

THE CO-CREATION TOURISM EXPERIENCE

Esther Binkhorst

ESADE/St.Ignasi - Co-creations

Carrasco i Formiguera, 32

08017 Barcelona

T: +34 936 023 030

F : +34 936 023 006

esther.binkhorst@stignasi.fje.edu

esther@co-creations.biz

ABSTRACT

Numerous books have been written lately about the fundamental changes in society, with titles like the 'attention economy', 'dream society', 'market of emotions', 'the age of access', the 'support economy', the 'experience economy', etc. (see Cornelis (1999), Davenport and Beck (2001), Florida (2002), Jensen (1999), Nijs and Peters (2002), Piët (2004), Pine and Gilmore (1999), Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), Rifkin (2000), Ter Borg (2003), Zuboff (2002), and more). The common factor they share is that society's system of social ruling is changing to make way for one driven by communicative self steering (Cornelis 1988). The traditional top down approach makes way for dialogues between equal partners. As a result, customers are gaining more power and control. Competition, however, is from a long time ago based on product and company centric led innovations to increase product variety or to increase uniqueness. This is being taken over by the co-creation experience as a basis for value and as the future of innovation, according to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004). The authors (2003) already see glimpses of the co-creation and expansion of such experience environments in a variety of realms. Strangely enough, the biggest experience generator, i.e., tourism, is not yet one of them. It falls behind both in applications as well as in fundamental research. For many people in the developed world, time spent on leisure and tourism has become an essential part of their quality of life (Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter 2003). Urry speaks of the 'culture of tourism' (1990). Especially during free time people express their quest for ever more unique experiences reflecting their own personal stories (Binkhorst 2002, 2005a, 2005b). The aim of this paper is to link tourism studies with other fields in order to develop an innovative perspective on tourism. This new perspective allows value to increase, not only for tourists but also for other stakeholders involved in tourism experience environments. In order to understand tourism and furthermore to develop tourism, the main source for input is hidden in each human being who eventually becomes a tourist or who, from one of his experience environments, comes into contact with tourism. A tourism network approach facilitates the inclusion of anyone and anything eventually involved in the (co-) creation of tourism experiences, each of them operating from different time spatial contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

The fundamental changes that developed societies went through have been depicted by numerous authors during the last decade. Each of them describes similar tendencies from their own perspective (see, for instance, Cornelis (1988) (1999), Davenport and Beck (2001), Florida (2002), Jensen (1999), Nijs and Peters (2002), Piët (2004), Pine and Gilmore (1999), Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004),

Rifkin (2000), Ter Borg (2003), Zuboff (2002), etc.). Out of those, the 'experience economy' (Pine and Gilmore 1999) became a hype. Due to the central characteristic of the present economy, i.e., abundance, suppliers of products and services find it hard to distinguish themselves. Tourism destinations face the same problem. Each stakeholder involved in a network offering something as (part of) a tourism experience strives after a piece of the big tourism pie, whether it is a singular sight or event, a small village or a big city, an area or a whole country, its people or those representing things. After linking up with local culture in order to guarantee uniqueness, places are increasingly in search of alternatives to escape from the serial reproduction of culture. It will otherwise be very hard to 'touch' today's people who, now they have access to almost anything they want, are in quest of psychological needs such as inspiration, belonging to a meaningful community and meaning in general (Nijs and Peters 2002, Ter Borg 2003). Selling experiences is the solution, according to Pine and Gilmore (1999), as experiences can 'touch' people better than products or services. Experiences are intangible and immaterial and although they tend to be expensive, people attach great value to them because they are memorable. Creating and supplying experiences will be a way for producers to survive in the ever more competitive future.

