Things we do not know about the **Tourist**

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Abstract | Albeit research on tourists is a 'younger' research discipline, within a foreseeable future many of the most influential texts on tourist behavior, motivation and vacation decision-making have been around for fifty years. However, especially in regard to the study of human beings, their motivations, behaviors and decision-making there is little (perhaps no?) justification for the belief that the future will resemble the past. Drawing upon a series of 'newer' research findings, the purpose of this paper is to address the (perhaps not so) simple question: 'What do we (not) know about the tourist?' In order to address this question, this paper critically examines a few, selected statements (or tentative hypotheses) about 'the tourist' – statements that underlie much contemporary research on tourists. Albeit the paper offers more of a discussion than solid conclusions it suggests that we do *not* actually know that holidays is a high involvement product; that the generic decision to go or not to go is the first decision vacationers make; that choice of destination is a critical decision; or that tourists want experiences. Drawing on this discussion, the paper furthermore offers suggestions as to the future of research on 'the tourist'.

Keywords | Vacation Decision-Making, Tourist Studies.

Resumo | Embora a investigação sobre os turistas seja uma disciplina de investigação recente, muitos dos textos mais influentes sobre o comportamento do turista, sobre a motivação e a tomada de decisão de férias, apresentam cerca de cinquenta anos. No entanto, especialmente no que diz respeito ao estudo dos seres humanos, das suas motivações, comportamentos e tomadas de decisão existe pouca (talvez nenhuma?) justificação para a crença de que o futuro será semelhante ao passado. O objectivo deste trabalho é tratar a (talvez não tão) simples pergunta: "O que nós (não) sabemos sobre os turistas?" A fim de responder a esta questão, este trabalho analisa criticamente algumas afirmações sobre "o turista" - afirmações que fundamentam muita pesquisa contemporânea sobre os turistas. Embora o artigo ofereça mais uma discussão do que conclusões sólidas, sugere que nós *não* sabemos realmente que as férias são um produto de elevado envolvimento; que a decisão genérica para viajar ou não viajar é a primeira decisão que os visitantes tomam; que a escolha do destino é uma decisão crítica; ou que os turistas procuram experiências. Com base nesta discussão, o artigo oferece sugestões para investigação futura sobre "o turista".

Palavras-chave | Tomada de Decisão de Férias, Estudos sobre os Turistas.

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Introduction

Around 40 years have passed since the 'grand' models of consumer behavior (e.g. Engel *et al.*, 1973; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Howard & Sheth, 1969; Nicosia, 1966) were introduced to the scientific community. Around the same time, authors such as Boorstin (1964), Cohen (1972), Crompton (1979), Graburn (1989), MacCannell (1976) and Moutinho (1987) published what has later proven to be some of the most influential texts on tourism and tourist behavior. Accordingly, the tourist researcher of today is fortunate enough to be able to draw upon an extensive, and ever--expanding, body of knowledge, the origins of which are these grand models. However, Popper (1959) reminded us to ask the question 'what is the justification for the belief that the future will resemble the past'? This question seems especially relevant in relation to research on tourists and vacation decision-making. Physical sciences (to a large extent) focuses on phenomena that are rather stable, thus making inductive inference from past experiences (or experiments) to yet unobserved instances a valid approach. For example, repeatedly observing that water boils at 100 degrees celcius validates the prediction that water, also in future, will boil at 100 degrees. However, is this sort of inductive inference valid when doing research on tourists? Can we expect the tourists of today (and even more importantly, the tourists of tomorrow) to think, feel and behave in the same way(s) as the tourists Boorstin (1964), Cohen (1972), Crompton (1979), Graburn (1989), MacCannell (1976) and Moutinho (1987) had in mind when they discussed 'the tourist' and his motivations and behavior?

Concordant with Popper's (1959) lines of reasoning, the purpose of this paper is *not* to provide a simple yes or no answer to these questions; nor is the intention to discharge the extant pool of knowledge on 'the tourist'. After all, without tradition there cannot be knowledge and if we do not draw upon the extant body of scientific knowledge, we cannot expand our knowledge. However, what we can, and should, do is to acknowledge that all of our knowledge is open to critical examination and that the key lesson for every researcher to learn is that, when all comes to all, we do not know much. Hence, in Popper's (1968) words, our knowledge is finite whereas our ignorance is infinite. Drawing upon Popper, the purpose of this paper is to focus upon the 'infinity of our ignorance' and the limitations of our knowledge on the leisure tourist. Hence, this paper takes a step back and asks the (perhaps not so) simple question: 'What do we (not) know about the tourist?'

