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A Cultural Tourism Research Agenda

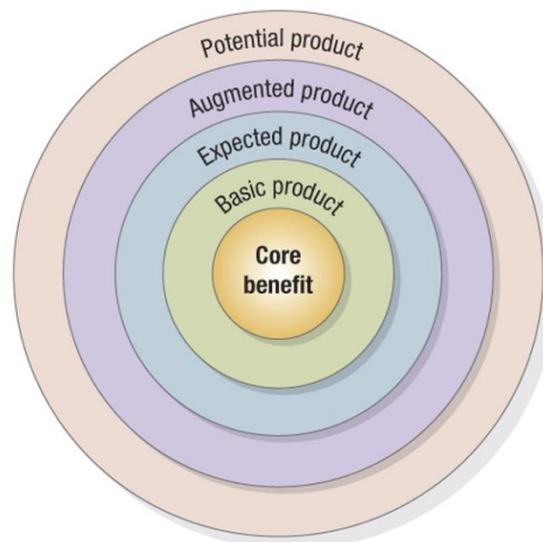
Introduction

The issues associated with accurately defining ‘art and cultural outputs’ as a ‘product’ is one that is familiar to both cultural tourism organisations and academics alike (Fillis, 2006). Those in cultural tourism organisations often reject the materialistic associations of ‘product’ when applied to their sector, as well as the notion of ‘consumer demand’, which does not accurately represent the primary driving force behind art/culture-based production nor does it the ‘relationship’ that exists between art/culture suppliers and art/culture consumers (Lehman and Wickham, 2014).

Similarly, traditional marketing literature does not present a clear conceptualisation of how ‘art/cultural outputs’ comply with the traditional ‘product’ concept, and it rarely addresses the circumstances where product creation is not directly linked to customer needs/wants/demand (Kubacki and Croft, 2011). Despite this, effective art/cultural supply chain management (i.e. the production, marketing and consumption of art/cultural outputs) is increasingly recognised as an important driver of economic development, and essential to the development of sustainable art and cultural sectors (Evans, 2009; Lehman and Wickham, 2014).

Given these issues, this paper presents a research agenda for the reconceptualisation of the ‘product’ concept for the cultural tourism context. It will do so through the lens of Levitt’s (1980) Customer Value Hierarchy (see Figure 1) - a framework that identifies a range of ‘product levels’ that serve to deliver ‘core benefits’ sought by different consumer segments across the art/cultural supply chain.

Figure 1: The Customer Value Hierarchy



Source: Kotler, Keller, and Burton (2009, p.342).

Production and Consumption and the Art/Culture Supply Chain

Contrary to the traditional marketing paradigm (i.e., where producers seek to understand target consumer needs and produce goods/services to satisfy them accordingly) the opposite appears the case in art/culture context (i.e. where an output is created to satisfy the producer’s

intrinsic needs – and then is subsequently presented to the art/culture market for consumption). The unique nature of the art/cultural supply chain was intimated by Botti (2000) in his ‘Artistic Value Creation and Diffusion’ model, which identified a number of specialised roles that connected the producers and consumers of art/cultural products and services. These roles included: ‘the artist’ – who represents the party that is intrinsically motivated to produce an art/cultural output; ‘the champion’ (i.e. patrons or cultural organisations) whose role is to recognise the potential of an output and attempt to diffuse it to ‘experts’ in a given art/cultural field (e.g. critics, theatres, museums etc.). The model also identifies a process of social and economic ‘value-adding’ to an art/cultural product as it passes between what are considered ‘authentic’ and/or ‘legitimate’ supply chain members in a given art/cultural market. This suggestion is mirrored by Fillis (2006, p.36), who stated that that:

[c]onsumption of art [and culture] differs from many other products, with aesthetic pleasure playing a large part of the process. Art is seen as a communication carrier of a variety of qualitative, intangible messages which conventional marketing frameworks cannot interpret... [and] that art as product has little or no functional or utilitarian value.

