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Analyzing the consumer value dimensions of rural tourism

Ph.D. dissertation

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Contents

1. Antecedents and subject of research	3
2. Applied methodologies	5
3. Achievements of the research	8
3.1 The first phase of the research: Creation of indicators.....	8
3.2 The second phase of the research: Experts' research.....	9
3.3 Third phase of the research: Large sample questionnaire research	9
3.4 Benefits and importance of the research	15
4. Main references.....	16
5. Publications in the topic	17

1. Antecedents and subject of research

In the beginning of the 3th millenary, the desire for experiences and intellectual challenges are increasing, parallel with the move of the consumers' behavior from the material values in the direction of the ethical and intellectual values. This is a reaction to the over-materialistic orientation of the society. In the so called "new economy" or "experience economy" the intellectual capabilities are the main values-creators instead of the hard materialistic factors, though the high quality level consumption is needed for the improvement of post-materialistic values. Complete industries are built on these values, e.g. the bio-food industry through the sport-equipment industry to the tourism. The consumer behavior is getting unpredictable and more complex, due to the wide scope of the available supply, as well as the quick decision-making, and the dematerialization of the consumption (Szabó – Hámori [2006]).

The values, and the experience –requirements of the tourists have been changed as well, and there is a growing need for standardized but individual travel services. There are a growing number of those, who realize that a crowded, polluted city or beach can not assure totally relaxing holidays in the overstressed world, and seek for the silence, romantics, cultural and natural values of the rural regions.

The analysis of the rural regions and villages in tourism has been in the focal point of my interest since my Master studies, and I wrote my MA dissertation on the supply-side success factors of the village touristic destinations. During my PhD studies, I presented my points of views on several conferences on the following factors of village tourism: the economic and social role of village tourism, competitiveness and quality of life issues, and the question of why rural tourism is needed in the touristic market, and what kind of values can it create for the travelers. In my opinion rural tourism can be a freshening area of tourism, which can assure that our country, cultural values, and traditions can be better known by the national, international tourists, as well as the appreciation of the sustainability and natural values, and the satisfaction of the need for authenticity, finally an economic growth.

The rural tourism is getting to the focus of the interest in academic as well as the market life, though because of its lower economic profitability, it does not get enough attention in the governmental policies, however it should be analyzed because of its high impact on the social and natural areas, job-creation. The relevance of the topic can be seen in the fact, that the UNWTO organize more and more events on the topic of rural tourism.

There are estimations available about the relevancy of the rural tourism: according to the UNWTO the 3% of the travelers travelled with the motivation of rural tourism in the world, though its dynamic growth of 6% (over the average of world tourism) should be highlighted (Mintel [2007]). According to the up-to-date

estimation of the EuroGites [2011] (the European organization of rural tourism), there are over 400.000 rural services supplier, with a 3,6 million bed places in Europe.

In my dissertation I focus on the analysis of the dimensions of consumers' values in the area of rural tourism in Hungary, with a main approach of value-creation as well as competitiveness, which focus is an under-researched topic in Hungary, and has come to the focus of international academic literature only in the near past. That is why the research of the topic serve a great challenge for me (among the satisfaction of my curiosity), but the support of my supervisors, teachers and colleagues keep up my motivation of continuing the research.

The main aim of my research is to realize a research built on the approaches of value-creation and competitiveness, and the international research results, can explore and rank the dimensions, components of the consumers' (tourists') values in rural tourism. That is why my main research question is in the following:

“What is value for tourists in rural tourism?”

The research question is complex, and should be divided into sub-questions, for the analysis of what I used qualitative as well as quantitative methods and what are in the followings:

- *Q1. Who make up the demand of rural tourism?*

The identification of the segments is important regarding the value-analysis, as the supply should be formed to meet the needs of the different demand segments. Further on, I find it important to see whether there is a change according to the trends (ETC [2006]) in the target-groups of rural tourism.

- *Q2. What is the motivation of tourists and what does rural tourism mean for them?*

Among the demographic characteristics, I focus on the identification of the main motivation of tourists, as I have that viewpoint, that it can give back, what rural tourism means for the tourists, and it can be a good starting point of identifying the consumers' values.

