

(MIS)UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF TOURIST EXPERIENCES

ULI KNOBLOCH, KIRSTEN ROBERTSON, AND ROB AITKEN

Department of Marketing, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

With the emergence of experiential marketing, the positive customer experience has become fundamental to marketing, hospitality and tourism. However, positive experiences have not been defined. This study explores how the words often used to define positive experiences may actually prevent us from understanding them. The terms “memorable,” “extraordinary,” “special,” and “peak” are particularly prevalent, but their meanings and characteristics are problematic and the nature of the experience to which they refer varies widely. In-depth interviews with tourists investigated the nature of their experiences and the perceptions that defined them in relation to the terms commonly used by researchers. Findings showed that 1) respondents associate different meanings with each term and 2) types of experiences might stand out in the minds of respondents for different reasons. This calls for a new approach for looking at tourists’ experiences that emphasizes the multidimensional nature of experiences, as well as the importance of emotional aspects. Findings raise questions about the uninformed use of words by researchers and the limitations for understanding the nature of experience, which may be a consequence. To contribute to experiential marketing and understanding experiences, researchers must embrace individual’s terms and acknowledge how defining terms shape outcomes.

Key words: Tourism experience; Memorable experiences; Experiential marketing; Emotions; Experience definitions

Introduction

With the emergence of experiential marketing, giving customers positive and memorable experiences has become fundamental to marketing (LaSalle & Britton, 2003; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). This suggests that special experiences and unforgettable memories are vital to achieve and sustain competitiveness. This focus on the customer experience has moved into other areas

such as hospitality, leisure, and, particularly, tourism because a positive memorable tourist experience is linked to revisiting a destination, repracticing the same tourist activities, and the spreading of positive word of mouth (Andereck & Caldwell, 1993; Kim, 2010; Kim, Ritchie, & Tung, 2010), and may even determine the value of a destination (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007). Providing memorable experiences has been said to be fundamental to long-term competitiveness and sustainability (Ritchie & Crouch,

2003), and understanding memorable experiences is crucial for exploring new avenues for tourism product development (Tung & Ritchie, 2011b) and allows for a more effective allocation of resources when tourism businesses plan and design new tourism programs (Kim et al., 2010). Despite the importance placed on memorable experiences, to date little is known about what constitutes memorable customer experiences or how to enable or provide them (Lanier & Hampton, 2009). There is a need for research to uncover the specific elements, that is, the essence of what exactly makes certain experiences special, spectacular, and, fittingly, memorable (Tung & Ritchie, 2011a).

To date, there is no agreed upon definition to describe memorable tourist experiences. Particularly, the words that are predominantly used in past research—"memorable," "special," "extraordinary," and "peak"—can be used interchangeably to describe and study experiences, assuming that all terms refer to the same aspects of experiences. This is problematic, as any study must define its aim, purpose, and terms of reference, and consequently define concepts "in terms which are clear, precise, universally understood and acceptable" (Farquhar, 1995, p. 502). Establishing a common terminology has also been seen to be an important step for advancing a new field of inquiry and "consensus on terms and definitions is essential if knowledge producers and implementers and users are to effectively and meaningfully communicate with each other" (Graham et al., 2006, p. 22). It is the aim of this study to further our understanding of the nature of experiences, by clarifying the use and meaning of different terms and the experiences they refer to.

The Nature of Experiences

Experiences are at the very core of tourism, because "practically everything a tourist goes through at a destination is an experience, be it behavioural or perceptual, cognitive or emotional, expressed or implied" (Oh et al., 2007, p. 120). However, not every experience a tourist has at a destination will create unforgettable positive memories. Behavioral scientists have argued that customers only remember a few events vividly when remembering an experience, such as a holiday, and "gloss over the rest. In other words, they remember snapshots, not

movies." (LaSalle & Britton, 2003, p. 107), suggesting that overall judgments of experiences are strongly influenced by peak moments from that episode (Brunner-Sperdin, Peters, & Strobl, 2011; Varey & Kahnemann, 1992). Although numerous researchers have been concerned with the study of these peak moments, or what Arnould and Price (1993) call "intense, positive, intrinsically enjoyable experiences" (p. 25), there is no specific definition to describe peak experiences and a variety of terms have been employed, including: "peak experiences" (Dodson, 1996; Lipscombe, 1999; Maslow, 1962; Panzarella, 1980; Quan & Wang, 2004); "epiphanic experiences" (Denzin, 1992); "peak performance" (Klausner, 1968; Privette, 1983); "flow experiences" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990); "extraordinary experiences" (Abrahams, 1986; Arnould & Price, 1993; LaSalle & Britton, 2003; Tumbat & Belk, 2010); "special experiences" (Farber & Hall, 2007); and "memorable experiences" (Honebein & Cammarano, 2009; Morgan, 2006; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Tung & Ritchie, 2011a, 2011b).

