

“Chill or thrill”: the impact of the “polarity paradox” on hospitality and tourism

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Abstract

Purpose – *In a society of abundance, complexity, uncertainty and secularisation, consumers seek extreme market offerings. They thereby avoid the grey middle ground and rather seek white or black, or rather utopia or dystopia, in their experiences. This consumer behaviour is coined the Polarity Paradox. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effect of the Polarity Paradox on travel and tourism and specifically highlight how darker and dystopian type of tourism experiences can add value to the overall tourist experience.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The paper is based on literature and trend report reviews to support the direction of the Polarity Paradox trend and the opportunities it presents to the hospitality and tourism industry.*

Findings – *Travellers do not seek only beauty and happiness when travelling. Examples of the thrilling or dystopian side of the Polarity Paradox clearly illustrate travellers' emerging needs to look for the extreme. In fact, new travel and hospitality experiences are all about originality and understanding that whether the experience triggers positive or negative emotions matter less in a market where consumers want to be “shaken up”, surprised, taught something or seek a deeper meaning. The difference with the past is that these same thrill seeking tourists, also seek “white” and chilling experiences and that demands a new approach to market segmentation.*

Originality/value – *Until now, the Polarity Paradox has been described as a general consumer trend. In this paper, the authors are the first to analyse its possible impact on hospitality and tourism and in detail describe that black, dystopian and thrilling experiences can be positive when they trigger emotions and reactions meaningful to the traveller. The authors further show that “playing it safe” will not be the future to build successful hospitality and tourism experiences. The examples explore how the hospitality and tourism industry can add elements of “dystopia” and by doing that actually add value to the overall travel experience.*

Keywords *Tourism, Trends, Experience, Hospitality, Consumer behaviour, Consumer trends*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

Introduction

There are no fifty shades of grey in a world where consumers are looking for black and white. Welcome to the Polarity Paradox.

Seeking the extreme in the form of either utopia or dystopia takes a foothold as consumers are looking more and more to spice up their lives after years of financial malaise (The Future Laboratory, 2014). At the same time, consumers today have everything available at their fingertips and to live their lives to the fullest, many are “experience cramming”. In the context of tourism and hospitality, this means that travellers want to experience a wide variety of very different types and diverse sorts of experiences (Trendwatching, 2012). In doing so, they often encounter deflationary effects as many travel related experiences have become undifferentiated and to a large extent commoditized (Abraham, 2012). Extreme choices of either an intensely “chilling” experience or a shockingly “thrilling” experience not only make for a clearer cut decision in a sea of sameness; such experiences also provide more lasting and interesting memories (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

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We therefore argue that the Polarity Paradox goes further than a countertrend. Our research suggests that we are dealing with a phenomenon that could be very different from situations in the past as consumers no longer aim to live their lives in the middle ground. On some occasions, travellers certainly choose the “chill” or rather the utopian side of the polarities, i.e. pleasing and comfortable experiences. Less explored however and especially in this context, is the effect of dystopian and “thrill” seeking travel experiences.

We argue that developing offerings in the field of extreme “dark” memorable experiences or even transformations, present interesting business opportunities for tourism and hospitality providers as consumer choices are polarising at both ends of the utopian-dystopian continuum. In this paper we specifically investigate “thrill side” of the Polarity Paradox. We highlight how these extreme experiences might ask for a new approach to customer segmentation as well as alternative value propositions to meet this demand.

The Polarity Paradox in a tourism and hospitality context

The Future Laboratory coined the term “Polarity Paradox” in 2014 as a major consumer trend. It was to define the polarisation in consumer choices and behaviour. Specifically it means that consumers are making very extreme choices whilst avoiding the middle ground. This grey area in the middle is boring, bland and emotionless (The Future Laboratory, 2014). Instead, seeking white or black or rather utopian or dystopian experiences help consumers’ aim to express their identities by experiencing a full range of more intense emotions (The Future Laboratory, 2014). Among other things this is due to the abundance of choice in today’s markets. With so much to do and to experience in the same amount of hours, consumers are going out of their way to pro-long life and to experience as much as possible (Trendwatching, 2012). They are pre-occupied with health but also with death in order to live “in the face of inevitable mortality” (Stone, 2012).

