

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON COMMUNICATION IN THE TOURISM SECTOR

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***Abstract:** Tourism is a sector of activity in which intercultural contacts frequently occur. However, little research was dedicated to intercultural communication in tourism along the years. Our article underlines the importance of observing the cultural aspects with the intention of perfecting communication between participants in the process of creating and delivering the tourism product.*

***Key words:** tourism, communication, intercultural*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an industry in which the persons involved in the making, delivering and using the tourism product meet frequent intercultural contacts. Generally speaking, travelling is – somehow involuntarily – placed under the sign of communication, which might take various aspects: communication between the tourists and the travel agency while services are negotiated and acquired, between tourists and the staff of the accommodation units, between tourists belonging to different cultures, between the employees of the various companies that participate in creating, offering and delivering the tourism product.

Intercultural contacts have increased in number lately due to globalization, which has inevitably taken its toll on business in this sector as well. According to the statistics provided by WTO (World Trade Organization), the year 2017 has registered the highest increase in the number of international tourist arrivals since 2010, and a strong return of the demand on the emergent markets of Brazil and Russia, after five years of decline. International tourist arrivals increased 7%, while average growth rates were registered in Africa and Europe. The revenues from international tourism have increased 4,9 % in real terms in 2017, with a significant growth in South and South-Eastern Asia, South-Mediterranean Europe and North Africa [21].

In Romania tourism has followed an upward trend as well. About 12 million tourists were accommodated here during the first 11 months of 2018. Most of these foreign tourists came from Germany (311.932 persons), followed by tourists from Israel, Italy, France and the U.S.A. [20, p.6-7].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

All these reasons imply the necessity of carefully studying the various aspects of intercultural communication in the tourism sector. Efficient communication does not only imply conveying information, but also a mutual understanding of the needs and demands of each participant in the process. In case one of the parts is dominant and rejects the intercultural dialogue, communication will experience difficulties, and negative influences will be felt in the tourism forms with specific destination. [20, p.8].

RESEARCH RESULTS

1. The Culture-Communication Relationship

Communication was defined in many ways, in most cases the definition being long and abstract, pointing to the author's ambition of including as many aspects as possible in it. If we consider the intersection between culture and communication, we conclude that a suitable definition would be the following: „communication is the management of

messages with the objective of creating meaning” [7]. Although it does not try to establish what successful communication is, the definition is accurate in specifying what is going on during every communicative episode. If communication has a specific aim in view (to inform, to persuade), we communicate with an intention and we achieve our purpose only by interacting with somebody [16, p.9].

Samovar and Porter (2004, p.15) define intercultural communication as an „interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event”. This definition claims that the way individuals perceive the world is deeply rooted in the system of beliefs and symbols used in their own culture to give a meaning to the events around them.

Communication is a complex process, for people are both very much alike and very much different from several points of view. The resemblances and the differences are attributed to the beliefs and values incorporated in history, tradition, education, religion, family structure. These beliefs and values are acquired, learned and then transmitted to the next generations through various communicative processes (education, language, mythology, proverbs, stories, media) [20, p.18].

Albu (2015, p.10-11) thinks that there is a circular relationship between communication and culture which is difficult to identify and decipher. Communication is included in the definition of culture and vice-versa, they intersect each other having one common ground, the symbolic language [5, p.79-83]. As soon as we can detect the way in which a certain culture perceives the world, we are able to efficiently communicate with people belonging to other cultures.

2. Culture and Communication in the Tourism Sector

The tourism sector nowadays is regarded to be an element of modern culture, researchers insisting not only on its economic, but also on its social and cultural aspects. The definitions based on humanistic studies present tourism as a social process, with psychological and cultural aspects. It is perceived as the manifestation of human activities connected to the changes in the natural, social or cultural environment, with reference to the contact with the cultural values of the visited destinations [8,p.83].

In the field of tourism, research devoted to the aspects of communication between different cultures was given less attention, as compared to what was done in the field of immigration or foreign studies [13].

