Technology Enhanced Eco- Tourist Familiarity – A Study

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Abstract:

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been transforming the tourist experience considerably and given birth to the supposed technology for better tourist experience where advanced ICTs can augment the tourist experience throughout the entire travel process. Technology can be considered the key device for the development of the tourist experience. Since; it facilitates and empowers the co-creation between the tourist and the service provider in order to generate added values for them. The main aim of this paper is to consider how the Eco-tourism practice and perceive the technology enhanced tourist experience through their websites and related online sources. The purpose is to support the Eco-Tourism Destinations by providing an overview in terms of the practice and perception of Eco-Tourism in Karnataka relating to the topic of technology enhanced Eco-tourist experience. The study encompasses the good perception regarding the website, social networking site, review site and video. The online reservation is limitedly practiced and perceived by most of the Eco-tourism destination in Karnataka. The topic of virtual travel community, mobile application, virtual reality and augmented reality as well as recommender system are not practiced by any of the Eco-tourism destinations of Karnataka. Moreover, it was also found that becoming a Smart Eco-Tourism Destination could be a most favourable solution for Karnataka tourism development.

Key Words: Eco-tourism, perception, technology and Communication, Smart destination.

Introduction:

Tourist experience is a key issue for both tourism educational and business world .It is especially pivotal to understand about the issue of "experience" in tourism industry because experience is what travellers

are searching for (Neuhofer–Buhalis 2012). During the past decades, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been transforming the tourism industry worldwide (Buhalis–Law 2008). The advancement in ICTs has, above all, revolutionized the nature of tourism (Neuhofer–Buhalis–Ladkin 2012) and thus changed the traditional way of forming the tourist experience by changing the "traditional roles, structures and processes" of tourist experience (Neuhofer 2014). ICTs, particularly the Internet, empower tourists to identify, customize and purchase tourism products (Buhalis–Law 2008). For example, with the huge information source from the Internet (websites and social media) potential travellers can easily collect ideas, become inspired, plan their vacation and book everything online. Tourist realizes the Eco-tourism potentiality of the Site.

In the context of abundant information, the competition that tourism providers and destinations have to face is fierce (Gretzel–Fesenmaier–Formica– O'Leary 2006) and thus they have to be after the consumers, listen and co-create values with them (Prahalad–Ramaswamy 2004). This leads to the fact that tourists nowadays are actively co-creating their own experience with the tourism providers (Prahalad–Ramaswamy 2004). In the experience co-creation process, ICTs act as the mediated factor and support tourists throughout their travel journey and enhance their overall tourist experience (Neuhofer–Buhalis 2012,). As a result, the impacts of ICTs on tourist experience are enormous. In fact, ICTs have not only fundamentally transformed and Tourist nowadays are highly informed and empowered to decide what they want and how they want to volutionized tourist experience but also led to the emergence of new types of tourist experiences namely technology enhanced tourist experiences (Neuhofer–Buhalis–Ladkin 2013a, 1). Hence, it is very important for tourism businesses to understand this new type of tourist experience in order to "create and deliver competitive experiences" (Zehrer 2009, according to Neuhofer–Buhalis 2012, 1). The obvious role that ICTs play in the formation process of tourist experience and the emergence of the new type of Eco-tourist experience make it worth carrying out this study.

Scope of the study:

Karnataka is an internationally known Eco-tourism destination. However, no study regarding the topic of technology enhanced Eco-tourist familiarity has been carried out yet so far. This study aims to answer the two research questions of how some Eco-tourism destinations in Karnataka, through their websites and other related online sources, use technology to enhance experience for tourists and how they perceive technology enhanced tourist experience through their practices.

Objectives of the study:

The main objective of the study is to Technology enhanced eco-tourist experience and the sub objectives of the study are as follows:

- ➢ To understand the Forces Transforming Tourist Experience Formation.

- ➢ To. Understanding Technology Enhanced Eco-Tourist Experience

- ➢ To study the Advanced ICTs Utilized for Eco- Tourist Experience Enhancement.

Forces Transforming Tourist Experience Formation:

Experience is a complicated and multi-faceted concern. Experiences arise from activities, from the environment and the social contexts embedded in the activities. Travellers are willing more than ever to pay for luxury experiences. Actually, tourism has been considered by many researchers as being in the business of selling experiences. The "complex combination of factors" can include the factors of individuality, authenticity, story, multi-sensory perception, contrast and interaction. The "tourist's feeling and attitude" towards the visit can be compared to the levels of the experience that the tourist acquires. The tourist's feeling and attitude would depend mainly on the combination of those factors which will form the level of the tourist experience. Further, tourist experience is regarded as all that happens during a tourist event, including things happen before the tourist travels to site, on-site activity and the return travel distinguished tourist experience into five different modes including the recreational, diversionary, experiential, experimental and existential mode. The experiential tourist experience mode deals with the search for experiences and the authenticity of life of others. Tourist experience involves numerous influential elements including individual elements and the tourism product. Individual elements such as knowledge and self-identity are important factors that can affect the outcomes of the tourist experience. The various types of tourist products and services as well as the quality of these offerings would equally determine the experience result. The traveller would come to a destination with various individual influences. The traveller's social construction of a certain destination is influenced by the media which results in the traveller's expectation of that destination. The activities of the destination in which the traveller takes part would remarkably influence the traveler's experience. Similarly, Craig-Smith and French (1994, according to Jennings 2006, 8) provided a model of tourism experience formation which consists of three linear phases: anticipatory phase, experiential phase and reflective phase. According to these authors, in this formation process, the previous experiences would inform the future experiences. Likewise, Vittersø et al. (2000, 434) mentioned the pre-travel processes, on-site experiences and post-

travel processes when conducting an empirical study to demonstrate the overall limitation in the general satisfaction measurement of the tourist by measuring the on-site affective experiences.