1.2 EUROPEAN REACTION TO THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

These ideas were launched at the end of the former century. The European reaction to the experience economy tends to be one of warning against the creation of staged experiences that are considered too commercial, artificial and superficial and therefore not always suitable for attracting today's customers (Binkhorst 2002, 2005b, Boswijk et al. 2005, Nijs and Peters 2002). Modern consumers want context related, authentic experience concepts and seek a balance between control by the experience stager and self determined activity with its spontaneity, freedom and self expression. This is also offered with the concept of creativity that recently popped up to explain why consumption is increasingly driven on the need for self development (Richards and Wilson forthcoming). Based on the need for self development or as Giddens (1990, 1991) puts it the 'construction or narrative of the self', Van der Poel (1993, 1997) studied the dynamic reorganization of daily life in the context of modernity. With the 'modularization of everyday life' he refers to the increased exchangeability of the allocation of time. 'Modules' that arouse a high level of interest will have the consumer's preference and will, more than other modules, fit into the individual's pursued 'narrative of the self'. A module can eventually result in a meaningful experience to the individual. Different series of modules may help the individual in developing himself and eventually in transforming the self. The conditions of modernity allow people to creatively shape their lives.

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The above described developments implicate that society's system of social ruling is partly being replaced by one driven on communicative self steering (Cornelis 1988). An increase can be observed in dialogues between equal partners instead of the top down approach of companies or decision making parties telling employees, customers or citizens what to do. As customers gradually prefer to go their own way, the relationship between customers and companies is changing in favour of customers who are increasingly gaining power and control (Florida 2002, Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). The popular defence against competition, e.g. product and company centric led innovations to increase product variety, is increasingly being taken over by the co-creation experience as a basis for value and as the future of innovation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004).

As tourism is the greatest and ever growing source of experiences with which people construct their own unique narratives, consequently, this line of thought deserves our attention. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2003) already see glimpses of the co-creation and expansion of such experience environments in a variety of realms. Strangely enough, the biggest experience generator, e.g., tourism, is not yet one of them. It falls behind both in applications as well as in fundamental research. In their challenge to create experiences that correspond with the latent needs that people have, experience

creators or designers still very much depend on their intuition, on copying best practices and on contextual time and space related conditions. Tourists are not often included yet as partners in the process of experience design.

1.4 HUMAN BEING AS STARTING POINT

Inspired by the ethnographic perspective, both from a fundamental research point of view and supported by an increasing need for and interest in innovations based on ethnographic or 'people research' among businesses, it is argued here that the concept of co-creation deserves to be taken seriously. Yet, tourism development and the study thereof, is hindered by the way it is claimed and framed traditionally. Very often approached from an economic growth perspective, tourism developers in their political surroundings allow(ed) tourism to grow at the costs of natural, cultural, historical, and other original settings. In tourism development the human being should rather be considered in relation to his/her time spatial context. This implicates an innovative perspective on tourism. This means no separation between supply and demand, company and customer, tourist and host, tourism spaces and 'other' spaces but viewing tourism as a holistic network of stakeholders connected in experience environments in which everyone operates from different time spatial contexts. In order to understand the tourism phenomena and furthermore to develop tourism, the main source for input is hidden in each human being who eventually becomes a tourist or who, from one of his/her experience environments, comes into contact with tourism. Therefore, the human being should be included somehow in the tourism development process. A tourism network approach facilitates the inclusion of all stakeholders who might be involved in the creation of tourism experiences, such as the travel intermediaries, those offering accommodation, heritage sites and those who protect and maintain them, events and those who organize and participate in them, the natural environment and those who protect and maintain it, the makers and users of Internet and other technologies; in short, anyone and anything involved in the tourism network. Another reason to put the human being central and to think in terms of tourism experience networks, is the blurring of boundaries between tourism, art, culture, sport, hobby, school, work, etc. that are giving the traditional approach a hard time.

1.5 AIM AND CONTENT OF THIS PAPER

This paper can be considered as a first trial to investigate the concept of the 'co-creation tourism experience' and to explore the possibilities using it within the field of tourism development to finally propose an innovative research framework. The aim is to explore what the co-creation experience in tourism means. Are we at the start of a more interactive form of tourism, e.g. tourism based on *co-creations* between entrepreneur(s) and tourist(s) to create unique value for both? Where does co-creation in the tourism experience chain actually occur and where could and should it occur? The following paragraph (2) provides insight into the concept of the co-creation experience. Paragraph 3 looks into where and how the co-creation experience currently occurs in tourism. Opportunities to be explored for tourism development and innovative tourism experience research are suggested in paragraph 4.

