or herself. Accordingly, the traveler has been disappointed with their own interpretation regarding the challenges in hiking and unfavorable climate conditions. The following excerpt evidenced an intrinsic negative experience regarding to the hike of *Knuckles* mountain range.

"The 3-hour hike consisted, from then on, of us checking each other every 2 mins for leeches. Some of the views were nice but we were not able to stop for long, or else we would be covered again. There was some wildlife on the hike but nothing too exciting. I am writing this post as a warning mainly if you want to do this hike please be prepared".

The above experience expressed by the traveler has clearly elaborated that, even though the place was rich with natural beauty it was not created an excitement for the traveler while he has disappointed with the less prepared hiking.

When it comes to the discussion of the findings, the first dimension that has been drawn by the researchers as extrinsic dimensions (both positive and negative) of emotional experience expressed by nature-based tourism has supported by the idea presented by Ghazail et al, (2021) as the environmental setting is crucial in destination marketing. The typology of emotions related to nature-based tourism is in line with Zins's (2002) idea as the travelers' destination experiences

were connected with the cognitive and behavioral components of the traveler. Extrinsic positive emotions connect with a delighted social setting have reinforced the idea expressed by Bharwani and Jauhari (2013) as hospitality experiential intelligence of employees that consists of four dimensions centricity of the guest experience, creativity and innovation, generosity, and professional behavior asserting that employees with high experiential intelligence can provide a positive customer experience.

Moreover, these research findings are in line with Coelho et al. in 2018 research findings on typologies generated in nature-based tourism as types of emotions of memorable travel experiences inward positive, inward negative, outward positive, and outward negative. Finally, this research has emphasized some factors that are creating extrinsic positive emotional experiences whereas the same external factor has created negative external experience for another traveler who has visited the same destination in the same period of time. Accordingly, researchers can elaborate on the idea as the emotional experience of nature-based tourism is strongly attached to travelers' attitudes and perceptions of their nature-based tourism. Further, this can be identified as a novel finding of this research study.

5   Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of the study is to explore how emotional experience is recalled by the travelers in online platforms with respect to a nature-based tourism destination. In that case, researchers have selected the travelers' experiences which have posted on TripAdvisor in relation to *Knuckles* mountain range in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, there are four main dimensions that represent the nature-based travelers' emotional experiences as intrinsic positive, negative and extrinsic positive, negative. Travelers have expressed and shared their intrinsic positive emotional experiences that are generated by their inner feelings after their hiking experiences. It has been further expressed by their own intrinsic expressions such as happy, enjoy, amazing, delighted, and excitement with their nature-based traveling. Furthermore, some intrinsic negative emotions have been generated that are reflecting their own perception of destinations and travel

experiences in the same natural settings. On the other hand, the external environmental factors created both positive and negative emotional experiences for *Knuckles* travelers. Moreover, the vast natural setting combines biodiversity including misty rain forests, endemic birds, fauna, and flora encouraging travelers to express the external positive emotional hiking experience of travelers. Finally, few travelers were disappointed with this challenging hiking with unfamiliar weather conditions and challenging hiking related to poor infrastructure in remote areas in *Knuckles*.

When focusing on the implications of this study, researchers have emphasized three main pillars for the process of implications as policy focus implications, commercial implications, and scholarly implications. As a country which is having a greater value for a natural setting, it has encouraged the nature-based tourism without heavy investments. Consequently, some of the travelers expressed extrinsic negative emotional experiences attached to man-made settings such as harder traveling with poor infrastructure. In this case, regulatory bodies need to adhere to proper regulations for safety, chargers for tourist guides and accommodations. The principle level implications can be identified in the commercial utilization of such natural resources in an experiential marketing interface. Accordingly, marketers need to enhance the positive extrinsic and intrinsic emotional experience of travelers by enforcing the development of the travel and tourism industry in Sri Lanka. The final implication is to connect with academia that has engaged with research. Those investigations should encourage local nature-based tourism with novel findings of their research that can enhance and ensure fair money circulation in the country from the top to bottom level.

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