EMOTION EXPERIENCE IN ETHICAL CONSUMPTION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN A TOURISM CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

The literature on consumer ethics and ethical consumption has experienced immense growth in the past thirty years leading to an array of decision-making models and frameworks (e.g. Rest, 1979, Hunt and Vitell, 1986, Ferrell and Gresham, 1985 and Marks and Mayo, 1991). Nonetheless, Carrigan and Attalla’s (2001) ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ clearly illustrates an inconsistency between consumers actual ethical behaviour and their expressed ethical concerns. This gap has been recognised as one of the key difficulties in these models. One factor that might explain such difficulties is the way in which consumer are constructed as rational, complex decision makers thus overlooking non-rational factors such as emotion. Although, Gaudine and Thorne (2001), and many others have argued that ethical decision-making is an emotionally charged process. Thus far, affect is regarded as an undifferentiated aspect of attitude formation. Failing to recognise the important role of emotion in ethical decision making, this paper seeks to explore how emotions can influence such behaviour.

The literature on emotion and decision-making has predominantly focused on a response-based perspective. This perspective regards emotion as an outcome stemming from the decision-making process, aimed with emotional satisfaction (Baumeister et al., 2006, Bigné et al., 2004, Sirakaya et al., 2005, Mano et al., 1993 and Goossen, 2000). Little is known about the role of emotion as an integral part of the decision-making process. Furthermore, extant emotion theories have relied on a strong scientific, behaviourist paradigm stemming from traditional psychology. Yet this comes with its limitations. The range of emotions offered in the traditional models is regarded as too limiting for consumption contexts (Richins, 1997). Tourism as a one such context experiences emotion prior to and during consumption due to its complex combination of phenomena and relationships. Hence, a context specific view of emotion is required. As a result, this paper introduces Goldie’s phenomenological perspective of emotion highlighting a subjective, intense and context specific view of emotion experiences. Goldie’s perspective is bound up in the way we take in the world, and how we consume everyday experiences. It takes into account emotion experiences, ‘what is felt’, their meaning for individuals and how they make sense of them. Furthermore, it acknowledges a wider range of emotions experienced in consumption contexts.

As a prototypical ethical consumption experience, tourists ethical concerns are evident in current issues such as the debate around aviation and carbon emissions; the conflict between host destinations, local communities and incoming tourists, and the destruction of natural landscapes. Indeed, such issues can be a direct consequence of a tourists’ decision-making process. Although an obvious economic advantage exists for tourism, it needs to be managed more efficiently to sustain the life of the industry. The literature recognises the importance of the supply-side perspective and its contribution to help manage tourism in a more ethical manner, yet, the role and responsibility of consumers is still lacking. This is despite the fact that consumers’ ethical behaviour is suggested to be a “valuable extension of sustainable tourism management toolbox” (Dolnicar et al., 2008, p.199). Furthermore, a paradox exists with regard to the role of hedonism in ethical tourism. As a key motivational factor in mainstream tourism, the role of pleasure is not widely acknowledged in ethical tourism. Nonetheless, ethical tourism experiences can be hedonistic as pleasure and satisfaction can be derived from choosing ‘the good life’; consuming in a morally conscious way (Soper, 2007). Consequently, for the purpose of this study, the term ‘ethical tourism’ is an umbrella term incorporates responsible, sustainable, eco, and environmentally friendly tourism. This includes all positive consumption behaviour as defined by the consumers’ themselves, who claim to consume ethically in a tourism context.