2 THE CO-CREATION EXPERIENCE

2.1 CUSTOMERS AS DESIGNERS OF INNOVATIONS

As customers are increasingly gaining power and control, organizations today have to enter into a dialogue with them. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argue for the 'co-creation experience' as a basis for value and as the future of innovation, e.g., the 'next practice' or 'second generation' experience economy. They argue that co-creation should not be seen as outsourcing or as the minimum adaptation

of goods or products as if it were tailor made. Consumers want much more. There is a need for the creation of meaningful and specific value for individual consumers through personal interaction with the company (Boswijk et al. 2005). Ter Borg (2003) argues that the experience of the co-creation itself is the basis of a unique value for each individual. The 'first generation experiences' date from the late 1990s and are characterised by merely staged entertainment and fun. In the meantime, the 'second generation experiences', based on co-creation, have come up and take the individual as a starting point. This type of experience is directed towards the personal social and cultural values that the individual itself holds (Boswijk et al. 2005:43). Generally, however, most companies and managers still innovate from a product-centric point of view. After becoming successful by coincidentally very well designed products or services that all of a sudden got highly appreciated by a niche market, growth finally forces those creative companies to start doing (market) research. If companies do not manage to do this research themselves, they hire market research consultants to find the customer solutions for them. Standard market research, thereby, often results in 'more of the same'. Some of them, however, specialise in innovations based on ethnographic or people research, something that completely fits with the tendencies earlier described: the human being as a starting point. At Philips Design, for instance, a research team continuously works on the innovation of people research as one of their innovation tools. They are moving away from a focus on consumers' product use and buying behaviour and shift to investigating people's needs and values instead. People are thereby studied in their daily-life contexts in order to establish how they and their needs are connected to the communities and the groups they live in. They, moreover, are seen as participants in the innovation process instead of passive respondents (Bueno and Rameckers 2003). Nokia similarly portrays their customers no longer as just product purchasers but as partners in creating personalised mobile experiences that add value and pleasure to their daily lives. Their approach is built on a constant and intensive dialogue with consumers as well as operators, service and content providers and a variety of other partners with a focus on daily life, not on features or technology (Nokia 2005). Although Philips and Nokia come very close to experience innovation as defined by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2003:16), the authors state that there are only few companies that completely embraced the experience space and the new experience-centric view of innovation. The objective of people research is to come as close as possible to the living world of human beings (later on eventually to be seen as a potential customer or client) to identify and understand his or her latent needs. The input serves as a basis for the co-creation of innovations with the client. *'In the experience space, the individual consumer is central and an event triggers a co-creation experience. The events have a context in space and time, and the involvement of the individual influences that experience. The personal meaning derived from the co-creation experience is what determines the value to the individual'* (Prahalad and Ramaswamy *ibid*:14).

2.2 VALUE THROUGH THE CO-CREATION EXPERIENCE

According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (*ibid.*), the individual's experience of co-creating, also called the 'co-creation experience' is what provides the value. The co-creation experience results from the interaction of an individual at a specific place and time and within the context of a specific act. A real co-creation experience is neither company nor product centred. The better companies focus on the consumer context and match with the individual's living and using environment, the more increases the co-creation experience value. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) speak of an 'experience environment' referring to a space where dialogue can take place between company and consumer. When the experience environment is sufficiently compelling, customer communities can take on a life on their own and thereby becoming directly involved in the co-creation of individual experience. An experience co-creation network contains all the people and things that are needed to provide the experience environment. Based on three examples of 1) the pacemaker where the patient and pacemaker are part of an information and skills network to remotely monitor the heart, 2) Onstar, a safety provider for customers of General Motors Corp. integrated with the vehicle and 3) Mindstorms, Mindstorms Robotics Invention System of LEGO, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2003:16) detect a glimpse of the nature of experience innovation and state: *'In each case, there is an enhanced base of*

competence comprising three co-creators of value: the company and its network, the consumer, and the consumer community’.