An issue to note is the chronological aspect of the terms discussed. The notion of a memorable experience became popular with Pine and Gilmore (1999) and is to date commonly used in marketing to describe and study particularly positive customer experiences. However, the concept leans heavily on earlier ideas from the fields of psychology and sociology, where Maslow first discussed peak experiences in 1962, followed by the concept of flow, introduced by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Extraordinary experience, originally defined and studied by anthropologist Abrahams in 1986, has re-emerged with Arnould and Price's (1993) famous study on white water rafting in the field of consumer behavior, and has since mainly been used to describe experiences in extraordinary consumption contexts, such as rafting, skydiving, or climbing Mt. Everest.

Researchers in various areas are using these terms to study experiences, but while some have referred to the original definition of the terms (e.g., by Maslow, 1962; Abrahams, 1986, or Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), others neglected their original meaning and formed their own independent definition in line with the nature of their research (i.e., Quan & Wang, 2004). Researchers have used the same term but provided different definitions, so it is questionable whether

results of studies regarding stand-out experiences are truly comparable. It seems that, overall, the meaning and depth of these kind of experiences have changed over time, from a transcendent or spiritual experience that was considered a rare, special, and very personal occurrence, to merely a positive customer experience that should occur every time a customer interacts with a product, service, or organization, to a somewhat more intense positive experience evoked by participants' involvement in an extraordinary activity.

Ambiguity of Terms

Not only has the meaning and use of these defining terms changed over time, but an extensive literature review on the terms predominantly used ("peak," "extraordinary," and "memorable") showed that they are often used interchangeably and there is no commonly agreed upon definition for them. It is unclear whether these terms refer to the same kind of experience, or whether they essentially describe different kinds of experiences (e.g., experiences that stand out for different reasons). Researchers have used the terms without addressing this issue, which potentially could lead to a comparison of concepts that are in fact different, and thereby overlook important aspects of experiences. For example, Dodson (1996) provided a definition of peak experience, citing Privette (1983) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990), as well as Arnould and Price (1993), thereby combining the concepts of peak experience, peak performance, flow, and extraordinary experiences. Another example can be found in Quan and Wang's (2004) discussion of a special way of cooking for tourists in China, which "brings about a memorable, enjoyable, and hence peak experience" (p. 302). Allen, Massiah, Cascio, and Johnson (2008) stated that "extraordinary experiences involve absorbing, flow, and peak experiences" (p. 711), and similarly, Klaus and Maklan (2011) suggested that "among extraordinary experiences, the most developed categories are flow and peak experiences" (p. 8). In addition, the *International Journal of Tourism Research's* special issue on "Extraordinary Experiences in Tourism" in 2009 includes several articles concerned with unique and memorable experiences (e.g., "Branding a memorable destination experience. The case of 'Brand Canada'" (pp. 217–228).

The same issue arises in empirical research. Dodson (1996) aimed to measure peak experiences during mountain biking, asked respondents about their "most memorable mountain biking experience." Farber and Hall (2007) explored visitors' extraordinary experiences in Alaska, and asked respondents about "one very special experience." Although there are similarities between the meanings of the four terms, they differ significantly, and furthermore, the way researchers have used them has varied.

It has often been suggested that methodology affects output (Gummesson, 2001), and descriptive words used in questions and the meaning respondents associate with them could have the same effect, thus influencing and predetermining responses. This issue has not yet been acknowledged and addressed in experience studies, but it is important, as references are often made to other terms and these terms are used interchangeably in the same study, or results are compared across studies that use different terms. This study aims to determine whether there are differences between these terms and, if so, whether they are mainly conceptual, or whether respondents differentiate between these terms and associate different meanings with them. Furthermore, an understanding of what makes experiences more memorable, special, or extraordinary and whether there are different types of such experiences will further our understanding of the nature of experiences, and make a valuable contribution to a better understanding of experiential marketing, which is built on the idea of the one/ideal memorable customer experience and does not encompass or consider different types of customer experiences. This has not yet been examined, as the few empirical studies concerned with what makes experiences stand out have focused on one experience and one term (e.g., a tourist's most memorable experience).