In order to address this question, this paper critically examines a few, selected statements (or tentative hypotheses) pertaining to 'the tourist' – statements that underlie much contemporary research on the tourist. Obviously, it is always problematic to decide which statements to include in such a critical examination. The indeed few (out of probably hundreds of) statements on the tourist, that are included in this paper are all statements that 'my' students learn by reading the introductory textbooks that constitute the syllabus of the introductory marketing, consumer behavior and tourism courses they take during their first years of study. Furthermore, when the students do large-scale empirical studies during their last years of studies these tentative hypotheses have a tendency to reemerge. However, at this stage, these hypotheses reemerge primarily because the students' empirical work does lend support to these hypotheses and consequently, the best bachelor or master theses that my students hand in tend to include refinements, or even rejection, of some of the statements on tourists we usually take for granted. As an example, one of the textbooks first introduced to students (Holloway, 2004: 122) declares:

> "*Obviously, deciding whether to buy a new bar of chocolate involves minimal risk, whereas deciding where to take the annual holiday involves substantial expenditure and a high degree of uncertainty*".

Nonetheless, many of my students account for empirical findings that show that this is not the case for their respondents. On the contrary, when doing larger scale quantitative or qualitative pieces of research, my students come across tourists that are not especially involved; that do not engage in extensive problem-solving; that do not search much for information; and/or who simply 'tag along' on holidays arranged by others. Drawing upon both my own research, that of peers and the many cases, in which students' empirical work questions extant knowledge on 'the tourist', this paper discusses things that we do not know about the tourist. Acknowledging that these 'things' (or issues) qualify as nothing but examples, the closing section of the paper discusses what the existence of such examples (which hardly qualify as anomalies that will bring about a scientific revolution) implies for tourism research – both at present and in future.

Issue 1: holidays is a high involvement product

As mentioned in the introduction, textbooks on consumer behavior and/or vacation decision-making (e.g. Holloway, 2004) tend to classify tourism as a high involvement 'product', thus suggesting that tourists engage in extensive problem-solving. Hence, in accordance with Holloway (2004), it is often taken for granted that decisions pertaining to holidays involve substantial expenditure as well as high levels of risk and uncertainty, or, as Goodall (1988: 2) boldly states:

"*A holiday is a high-risk purchase*"

Undoubtedly, the tourists Boorstein (1964), Cohen (1972), Crompton (1979) and MacCannell (1976) met in the sixties and seventies would probably agree that their annual holiday involved substantial expenditure, high degrees of uncertainty and high levels of risk. However, the question is whether today's tourist agrees? The mere number of holidays we take today indicates that, to the 'average tourist', it makes little sense to talk about the *annual* holiday (although I do acknowledge that this statement – as most parts of this paper – draws upon a very 'westernificated' perspective). Furthermore, the fact that many children and tweens are highly experienced tourists (Pedersen *et al.*, 2008) means that the tourists of today (and even more so, the tourists of tomorrow) have developed multifaceted and extensive travel careers – even early on during their lives. Moreover, as standards of living have (generally) improved, we do *not* know that tourism qualifies as a 'luxury good'. On the contrary, the mere number of trips we take suggests that holidays may even be an integral part of (at least some) people's consumption patterns. At least, Blichfeldt's (2007b) analysis of a series of phenomenological interviews suggests so. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 Danes, Blichfeldt (2007b) identified three clusters of tourists (i.e. those engaging in ad hoc based decision-making; those who habitualize decision-making; and those engaging in extensive problem-solving at times of transition). Furthermore, on the basis of this piece of research, Blichfeldt (2007b: 265 concluded that:

> "*… the picture of highly involved people, who engage in extensive problem-solving processes when they plan their holidays does not seem to adequately describe all tourists. Therefore, extensive problem-solving processes may actually only characterize a subset of tourists, i.e. the set of tourists that are in the midst of changing their holiday behavior profoundly*"

According to Blichfeldt (2007b) it is thus too simplistic to assume that all tourists are highly involved. On the basis of his qualitative study, Decrop (2006) also concluded that holidays are only high risk purchases to some tourists. Accordingly, we do *not* know that holidays is a high involvement

product for today's tourists. On the contrary, we know that some tourists do not consider holidays to be a high involvement product.

