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ADVANCES IN GLOBAL SERVICES AND RETAIL MANAGEMENT

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What Are Tour Guides Most Praised for? A Sharing Economy Perspective

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the key themes featuring tour guides who promote their services through the sharing economy landscape. A content analysis approach was applied to 229 online reviews posted on *Tours by Locals* by tourists who bought tours in Istanbul. Findings reveal two key themes that summarize how tourists view local tour guides in the sharing economy. These were labelled as interpersonal skills (e.g., good communication, helpfulness) and competence (e.g., knowledge about the history and culture of the attractions). The proposed themes can be useful for both service providers and destination management organizations.

Keywords: sharing economy, tour guides, online reviews, tours by locals

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Introduction

Tour guides are regarded as a core element in the tourism industry and understanding how their services are viewed by the end-users (i.e., tourists) is obviously of a significant importance for destinations and policy-makers. However, despite the fundamental role of tour guides in enhancing tourist experience (Cetin & Yarcan, 2017), tour guiding remains largely a neglected segment in tourism research (Farkic, 2018). Specifically, little is known about the key factors that determine tourists' satisfaction from tour guiding services. While research in mainstream literature is lacking on this specific topic, to the authors' best knowledge, no study has addressed how tourists view tour guides who promote their services through the sharing economy landscape. The current study fills this gap by identifying the key themes that are likely to be praised by tourists buying tours directly from local guides through sharing economy platforms. The present study responds to a recent call for sharing economy research shifting attention to other forms of tourism services that go beyond peer-to-peer accommodations (Kuhzady et al., 2021).

Literature Review

Although largely interrupted by the ongoing pandemic, the sharing economy has significantly reshaped the whole landscape of tourism and hospitality introducing both benefits and threats to traditional service providers (Alrawadieh et al., 2020). The sharing economy landscape in tourism involves a wide range of services including lodging, meal sharing, local guiding and is increasingly

encouraged by modern travelers' tendency to experience local and authentic way of life in destinations (Böcker & Meelen, 2017). Previous research indicates that services within the sharing economy can generate more meaningful interaction between tourists and locals, thus enhancing authentic tourist experience (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). While existing research is notably biased toward the peer-to-peer accommodation business model or Airbnb (Kuhzady et al., 2021), there has been a recently growing number of works examining sharing economy experiences within other tourism service domains including food and beverage (Atsız et al., 2021; Atsız et al., 2021) and thematic tours (Melián-González, et al., 2019). However, tour guides remain underrepresented both in mainstream research (Farkic, 2018) and sharing economy scholarship (Kuhzady et al., 2021). In his recent study, Seyitoğlu (2020) used TripAdvisor reviews to understand how tourists perceive tour guides. His findings revealed four key themes, namely, attributes, knowledge, communication skills and value-added experience. To the authors' best knowledge, no previous study has addressed determinants of satisfaction from tour guides drawing on a sharing economy perspective. This is particularly important in the case of Turkey, a top world's destination where sharing economy is increasingly penetrating into tourism services disrupting traditional business models (Demirdelen Alrawadieh et al., 2020).

Methods

The study aims to understand tourists' perceptions of local tour guides who promote their services using sharing economy platforms. The study draws on a qualitative research approach due to the exploratory nature of this study and the absence of well-established frameworks into tour guiding experiences in the sharing economy landscape. Using online reviews about local tour guides offering tour services in Istanbul were retrieved from the sharing economy platform '*Tours by Locals*'. A total of 25 local guides in Istanbul were registered on this platform. By March 2021, these tour guides have received a total of 1399 reviews from users with the vast majority of these reviews being positive (i.e., 23 local guides were rated with 5 stars). For the purpose of the current study and in line with the recency effect (Alrawadieh & Law, 2019), the most recent fifteen reviews on each guide were collected and content analyzed. Some tour guides had less than fifteen reviews, in this case, the available reviews were included. In sum, 229 reviews were included in the study. This number is deemed adequate since the data has reached a satisfactory level of saturation with additional reviews that would provide little insights. Conventional content analysis was performed to understand how tourists perceive local tour guides in the sharing economy context. The conventional content analysis has some advantages over qualitative analysis software packages (Krippendorff, 2004; Au et al., 2014). A hybrid approach using inductive and deductive content analysis was adopted in the study. This approach resulted in identifying two categories summarizing how tourists view local tour guides in the sharing economy.