In these recent years, several authors (Neuhofer–Buhalis 2012; Neuhofer–Buhalis–Ladkin 2013b; Neuhofer 2014) also utilised the aforesaid phases when discussing about the related issues of the tourist experience construction: pre-phase tourist experience in pre-travel stage, on-site phase tourist experience in during travel stage and post-phase tourist experience in post-travel stage. In this study, the concept of the tourist experience formation process when discussing about technology enhanced tourist experience in the next parts of the study. The pre-phase experience refers to all the preparations and activities the tourists have prior to their arrival at the destination. The on-site phase experience concerns all the touristic activities and happenings the tourists have and encounter at the destination. The post-phase experience includes all activities such as the reflection and sharing which are related to the touristic trip after the tourists leave the destination.

Understanding Technology Enhanced Eco-Tourist familiarity:

 ICTs have been transforming the tourism industry globally. As early as 1999, Pine and Gilmore claimed that the world economy has been moving towards to the so-called experience economy which is partly thanks to technology that powers so many experiences (Pine–Gilmore 1999, 5), and that "the Internet is the greatest force of commoditization ever known to man for both goods and services". Today, the Internet is a central channel for communications and transactions in the tourism industry. The Internet gives the users the ability to access information which is fundamentally changing the tourism industry in terms of how people use information sources. People use the Internet as their first place for information search, for buying products and services online, for connecting with friends and for obtaining information on the spot by using location based services. It can be said that the Internet mediates the tourism at a more extended level than other media since "it provides interactive opportunities for the audience and the media.

After the Internet, mobile technologies are today most pervasively influencing the tourism industry. Tourism has been a popular application area for mobile information systems. Mobile phones and other portable devices are becoming more advanced. The advance in technology has given birth to the new field of Tourism or mobile tourism which concerns tourism industry and new technologies to obtain tourist information. Today, Tourism is linked closely to the increasing worldwide penetration of smart phones, tablets and related mobile applications (Schieder–Adukaite–Cantoni 2014, 19). Indeed, it can be easily observed that smart devices embedded with various mobile applications are becoming increasingly indispensable devices among tourists.

The tourism industry provides the land and motivation for ICTs development. At the same time, the cutting-edge ICTs are changing the nature of tourism fundamentally. One of the excellent applications of ICTs in tourism is that tourists nowadays can experience the real physical environment of a destination and at the same time stay connected in the online world thanks to the innovative technology combination of Internet, web 2.0 and mobile technologies.