Issue 2: the generic decision to go is the first decision vacationers make

A holiday is generally perceived as a 'composite product' (Decrop, 2006; Woodside & MacDonald, 1994). Accordingly, vacation decision-making is not only about decisions 'to go'. Instead, people make decisions pertaining to a broad range of issues, including whether to go; when to go; where to go; where to stay; what to do; how to get there; how to get around at the destination; who to go with; how long to stay there; how much to (roughly) spend; what to eat; what (souvenirs) to buy etc. Thus, tourists do not make 'one' decision. Instead, they make go/no-go; destination; accommodation; activity; period; transportation; accompaniment; duration; tour; route; attraction; budget and expenses; meal; organization; purchases; formula; and vacation style choices (Decrop, 2006). Although some of these choices are, perhaps, made months before one actually goes on holiday while other are made *in situ* at the destination, the decision 'to go on holiday' is usually considered to be the first decision tourists make (e.g. Mansfield, 1994; Um & Crompton, 1990). As such, the decision 'to go' is perceived as a generic decision that triggers the vacation decision-making process. Löfgren (1999: 153) argues that "the psychical move is a precondition for the transformation of the winter person to a summer person", thus implicitly suggesting that the generic decision 'to go' precedes any attempt to 'vacare' (or have a vacation). However, although 'staycationing' has received little attention from academia, people often choose to spend (part of) their holidays at home and hence, 'to go' is not always a decision that precedes vacationing. For example, Blichfeldt's (2008b) highly inductive, qualitative research showed that vacationing at home (or 'staycationing') may qualify as a suitable alternative to 'go' on holiday. Henceforth, people do not need to make the generic decision 'to go' in order to have a vacation, or, as one of Blichfeldt's (2008b: 94-95) informants (Karen) argued:

> "*A nice vacation? There are two types of nice vacations. The first one is when you leave home and are in a new situation. You are not in a holiday house that you know well. You are not in a place that is well known. You are in a new place with new impressions. You can be with your close family or friends or acquaintances and so forth, it really doesn't matter. But you are in a place where the impressions you get are new and fresh. And you experience something. A new place anyway. Because you can be at a holiday house and have a barbeque and you could have done that at home, but the fact that you are at a new place, that's what makes it a holiday* [break inserted by the researcher]
> *And then there is, a nice vacation, that's also to be at home without having planned anything. It is to get up in the morning and have your breakfast and have a cosy time and say, 'what do I want to do today', and then take it from there. You might have some sort of rough idea about what you would like to achieve during these 14 days. But it is not as if you have made a deal with yourself, it's more like 'if I feel like it, then I might paint those windows'. If I don't get around to it then I can do it on the weekends after I have had my vacation. And well, then you just slouch about and relax and you might end up clearing up some old stuff from high school. All quiet and easy and after those 14 days you spend one day feeling guilty because you have done nothing. I think that is a nice vacation as well. I like that, I like to … I really don't like that thing about having to hurry during the holidays, I can get fed up with that. And if you go away on vacation, then you have to have experiences, because once you have paid for it …*"

As MacCannell (1999) argues, tourism is all about the fact that "everyone must go somewhere else" and hence, the physical move is an integral of all definitions of 'the tourist'. However, Obrador--Pons (2003: 51) argues that the characteristics of the tourist relates, not to Löfgren's (1994) 'physical move' or to MacCannell's (1999) 'somewhere else', but to

> "*his/her capacity of taking up different views and redefining the parameters of his/her involvement in the world*"

Urry (2001: 1) agrees on the importance of the taking up of different views and states that "when we go away we look at the environment with interest and curiosity". However, drawing on Blichfeldt (2008b), and especially on vacationers such as Karen, 'to go' is not necessary in order to look at the environment with interest and curiosity. On the contrary, people like Karen seem to be able to look at their home environment (or at least her 'old stuff from high school') with interest and curiosity while vacationing at home. If people like Karen are not anomalies, but actually amongst the people we have in mind when researching 'the tourist', then we do not actually know that the generic decision 'to go' is the first decision people make when planning a holiday. On the contrary, people may very well first decide on the end their vacation has to meet (e.g. relaxation or experiencing) and only thereafter they might decide whether staycationing (possibly 'spiced up' by excursions etc.) or 'to go on holiday' qualifies as the mean that best ensures that we experience the wanted end. Accordingly, we do *not* know that holidays away from home is the only way to truly 'vacare' and consequently, we do *not* know that the generic decision 'to go' is the first decision people make.

