

A rural tourism perspective in India

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Abstract

Tourists' perceptions of genuine hospitality may be molded by hosts' readiness and capacity to offer 'philoxenia'. This study sought to explore whether the most generous and benevolent form of hospitality, 'philoxenia', is currently attainable. Rural tourism is a fitting context because it allows generosity and strong emotional dealings between guests and hosts. Findings derived from informal interviews with stakeholders in rural tourism enterprises in Cyprus show that the notion of philoxenia is essentially founded on 'philallilia' (love for the other). However, it is called on to address challenges such as shifting societal values and a 'fear of the stranger'. Nonetheless, philoxenia can be cultivated, provided that organizational values shift towards anthropocentric rather than ego/commercial-centric activities. This paper discusses managerial implications and establishes a future research agenda for this underresearched notion.

Introduction

From a social perspective, tourism is primarily defined by the nature of peoples' interactions. Hence, attempts have long been made to understand and explore the relationship between host and guest (Griffiths & Sharpley, 2012; Tussyadiah & Park, 2018) which lies at the heart of both tourism and hospitality (Cetin & Okumus, 2018; Germann Molz and Gibson, 2007). In particular, Tucker and Lynch (2005) highlight the central role that host-guest interaction plays in the guest experience, whilst the concept of hospitality more generally has also been addressed from a social perspective with the research providing us with interesting insights regarding its place and importance within societies (e.g. Höckert, 2018; Lynch, Molz, McIntosh, Lugosi, & Lashley, 2011; Poulston, 2015; Sweeney, Hughes, & Lynch, 2018). Nevertheless, researchers have long recognized and continue to draw attention to the failure to develop an adequate understanding of hospitality, or suggest further research that reflects more deeply on its essential nature (Botherton, 1999; Hemmington, 2007; Lynch, 2017; O'Connor, 2005; O'Gorman, 2007; Tasci & Semrad, 2016). More specifically, the vast majority of publications on hospitality continue to emerge from the business sector, leading to a 'narrow focus' that reduces hospitality to an economic activity (Lynch et al., 2011, p. 4).

The origins of hospitality can be traced back through the millennia to what has been referred to as 'philoxenia' (Homer's Iliad, 2004), a term that implies that a visitor is perceived and treated as a 'philos' (friend) rather than a guest. Indeed, the concept extends beyond the boundaries of commercialized hospitality; that is, it embraces the active pursuit of comforting guests, based on the principles of 'agape' or unconditional love (see Christou, 2018). Thus, philoxenia may be aligned with what can be thought of as the most generous and benevolent form of hospitality, that of 'altruistic' hospitality (Lashley, 2017, p. 5). At the same time, however, philoxenia is often also underpinned by non-secular motives, particularly the provision of psychological comfort and spiritual guidance, such as by 'elders' (implying spiritually-mature people, as discussed below). A question that inevitably arises is, then: to what extent does philoxenia continue to be offered given that contemporary hospitality tends to be characterized by commercialization, automation (Lashley, 2008; Ritzer, 2017) and egocentric tendencies (Christou, 2018)? Putting it another way, destinations that experience high levels of visitation may not, according to Cetin and Okumus (2018), demonstrate the same degree of hospitability as smaller, more 'intimate' destinations, while Brotherton and Wood (2008) suggest that the nature of hospitality has varied over time and continues to do so in different contemporary environments. Yet, it remains unclear as to what extent contemporary service providers are able or, indeed, willing to provide generous or 'altruistic' hospitality, given that commercial imperatives that may interfere in this process. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to address this question. More specifically, it seeks to explore whether and to what extent philoxenia is offered today in the particular context of rural tourism, a form of tourism that demonstrates a rather idiosyncratic character in as much as its commercial governance, like that of any business activity, may be diluted by close guest-host relationships. Indeed, rural tourism has been long recognized for its characteristic yet singular host-guest relationships and also by the hospitality dynamics that it constantly promotes (Sharpley, 2002; Smith, 2009).

The present study draws on research amongst hospitality providers within the rural tourism context in Cyprus, a country that maintains a long-tradition of rural tourism provision. Extant research in Cyprus has revealed that countryside visitors are recipients of philoxenic experiences, which in turn suggests that such (rural) places – and the venues and hosts engaged in rural tourism in Cyprus – offer philoxenia (Christou, 2018; Christou, Lashley, & Saveriades, 2009). Nevertheless, it may be reasoned that tourists' understanding of hospitality is shaped by what hosts offer in the guise of philoxenia and, thus, it is equally important to develop an understanding of how hosts perceive hospitality in the offer-consumption process. Indeed, Sharpley (2014) argues that whilst the role of the tourist in the host-guest relationship has benefitted from extensive analysis, the same cannot be said for that of the host. More specifically, the tourism experience is based on an instantaneous production-consumption structure (Sharpley & Stone, 2014) and, hence, it is necessary to consider providers' perspectives in the process of offering hospitality to their guests. Likewise, Cooper and Hall (2016) posit that both supply and demand are intimate components in the production and consumption of experiences by tourists and, therefore, providers clearly play a vital role in shaping guests' experiences.

In drawing conclusions from this study, which delves into the core nature of hospitality, it is hoped that a deeper understanding of the concept of hospitality will emerge. This, in turn, may equip practitioners with the knowledge they need to establish some of its principles – if indeed they are aiming to provide a holistic hospitality experience to their guests. Certainly, according to Severt, Aiello, Elswick, and Cyr (2008), understanding hospitality and its provision is necessary for the overall enhancement of the tourist experience. In the following sections, the concept of philoxenia is reviewed primarily from a psycho-social perspective, though without neglecting commercial influences; in particular, philoxenia is explored within a psycho/spiritual-social context. This theoretical discussion then serves as a framework for the subsequent methodology section which discusses the study's methods, followed by a discussion of the research findings. The paper then concludes with a discussion of both theoretical and managerial implications and a proposed agenda for further research.

Section snippets

Origins and expressions of philoxenia towards others

The verb *philoxeno* is defined as 'to offer friendship' (Zarkia, 1996, p. 163), while 'philoxenia' is a compound word comprised of *philos* (friend) and *xenos*, the latter initially meaning 'guest' but later acquiring the meaning of 'foreigner'. Although the literal translation of the word philoxenia is 'hospitality', this does not fully convey its full sense as it fails to encompass the fundamental element of philoxenia, namely, the generosity of the spirit (CYEU, 2012). In fact, philoxenia is

Discussion

The study findings support the argument that the concept of philoxenia differs from that of 'hospitality', the latter term being associated by respondents more with commercialized activities and rules. Interviewees did, however, note that expressions of philoxenia have altered over time, although the rural setting allows continuing opportunities for it to be offered. In more detail, the respondents in this study generally agreed that although the two terms philoxenia and hospitality are used

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore whether philoxenia is still offered in an age when people may have no longer strong obligations to act hospitably. It was undertaken in response to calls for additional research (Cetin & Okumus, 2018) and for further philosophical insights into the notion of hospitality, which is highly influenced by commercial domains. As Lashley (2017, p. 412) suggests, 'It is necessary to focus more on the development of (hospitality) graduates who are at least the loving.'

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