

# IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN TOURISM

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## ABSTRACT

Tourism as a social phenomenon may be defined as a special form of indirect contact between two societies which may be comprehended according to the following scheme: communicator–message–receiver. Therefore, the primary focus of tourism is the communication between tourists and the host destination. Tourism is a result of the interaction of people from emissive countries with the receptive countries. Establishment of contacts with people from different countries and cultures in contrast to the anonymity and alienation encountered in everyday life turns out to be a very important motivation for travelling. The scope of this article is to highlight the importance of the social interaction and effective intercultural communication in tourism encounters. Although tourism encounters may result in mutual appreciation, understanding, respect, tolerance and the overall improvement of the social interactions between individuals, it also represents a potential minefield full of difficulties, which occur mainly due to cultural differences in communication and rules of social behaviour.

*Keywords: intercultural, communication, interaction, cultural differences, host, guest, contact, culture.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Tourism is primarily a social activity including a temporary migration of people to places outside their everyday surroundings and including pleasure deriving from the participation in various leisure activities, facilities and services provided to cater to tourists' needs. The study of tourism is the study of people away from their usual surroundings, the study of establishments which have been set up in response to the needs of tourists and of the impacts that they have on the economic, environmental and socio-cultural wellbeing of host destinations [1].

Until recently, participation in tourism was limited to the chosen few who could afford time and money to travel to other destinations. Contemporary tourism has evolved as a consequence of various benefits enjoyed by laborers as a part of social welfare policies, that is, people's right to take leave for paid annual vacation. The development of the means of transportation, the development of accommodation facilities and the growth of package tour holidays have all contributed to the rise of tourism, that is the travel for pleasure. People's choices of travel and holidays mainly depend on their standard of living, their profession, the level of their education and their disposable income. Today every seventh person in the world is a tourist. Tourism has ceased to be the privilege of a few and has become one of the most popular activities of people in their leisure time.

Tourism is of major economic and social importance. With a world growth rate in international visitors' arrivals of approximately 5% per annum, tourism has become one of the fastest growing economic activities globally and it has proven to be resilient to political and natural crises and disasters, recovering quite rapidly once these calamities have passed [2]. It is the most important export industry and earner of foreign exchange in many countries all over the world. Tourism has triggered employment, investment and entrepreneurial activity, improved the economic structure and made positive contribution to the balance of payment in many countries throughout the world. However, the unprecedented growth of tourism has given rise to a multitude of economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts which are concentrated in destination areas. In the past, tourism was encouraged for its



economic benefits with little consideration for the consequences on host communities and their environments. For this article's sake the economic and environmental consequences on the host destination shall be purposefully put aside and sociocultural effects brought to the fore.

Sociocultural impacts appear as a result of particular types of social relationships that occur between tourists and hosts as a result of their mutual contact. In this respect tourism may be defined as a special form of indirect contact between two societies which may be comprehended according to the following scheme: communicator–message–receiver [3]. Tourism is based on the interaction and communication of people from emissive countries with people from receptive countries. This interaction offers new possibilities of encountering various people and encouraging the exchange of values and experiences between individuals originating from different cultural backgrounds. Tourism brings people together, making them more tolerant and more open for other cultures and in this way, it has become the promotor not only of worldwide development but worldwide peace as well [4].

The scope of this article is to highlight the importance of the social interaction and the effective intercultural communication in tourism encounters. Although tourism encounters may result in mutual appreciation, understanding, respect, tolerance and the overall improvement of the social interactions between individuals, it also represents a potential minefield full of difficulties, which occur mainly due to cultural differences in communication and rules of social behaviour.

## 2 TOURIST–HOST ENCOUNTERS

According to Wall and Mathieson [5] the most relevant categories in the research on the social and cultural impacts of tourism include: the tourist and their motivations, attitudes and expectations as well as their purchasing decisions; the host, that is the inhabitants of a destination often employed in tourism industry and their provision of labour services and the tourist–host relationship focussing on the nature and contacts between hosts and guests and the consequences of these contacts.