- *Q3. What partial factors, indicators make up consumer value in rural tourism?*

During my research it was my aim to explore the indicators based on the literature review and primary research, so as to sophisticate and finally test them.

- *Q4. Which value dimensions make up consumer values in rural tourism, and among them, to what extend is the value of experience emphasised?*

The experience-, value-oriented trends of the consumption nowadays motivated me to analyze, that how these elements can be identified in the rural tourism, what kind of forms, dimensions, value-elements are more / less important.

I think that the research has a relevancy, and usefulness from academic as well practical point of view. Regarding the academic point of view, the research of the consumers' value in rural tourism will stop-gap in the tourism management literature, while from practical viewpoint, based on the results of the research, the product-development, and marketing-communication strategy can be more punctually planned.

2. Applied methodologies

The objective of the quantitative research based on qualitative baseline is to explore and describe the dimensions of consumers' value. During my qualitative research through a small-sample consumers' research, I added newer dimensions and indicators to those coming from the literature review, and then checked, and sophisticated this indicator-list through an expert-analysis so as to improve the validity of the research. The next step was to realize a quantitative research, with the objective to interpret and analyze the consumers' values based on the indicators.

The exploratory analysis is typical, when the researcher start to analyze new phenomenon, new interest-area. This kind of research has the value of supporting the better understanding, and assure baseline for further researches. The descriptive research is used to describe and measure the different characteristics of the given population (Babbie [2000]). While at the research serving for exploration and measurement, the usage of scale-creation technics can be seen as successful (Kim et al. [2010], Jamal et al. [2011]).

My research can be divided into the following three parts:

1. Indicator-creation

The methods of pre-examining the indicators, based on identifying the motivations are accepted, and found useful in the area of rural tourism. The need for this can be explained by that fact that the value-perception of the tourists, as well as the personality and the motivation can be changed during the research at different time, different destination. There are two basic cases of the indicator-creation: firstly the secondary research in the literature, secondly the list found in the literature can be sophisticated by an individual or group-research based consciously selected sample (Jamal et al. [2011], Kim et al. [2010]).

In my research, I created the indicator-list based on the results of Jamal et al. [2011] (20 indicators), Kim et al. [2010] (24 indicators), Komppula [2005] (16 indicators), Pesonen et al. [2011] (31 indicators), and the Hungarian rural tourism characteristics (Szabó [2006]).

Further on, I found it important to sophisticate the list with the help of those Hungarian tourists, who were several times at rural touristic vacation so as to improve the validity of my research, as those returning can have deeper experiences to describe the values and the experiences for them. That is why I made a small-sample research of 30 people on group showing heterogeneity regarding sex, age, education level, place of living, family state, with a personal, open-ended interview. The sampling was made by volunteering application of then interviewees, with a cautious care of assuring the heterogeneity of the sample, based on announcements calling for participation on the Facebook page of the Association of Hungarian Rural and Agrotourism and Tourism Competence Center of Corvinus University of Budapest.

I have chosen semi-qualitative critical case method for methodology of my research. The method is widely used in the literature of the service management and marketing, as it is a great way to observe the consumers' consumption, and satisfaction (Flanagan [1954]). The method is based on consumers' narratives, during what the consumers share the experiences about the services and the service provider (Kim et al. [2010]). It can be said that the critical cases represent those factors, which drives the change of the behavior and the value-creation. During my research, I asked my respondents to name the followings: 3 factors, meaning good and 3 factors meaning bad experiences, because of what would they, or would not recommend the service to the others, and what and why meant experience for them. Based on this primary research, and the list collected from the literature, I made my own list, what I tested through experts' interviews.

The methodology can be reasoned by the followings:

- In the rural tourism such a research of the consumers' values and the experiences have not been carried out, so the area have not been explored. The starting point of the research is given by gathering secondary and primary research. As the research area has not reached its saturation point that is why the qualitative consumers' research is reasoned (Malhotra [2008]).
- The international researches, what my research is based on, also suggested making qualitative research on a small sample, before quantitative research, what is not definitely reliable but a good additional method of a secondary research, and base of experts' interview and questionnaires.
- The critical case method assure an opened possibility for the consumers to express their answers based on their experiences and to support the exploring of the really destination-specific (national) characters with identifying the best and the worth consumers' experiences (Gremler [2004]).
- This method inductive nature does not need hypothesis creation, and it can be well used in exploratory researches, and support to know more about the areas without enough investigation (Edvardsson [1992]).

