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Basic Social Etiquette and Intercultural Awareness Before Departure as a Way to Minimize Tourism-Phobia using World Civility Index: A Decade-Long Social Experiment by NGO IITTI

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Objectives | The primary objective is to elucidate a strategy aimed at mitigating tourism-phobia, concurrently establishing a novel sector in alternative tourism. This innovative approach entails implementing a pre-departure program centered on basic social etiquette and intercultural awareness, thereby creating a new revenue stream.

Methodology | The proposed practice is conceived to work as following: prospective tourists would undergo pre-departure training in international social etiquette, coupled with cultural and historical insights about their intended destination. After each brief daily lesson, participants would accrue points as evidence of their acquired knowledge. Incentives, such as discounts and perks, would be provided by establishments like hotels, restaurants, and tour operators. Ultimately, destination authorities, such as municipal or national immigration offices, could stipulate a requisite point threshold for entry. The lack of a standardized measurement has historically hindered the implementation of alternative tourism economic movements. However, a recent corporate-derived standard for assessing soft skills, known as the 'World Civility Index,' offers a potential solution. Similar to a credit rating but gauging manners and refinement, this index includes aspects like social etiquette, empathy, and intercultural awareness. It is based on field-tested evidences that individuals who engage in consistent training over the long-term on average exhibit more civility (Ariely, 2009, 8:00 mark). The open-standard nature of this measurement allows universal adoption within the tourism industry, aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal #8, Decent Jobs. The Index became a part of UN Sustainable Development in 2019. The proposed strategy emphasizes a long-term, low-intensity, and high-frequency educational model (or 'micro-learning'). For instance, individuals interested in a Brazilian tour would complete lessons on international social etiquette, the Amazon forest, ecological issues in farming, and the history of Brazil. Participants earn World Civility Index points for each lesson, paying a nominal fee. The tour operator, in turn, provides those with credentials a complimentary VIP package.

Main results and contributions | The IITTI World Civility Index NGO, founded in 2011, is now employed in 19 countries across diverse sectors. A study in 2015 highlighted the considerable economic value of soft skills, amounting to £88 billion to the UK economy alone. This operational model, borrowed from corporate training, introduces a new revenue stream for tourism, which can be shared among stakeholders. This revenue stream is the micro-lessons' and related seminars' credentialing fee when a participant earns the World Civility Index "points". The emergence of this industry category necessitates content creation, vetting committees, digital video production, storyboard development, training of trainers, academic research, big data analysis, and investor involvement.

Limitations | While this decade-long social experiment has successfully brought together training companies, NGOs, and governments in adopting a common civility measuring standard, additional data collection is imperative. It is crucial to recognize that the foundational efforts of this initiative were carried out with a relatively small set of educational lessons, designed to provide a broad overview rather than in-depth exploration of social etiquette and intercultural awareness. This "broad stroke" approach was instrumental in laying the groundwork and testing the viability. However, it also presents limitations in terms of the depth and specificity of the content delivered. The initial decade, while successful in demonstrating the potential of such an educational model, only scratched the surface of what is required to fully address the complex and varied nuances of cultural understanding and etiquette across different global destinations. Fine-tuning content for optimum effectiveness requires further examination of distinct needs among different age groups, ethnic backgrounds, and geographic locations.

Conclusions | To continue and expand upon this project, several research methodologies could be employed to deepen the understanding and effectiveness of pre-departure training programs aimed at minimizing tourism-phobia. These methodologies would focus on fine-tuning the educational content, tailoring it to diverse audiences, and rigorously assessing the impact of these programs on both tourists and host communities. Some potential research methodologies include:

1. Longitudinal studies: Conducting longitudinal research to track the long-term effects of the pre-departure training on tourists' behaviors and attitudes, as well as its impact on the host communities. This would involve following participants over extended periods to observe changes and gather comprehensive data.

2. Mixed-methods approach: Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative data, such as surveys and questionnaires, with qualitative insights from interviews, focus groups, and case studies. This would provide a more nuanced understanding of the program's effectiveness and areas for improvement.

3. Experimental design: Implementing experimental designs, such as randomized controlled trials, to compare the outcomes of participants who underwent the training with those who did not. This would help to isolate the effects of the training and provide strong evidence of its impact.

4. Cultural competency assessments: Developing and utilizing cultural competency assessments to measure the growth in participants' intercultural awareness and sensitivity. This could involve both self-assessments and evaluations by others, including peers and host community members.

5. Content analysis: Conducting content analysis on the educational materials to ensure they accurately reflect the cultural, historical, and social contexts of the destinations. This could involve consulting with cultural experts and locals to validate and enrich the content.

6. Big data analytics: Leveraging big data analytics to analyze patterns and trends in participants' engagement with the training materials, as well as their travel behaviors post-training. This could provide insights into the most effective content and delivery methods.

7. Impact evaluation: Employing impact evaluation techniques to assess the broader social, economic, and environmental impacts of the training program on destinations. This would involve measuring variables such as changes in local attitudes towards tourists, economic benefits to the community, and environmental sustainability.

8. User experience (UX) research: Applying UX research methods to evaluate the design and delivery of the training program, ensuring it is user-friendly, engaging, and accessible to diverse learners.

By incorporating these methodologies, future research can build on the foundational work of the IITTI World Civility Index and contribute to the development of more sophisticated, effective, and inclusive strategies for promoting responsible tourism and enhancing global understanding through pre-departure training. The strategic approach involves addressing issues of vandalism and unruly behavior through a set of common social etiquette lessons suitable for various international situations. The ongoing process involves gradual refinement of education with distinct intercultural content to foster behavioral changes effectively.

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