Tourists have different expectations concerning the services to be offered in the target area, various reasons for travelling, diverse experiences both before and during the voyage. There is no universal experience regarding the intercultural contact during the (short) period of time spent as a tourist, an aspect that confers a challenging character to the research done in this field.

Bean and Martin (2006) estimate that there are at least four unique characteristics that differentiate the contacts of the tourists and the natives of the target area from their usual daily interactions:

- they are short-termed;
- they have a transitory character;
- they are commercialized;
- they imply an unequal balance of power between the participants.

Tourists rarely stay in the same place for a long period of time and, generally speaking, they rarely interact with the locals; the long-lived impressions of the tourists are often based on their anecdotal experience only. Due to the short-termed interaction, impressions are formed on the basis of superficial knowledge, which can potentially lead to generating stereotypes and other perceptual errors [14].

Many interactions between tourists and locals are of a commercial nature. Commercializing interpersonal relationships can have dramatic effects in certain developing countries, where a generous welcoming is the norm. Quite often the locals invite even the unknown tourists to have a meal with them or to take part in the life of the community they belong to. Along with the development of the tourism industry, such assets that were part of the private and social life of the local community became commercialized. Thus, the tourists' possibility of having genuine social interaction with the locals was dramatically diminished [12, p.293].

An interesting characteristic of the tourist - host interaction is the imbalance in this relationship. This aspect can be the result of the different meanings the two parts attribute to tourism: to the tourists it can be just leisure, a breakout from everyday life or routine work, while to the locals it can mean hard work, stress for their families and a kind of "selling out" of their own culture.

Those who feel they detain less power will try to fit into the system of requirements imposed by those that have greater power (the locals try to learn the language spoken by the tourists, they are urged to offer products or services supposed to satisfy their more and more sophisticated demands). On the other hand, the tourists might become suspicious and develop resentments due a feeling of being taken advantage of [12, p.294]

Not all tourists communicate with the persons they meet in their target touristic area. There are numerous systems that classify the tourists, dividing them into groups, in accordance with the main activities they perform (shopping, visits, having meals) or in accordance with the specific motivations of the individual tourists (that is, what they expect to obtain from the trip). Very probably, the persons having in view a tourism directed towards the cultural heritage will prefer experiences based on cultural differences, unlike those having in view ecotourism. Thus, experimenting on cultural differences will be preferred by some categories of tourists only, having a direct impact upon the choice of the tourism product [13].

The relationship with tourists can be a complex process for the inhabitants of some touristic destinations. Boissevain [3,p.1-26] observes that the attitudes of the residents can vary from "retreatism" (avoiding the contact with the tourists), "resistance" (resistance), "boundary maintenance" (keeping within limits) to revitalizing ("revitalization") and acceptance ("adoption"). The members of the host-culture can also have mixed reactions, some of the locals having a welcoming attitude, while the others reject contacts. The residents can develop simultaneous positive and negative reactions.

Communities that do not show enthusiasm towards the tourist phenomenon might choose to retreat or avoid the contact with the visitors. This phenomenon can occur mainly in the areas where economy depends on tourism and the members of the community feel they are invaded by tourists (for instance in some of the small rural Mediterranean communities). Under such circumstances, to avoid the unwanted meddling into their affairs, the locals can develop in time some forms of resistance, both passive (harsh comments and gossiping) or active, making up stereotypes referring to the unreasonable tourist. A certain strategy of keeping within limits in order to control the interaction between tourists and hosts is specific to some U.S.A. subcultures (Amish, Hutterites, Mennonites). On the basis of their religious percepts, these cultures do not encourage contacts with the visitors. Another strategy that can be practiced in the tourist-host relationship is revitalization and adoption. Some communities might decide to invest in attracting tourists or they might have a passive approach, accepting tourists, but imposing some restrictions. By highlighting the importance of their culture, the locals can rediscover their own history and traditions, becoming conscious of their own value [12, p.296-297].