The focus of this article is on the latter two topics and it aims to highlight the importance of the social interaction and effective intercultural communication in tourism encounters contributing to the achievement of the goals set out by World Tourism Organisation in Manilla Declaration that tourism “stands out as a positive and ever-present factor in promoting mutual knowledge and understanding and as a basis for reaching a greater level of respect and confidence among all the peoples of the world” [6].

The most common social and cultural consequences of the tourism development are reflected in the changes of the quality of life of a local destination and its values, norms and traditions, individual behaviours and lifestyles, traditional ceremonies, community organisation and social interaction. Sociocultural impacts spring up from the social interaction and contact between tourist and hosts, which occur in three main contexts: during the purchase of a good or service from the host, when tourists and hosts coexist side by side, for example, on a beach or at a pub and when two parties come face to face with the aim of exchanging information and ideas [7]. The first two kinds of contact are more common and related to mass tourism and by character rather superficial and short. The third type of contact requires more effort and a deeper involvement with the other party and it is normally regarded as indispensable tool for increasing international understanding in tourism [8].

Despite the fact that the analysis of tourist–host encounters is a difficult task, it is possible to make some general observations about the nature of these encounters. It is logical to assume that the greater the economic, cultural and social differences between a tourist and a member of the destination community, the less balanced will be the relationship between



them. In most tourist–host encounters the tourist is on vacation, easy-going, enjoying their leisure and the experience of being in a different place, whereas the host is relatively stationary and often employed in the tourism industry in which case they spend a significant amount of time catering to the needs and desires of tourists [9]. Under such conditions, the contact is transitory in nature, it suffers from temporal and spatial constraints, it lacks spontaneity and the relationship is unequal and unbalanced, providing little opportunity for deeper interaction [10]. Furthermore, tourism is usually constrained by certain season of the year limiting tourists' length of stay. Tourist–host contact may also be limited by the location and span of tourist-related services often concentrated in a small number of complexes, which are commonly referred to as tourist zones or ghettos, where tourists are isolated and discouraged to mingle with the local population reducing the possibility of the two parties to come into deeper contact. Tourists tend to buy into pre-packaged tours and pre-planned attractions and thus invest into convenient, comfortable and risk-free tourist experiences, provided at the expense of less frequent and spontaneous contacts with their hosts. Relationships which were once motivated by traditional hospitality may become commercialised and reduced to a series of cash-generating activities. Material inequality between tourists and their hosts often results in a tendency for the tourist–host relationship to be unequal and unbalanced in character. That is, local people may feel intimidated and inferior when faced with tourists' obvious wealth and may feel offended or frustrated in comparison to tourists who are on holiday and even develop a hostile stance towards incoming tourists [11].

There are also other factors which promote or impede friendly host–guest relationship and contacts, such as the size of tourism development, types of tourists and tourism, the degree of tourists' ghettoization, the length of stay, residents' involvement in tourism development, language and communications, etc.

Social interaction includes communication among people on a daily basis. The main goal of social interaction is to come in contact with other people in various situations, participate in conversation, exchange attitudes and views, learn about each other's social and cultural background, develop relationships, etc. [12]. Successful social interaction may contribute to the eviction of social and national prejudices and the promotion of better intercultural understanding, social inclusion and positive social change. It is of great importance for the promotion and contribution of understanding between tourists and their hosts.

### 3 INTERCULTURAL SOCIAL INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION IN TOURISM

It is impossible to be a tourist in isolation and it is inevitable that tourists come into contact with other people. As already mentioned these may be either other tourists or members of local communities or more likely it will be a combination of the former and the latter taking place in planes and buses, hotels and restaurants, tourist attractions, shopping centres or nightclubs. Hosts can be local inhabitants, investors, developers and those who are employed in tourism industry such as hoteliers, front desk employees, waiters, shop assistants, tour guides taxi and bus drivers, etc. Therefore, social interaction in tourism can occur between tourist and other tourists, tourists and service providers, tourists and local residents, tourists and workers in the tourism industry and tourists and investors [13].