An opportunity to explore the ‘Symbolic Product’ Level

The apparent inability for extant marketing theory to explain how art/cultural products satisfy the core benefits sought by art/cultural supply chain members (e.g. champions, critics, theatres, museums and consumers - in this case, cultural tourists) presents an important research agenda for tourism and marketing academics alike. It is particularly relevant for researchers in cultural tourism, where ‘products’ such as art and heritage sites and events almost always have a significant societal value. With this in mind, we suggest that Levitt’s (2000) Customer Value Hierarchy be extended to include a ‘Symbolic Product’ level that incorporates the symbolic/expressive elements that cultural tourism products appear to possess.

This call aligns with Khalil’s (2000) recognition that various members of an art/cultural supply chain attach psychological meaning (or symbolic/expressive value) to these types of products and services. In a market context, Khalil (2000) distinguishes between ‘substantive’ and ‘symbolic’ products; substantive products conferring ‘welfare utility’ in the sense of pecuniary benefits for the consumer, whereas symbolic products accord self-worth or ‘self-actualising’ utility for the consumer. Following on from this idea, Ang and Lim (2006) concluded that ‘symbolic’ and ‘utilitarian’ (i.e. ‘substantive’) products possess different characteristics that serve to satisfy different core benefits. This contention is supported by Schwer and Daneshvary (1995), whose study into led them to conclude, *inter alia*:

...two important premises from symbolic interactionism. First, individuals' consumption patterns strongly reflect societal reference group behavior. Second, individuals act on the basis of the symbolic meanings that society has given to goods. Thus, societal effects have increasingly found acceptance in marketing and other noneconomic fields of study.

A Proposed Research Agenda

In the cultural tourism context, we feel that the exploration of a ‘Symbolic Product’ level has a potential to increase our understanding of how art/cultural ‘production’ links to the core benefits sought by the various art/cultural supply chain members, whilst at the same time

fulfilling their inherent value to society and humanity. Given the added complexity of production in the arts/culture context, we feel that both tourism and marketing academics alike have an opportunity to explore the following research agenda to (a) improve our academic understanding of 'production' in this context, and (b) improve the marketing and management of art/culture production by tourism operators across the art/culture supply chain: Firstly, taking a marketing approach to cultural tourism allows a focus on some of the main drivers of supply chain satisfaction (e.g. issues of service quality and experience delivery) (Christou, 2005). The basic issue of what constitutes a 'product' appears key to understanding what it is that cultural tourists, for example, 'buy' when they consume an experience, participate in an event, or buy an artwork. It has been noted by Stylianou-Lambert (2011) that cultural tourists require authenticity, and this raises questions such as: what parts of the art/culture supply chain 'product' provide sufficient authenticity? And, what do supply chain organisations have to do establish authenticity and communicate it to their consumers?

From a marketing theory perspective, adapting the 'Customer Value Hierarchy' to further develop our understanding of the 'product concept' may be particularly useful in the context of cultural tourism. Given there is ongoing debate on definitions for cultural tourism itself (as well heritage tourism, arts tourism and urban and rural cultural tourism) (Smith, 2003), understanding the different levels of value inherent in the product offered would provide useful insight into the nature of the cultural tourism experience. Similarly, the continuum that exists between a 'pure service' and a 'pure good' is readily apparent in the art and cultural tourism context, and seeking to elaborate on these basic distinctions through the inclusion of 'symbolic value' will be advantageous for future tourism and marketing research.

As an extension of the above, there is an opportunity to research the manner in which symbolic value is created across the art/culture 'supply chain' in order to account for the observed complexities of the market and the nature of production and consumption by the actors therein. Each will have a different understanding of what value means for them: a visitor to an art museum will perhaps 'experience' a cultural icon; the museum will 'conserve' that same work as a physical thing; and the artist may well consider the work as part of their 'reputation' as it is now owned by an institutional member of the art market. Research in this area will provide insight into the product levels from the perspectives of the artist, gallery, institution, collector and consumer.

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