- With content analysis the critical case method is a good baseline and complementarity of further empirical researches (e.g. questionnaires) (Babbie [2000], Gremler [2004]).

2. *Experts' research*

To raise the content-validity of the complex list of indicators, I sophisticated it due to independent experts' interview (N=7).

The experts' interviews are reasoned in all those cases, when it is needed to define the problem more punctually, which helps the researcher for a better understanding. Though the sample is small, but it is focused on asking appreciated, experienced experts, who are able to drive the research to a suitable way (Malhotra [2008]).

I found the experts' interview reasoned, as there has been no research realized concerning the value-dimensions of rural tourism, and the adaption of the results of the international research is limited. To raise the validity of the research, I created the relevant indicators of the value-dimensions due to the opinions of those experts, who have the greatest overview to the topic in Hungary from academic, as well as from practical point of view.

3. *Quantitative research with questionnaire based on large sample*

The list of indicators accepted as the results of the experts' research was measured and dimensioned by a *quantitative research with questionnaire based on large sample*. The questionnaire is the best available method for such a research, which describes a great basic population through direct observation. Because of the further characteristics, low validity, high reliability, that is why great emphasis should be taken over the creation, the order of the questions. Though the results can be generalized well, but attention should be laid on avoiding the over-generalization. That is why the analysis of critical cases should be realized (Babbie [2000]).

During my quantitative research, I made a double-type questionnaire research. On the one hand, based on the co-operation of Association of Hungarian Rural and Agrotourism, I managed to get into contact with those village service suppliers in the different region of the country, whose touristic performance is outstanding from demand as well as supply-side. My questionnaire – based on judgmental nonprobability sampling – was sent to 25 enterprises, through whom, with a simple, random sampling 132 valid questionnaires were reached on site.

My online retrospective research (N=220) was carried out in the circle of the tourists earlier participated, having experience in rural tourism. The applicants of the research was reached through the advertisement published on the websites, facebook sites, and newsletter of the different expert-magazines, universities, colleges, and that of the Tourism Competence Center of Corvinus University Budapest, and the Association of Hungarian Rural and Agrotourism. The aim of the double questionnaire was to analyze the differences among the sampling on the scene, and that of the retrospective research.

Regarding the content of the questionnaire, the following themes of the questions can be highlighted:

- the motivation of the tourists,
- the travel decision,
- the interpretation of rural tourism,
- the evaluation of the supply,
- the factors meaning values for the tourists,
- the content of experience,
- demographic and psychographics questions of the answerers.

The questionnaire contained questions measured on nominal, ordinal, and semantic differential and Liker scale. In the aim of increasing the validity test-questioning was carried out, and the result of that, some questions and answer-alternatives were changed. The research was carried out in the time-interval of August and September, 2012.

During my research I used multiple methods based on the principles of triangulation and the research possibilities of the theme. This research strategy is based on that approach, that the quantitative, and qualitative methods used on a parallel way can complement each other, and can serve the better understanding of the analyzed topic.

3. Achievements of the research

3.1 The first phase of the research: Creation of indicators

The first phase of the survey was focused on the exploring of the indicators helping the analysis of the research problem. As in Hungary there was a lack of analysis of the consumers' values in rural tourism, the survey was based on international researches (Jamal et al. [2011], Komppula [2005], Pesonen et al. [2011], Kim et al. [2010]), what were specified by the area-specific factors, and was complemented by further indicators identified at the semi-qualitative consumers' research, with the following results:

- In Hungary the factors meaning values for the consumers are not different than that of showed by the international researches.
- The values and experience dimensions do not show too many differences; only the consciousness or unconsciousness of the answerers can be realized, regarding differentiating the two.
- Comparing the results with that of the indicators of the experiences of the international research, it can be said, that the factors hedonism, the innovation, the refreshment could not be realized, while there was a higher frequency of mentioning the factors connected to *aesthetics, rural culture, attraction and personal interactions*.