The opportunities for successful mutual interaction depend on the personal traits of tourists and hosts alike, such as tolerance, enthusiasm, generosity, welcoming attitudes, willingness to listen, mutual respect and tolerance, whereas resentment, disrespect, lack of appreciation for each other's cultural background, arrogance, and sense of superiority diminish the chances for interaction. In addition, motivation plays a significant role in the



achievement of a proper social interaction between tourists and hosts. In most cases tourists meet hosts with a lack of proper motivation to do it limiting themselves to unavoidable conversations with fellow tourists or most often with service providers in various tourist facilities or they may like to get involved in conversation but with no further commitments. As a rule, only a few tourists show the willingness to engage in deeper and longer conversations with hosts in order to get acquainted with each other, share personal experiences and develop long-term friendships. In this process social interaction is influenced by cultural values, which play a dominant role as well [14].

Participants' interests and their willingness to be involved in deeper and more demanding social interaction is determined by cultural values, which stimulate the development of particular attitudes towards people [15]. The so-called cultural distance [16], that is cultural similarity or cultural gap between guests and hosts is a very important factor which defines the intensity of their mutual interaction in tourism. The bigger the gap the more unbalanced and less intense interaction between guests and hosts is likely to emerge and vice versa the smaller the cultural gap the more balanced and more in-depth interaction is likely to develop.

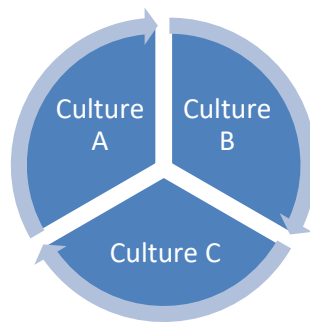


Figure 1: The cross-cultural interaction model [12].

However, cultural disparity can also play an important role in attracting people to each other and result in dismantling of the social and cultural obstacles [17]. Such interaction involves individuals with different cultural backgrounds in regard to their values, communication styles, expectations, perceptions, rules of behaviour and the way they understand the world. They carry different cultural conventions and norms, speak different languages and use different symbols of communication. Their interaction is intercultural because every person involved in the interaction is different in regard to their cultural background. Therefore, the interaction is least intercultural if the involved individuals are culturally very similar to one another and most intercultural if the involved individuals are culturally significantly different from one another [18]. Such a face to face communication and interaction between participants with different cultural backgrounds may result in both positive and negative outcomes. Mutual affection, understanding, respect tolerance, development of positive attitudes and reduction of ethnic prejudices, stereotypes and racial tension, improvement of the social interactions between individuals, cultural enrichment and learning about others are most commonly singled out as positive outcomes contributing to the development of pride in the local culture on the part of the local residents and a possible development of personal relationships and long-term friendships [19]. On the other hand, in destinations (usually in less developed countries) where cultural differences between tourists

and hosts are more pronounced than elsewhere the negative outcomes may be greater varying from exploitation, mistrust, stereotyping and unmeaningful conversation to lack of respect for local values and lifestyles on the part of tourists who are perceived as aggressive and insensitive by the locals [20].

Mass tourism, which is the dominant form of tourism in the world, offers only minor opportunities to learn about the social, cultural, and political conditions of the destinations which are visited. Instead of deconstructing various local residents' established misperceptions and stereotypes about incoming tourists, tourism perpetuates them and often creates new prejudices, stereotypes, misunderstandings, hostility, tensions and conflict of values and communication problems [21].