Issue 3: choice of destination is a critical decision

Most theories on vacation decision-making draw on the (more or less implicit) assumption that the various decisions are made in a hierarchical (and rather predictable) manner. Hence, the tourist is supposed to first make the generic decision to go, then to decide where to go (i.e. destination choice) and to only engage in the other decisions after choice of destination is made (Mansfeld, 1994; Um & Crompton, 1990; Woodside & Lyonski, 1989). Nonetheless, contemporary qualitative research contests that choice of destination is an important decision. For example, on the basis of his longitudinal study of 25 Belgian decision-making units (singles, couples, families or groups of friends), Decrop (2006: 99-100) concluded as follows:

> "*… destination is not always important in vacation choices. This is an interesting result for the tourism industry, which is in contradiction with most vacation DM* [decision-making] *models, where destination is presented as the key decision*"

According to Decrop (2006), destination choices do not (always) precede other choices inherent in the vacation decision-making process. Studying mobility-disabled tourists, Blichfeldt and Nicolaisen (2009) found that, to this group of tourists, the key criteria when planning a vacation is accessibility, or, as two of their informants put it:

> "*Some things we simply need to know are okay – like, for example, me being carried on to the plane, that the hotel is fit for wheelchairs*"

> "*So often you are told that the hotel room is handicap friendly and then it turns out that the shower cabin is fringed. That can be totally insurmountable*"

As exemplified by these two quotes, Blichfeldt and Nicolaisen (2009) found that, to mobility-

-disabled tourists, accessibility – and predominantly accessibility of hotels – is so critical that choice of hotel precedes all other vacation choices; including destination choice. Drawing on Decrop (2006) as well as Blichfeldt and Nicolaisen (2009), we do thus *not* know that choice of destination is a critical decision for the tourist. On the contrary, both of these studies show that, to some tourists, choice of destination is not critical *at all*.

Issue 4: tourists want experiences

In 1982, Holbrook and Hirschman published their seminal article on the experiential aspects of consumption. This was followed by Holbrook's (1984) paper on emotions in the consumer experience. The key message in both of these texts is that it is not sufficient to (only) define the consumer as a rational problem solver. Instead, Hirschman and Holbrook argue that the consumer also buys products and services as means to the ends 'fantasies, feelings and fun' and in order to experience pleasure and emotional arousal. More researchers (e.g. Hyde, 2000; March & Woodside, 2005) have demonstrated that fantasies, feelings and fun are especially prominent in regard to tourism and henceforth, vacation decision-making does not resolve only around problem solving. Instead, these authors argue that vacation decision-making hinges on the hedonistic nature of the travel experience. In 1998, Pine and Gilmore (p. 98) welcomed us to the experience economy and argued as follows:

> "*An experience occurs when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event*"

Albeit much research emphasizes experiences as memorable and/or out-of-the-ordinary experiences "there has been no attempt made to systematically define what exactly constitutes an experience" (Thompson *et al.*, 2004: 268). Furthermore, people do not only go on vacation in order to have 'grand' experiences. On the contrary, many people would probably argue that they go on vacation because they want to relax, or, as O'Dell (2005: 30) puts it:

> "*… tourists are not always looking for pulse, intensity, and the hottest nightlife. On the contrary, many people are trying to escape the tourist traps and big bustling cities of the experience economy. They are in search of a different type of experience: peace and quiet. And this is a phenomenon that has been largely overlooked in the literature on the Experience Economy*"

In the same vein, Blichfeldt (2004) and Jantzen *et al.* (2007) found that to some tourists, the opportunity to be 'freed from experience', quite ironically, qualifies as the 'peak' touristic experience. Thus, we do *not* know that the tourist wants experiences. Instead, it seems that the 'experiences' tourists seek both include 'grand' experiences and to be 'freed from experiences'. Apter's (1982, 1992) theory of psychological reversals offers a plausible reason for this phenomenon. Apter's (1982, 1992) reversal theory suggests that two meta-motivational systems affect preferred levels of arousal. In relation to the first system (the excitement-seeking system), the consumer seeks to gain as much arousal as possible in order to be exited and avoid the unpleasant state of boredom. Most research on experiences presupposes that consumers, actively, seek intense experiences in order to feel excited/to avoid boredom. As a result, in recent years much research (and especially research the aim of which is normative in nature) focuses on destinations as experiencescapes and the tourism sector as those who use services and goods as means to engage the tourist in the making of memorable experiences. Accordingly, the tourist is supposed to *want* to be aroused and to avoid the unpleasant state of boredom. However, according to Apter (1982, 1992)