What Makes Experiences Stand Out

In order to study consumption experiences, researchers have conventionally focused on customer satisfaction, and tourists' assessments of variables and hygiene factors such as hotel features, food quality, recreational activities, and other characteristics (Ryan, 2002), often associated with service quality research such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman,

Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). This approach has been criticized as being outdated as customers do not evaluate their experiences according to a checklist of individual attributes, but, instead, as a cumulative sense of satisfaction over the course of the whole experience. This is a much more affective response to the overall outcome (Arnould & Price, 1993; Morgan, 2006; Zaltman, 2003). Focus has since shifted to acknowledge the subjective nature of experiences, including emotional aspects (Brunner-Sperdin, et al., 2011; Farber & Hall, 2007; Fournier & Mick, 1999; Oliver, 1999) as well as tourists' subjective interpretation of meanings (Uriely, 2005). In line with the changing focus from measuring satisfactory experiences to understanding experiences that leave lasting impressions, a number of researchers have investigated outstanding experiences within consumption contexts, such as peak experiences in mountain biking (Dodson, 1996) and skydiving (Lipscombe, 1999); memorable experiences in the context of a folk festival (Morgan, 2006) or in retail (Babin & Borges, 2009); and extraordinary experiences such as white water rafting (Arnould & Price, 1993) or climbing Mt. Everest (Tumbat & Belk, 2010). Their findings differ greatly and seem to depend largely on the consumption context that was studied. It is therefore unlikely that there is one universal recipe for memorable or extraordinary experiences; it seems to depend on the individual as well as the context or consumption activity.

Empirical research in the realm of tourism is limited and only a few researchers have investigated what makes certain experiences stand out for tourists. Farber and Hall (2007) found seeing scenery and wildlife; surprising, novel, or unexpected circumstances; as well as the feelings of awe, excitement and pleasure to be the main factors that made an experience extraordinary. Tung and Ritchie (2011a) also found positive feelings, as well as expectations and the notion of unexpected surprise to be dimensions that made certain experiences more memorable. Additionally, they found recollection and consequentiality (the enhancement of social relationships), intellectual development, self-discovery, and overcoming physical challenges to be contributing factors. Chandralal and Valenzuela's (2013) findings were similar, but they also found local hospitality and authentic local experiences, as well as local tour

guides' professionalism, to be important antecedents for memorable tourist experiences. They added the dimension of "perceived significance," which refers to the exclusiveness, extremeness, or reputation of a trip that is often perceived as a once in a life time experience. Taking a quantitative approach, Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2012) developed a scale to measure memorable tourist experiences using a survey based on dimensions of tourist experiences stemming from an extensive literature review, and they identified hedonism, novelty, local culture, refreshment, meaningfulness, involvement, and knowledge as main contributory factors to memorable tourist experiences. However, Sthapit (2013) tested the scale with tourists in Lapland with slightly different results and high correlations between factors. While these findings clearly point to the importance of certain general contributing factors, they do not capture the details and complexity of the actual experience, and aspects of it that led to those evaluations. Moreover, by implication, it is suggested by these studies that the combination of elements makes an experience more memorable, assuming that there is one type of such experience. However, an experience such as skydiving is most likely memorable for reasons that are different from a romantic evening watching a sunset on a remote beach, and it is therefore proposed that different types of experiences stand out in the mind of tourists for different reasons. This calls for a qualitative approach with a focus on tourists' perceptions and spontaneous narratives of their experiences, unaffected by predetermined items and classifications, to gain a better understanding of the complexity of memorable tourist experiences, providing what Jennings (2010) calls "an insider's perspective."

To examine what makes experiences stand out and whether there are different types of such experiences, the present study focuses on respondents' accounts of their four best experiences, the factors that made each of them stand out, and the terms they would use to describe them. The study therefore aimed to answer the following research question:

RQ: Do tourists distinguish between different types of experiences (memorable, extraordinary, special, and peak) and, if so, what characterizes each type of experience?