Language is an important tool of communication and it constitutes a part of the social and cultural attributes of any population. Therefore, proper intercultural communication between tourist and their hosts may contribute to the promotion of versatile changes in local culture while maintaining and preserving local ethnic and cultural identity [22]. That is the reason why proper intercultural communication turns out to be of great importance to the development and advocacy of tolerance and understanding between tourists and their hosts.

#### 4 IMPROVING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN TOURISM

In situations when tourists and hosts are conscious of their differences and when they try their best to understand them and each other, the difficulties in social interaction may be avoided or minimized. People should be more approachable and prone to accept new ideas and, in this way, make a personal contribution towards successful intercultural communication. Adaptability, tolerance, respect for other peoples' viewpoints are crucial qualities for all those involved in the process of social interaction and communication in tourism. As it was pointed out hereinbefore, there is no tourist in isolation from other people whom he comes into contact with and who are potentially different from him. In order for the communication to be effective and fair and if all the involved want to benefit from their mutual interaction their diverse backgrounds must be acknowledged and respected [23].

Tourists and hosts will be ready to acquire new ways of interacting outside the already established patterns of behaviour only if they disregard and avoid stereotyping, ethnocentrism and even racism and only if they bear in mind that they are confronted with an individual and culture different from their own. It will help them to broaden their horizons and open up to new opportunities and fresh perspectives. In such a way they will also more readily admit that their own attitudes and points of view are not necessarily always the best ones, which will make them more attentive to other peoples' necessities and make them restrain their mouths to work faster than their brains. They will learn to listen more attentively, to show mutual appreciation and to analyse each other more properly becoming in this way more effective intercultural communicators.

#### 5 CONCLUSION

Tourism is a unique social and cultural event for the tourist and the host [24]. Tourism is a social process which brings together different people from all over the world in a form of social interaction. Although it is often regarded as a very important tool of economic growth and development, it is also an agent of social change and cultural change and a tool for the promotion of international peace and understanding. Naturally, tourism is rarely the only agent of social and cultural change. No society and culture are immune to progress and development in which process the rapid growth of population, dissemination of multinational corporations, urbanisation and industrialisation are the most important factors which have greater impact on the societies than tourism. The current conditions of globalisation, with



pronounced mobility and ephemerality allow for a much greater degree of mixing and interchange than it was possible in the past. Mobility is a prerequisite of tourism and it is indispensable for the social contact and interaction between people of different cultural backgrounds.

Travels are characterised by interaction and communication between tourist and other tourists, tourists and service providers, tourists and local residents, tourists and workers in the tourism industry and tourists and investors. Good communication doesn't only consist of conveying information but also of mutual understanding of communication participants' wishes and needs. If one of the parties takes a dominant stand and disregards the intercultural dialogue, communication may be difficult and it may have significant negative impacts for the development of tourism in a destination leading to the situation in which local residents may perceive tourists as intruders in their own culture. People's own cultural backgrounds, their attitudes, values, norms and beliefs determine the way in which they behave in the process of communication. Situations in communication which include individuals of different cultural backgrounds are called intercultural communication situations [25].

Intercultural communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process, in which people from different cultures create shared meanings [26]. It is never perfect and the difficulties in intercultural communication are caused by cultural differences in verbal and non-verbal signals, wrong interpretations, relationship patterns, communication gaps, conversation and interaction styles, the activation of negative stereotypes, cultural values and time and context situations. On the other hand, effective cross-cultural communication between tourist and their hosts may promote adaptive changes in local culture while preserving or revitalising local ethnic and cultural identity [27]. The achievement of this goal doesn't only require the acquisition of cultural knowledge or tolerance towards cultural differences. Successful intercultural communication requires from people to be accessible to new experiences and to be ready to accept their own and other's unique and different identities. In this way the interaction with other cultures may change peoples' innate perceptions and attitudes contributing to their own cultural and spiritual development. In conclusion it is therefore possible to point out that the proper intercultural communication is an inevitable prerequisite for the promotion of tolerance and understanding between tourists and their hosts in any destination.

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