3.2 The second phase of the research: Experts' research

To raise the validity of the research, the relevancy of the explored indicators was analyzed through experts research, by those Hungarian experts experienced in the academic life (researchers, lecturers) on one hand, on the other hand in practice (qualifiers, mayors, representatives of Association of Hungarian Rural and Agrotourism).

The overview of the literature and the semi-qualitative research 44 values indicators important in rural tourism were identified, and tested later in the large sample questionnaire research.

3.3 Third phase of the research: Large sample questionnaire research

3.3.1 The hypotheses of the research

The hypotheses of the large sample size research was based on the first two phases (containing quantitative as well as qualitative methods), as this way was considered as correct from methodology point of view. My hypotheses based on earlier findings are the followings connected to my research questions and with respect to the sampling in the research period (summer of 2012).

Q1. Who make up the demand of rural tourism?

H1. Among the consumers of rural tourism, middle-class urban intellectuals represent a larger proportion than elderly or young age groups.

H2. Rural tourism is mainly favoured by guests who respect traditional values and are materialistic.

Q2. What is the motivation of tourists and what does rural tourism mean for them?

H3. Among tourists' motivations, learning about the cultural values of country life is more highly rated than natural values.

Q3. What partial factors, indicators make up consumer value in rural tourism?

H4. The authenticity of the accommodation and the surroundings of the house are of outstanding importance for tourists.

H5. The peaceful and orderly environment of the accommodation and the destination is of outstanding importance for tourists.

H6. Country lifestyle and cultural elements to be experienced as part of the local community are of outstanding importance for tourists.

H7. The competences and helpfulness of the host is of outstanding importance for tourists.

Q4. Which value dimensions make up consumer values in rural tourism, and among them, to what extent is the value of experience emphasised?

H8. For the consumers of rural tourism, affective value dimensions represent a greater value than functional value dimensions.

3.3.2 The results of the large sample size research

During my empirical analysis I used descriptive statistics (e.g. frequency analysis mostly), Importance-Performance Analysis, and multivariate data analysis methods, cross-tabs analysis and factor analysis with the help of SPSS 18 statistical program.

The results of the empirical survey made on site (N=132) and those researched online (N=220) were firstly compared through the main dimensions of the research, so as to make a conclusion for the possibilities of comparison. It was also important to analyze, whether the content of the sample, as well as the results are different due to the way (on-site or online) of the research. These comparisons strengthen that proposal, that not the content or the preferences showed by the samples gained on different ways show differences, that is why the full-analysis was made on the total sample of 352 valid answers.

1. The characteristics of the sample

In the sample of 352 answerers the rate of males and females were 28,4% and 71,6%. Regarding the age, the main segment of the rural tourism is in the middle age range of 36-49 year old (33,5%), and the young adults (29,3%). The demand of the young and the senior segment is small. The rural tourism is not so attractive in

the population living in villages, as the rest of the sample were from towns (79%), among whom, the 32,4% from Budapest, what can be explained by the factor, that for those living in village the rural form of life is not so attractive. Regarding the education, the dominance of the highly educated segment can be realized (55,1%).

Consequences

H1. Among the consumers of rural tourism, middle-class urban intellectuals represent a larger proportion than elderly or young age groups. – I accept it.

For the rural tourists, it is important to find a cheap accommodation (88%) which can be drawn back to the feature of the supply. The 35,8% of the answerers evaluated himself as economical, than wasteful (15,8%). In contradiction, the answerers prefer more the higher category of accommodation (3 sunflowers, 21,3% of the answerers, or 4 sunflowers, 29,5%), if the choice of categorized accommodation is the point. The money-grubbing attitude is parallel with personality with traditional values preferences. Only the 25,6% evaluated himself as a person of modern thinking, while for 32,4% the traditional values were important, and the rest (42%) is in the middle.

Consequences

H2. Rural tourism is mainly favoured by guests who respect traditional values and are materialistic. - I partially accept it, since while the dominance of guests having money-grubbing attitude was verified, while the proportion of consumers who like traditional values was not significant.

2. The interpretation of the rural tourism – Based on consumers' opinions

The main question is whether there is a need for the „inner” (traditional) and „outside” (modern) circle of the rural tourism? The results show that in Hungary the rural tourism is chosen because of the complex experience of the countryside (27,8%). Though there is circle for whom the relaxation (26,1%) is the main motivation.