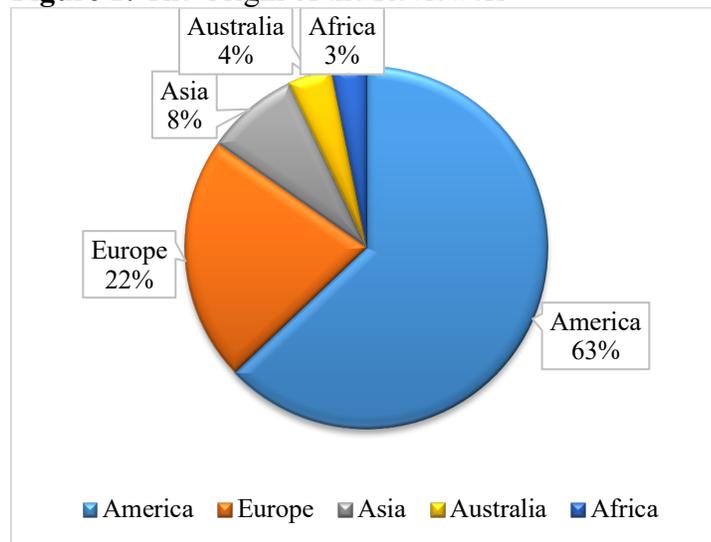
Findings and Discussion

The demographic profile of the 25 local guides is presented in Table 1. The majority of local guides were male and offered guiding mostly in the English language. The majority of them generally had a considerable work experience as official tour guides with a good portion of them having experience in promoting their tours using sharing economy platforms under the scope of the sharing economy.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Tour Guides

Gender	No
Male	18
Female	7
Total	25
Language(s)	
English	25
Spanish	6
Italian	2
Japanese	2
French	2
Other	5
Total*	42
Official work experience	
Less than 6 years	2
7-15 years	10
16 years and more	5
Unspecified	8
Total	25
Work experience on the sharing economy platform	
Less than 2 years	9
2-5 years	5
6 years and more	11
Total	25
No of Reviews	
Less than 10	7
11-49	8
50 and more	10
Total	25

Figure 1 shows the origin of tourists buying tours through sharing economy platforms. It appears that tourists from the United States constituted the major market.

Figure 1: The Origin of the Reviewers

According to the study findings, the views of tourists were shaped around two categories, namely '*interpersonal skills*' and '*competence*'.

Interpersonal Skills

The attitude and personal skills of a tour guide during the tour are very important for the quality of the tour and to ensuring tourists' satisfaction. According to the data obtained from the experiences of the tourists, interpersonal skills consist of a combination of ten sub-themes; good communication, helpfulness, kindness, patient, secureness, punctual, accommodating, entertaining, intelligent, and energetic. Following are some examples:

She was an amazing tour guide... She was knowledgeable, kind, and super easy to get along with, I can say we became good friends! She took my experience in Istanbul to the next level! (R166, USA).

[she] is the best guide we have ever had the pleasure of guiding us! She not only showed the highlights of Istanbul but she also gave us the history, a glimpse of everyday life and the best coffee we've ever had. She is knowledgeable, approachable and fun! We would recommend her tour to anyone visiting Istanbul... (R91, Canada).

Competence

Our qualitative data reveals that to enhance guest satisfaction, it is crucial for guides to have information about the destinations they work in and to have knowledge about the history and culture of the attractions in the destination. Moreover, language skills, expressiveness and flexibility shown during the tour were also evaluated in this context. This is illustrated by the following reviews:

We asked [him] to organise a walking tour of Istanbul and had the most fabulous and memorable walk. The tour consisted of visiting Hagia Sophia, Hagia Eirene, a stunning Bulgarian church, the local spice market and at our request the Fener neighborhood. He patiently answered all our endless questions and was unbelievably informative not only about what we were looking at but Turkish history and culture... (R8, United Kingdom).

Once we met him he quickly understood what interested us and was really good at adjusting the schedule according to how the children were coping. He was full of useful and interesting information and spoke fantastic English... (R20, Malta).

Conclusion and Discussion

Recent sharing economy studies in the tourism field have largely focused on accommodation and meal-sharing activities (Atsız et al., 2021; Atsız et al., 2021; Kuhzady et al., 2021). However, tour guiding activities in the sharing economy appear to be neglected (Farkic, 2018). Identifying the main themes that are likely to influence tourists' satisfaction is important for destinations and local service providers. It has become apparent that sharing economy platforms are becoming a new channel for tourism activities including tour guiding. Yet it still unclear whether this will disrupt traditional business models such as travel agencies and tour operators. This qualitative study is based on online reviews of tourists, so, the view of the tour guides who use these platforms could not be evaluated. Although sharing economy is seen as a disruptive advancement in the consumption concept (Guttentag & Smith, 2017), the concept of a locally guided tour with a guidance license in the sharing economy can be treated as a new innovative business channel, which can contribute to host-guest interaction in a broad sense. Therefore, this study supports the finding of a recent study, conducted by Atsız and Cıfci (2021) highlighting the importance of social interaction in the motives of engaging in the sharing economy. Future studies should consider

examining this issue by interviewing or surveying tour guides to have a more comprehensive understanding.

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