Connected to the Polarity Paradox, dystopia then becomes just as important to experience as utopia. Following this line of thought, we somehow seem to need the lower lows, in order to better enjoy and appreciate the higher highs in our lives. As such, when seeking the thrill, consumers look to be shocked, uncomfortable or even scared. Think of, for example tourists travelling in developing countries on an overfull local bus with people and animals, staying in a local private accommodation not half as comfortable as the bed they have at home and eating food off the street they normally would not find appealing at all. Admittedly, some travellers do this because of the cost savings, but culturally and authenticity driven travellers would primarily choose such options because of the meaning it gives to their lives (Yeoman *et al.*, 2006). A thrill that makes the trip a more transcending and meaningful experience despite the discomfort they might have experienced. The challenge for the tourism and hospitality industry to provide dystopian experiences is that it is by nature a hospitable industry. It is unnatural and counterintuitive that spine chilling, uncanny and even creepy experiences would appeal to customers. Important to understand here is that in contrast to the past, it is not one specific group of consumers with pre-determined demographic characteristics that are seeking these types of experiences.

Hybrid tourists demanding a new segmentation approach

These are so called “hybrid tourists” who consume a wide variety of tourism experiences during a period when “life circumstances” remain stable (Boztug *et al.*, 2015). Understanding this Polarity Paradox trend, they might either choose for a “chill or thrill” experience depending on the context and the usage moment. Yeoman (2010) also argues that consumers’ need to experience a range of different travel experiences can be explained by their need for self-expression and identity building. This means that one travel or hospitality experience might be completely “white” in order to chill and the other “black” to get a total thrill. It can even be granulated further in that elements of the overall experience at a destination can be dystopian which in turn can enable the same tourists to enjoy the utopian side of their travel more. Think of, for example, staying at a five star golf resort in South Africa and spending one day experiencing the townships.

In literature this has been described as “polarisation of markets” (Silverstein and Butman, 2006). These are consumers, also described as “hybrid consumers”, who are happy to shop budget brands for functional purposes but at the same time can spend lavishly on premium brands or luxury offerings that they feel socially and emotionally connected to (Ehrnrooth and Grönroos, 2013). Similar to the Polarity Paradox, market polarisation ignores midmarket offerings (Ehrnrooth and Grönroos, 2013) but in contrast, it is largely value driven in terms of what consumers are prepared to pay for.

The bipolar behaviour we are observing today; spending more does not necessary mean luxury, splashing out and bingeing but it can also mean paying high rates for dark, extreme and almost depriving offerings (The Future Laboratory, 2014). Similarly, being on a budget can mean enjoying the simple things in life such as the luxury feeling of space and peace of mind or the thrill of not paying for travel and accommodation by hitchhiking and using, for example coach surfing options. In fact, recent research shows that 60 per cent of travellers “provide distinctly different motivation patterns for the trips they have undertaken in one year” (Boztug *et al.*, 2015). Yeoman (2010) refers to this as fluid identity where “the concept of self [...] is fluid and malleable [...] and the desire for self and new experiences drive tourist consumption”.

We are thereby moving into a “post demographic” era (Trendwatching, 2014). These are times where consumers are free to make their own choices. It is well documented that as part of forming their identities, consumers buy and consume market offerings to communicate to others who they want to be and whom they would like others to perceive them to be (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). This means that just because you have a certain age, you are no longer socially “obliged” to behave and/or to purchase certain types of products, services and experiences. To illustrate, there are more video play gamers over the age of 43 than there are under the age of 18; and among thousand favourite artists of 60-year olds and 13-year olds, “there is a 40% overlap” (Trendwatching, 2014). Similarly, just because somebody is from a certain socio-economic background, it does not mean that they would not enjoy a “cheap and cheerful” travel experience. Especially if it allows them to spend their money on something else they deem more important. This “value in use”, we believe is at the backbone of the Polarity Paradox. How far consumers then will go in terms of consuming a (especially) dystopian experience indeed depends on the value they seek at the specific usage moment and in that exact context.