In the aim of indentifying the groups, cross tabulation analysis were made. It can be said that regarding the most important motivations (culture, nature, sport, hospitality) Northern Hungary is the most popular, but for those travelling with nostalgic motivation choose South-Plain. Those travelling with kids, and pairs travel with the main motivation of the complex experience of the rural areas (29,2%/31,2%), while for the young people (travelling in companies of friends) the calm relaxation is the main objective (30,3%). The cheap accommodation is not issue in any segments.

Finally it can be concluded that the tourists favour the natural values, and the connected programs, while the wider sightseeing sites of the area is the second, and the experience of the rural life is the third on the motivation-list.

Consequently, it can be stated that majority of domestic countryside tourism consumers travel for a complex experience of rural lifestyle, culture, nature and authentic programs. The most important from all factors are exploration of natural values, and relaxation on fresh air and in nice environment. So, the elements of the constructed rural tourism theoretical model are swapped, and nature-centric interest is moved to the inner, essential level, while rural lifestyle, culture and heritage are placed to supporting services level.

Consequences

H3. Among the motivations of the tourists the cultural values of the rural life is in the first place followed by the natural values. – I reject it.

3. Indicators of consumer value in rural tourism

The third group of research results includes results from indicators' test. My goal was to verify the relevance of value indicator list of Hungarian rural tourism based on secondary and semi-qualitative sources. Although in the centre of my research interest was the degree of importance of these indicators, I examined service performance satisfaction, too. The practical relevance of exploration of importance – performance differences is really high, because it provides a valuable feedback for the supply side, so its products and services might be better matched with the consumer demand (Martilla – James [1977]). For analyzing I used IPA framework (Importance-Performance Analysis). The pre-identified indicators were divided into two parts and I examined their importance in relation of physical environment and human interactions. The consumers graded on a 4 assessment scale, on the one hand, the individual importance of each indicator, on the other hand, the satisfaction with the presence of each indicator.

The analysis results show that while the appearance of the accommodation, the rustic style, and environmental fit are important for consumers, their experience shows that this is not always achieved, and consumer dissatisfaction arose. The importance values for settlement characteristics were also higher. There are also interesting results about the pets and farm animals around the house. Although tourists showed medium interest about them, yet the difference in satisfaction with supply is higher in this case. Higher values showed up regarding accommodation facilities and cleanliness, which in our case means that customer satisfaction was higher than it represented a priority for them.

The IPA approach showed that the rural tourism providers are well suited for the consumer needs based on the critical and fundamental indicators chosen by their guests, which means that the businesses have

competitive advantage. The biggest importance and satisfaction factor belonged to the accommodation's cleanliness, while the lowest belonged to the presence of animals.

Consequences

H4. The authenticity of the accommodation and the surroundings of the house are of outstanding importance for tourists. – I reject it.

H5. The peaceful and orderly environment of the accommodation and the destination is of outstanding importance for tourists. – I accept it.

By examination of consumer satisfaction related to human factors and its importance, we see that the importance-performance evaluation is much more balanced. Tourists found the biggest deficiency in the host's ability to provide information about the surrounding tourist attractions and activities. Indication of local programs and activities on the host's court also proved to be crucial, but despite the demand only few hosts provide it. Further aspect of dissatisfaction is the interaction with other guests and locals, tourists see them less tolerant and friendly.

Among indicators with outstanding importance belong: host's personality, attitude and preparedness, his respect towards other guests, online availability, and conditions suitable for a family holiday.

The examined human factors proved it, too, that service providers are able to meet consumers' high expectations. Overall, it can be observed that *consumers are more critical about human factors by assigning higher priority values to these indicators, as they did in case of physical environment (functional elements).*

Consequences

H6. Country lifestyle and cultural elements to be experienced as part of the local community are of outstanding importance for tourists. – I reject it.

H7. The competences and helpfulness of the host is of outstanding importance for tourists. – I accept it.