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3.1 TOURIST TYPOLOGIES

Yet, social and cultural values vary a lot among individuals. Much has been written on why people spend their leisure time the way they do and how this can be explained. Authors like Cohen (1972, 1979, 1988), MacCannell (1989), Urry (1990), and Lengkeek (1994, 1996) all interpret tourism as a consequence of the alienation in everyday life. Most of them (see Cohen, 1979; Urry, 1990; Lengkeek, 1994) draw on the same source from 1973, namely, the pilgrimage study of the anthropologist Turner, to illustrate the change of everyday life into a stage of contra-structure that travel brings about. First, when leaving the normal place of residence, the tourist is separated socially and spatially from his familiar environment or ‘centre’ in Turner’s language. Second, while at his destination, the tourist enters a contra-structure, out of time and place, a phase that is also called the ‘liminal zone’ and a space that is also called the ‘centre-out-there’ (Turner, quoted in Cohen, 1979). Finally, the individual, enriched with the travel experience, is reintegrated with his original social group in its familiar context. Considering the numerous tourist typologies and the continuous debates about them (see Cohen (1972) (1979), Elands and Lengkeek (2000), Lengkeek (1994), (1996), MacCannell (1989), McKercher (2002 in Schouten 2003), Van de Poel (1999) amongst others), we can conclude that the specific character of the leisure experience is derived from the tension between everyday life and other realities which is to be experienced most obviously as a result of changes in habitual temporal and spatial structures. Although people’s needs differ and consequently does their quest for experiences, research shows that for many people in the developed areas, time spent on leisure and tourism has become an essential part of their quality of life. A study by Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003) using the experience sampling method, shows that social active and passive leisure activities contribute more to happiness compared to school activities that rate below average scores of happiness. Urry argues (1990) that the ‘culture of tourism’ that we now live in provides people with the opportunity to come loose from temporal and spatial constraints and to increase their quality of life by focusing what they really like to do, with whom they like doing it, etc. Richards wrote in that respect that *‘the desire for more leisure and tourism consumption reflects the shift in the focus of consumption away from physical goods toward services and experiences, which means that quality of life is increasingly judged in terms of access to those experiences’* (1999:190). General consumer behaviour trends are reflected in tourism behaviour resulting in an increasing quest for authenticity and moreover, the ‘new tourist’ (Poon 1993) wants to be in charge.

3.2 EXPERIENCE ENVIRONMENTS

The ‘experience environment’ in tourism is made up of all people and things that surround the tourist, or better, the human being. The argument to speak about human beings instead of tourists is explained now. When talking about a tourist, we routinely start building our images of someone coming from (probably our own) western, developed areas with the freedom, time and money to travel to other areas outside his daily living environment. Moreover, we would imagine the tourist either when travelling to or while being at the destination. We usually do not consider him a tourist yet while he is still in his daily context. And according to the definitions he is not at that moment. But, in its daily context, is exactly where ‘a tourist’ spends most of his time and where decisions are being taken about next trips. Certain newspapers and magazines drop into ‘the tourist’s’ mailbox regularly; certain TV channels are mostly watched (IDTV in the near future); donations to certain organizations are being paid; certain souvenirs in the living environment and clothes in the wardrobe remind about previous trips; books,

CD's and DVD's on the shelves tell about art, culture, gastronomy, music, painting, pottery, history, travel destinations, etc.; favourite bars, restaurants or clubs are visited; certain websites connect the 'tourist' through the Internet with the rest of the world; travel information is received on mobile devices; stories and experiences are exchanged with family members, colleagues and friends; a certain type of work or education is shaping 'the tourist's' life, etc. etc. So, it is in these home and work or school related experience environments where lifestyles express latent needs and hidden values of human beings that eventually become tourists at a certain moment. These yet much unknown experience environments of human beings are an indispensable contributor to innovative tourism development. Which tourism (related) business knows their clients as human beings? In tourism, but definitely in its development or initiatives for innovations, the experience environments that directly surround people, e.g. the home and work or school experience environments, are still often neglected. The general focus is usually limited to their leisure and tourism experience environments and this is when decisions are already made.

Figures 1.a, 1.b and 1.c on the following page illustrate that each individual has his various and continuously changing experience networks, e.g. people and/or things that surround the individual in his experience environments. Not only as a tourist during travel (Figure 1. c) but also when the decision to travel is being taken (Figure 1.b) or while being or returning home (Figure 1.a), people continuously connect to other people and things to shape their lives. Considering tourists as human beings moving around in various experience environments brings one closer to their values and (latent) needs. Consequently, it allows companies to broaden their perspective on their client from 'a tourist during travel' to 'the person behind the tourist during travel'; it provides access to the life he lives when he is not with the company as a client.