How black is black? Types of dystopian experiences

There is a range of different types of dystopian experiences that are travel and hospitality related. We have attempted to categorise them in relation to the emotion or reaction they trigger, which could be an indication of the underlying human need. This is to illustrate that there are many dimensions to these “thrilling” experiences. One might just be “blacker” than the other and one might just trigger different emotions than the other. We give business examples of each type.

Grief: war, disaster and death related tourism

In the context of the Polarity Paradox, we are not so much referring to the places on earth where traditional death and funeral rites have become commercialised for tourism, such as on the Indonesian islands of Sulawesi or Bali. We particularly refer to dark tourism, which means visiting historical sites that are associated with death, suffering and tragedy. It also implies travelling to areas affected by disasters or places where people were murdered and although the definitions overlap, it includes other variations of dark tourism such as are battlefield tourism, cemetery tourism, disaster tourism, ghost tourism or prison tourism (Stone and Sharpley, 2008).

Consuming dark tourism is considered a complex phenomenon (Stone and Sharpley, 2008). It is considered more closely connected to life than with death and can thereby help travellers to address issues of personal meaningfulness “and ultimately to the maintenance and continuity of ontological security and overall well being” (Stone and Sharpley, 2008).

Examples of dark tourism are for instance Nazi concentration camps such as Auschwitz, Ground Zero in New York City or the infamous prison Alcatraz and many more. In the former Soviet Union it is labelled “gulag tourism” (*The Telegraph Travel*, 2015). Here in these often hard Russian labour camps,

the experience is really lived and co-created as visitors are encouraged to play the part of prisoner. A different kind of destination associated dark tourism can be seen in “the Chernobyl Disaster”. It features popular visitor tours to the nuclear power plant and it is viewed as a “heterotopia” – a ritual space that exists outside of time; a “no place” where things are different (Stone, 2013).

Compassion, appreciation and self-development: conflict and disaster tourism

Interesting research has recently been conducted in danger-zones of on-going socio-political conflict, for example in Jordan, Israel and Palestine (the West Bank of the Jordan river to be specific) (Vermeulen, 2015). Here refugee camps have become a serious tourist attraction. Buda (2015) argues that we can better understand and interpret tourist experiences in conflict zones through the psychoanalytic concept of death drive. Buda refers to the binary concepts of life/death and fun/fear, crossing blurred lines (Buda, 2015). Travellers to, for instance, the West Bank in Palestine undergo feelings of a total shock, whereby they engage their senses and feel emotions in nuanced and complex ways. “Fear blurs into fun, danger merges with safety as conflict and peace intermingle” (Buda *et al.*, 2014). This type of extreme dark tourism attracts an increasing number of people who choose to visit these areas because they want gain a better understanding of the world. In fact, the main goal is to experience the fear of terror and horror at an extreme and intense level in order to develop and discover the “self” (Vermeulen, 2015). Interesting and aligning with the Polarity Paradox, it is not eccentric or radical kind of persons that undertake these sorts of extreme travel experiences but actually tourists who otherwise would be described as very “normal”. Of course, not all thrilling experiences have to be this dark and deep to make an intense impression.

Scare: haunted experiences and the urge for survival

The fascination to be “shaken up” and taken outside the normal comfort zone seems to be a sign of our times as “everyone is so blasé about what happens in the world. They [consumers] need a safe release. It is about creating a cinematic experience and making people feel they’re living their own horror movie. Movies can’t fool us anymore” (McKamey in Carroll and Ryan, 2015). As such, co-creating and truly living the experience, becomes more important than ever.