4. Dimensions of consumer value in rural tourism

After exploration and relevancy test of the value indicators, I have concluded that all the indicators are characterized with high importance and high satisfaction IPA values, although there are some important (value of 2.5 and above) and very important (value of 3.5 and above) indicators. I have found their further aggregated testing reasonable. Dimensioning of these factors and determining the priority order of dimensions were in centre of my research interest. For analysis I used a multivariate statistical method, factor

analysis with Varimax rotation. The method serves for data compression and data structure exploration, and it merges directly not observable number of initial indicators into a factor variable (Sajtos - Mitev [2007]). I have carried out a test of suitability of the indicators for factor analysis partly with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) - criterion, on the other hand, with the variance-based method. In the former case, the index was above 0.8, the latter showed above 60% value, so the application of factor analysis could be judged as very good.

After the factor analysis of the indicators of physical state of the environment and human interactions, I carried out the factors ranking by importance based on the rating scale (1 = not important - 4 = very important) (Fig.1). I found that for the guests the most important indicator groups are: the *cleanly and orderly village*, follower of the *stylish and attractive design of accommodation*, as well as a third indicator group, the *host personality, preparedness and readiness of every* .

Figure 1: Factors in order of importance

Ranking	Value factors		Number of indicators	Mean	Dimensions
1.	Orderly and clean village	F8	2 indicators	3,63	Functional (Quality)
2.	Attractive accommodation	F2	3 indicators	3,51	Functional (Quality)
3.	Host attitude	F1	7 indicators	3,49	Functional (Quality)
4.	Calm recreation	F6	3 indicators	3,42	Affective (Experience - recreation)
5.	Clean, well-equipped accommodation	F3	5 indicators	3,39	Functional (Quality)
6.	Online accessibility	F9	2 indicators	3,29	Functional (Quality)
7.	Cheap accommodation close to attractions	F10	2 indicators	3,17	Functional (Price)
8.	Interactions, activities at accommodation	F4	4 indicators	2,98	Affective (Experience – human interactions)
9.	Authentic accommodation	F5	2 indicators	2,89	Affective (Experience - milieu)
10.	Presence of animals	F7	2 indicators	2,64	Affective (Experience - milieu)

The analysis also found that for rural tourists indicators related to the physical state of the environment are more important than the human indicators, in addition, we can see that the rural tourism 'modernization' phenomenon is also valid for the test consumers, which is unfortunately because the traditional characteristics of the village, the authentic milieu and the presence of pets and farm animals could be displaced from tourism supply.

During my research I discovered the guests' experiences relation to rural tourism. The analysis was performed by factor analysis, and based on this method the following factors have been established:

- Pleasantly relaxing

- Hospitality and welcoming atmosphere
- Entertaining
- Well-priced
- Contributes to personal development
- Familiarize with nature and local culture
- Ensure the “flow” experience

I ranked the resulting factors based on the evaluation of the guests. The most respondents – based on their rural tourism experience – mainly agreed that rural tourism is a *pleasantly relaxing, well-priced and entertaining* holiday for them. However the "flow" experiences factor moved to the end of the ranking, from which it can be concluded that rural tourism is less able to provide experience-chain, the opportunities for guests to obtain continuous experiences.

Based on the results of factor analysis and ranking related to value indicators and tourist experiences we can conclude, that for the tourists the functional (quality, price) value dimensions are more important than affective (experience - recreation, human interactions, milieu) dimensions.

Consequences

H8. For the consumers of rural tourism, affective value dimensions represent a greater value than functional value dimensions. – I reject it.

3.4 Benefits and importance of the research

The empirical research and the literature review have added value to the interpretation of the consumer value conception in rural tourism in the following areas:

In the literature review:

- Summarizing the definitions and the theoretical approaches of rural tourism.
- Presenting the theoretical approaches of consumer value, highlighting and describing in details the most important approaches regarding the tourism management.
- Summarizing and evaluating the most relevant theories of the approaches of tourism experience.
- Summarizing and evaluating the most relevant international and Hungarian researches, and their results.

In the empirical research:

- Characterizing rural tourism consumers and exploring their motivations.

- Exploring the content elements of rural tourism and interpreting its Hungarian definition from consumers' point of view.
- Exploring, classifying and ranking the value drivers for guests during the stay.
- Finding the differences between the expected and provided tourism services.
- Creating the consumer value dimensions in rural tourism.

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3. Other publications

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