

Valorization of cultural heritage in tourism through co-creation - a Cypriot perspective

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Keywords | Cyprus, rural tourism, cultural heritage, co-creation

Objectives | The paper presents primary qualitative research on valorization strategies of cultural heritage by the most important player of Cypriot Agrotourism. Empirical evidence is used in order to develop a conceptual model including the co-creation-concept into the wider context of valorization strategies for cultural heritage in tourism.

Methodology | The study is based on a qualitative approach; using face-to-face in-depth interviews with the management of the company, represented by the local owner and the managing director of the company, four locals involved as supervisors in the so-called village activity program, and finally 14 tourists participating in the village activity program. The interviews lasting from 15 to 90 minutes were conducted from April to May 2008. The recorded interviews were transcribed after each interview and analyzed with the “open code” software tool for qualitative content analysis. This pilot study is used to conceptualize a first draft of a theoretic model on valorization strategies of cultural heritage in tourism, including the co-creation approach, in an inductive way.

Main Results and Contributions | Following up earlier studies on consumer behavior and impacts of the so-called Cyprus Agrotourism Program (Gronau et al. 2009, 2012, 2013), the paper at hand would like to sum up previous research activities by proposing a conceptual model on valorization strategies of cultural heritage in tourism through approaches like co-creation. The paper therefore focuses on the village activity program of the Cyprus Villages Ltd. The program as described by Gronau et al (2009) can be understood as product enhancement aiming at an increased interaction of tourists and locals in order to increase social as well as economic sustainability. Today, the company owns about 40 restored houses in 5 villages of the Pitsillia region and offers a rough lodging capacity of 250 beds. The accommodation units, as well as other additional infrastructure, e.g. an outdoor swimming pool, a meeting room and a tavern, are allotted all over the villages. Beyond the lodging of customers, the company introduced hiking trails, a bike renting station and a horse farm, in the late 90ies. Utilizing the developed infrastructure through guided hiking and biking tours, as well as horse riding courses. In

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the beginning of the 21st century, a further concept aiming at a stronger interaction between tourists and locals has been carried out by the management. The already existing connection with the local community, e.g.: including tourists in traditional events, has been integrated into an extensive activity programme for the tourists, the so-called village activity program. Activities such as cooking courses on traditional Cypriot food, production of traditional olive oil using the traditional olive mill or production of traditional Halloumi cheese, where set up following a co-creation approach. The program therefore showcases a successful implementation of a valorisation strategy through co-creation on the one hand, while also representing a best-practice approach on harmonizing established traditions, hierarchies and institutions with new and innovative ways of thinking and behaviour by concerted strategies on the other (Kaufmann, 2007; Morrison, 2000) whilst also triggering new forms of entrepreneurship such as youth and female entrepreneurship. The described approach was widely adopted by other Agrotourism providers in Cyprus in recent years. An evaluation of the program of Cyprus Villages Ltd. showed a clear economic impact for the local community, as well as an increased customer satisfaction. The majority of the customers even outlined the village activity program as a major factor for rebooking with Cyprus Villages Ltd. (Gronau et. al. 2009).

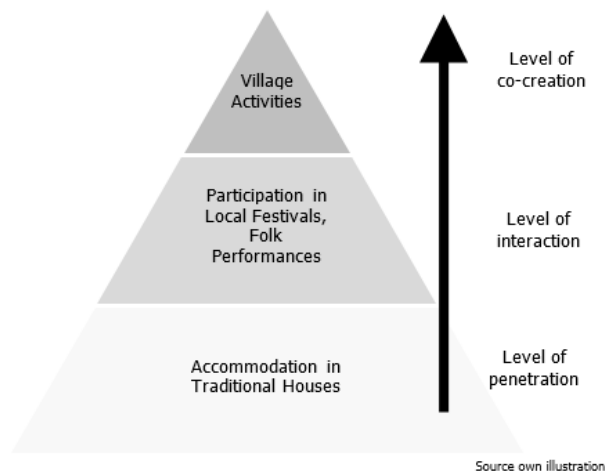


Figure 1 | Valorization Pyramid Cyprus Villages

Based upon the described management strategy of the company and the adoption of it by competitors, the following section will be used to propose a conceptual model, while also elaborating on general strategies related to such an approach. The Cyprus Villages Ltd. started off with a simple approach utilizing given traditional infrastructure by renting out apartments in historic complexes. In a second phase, due to existing demand amongst customers, the company utilized traditional local festivals and events, such as the Easter-procession, to connect tourists and locals, where the visitors had the rather passive role of spectator. In the third and final phase an active involvement of tourists was implemented through the active participation in traditional everyday village activities. Tourists became part of the production process of e.g. traditional halloumi cheese through joining in on the milking of the goats, the heating and stirring of the milk or the straining of the cheese itself. Therefore, the three steps in the development of the “village activity program” can be summed in the above “valorisation pyramid”. With each level of the pyramid, the level of penetration in local culture heritage, the interaction with local culture heritage and finally the co-creation of culture heritage tourism products is increasing. The proposed “valorisation

pyramid" can be further abstracted for a more general use in the context of cultural heritage, as shown in figure 2.

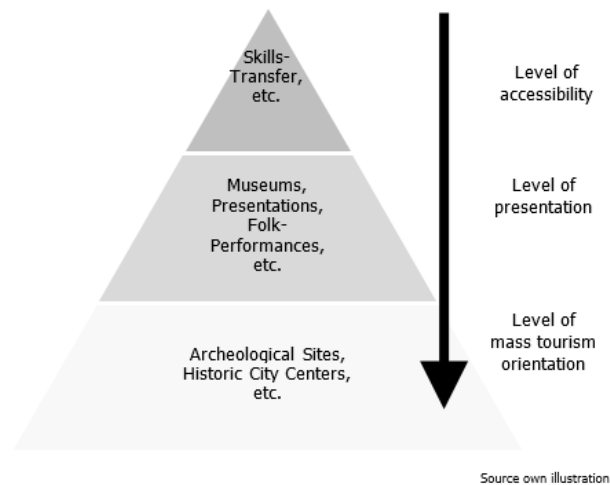


Figure 2 | General Valorization Pyramid

Beside the further generalization additional aspects can also be outlined. In contrast to the constantly increasing penetration, interaction and co-creation level, one can determine a constant decrease of mass tourism orientation, of high quality presentation and of accessibility when “climbing up” the valorisation pyramid. While accepting the mentioned aspects the valorisation of cultural heritage has to be considered a rather individual instead of a mass tourism product. The intensity of co-creation and interaction in relation to the higher complexity of accessibility through the needed interaction of customers and locals can therefore also be interpreted as evaluation factors for the quality of cultural heritage tourism products in general.

Limitations | The presented conceptual model is still in its early stages, as it is so far mainly relying on a single case study and a qualitative analysis of other businesses in the Cypriot Agrotourism context. Nevertheless it might be a basic framework for a fruitful discussion on the role of co-creation as an examining factor for the quality of cultural heritage tourism products.

Conclusions | The concept of co-creation plays a vital role in the creation of customer satisfaction in the context of cultural heritage tourism products, therefore it should be among the main evaluation criteria for these type of tourism products. The proposed valorization model of cultural heritage tourism products, which includes co-creation, forms the base for an intensive debate on more general models, integrating the co-creation-approach into the wider field of tourism product development.

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