Some businesses are picking this up successfully. For Halloween, Airbnb ran a competition to win a night of sleep in the world’s largest grave – the Paris catacombs! (Airbnb, 2015; Drescher, 2015). The pop-up restaurant Wolvesmouth, UK serves dishes looking like the meat has been “ravaged” by an animal with blood on the plate as the sauce (The Future Laboratory, 2014). The Blade Rave, is a nightclub where blood rains from the ceiling and where a thousand partygoers get drenched in fake blood (in an homage to the Wesley Snipes film while dancing to the Crystal Method) (Anderson, 2015).

More permanent horror attractions in the form of haunted houses and haunted events attracted in fact more than 32 million visitors in the USA in 2014 (Schnitzer, 2015). The most extreme of all, seems to be the McKamey Manor. It is a “survival horror boot camp” where visitors experience the most extreme form of a haunted experience (Carroll and Ryan, 2015). They sign up to be kidnapped, bounded, masked, water boarded and generally tortured for the duration of eight hours. There is no safe word to stop. They are so successful in delivering “anxiety, fear, revulsion and, eventually, relief” that they have 27,000 people on the waiting list (Carroll and Ryan, 2015). Taking this a step further, we ask ourselves if consumers choosing a McKamey Manor type of experience might also do so to prepare themselves of the fear of what might come?

Shock to enlighten and educate: artists initiatives

The art world is generally faster in expressing early warning signals that could be pointers for eventual shifts in mentality, mindsets, moods and behaviours in society (Bina *et al.*, 2014). Some of these art initiatives have a direct impact on the dark tourism experience.

Isla de las Muñecas or the Island of the Dolls is a remote site in Xochimilco, Mexico where an artist, Julian Santana Barrera hung up dolls or part of dolls as a sign of a haunted place where a young girl once disappeared (Morton, 2014). Today it attracts hundreds of thrill seeking tourists (Akbar, 2015).

Another example is the dystopian pop-up theme park Dismaland Bemusement Park in Weston-Super-Mare, UK. Created by street artist Banksy, it attracted over 150,000 visitors in only 36 days by shocking visitors with “apocalypse, anti-consumerism, and pointed social critiques on celebrity culture, immigration, and law enforcement” (Jobson, 2015). Similarly, a polar opposite of Disneyland is the theme park Haw Par Villa in Singapore and more in particular its underworld-themed Ten Courts of Hell, intended as “a way to teach young children about morality, the dioramas portray severe modes of punishment accompanied by a placard explaining the sin that warranted such lashings” (Morton, 2014).

Finally, Gunter van Hagen’s Body Worlds exhibition is another rather shocking event. It has attracted over 40 million visitors displaying plasticised corps of real human bodies (Gunter von Hagen’s Body Worlds Amsterdam, 2015). They thereby “facilitate utopian desires [but] also generate dystopian anxieties about the manipulation and commodification of the human body” (Stern, 2006).

Fun as a result of unexpected service delivery: offensive experiences

Consumers today expect friendly, fast and helpful service regardless of the type of service organisation. Even if we fly with a budget airline or stay in a three star hotel, if the service is not up to par, the company will feel the consequences immediately as consumers can share their unpleasant experiences instantaneously with thousands of others (Yeoman, 2010).