Method

As experiences are said to be highly subjective and personal (Cutler & Carmichael, 2010; Ryan, 2002; Sharpley & Stone, 2011), in order to examine tourists' conceptualization of their special, extraordinary, peak, and memorable experiences, an exploratory approach was taken. This study used semistructured qualitative interviews with 25 tourists aged 19–34 from 14 different countries. To increase the likelihood that they would have several experiences to discuss, participation was restricted to free and independent travelers who had been in New Zealand for at least 2 weeks. To the authors' knowledge, the present study is the first to conduct in-depth interviews with tourists *while* they are traveling instead of a convenience sample interviewing about past travel experiences. Restricting the research to current tourists minimizes limitations due to recall bias (see “reminiscence bump,” in Tung & Ritchie, 2011b). To examine how participants used the terms “special,” “memorable,” “peak,” and “extraordinary” participants were asked to describe their four best experiences and to label them using the terms provided. This method enabled participants to describe and compare different experiences, and overcome the limitations to descriptions from past research that used only one term. Laddering was employed to find out what made each experience stand out for the individual. Participants were also asked to provide their own definition of a peak, special, memorable, and extraordinary experience. Thematic content analysis was used to examine aspects that made each experience stand out and whether there were significant differences between what respondents perceived as a special, memorable, extraordinary, and peak experience.

Findings and Discussion

The findings showed that the nature of experiences cannot be truly understood if various definitions and terms are used interchangeably and in an uninformed manner. Respondents differentiated clearly between the four terms and assigned different meanings to them. Thus, aspects that made one experience special were different from aspects that

made another experience extraordinary. This means that defining terms used in questions are likely to be leading and may predetermine a certain kind of response, but also implies that there are in fact different kinds of experiences, which has not been acknowledged and addressed thus far. While the study initially examined cognitive aspects of experiences, emotional aspects were found to be at the core of tourists' most important experiences. Terms used to present and discuss findings such as “most” or “the majority” relate to the sample of this study and are not representative of all tourists.

Differences of Terms

The way respondents used the four terms to label and explain their best four experiences showed clearly that the terms are not perceived to be synonymous, but evoke different connotations and meanings, indicating that researchers must pay more attention to the definition they use regarding their consequential influence and the potential bias this confusion creates. The majority of respondents perceived extraordinary and peak as stronger and more appropriate words than memorable and special. Accordingly, participants reported that extraordinary and peak experiences happen less frequently than special and memorable experiences. Extraordinary and peak were mainly used for particularly extreme/adrenaline activities, and memorable and special for places and things to see but also experiences involving other people (e.g., connecting and shared experiences).

For the majority of respondents, peak was the “highlight,” the “best experience,” and involved feelings such as happiness, excitement, and enjoyment. In contrast to all other terms, peak is relative and can change over time (e.g., the peak of the holiday/in New Zealand/of one's life, and the peak *so far*). The term special usually referred to something “different” or “unusual,” an experience that was new to the respondent and was often described as “different from home.” Special was also used to refer to an experience that was unexpected or unplanned and involved feelings such as enjoyment, but also amazement, feeling at home, feeling content, or feeling free. Extraordinary, for most respondents, meant something “totally different” (from the known and

familiar; from one's everyday experiences) and stronger than "special." It often referred to a first-time experience, but they were also perceived as one-off experiences frequently involving surprise or something unexpected, as well as intense feelings of excitement, adrenaline, and amazement, and often described as a "wow" experience. Not surprisingly, most respondents defined a memorable experience as "something you will always remember" or something you would "talk about in the future." The aspects of experiences that make them unforgettable are mainly linked to people, either as making connections (e.g., making friends on a hiking trip or in a hostel), or experiences that are shared with certain people. An unexpected happening was another factor that turned an everyday experience into a memorable experience, and included both positive surprise as well as negative incidents, as long as the overall outcome was positive. Memorable was mainly linked to enjoyment and was often used to describe different kinds of memories, such as photos, a vivid image in one's mind, or a certain feeling.

While there were distinct differences in perception of meanings for the four terms, they were not necessarily used to refer to different experiences. Many experiences were labeled with more than one of the terms, as respondents used them to describe and explain different aspects of their experiences. For instance, one participant labeled one experience with three terms:

[peak] because it is the most exciting experience of the trip; extraordinary because it's absolutely different of my reality. I never did it before [and] it's absolutely amazing. And memorable because "I will remember that forever." (respondent 13)

Another respondent stated that

it's extraordinary because it's my first time doing it, and memorable because I was with one of my best friends when I did it. (respondent 8)

Some experiences are also perceived to be different from others, which means, they stand out for different reasons:

[Skydiving and a day trip in the Bay of Islands,] the two experiences were completely different! That was adrenaline; that was just . . . nice . . . calm . . . so, very different. (respondent 12)

They're just very different from each other. They all have different significances in my mind, so it'd be hard to rank them. (respondent 20)

These findings show that more importance must be placed on the use of terms and definitions in research to truly understand the nature of tourist experiences. The way respondents differentiate between the four terms means that the specific terms used in a study are likely to influence and predetermine responses, as respondents' description of a memorable experience might differ from their story about an extraordinary experience; and findings of respective studies might not be as comparable as has been assumed. Findings further suggest that different experiences stand out in the respondents' minds for different reasons, leading to the belief that there is no *one* way to define a memorable, extraordinary, special, or peak experience. It is important, therefore, to use terms that are natural to respondents to describe experiences rather than the definitions provided by researchers, which are likely to be leading and might force respondents to choose and categorize experiences.