Figure 1.a Tourism experience network in the home experience environment.

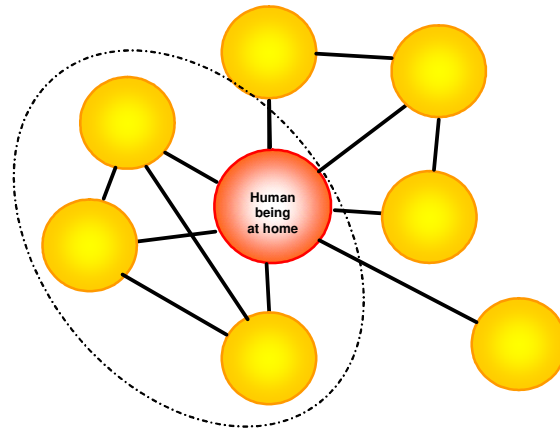


Figure 1.b Tourism experience network during the travel decision making process.

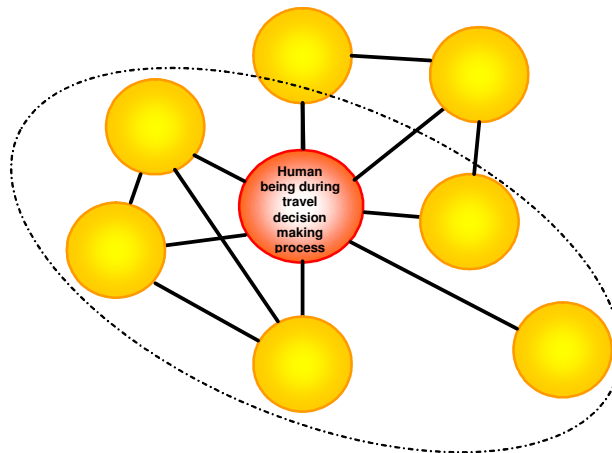
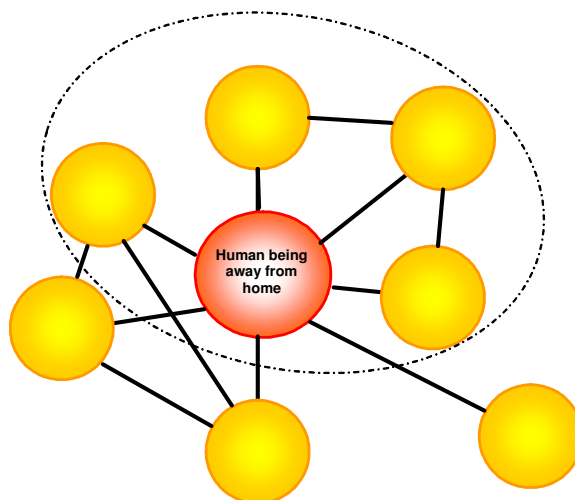


Figure 1.c Tourism experience network away from the home environment.