Yet, there seems to be a fascination with establishments who do not make the effort to be polite and have the courage to be indifferent or even rude to their guests (Kelly, 2014). It seems to humanise the service offering, refresh us and the surprise to be insulted in a service setting seems to be so counterintuitive that it becomes humorous. To illustrate, a video showing a rude waitress at a Chicago restaurant known for its rudeness was uploaded to Facebook. In seven days the film was viewed more than three million times with almost 25,000 likes (McCluskey, 2015). Similarly, at London’s rudest restaurant, Wong Kei, patrons have been lining up outside this 500-seat restaurant for years to end up being bullied, insulted and scolded at (Kelly, 2014). In Amsterdam at the Hans Brinker Hotel, guests are proud to wear t-shirts stating, “I survived the Hans Brinker Hotel”. This hotel, which recently opened a sister property in Lisbon, Portugal takes pride in promoting everything that they do not have in the hotel or rather as they phrase it: “more honesty and less of everything else” and “what you see is what you get, just don’t look too closely” (Hans Brinker, 2015). One campaign took it even a bit further to make sure to inform potential guests that there is now “less dog shit” in the lobby (Hans Brinker, 2015). The Heart Attack grill, USA, on the hand, attracts guests from all over the world by serving the world’s unhealthiest burgers. They proudly state that customers dying after eating their (up to 20,000 calories) “bypass” burgers “are good for business” (Wei, 2015).

Thus, shocking and surprising consumers in often rather unpleasant ways can have a canny way of bringing consumers outside their normal life and comfort zones. In a world where so many things are pre-defined, the Polarity Paradox teaches us the consumers enjoy these extreme examples of service delivery, even if they are not always meant to be pleasant at first sight. It is a risky strategy but the surprise and unexpected situation can trigger feelings of pleasure, fun and relief, as it is indeed not the grey average middle ground, but a refreshingly black and thrilling experience of something different.

Conclusion

Apparently we do not always only try to see beautiful things or find happiness when we travel or spend our leisure time. The variety of the previous examples illustrate the emerging needs to look for the extraordinary and the more extremes in our fascination with death, thrill seeking, escapism or even pain as ways to better cope with our contemporary secular and often complex lives. In a society of abundance, the Polarity Paradox mindset can then indeed simplify choices yet leave the mark needed for consumers to feel alive and to build their identities in a way that fits a specific time, place and setting.

We thereby argue that in addition to developing new concepts that address the “what-do-we-develop-for-whom”, hybrid tourists and extreme choices demand a new approach to

market segmentation. Successful hospitality and tourism organisations understand that predicting any consumer behaviour based on demographic variables it becomes very difficult as hybrid tourists continue to explore a range of very different types of travel experiences. Understanding the momentum and the context when tourists chooses for what type of experience becomes much more important. This can be seen as part of the on-going shift from an experience economy to a “context economy” where “the context in which the technology and the offering provide what people want” (Boswijk *et al.*, 2012). So how can hospitality and tourism companies build the new kind of transformational experiences that create and capture value in the context of this Polarity Paradox, addressing the need for “dark experiences or transformations” in particular?

We believe that new travel and hospitality experiences must be less about what other players in the market are doing and more about how to trigger reactions and emotions in novel ways. In fact, almost any emotion and reaction is better than bland, “grey” and emotionless offerings as “moderation is no longer the modus operandi” (The Future Laboratory, 2014). In the previous paragraphs we gave examples of how this can be done in a darker or more thrilling way. It is all about originality and understanding that whether it is a positive or a negative emotion matters less in a market where consumers want to be “shaken up”, surprised, taught something or seek a deeper meaning. In doing so, The Future Laboratory (2014) urge companies to “enable all and nothing” and thereby “play with utopia and dystopia”. They go on by stating that balancing the thrill and the chill can indeed create more meaningful and transcending experiences.

This means for tourism and hospitality operators that not every experience has to be all white, chilling and fairy tale like. Actually if a thrilling element is included in the overall experience, guests might even enjoy it more. As seen above, this can take many forms; from experiencing a very different type of service delivery, to engaging in local activities different from normal standards at home, to visiting areas and sites that bring the current reality into a new daylight. The dimension and to which level of extremeness this should be taken is, as mentioned before, depending on situational and contextual factors.

As grey is not included in this colour pallet of experiences, we believe that by using interactive technologies, this can best be co-created with consumers to understand which fifty shades of white or which fifty shades of black they find most appealing in a particular setting and at a specific time.

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