Thus, an important zone of the actual debates in the studies dedicated to tourism is the concern of promoting the genuine experiences of a certain local community, especially within the cultural heritage touristic areas. The actual debate in the academic world puts forth the opinions of some researchers who support the idea that tourists are in search of genuine experiences [10], while others estimate that they can anticipate and discern between real and staged situations. The attempt of some host cultures of deceiving the uninformed tourists is a matter of ethics.

An increasing number of studies discuss the interaction between international tourists and local residents. They presume that the experiences in tourism activated by international travels are modelled in accordance with the contacts between various cultures (Cusher and Brislin, 1996; Korzay and Alvarez, 2005; Maoz, 2006). The cultural experience and the interactions between tourists and locals give tourism an attractive and appreciated character. Gomez-Jacinto, Martin-Garcia and Bertiche-Haud'huyze (1999) discovered that the fundamentals of a cultural order (values, behavioral characteristics) have an impact not only on the socio-cultural interactions but also on the satisfaction provided by the excursion.

One of the useful themes in studying the relationship between tourists and local residents is emotional solidarity, respectively studying the emotional links of the individuals within the context of tourism. Woosnam and Norman (2010) underline that the theory of emotional solidarity may contribute to explaining the relationship between local residents and tourists, while developing and validating four scales (shared beliefs, shared behavior, interaction and emotional solidarity).

A study done by Yu and Lee (2014) points out that the intercultural relationships of the international tourists can become reflexive experiences, either comparative or comprehensive, and any of these experiences can lead to a change in the tourists' perception of their own person, country or the entire world. A change in perceptions can lead to a change in attitudes, which can be extended to certain external groups, including persons who had not interacted within the same culture (p.235). The two authors have identified a new factor in the intercultural interactions between international tourists and locals, namely a feeling of equality, reflecting perception aspects of the international tourists in Asia that have not been explored by the research done in Western countries.

The exponential development of the new mass-media also raises an important issue for researchers: what is the role of the new media in the intercultural contacts occurring in the context of tourism? Martin and Nakayama ([12, p.305-306] have identified three possible approaches:

- using the new media for getting information before the trip;
- using the new media during the touristic experience;
- using the new media as a substitute of the intercultural experiences in real life.

The information obtained via the Internet helps the tourists to prepare their intercultural contacts (tips regarding accommodation facilities, local currency, means of transport, suggestions regarding the cultural customs in the area they intend to visit). The perception of the tourism services consumer on the respective destination is also important, depending on the way the culture of the target area is promoted, whether it is realistic or done by means of stereotypical images (for example, the image of women as presented by operators in Thailand or Brazil).

While visiting a different culture, the tourists generally use mobile technology to guide them towards the tourism objectives they want to visit or the places they want to go to. The tourists can also offer suggestions or personal reviews on the respective destinations or they can post photos of the places they have visited by using social media[22].

The virtual visiting experiences achieved with the help of the new media (cybertourism) allow watching the desired places without financial restrictions or limitations in time and space. However, such experiences might encourage an escape from reality by presenting things in a "cosmetically embellished" manner.

CONCLUSIONS

Culture is an important link between communication and tourism. The process of communication which is carried out almost mechanically with persons belonging to the same country becomes complicated in the contacts with strangers, as it implies differences in language, mentality and even body language [8, p.83]. As the contact with those who seem to be different from us implies a certain amount of anxiety and uncertainty, intercultural communication in tourism is a challenge that needs acquiring further knowledge and effort. Even if the tourists cannot get complete knowledge of the customs and traditions of the target countries, they must realize the presence of the cultural differences and show respect in relation to the others.

The researchers in the field of tourism and intercultural communication have approached several areas such as the tourists' experiences, the culture shock, the tourist-local interaction, genuine experiences of the touristic destinations. Mc Mullen suggests that future research would be most welcome in the following fields: the psychological effects of intercultural contacts on both tourists and host-culture; interpersonal experiences of intercultural contacts; using qualitative methods in the study of tourism; resorting to longitudinal studies regarding the impact of tourism.

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