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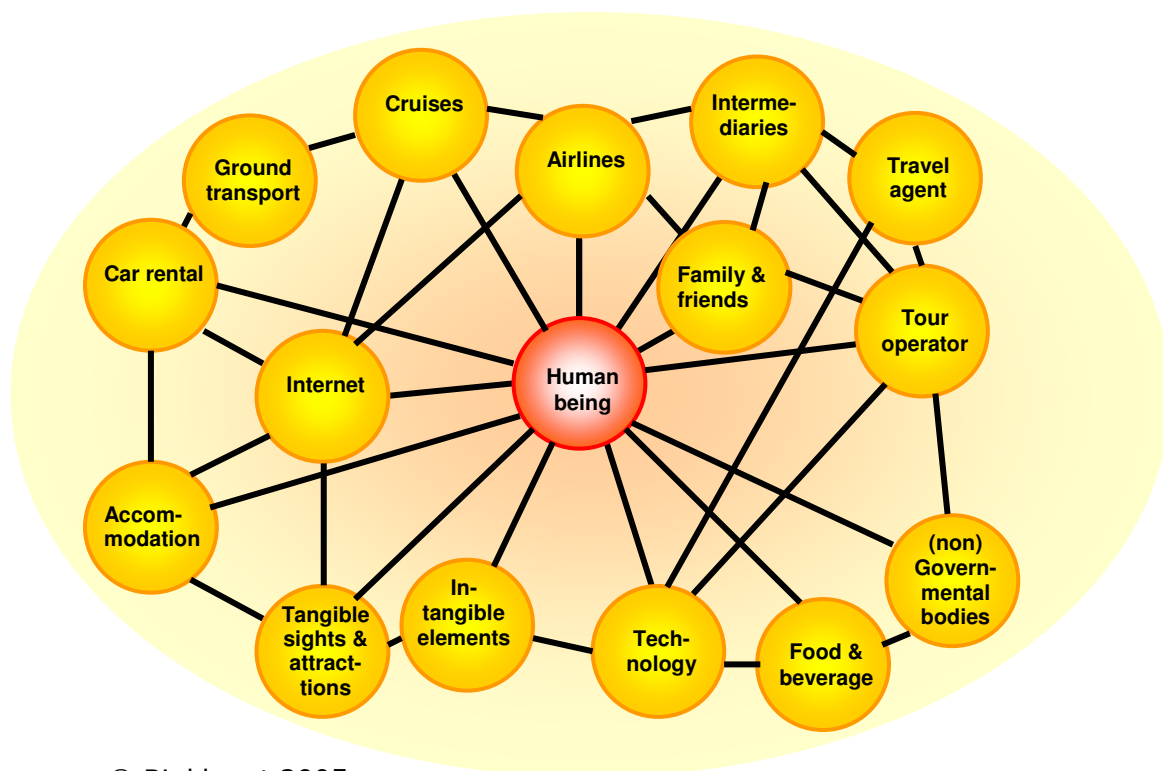
Consequently, each person is surrounded by a unique tourism experience network of all stakeholders, e.g. people and things, involved in his or her tourism experiences, whether they are real, virtual or even

in dreams. The tourism experience network approach forces us to put the human being in the centre. Not the tourist but the human being. First of all, any human being is a person in a home environment (see Figure 1.a). This is where he or she will usually spend most of the time and where he will undergo lots of memorable social experiences. Besides free time spent in the home environment, people spend much time as well on work and school (outside as well as in the home environment). The various networks in which people act basically guide them through life and change accordingly. The need for a tourism experience might evolve at a certain moment and so will the individual's network consequently. Other stakeholders will be looked for (exploring websites or brochures) or links with existing stakeholders will be strengthened (calling a friend to hear about his experience over there) to achieve one's objectives to fulfil the need to travel (see Figure 1.b). Finally, when the travel decision is made and the home experience environment is left (see Figure 1.c), the individual's tourism experience network changes accordingly. This happens again after returning to the home environment (see Figure 1.a).

3.3 TOURISM EXPERIENCE NETWORKS

The argument that is made here to consider tourism as an experience network in which various stakeholders co-create as to engage in tourism experiences relates very much to what Van der Duim called 'tourismsapes'; e.g. the complex process of ordering of people and things (2005). Such a tourism experience network is immense; tourists are surrounded by the Internet, mobile devices, travel agencies, tour operators, suppliers of transport, hoteliers, guides, local entrepreneurs offering activities at the destination (whether it be passive sightseeing or active participation), the locals, the things to do and see at the destination such as attractions, typical landmarks, museums, heritage sites, events, natural characteristics, governmental and non-governmental agencies as well as technology that shape the conditions of their travel, etc. Figure 2 (A tourism experience network), is a simple representation of such a tourism experience network.

Figure 2 A tourism experience network



Technology influences tourism experience networks tremendously and changes them continuously. Both the searching and booking of tourism experiences is increasingly done on-line, taking over from the traditional electronic tourism intermediaries. This adds value to the end user as up to date information and prices can be compared before booking and the actual experience can be shared during and after travel. Yet, this forces companies even more to compete not on price but on service. *'When examining their core value proposition, successful enterprises will put their customer not their company first when asking the question – what can I do to make the lives of my customers better?'* (Pollock and Benjamin 2001). Research by Buhalis and Licata (2002) confirms that the Internet offers the opportunity for companies to develop closer relationships with customers. Some of the interviewees in their study mentioned that *'actually the Internet is offering a better service and experience for the consumer as their interaction with tourism organisations can be more meaningful. Instead of meeting an inexperienced travel consultant in the high street shop, after having struggled to park and waited in the queue for their turn, a number of travel companies already offer specialised support through their calling centres and enable consumers to ask specific questions to a product/property/destination specialist'* (ibid: 211). The Internet, IDTV and mobile communication devices were in the same study identified as the three most significant ePlatforms for the near future. These technological developments will make meaningful dialogues possible with each individual customer and besides, it provides an experience environment where innovations in tourism can be based on the co-creation experience.

4. TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

4.1 CONTEXT BASED TOURISM

Considering tourism as a network and tourists as human beings operating from various experience environments, the concept of the co-creation experience is very interesting to apply on the tourism phenomena. It will add value to all stakeholders, both to the visitor and the visited, and at the same time it will contribute to the uniqueness and authenticity of the destination. Experience concepts will be strongly linked to the spirit of the place and its people. The context related experience environments that result, will link with the destination's history, its legends, folklore, stories, myths, etc. Experience concepts being copied elsewhere without adapting them to their new context usually end up as so called 'third places'. Starbucks in Spain is successful among tourists but can not be characterized as a favourite place for a coffee among the locals. Similarly, the Hardrock Café is not a remaining success in several European cities. *'It is much more a tourist attraction than a café where you would want to meet people regularly'* (Nijs 2003). During the creative process of developing tourism experience environments, both the host environment as well as (potential) visitors to the area should play a key role.

4.2 C2C CO-CREATION

Putting the human being central in the tourism phenomena has another advantage. It challenges us to stop thinking about the western tourist travelling to or being at a tourism destination. It will equally put the human being to be found at the destination, the so called 'host' (another concept to be avoided within this new perspective) central in the tourism network. With the growing interest to learn about other cultures, tourism experiences increasingly are a means for interaction, e.g. co-creations, with other stakeholders. Someone who wants to visit a destination as a tourist must undertake some steps to plan his trip (see Figure 1.b). He will meet some of the local stakeholders during this process, although probably at a distance, through websites, books, travel information, music, etc. Something links his living world with the later to be visited local stakeholders. Some of the local stakeholders will also

meet the visitor before. The tourism development cycle would be complete when the human being living in the tourism destination (as one of the attractions of that destination), will in the future visit the tourist in his daily environment. From a traditional Western point of view, however, 'tourists' would probably not want that because it would, hypocritically, wash away all reasons why that destination was originally so attractive to visit. Between Western destinations, however, this already happens when people through the Internet or specialized organizations exchange houses during their holidays. They co-create their most authentic tourism experiences. Technology will empower consumers ever more to co-create their 'Consumer to Consumer' (C2C) tourism experiences.

To conclude, in tourism and leisure we are only at the beginning of exploring co-creation experiences. It is common sense that tourism is a very important, if not the most important experience generator and economic motor of many societies. But, the sector with its enormous number of big and small stakeholders is not used yet to think in experience environments and experience networks in which tourists - considered as human beings - play a central role. Nor is it common to invest in innovative (people) research as a basic tool for tourism development as is already done in some other sectors. The final paragraph presents input for an innovative research agenda.

4.3 INNOVATIVE TOURISM EXPERIENCE RESEARCH AGENDA

- Is the tourism industry ready or willing to get ready to operate from a network perspective in which the human being plays a central role (people in their home environment – visitors and visited - as well as during travel, intermediaries selling or protecting things, and many others)?
- How willing are human beings to participate in people research in order to co-create meaningful tourism experiences?
- How willing are entrepreneurs in and outside the area of leisure and tourism and governmental bodies (cities) to co-create the design of meaningful tourism experience environments (from tangible experience (research) environments to virtual communities)?
- Are technological capabilities such as for instance found in the areas of adaptive learning applications by TiVo Inc's, miniaturization by LEGO and networked communication by Onstar (see Ramaswad and Prahalamy 2003) applicable and desirable in the area of tourism development?
- What experience research settings and methodologies would be most suitable?
- What partners are interested to invest to set up some pilot settings?

Please, contact the author for any questions, comments, suggestions or initiatives to further explore the challenging world of the co-creation tourism experience.

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