Outcomes also suggest that there is no one ideal memorable customer experience, but different types of experiences that stand out for different reasons that should be acknowledged and incorporated to broaden the scope of experiential marketing, which is built on "the memorable experience." The use of various terms in experience research has led to a confusing array of definitions, studies, and findings, seemingly concerned with the same subject, but quite possibly comparing apples with oranges, as each term seems to refer to different aspects of experiences, thereby only providing a narrow insight into which of those experiences truly matter to respondents. This issue needs to be addressed to obtain a holistic and in-depth understanding of tourist experiences. At this point in time, we can only offer speculations on how these different types of experiences can be contextualized, but the different aspects or reasons discussed by respondents for an experience to stand out seem to be in line with travel motivations of younger tourists, commonly discussed in the literature, such as personal growth (Ryan, 2002) and personal enrichment and socialization (Prebensen, Woo, Chen, & Uysal, 2012), as well as emerging

research in the realm of positive psychology, linking tourist experiences to hedonic and eudemonic well-being (Filep & Pearce, 2013). A subsequent study will further investigate these ideas.

Experience and Emotion

While all respondents first named a place or an activity when asked about their best four experiences, the interview process then revealed aspects that made this particular experience stand out from others for the respondent, and stories were essentially characterized by accounts of their emotions. This is likely due to the method used in this study: interviewing tourists on site while experiences were still “fresh” in their mind. Therefore, the interviews became part of tourists’ processing and sense-making of their experiences and occurred before they had fully processed and cognitively evaluated them. Furthermore, the use of “labels” combined with laddering encouraged respondents to think about different aspects of their experiences and allowed for an in-depth account of those experiences that tourists perceived as their most significant, and in all cases emotions were very important. The following examples shows how “surprise” is a contributing factor to this tourist’s memorable experience, but also the importance of this tourist’s emotions in the moment and after the experience.

I was surprised by the dolphins, cause I booked a whale watching tour . . . yeah, it wasn’t the whales that impressed me the most. Whale watching is more memorable because we saw the dolphins, you don’t always get to see them, you have to be lucky to see that many dolphins. . . . I just felt really happy seeing the dolphins. . . . I will never forget that moment that we all saw them and walked outside and I stood there with a smile on my face. We were just happy all day, like wow, it was so amazing! (respondent 2)

Previous studies concerned with aspects of memorable or extraordinary experiences typically discuss positive feelings, particularly happiness, enjoyment, and excitement (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; Farber & Hall, 2007; Tung & Ritchie, 2011a), often categorized as hedonism (Kim et al., 2012). However, thus far, emotions have been treated as a separate category (e.g., as one contributing factor), in the same vein as other factors

such as surprise and social relationships. The present findings suggest that emotions cannot be seen and treated as a detached factor, but are possibly at the core of tourists’ experiences and the main reason why certain experiences become memorable, special, peak, or extraordinary.

It has also been demonstrated that experiencing is predominantly about “being there”; being absorbed in the experience, and “feeling it;” more than about cognitive and evaluative aspects, as illustrated by a tourist’s story about his visit to a Maori village:

That was actually a very, very good show [and] a very nice way to get to know them [and] to see how they live nowadays. We were both looking forward to go there and we both enjoyed it. The thing is that impressed . . . me, it’s the, not the culture part, it’s the feeling. I mean because the cultural part, you can actually see it, you don’t need to come here to learn that. You could learn it over the internet, books, museums. . . . So that would be, the cultural part, it’s great, it’s awesome but it’s not what made me the biggest impression. Actually seeing them, actually hearing them, feeling kind of threatened, that would be what, . . . made the biggest impression for me. (respondent 22)

For this tourist, cognitive aspects of the experience (e.g., learning about culture) were far less important than emotional aspects, the involvement of senses and his resulting feelings, which made the experience extraordinary and memorable for him. Various studies have been concerned with the study of experience elements, such as local culture, intellectual development, or surprise; however, findings of this study suggest that more emphasis should be placed on emotional aspect of tourist experiences, as this appears to make certain experiences stand out for tourists and leave lasting impressions. This is in line with recent findings by Gountas, Mavondo, Ewing, and Gountas (2011), who stress the importance of understanding the complexities and dynamics of emotions in service transactions in tourism, “as consumers’ emotions influence their service consumption evaluation” (p. 395) and should therefore be part of a holistic approach to satisfaction in tourism.