This paper provides a review of the relevant literature highlighting prospective research links between ethical consumption, emotion and tourism. Furthermore, analysis from a qualitative study adopting an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach aims to provide a greater understanding of the role of emotion as a possible motivator for choice and behavioural change in an ethical consumption context. Thus enhancing the knowledge and understanding of consumer cognition as a continuing area of interest and crucially, emotion as a driver of choice that cannot be wholly explained by rational processes.
METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretivist research approach to help uncover participants’ subjective experiences, their meaning, and how participants make sense of them. That is, it aims to help overcome the frustrations outlined in the dominant scientific methodology employed in extant emotion research. Employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA: Smith, 2006) approach, this study focuses on the exploration and understanding of participants’ experiences and perceptions as part of their ‘lifeworld’. By concentrating on a ‘particular’ phenomenon in a ‘particular context’ by a ‘particular’ participant this offers “a deeper, more personal, individualised analysis” (Brocki et al., 2006, p.99). It is an idiographic study aimed at hearing the voice of the participant from the first person perspective. IPA is not a prescriptive approach; it provides a set of flexible guidelines that can be adapted by individual researchers in light of their research aims (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Thus, a semi-structured interview style was applied with the aid of an interview schedule. The interview schedule compliments phenomenological protocol allowing the life-world of the participant to emerge. That is, the pattern of dialogue is largely set by the participant rather than being guided by pre-specified questions. Once the data was collected and transcribed, the analytic stages included: reading the transcripts several times using left hand margin to make notes of significant/interesting points. Next the researcher returns to the transcript anew using the right-hand margin to develop the initial notes into more specific themes. Caution is paid not to confuse the participant’s words and the researcher’s interpretations. A further reduction of the data is carried out by establishing connections between the preliminary themes and grouping them appropriately. These groups are given a descriptive label that conveys the conceptual nature of the themes within. Finally, a table of themes is produced.

Participants

As this study is concerned with the aforesaid ‘particular’, a relatively homogenous participant group is required. On the basis of self-identified ethical beliefs in tourism choices; participants were access through ethical tourism networks and social networking sites. A total of 15 interviews were carried out and analysed as per IPA guidelines. This included 7 males and 8 female participants ranging between 29-48 years. As an exploratory study, this paper provides three broad outcomes: the use of emotive language, the role of desire and the concept of ‘prolonged hedonism’ in ethical consumption.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emotive Language Use in Ethical Consumption

In the first instance, a basic observation highlights that in every transcript examined the use of emotive language in individual’s descriptions of their ethical consumption experiences was apparent. Although the analysis was not primarily focused on the use of language per se, it provides some interest outcomes with regard to the role of emotion in ethical consumption experiences. Participants use emotive language to describe their ethical consumption experiences such as; “we were so happy it was Spanish”, “it is euphoric and has the wow factor ... “It just blew me away”. Such statements were commonly used by participants thus contextualising consumer’s emotion experience as part of their ethical consumption experience. The use of emotive language generally coincides with a desire for pleasure as part of the consumption experience. The next section examines the way in which individual’s desires to consume ethically can help influence actual ethical behaviour. This provides important insights to help address the attitude-behaviour gap evident in the literature

A Desire For Pleasure in Consuming Ethically

On the whole, participants refer to pleasure as a positive emotional experience and as an integral part of ethical consumption. The term pleasure is often used synonymously with enjoyment which is intrinsically experienced; a subjective positive emotion experience. Indeed, the following extract illustrates the motivational role of pleasure as an important positive emotional state in ethical consumption. Referring to her ethical tourism choice Fiona stating: “I get my motivation from the enjoyment I get from doing these activities and past-times, as in I feel better, I feel healthier, my mind feels free when I am enjoying these past-times ... it’s very pleasurable; actually it’s extremely pleasurable but not pleasurable in as so happy and excited to be there, pleasurable as in its deeper I get so much out of it. I feel renewed and energised even though I will be physically wrecked. It’s the energy you get from nature and the effort you put in. Inside I feel alive”. For Fiona, consuming ethically is an emotion rich experience, and as a consequence such emotions have a strong influence on her personal choice.

Indeed, Fiona’s desire for pleasure is apparent, yet it is also what motivates her to choose her ethical tourism experience. In developing the conversation, Fiona was asked to describe what she means by a ‘deeper pleasure’, Fiona states: “I think, you