a second system (the anxiety-avoidance system) also affects preferred levels of arousal. According to this system, the consumer seeks to avoid high levels of arousal (and henceforth intense experiences) due to the fact that high levels of arousal evoke the unpleasant feeling of anxiety. At the same time, low levels of arousal are preferred because they evoke the pleasant feeling of relaxation. In the same vein, Murgatroyd *et al.* (1979) argue that consumer actions are not driven by either the excitement-seeking or the uncertainty-avoidance system. Instead, they argue that consumers will "change to the opposite system from time to time" (p. 519). Murgatroyd *et al.* (1978) thus argue that sometimes consumers (or tourists) long for the telic state (characterized by lower arousal, avoidance of anxiety and relaxation) whereas the same consumer (or tourist), at other times, long for the paratelic state (characterized by high levels of arousal and triggered by intense experiences). Accordingly, our finite knowledge contains knowledge on tourists' search for intense experiences in order to be excited whereas our infinite ignorance encompasses the anxiety-avoiding tourist, who seeks to be 'freed from experience'. Hence, at best, we know that some tourists, sometimes, want experiences whereas we do *not* know that the tourist craves for 'the next grand experience'.

Implications

Moutinho (1987: 5) argues that "as travelers become more sophisticated in their vacationing behavior, research must continue to become more sophisticated to explain this behavior". To today's researcher (and even more so for the tourist researchers of tomorrow), this means that we, indeed, face some very serious challenges in our quest to understand the creature we call 'the tourist'. Especially, the challenge is to keep up with the more and more experienced and henceforth, more and more sophisticated leisure tourist. Hence, although our knowledge on the tourist expands (at least incrementally) with every new piece of research devoted to the study hereof, if the tourist simultaneously becomes more and more sophisticated, our infinite ignorance may, continuously, increase more than our finite knowledge. As a result, tourist researchers might be in a situation that resembles the situation that someone who wants to catch a Heffalump encounters. The Heffalump is a creature that was first introduced by A. A. Milne (1926, 1928) in one of his stories about the adventures of Winnie the Pooh. Unfortunately, the clearest definition of the Heffalump that exists is that he is (Kilby, 1976: 1):

> *"… a rather large and very important animal. He has been hunted by many individuals using various ingenious tracking devices, but no one so far has succeeded in capturing him. All who claim to have caught sight of him report that he is enormous, but disagree on his particulars"*

One reason why it is so difficult for tourist researchers to 'catch our very own Heffalump' might be that our tracking devices (i.e. the extant pool of knowledge and destination based empirical research) allow us to only see one part of the tourist. Undoubtedly, no one would attempt to describe the Heffalump in its totality after having only caught a glimpse of its head or tail. In the same vein, is it fair to try to describe and understand the (also rather large and very important) creature we call 'the tourist' on the basis of research on *one* of his holidays? Or is it fair to rely on implicit assumptions on who this tourist is such as the ones discussed in this paper? My suggestion would be to answer these questions with a 'no'. Consequently, the suggestion for future tourist research is that if we ever hope to really get to know this 'tourist', then we have to do more research based on that which we do *not* know about him and to focus less on that which already is part of our finite knowledge.

Conclusion

Already in the introductory part of this paper, the reader was warned that this paper would contain no solid conclusions. Accordingly, the purpose of this closing section is not to make any grand statements that guarantee that tourist researchers will ever catch (up with) our particular Heffalump. After all, we are all similar to Winnie the Pooh insofar we believe that a (or perhaps the collaborative efforts of more than one) Very Clever Brain can catch (up with) creatures such as the Heffalump or the tourist. The critical question is just, as Winnie also realized, to figure out the 'right way to go about it'. In the case of 'the tourist', the right way seems to depend on a never-ceasing criticality towards what we *think* that we know as well as a never-ending eagerness to explore the infinity of our ignorance. Accordingly, I really hope that the reader has learned one thing from reading this paper: To be very critical towards the finite knowledge and infinite ignorance that this paper (as all other papers) is the end result of.

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