The point in time of the interview has shown to be an important factor. Typically, previous studies concerned with memorable tourist experiences have asked respondents (such as students at a university) about their most memorable tourist

experience, hence obtaining a retrospective perspective based mainly on cognitive evaluations of aspects of their experiences. Interviewing tourists while they are traveling and before they have fully processed and evaluated their experiences has shown that the emotional aspect of experiences is very important for some experiences to stand out from others. More research is needed to understand the emotional aspects of experiences, and how perception, memory, and evaluation of experiences change over time.

Conclusion

This study revealed that how researchers use terms to study experiences needs to change in order to truly understand the nature of experiences. Respondents associate different meanings with the terms “special,” “memorable,” “extraordinary,” and “peak,” which have thus far been used interchangeably. Terms used in questions are likely to predetermine a certain kind of response, as respondents will talk about different experiences or different aspects of their experiences, depending on the term used, which depicts only part of the multidimensional nature of experiences. In order to obtain a more holistic and emic picture of tourist experiences researchers need to be aware of the consequences of their choice of terms, and should use terms that are natural to respondents to avoid bias and constriction. Furthermore, while previous studies have found elements of “a memorable tourist experience,” findings from this study suggest that there might be different types of experiences that are important to respondents for different reasons and not comparable based on the same elements. Acknowledging different types of experiences allows researchers and practitioners to move beyond existing conceptualizations, which focus on elements thought necessary to tailor and facilitate “the perfect tourist experience.”

This makes a valuable contribution to a broader understanding of experiential marketing, which is built on the idea of one ideal memorable customer experience and which currently does not encompass or consider different types of customer experiences. Understanding the importance of emotional engagement and its cumulative effect on establishing meaning may enable tourism operators to improve

and better position their products and services. If tourism experiences are seen as part of a eudemonic process that is both emotionally motivated and infinitely varied, researchers may be encouraged to focus as much on the nature of engagement as they do on its context. As mentioned above, the attempts to contextualize these types of experiences are thus far speculative, and further studies could investigate the relationship between experiences and travel motivations, to determine whether tourists—either actively or unconsciously—search for certain kinds of experiences.

Lastly, findings from this study suggest that more importance must be placed on emotional aspects of the tourist experience. Emotions cannot be treated as a separate category or a mere by-product of an experience, but instead should be seen to be at the very core of those experiences that tourists perceive to be special, memorable, extraordinary, and peak. More research is needed to understand the role of emotions and their intensity or rarity, as the feelings that many respondents talked about, such as extreme excitement, adrenaline, rush, thrill, being scared, but also wonder and amazement or feeling free and alive, do not seem to occur regularly in everyday life. These findings may also have implications for tourism providers, as understanding the emotional aspect of their customers’ experiences could enable them to tailor their products and facilitate an environment that enhances the likelihood that visitors will have an outstanding experience. The role and influence of tourism providers as well as the influence of context will be investigated in a subsequent study.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The current study has a number of limitations. First, respondents were all free and independent travelers within a comparatively narrow age range. It would be interesting to repeat the study with a more representative sample in terms of age and travel style (e.g., couples, families, groups of friends, and organized travel groups). Second, findings may have been influenced by the nature and context of the holiday, as visitors to New Zealand are usually on a long-haul trip, which creates different expectations and experiences than a visit to an event or site in close proximity (Prebensen et al., 2012). Furthermore, New Zealand as a destination

might attract certain types of tourists, due to its unique features and reputation for its beautiful scenery and “extreme” adventure activities. A third point to note is the timing of the interviews. Tourists’ narratives of their outstanding experiences, so close to the point in time that they have been encountered and while they are still traveling, have been shown to differ from the retrospective perspectives that they have provided in previous studies. The timing of the present interviews ensured that experiences would be fresh in the minds of the tourists. On the other hand, however, the process of reflection and assimilation of their meaning might not have been fully appreciated at this point in time. A longitudinal study, interviewing tourists upon their return to their home country, would therefore provide valuable insights into the change of perception as well as memory formation in regards to memorable tourist experiences.

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