As a result, the tourist experience can be taken to the new level with the integration of the advanced ICTs. The availability of ICTs' devices and services accompanying the tourists anytime and anywhere opens up new ways to create technology enhanced experiences throughout the travel process for the tourists. ICTs support the tourists in all traveling phases throughout various activities, such as "inspiration, preliminary information search, comparison, decision making, travel planning, communication, engagement, retrieval of information as well as post-sharing and recollecting travel experiences". With the integration of ICTs, the tourist experience can be dynamically created in both physical spaces of the on-site phase and virtual spaces of the pre and post-phases. Enhanced tourism experience throughout three phases of the travelling process is presented in the following figure.
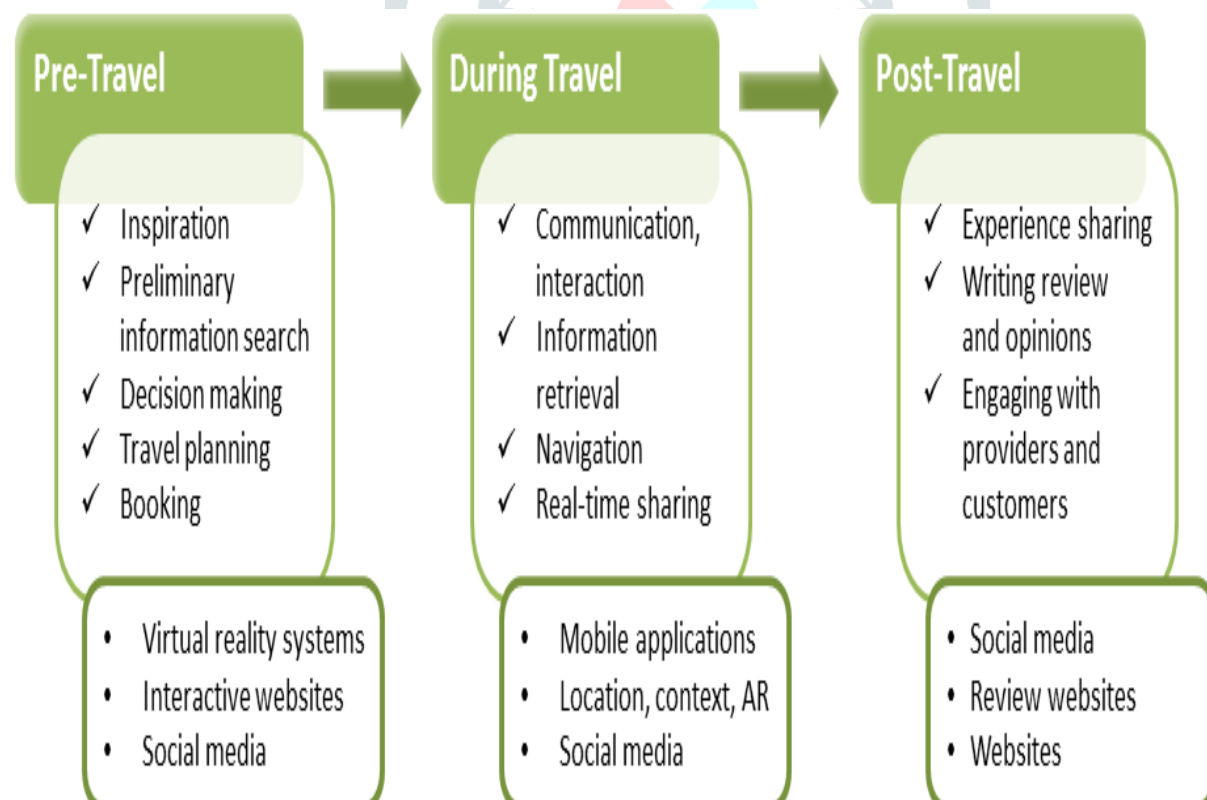
"Technology enhanced tourist experience" with the focus placed on the most cutting-edge ICTs utilized to enhance the tourist experience throughout the three phases of the travelling process.

Advanced ICTs Utilized for Eco- Tourist Experience Enhancement:

The potential of World Wide Web in businesses, including the tourism industry, has been noted in academic research since the launch of commercial Internet applications more than two decades ago. Nowadays, the website is considered a valuable tool for both suppliers and consumers to disseminate information, communicate and purchase product and services online. Interactive websites allow users to go beyond reading text and viewing images; instead, it allows users to alter the website's display, interact with friends online and achieve different tasks. To this extent, interactive websites help the users optimize the information retrieval process. In tourism industry, interactive websites are very useful in the orientation phase of travel planning for tourists. Indeed, interactive websites can be considered as the company's official source of information and communication for consumers. It is, therefore, vital for businesses to maintain an effective interactive website in order to strengthen the relationship with customers. Social media is considered as an entire online environment which is built on participant's contribution and interactions. Social media exist in variety of forms and serve numerous purposes. They are applications based on web 2.0 technologies. Some applications include collaborative trip planning tools, social networking sites and multi-player online social games which make it possible for tourists to participate in all business operation processes. Hence, social media have gained an enormous popularity among tourists. In using social media, the tourists document and comment traveling information and experiences on different social media websites. This form of information is called user-generated content (UGC), created by consumers and shared among themselves .The UGC facilitates the distribution and accessibility of tourism information. This UGC is considered as "collective travel intelligence", which is a great source of information for travellers and useful for touristic service providers for "informational sing and improving the effectiveness of business operations".

Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies have been effectively utilized in the tourism industry. Technically, VR is a term used to describe "a three-dimensional, computer generated environment which can be explored and interacted with by a person". VR can bring about multi-sensory experience since VR systems are "added by various sensory stimuli such as sound, video and images which form part of most VR environments". VR technologies have been applied into different areas of tourism such as management, marketing, entertainment and accessibility.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Social networking site is another form of social media. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and many more are very popular and have an enormous influence on how tourists nowadays organize and consume tourism experience Among these sites, Facebook and Twitter are the most popular of which Facebook is the most used site for the number of visitors and total minutes spent. Social networking sites help the tourists engage, interact, exchange as well as share experiences with friends, family and peers and even with a wider network of followers By being interconnected to social networking sites, tourists can easily share and co-create with friends, touristic service providers and other consumers while still being on-site for vacation Social networking sites can also enhance the experience for potential travellers by allowing them to organize their trip online with friends and being reassured about their choice by other users with similar profile. For service providers, the adoption of social networking site as a tool for customers to collaborate with each other to organize their holiday can help inspire travel and enhance travel experience for customers.

Another form of social media is weblog or blog. Weblog can be described as an online journal which is published on a website and distributed through trackback technologies to keep the creator informed of comments or replies received. Weblog allows the creators to describe their tourism experiences by words, images and sound. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been transforming the tourist experience drastically and given birth to the so-called technology enhanced tourist experience where cutting-edged ICTs can enhance the tourist experience throughout the entire travel process. Technology can be considered the key instrument for the enhancement of the tourist experience since it facilitates and empowers the co-creation between the tourist and the service provider in order to generate added values for them.

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