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Tourism is a global socioeconomic phenomenon freely used as a generic term to cover a broad continuum of travel-related practices. These comprise tourist activities and experiences serviced by a global industry and host destinations. Although a fragmented industry, it has been traditionally served by large commercial and public sector organizations targeting entire marketplaces, such as specific countries or regions, with “one size fits all” experiences. This mass-market approach overlooks many customer needs in the provision of tourist products and services. This has led to a paradigm shift from mass markets to mass niches. Reflecting an increasingly fragmented industry, tourism businesses are adapting to more demanding specific interests that coalesce into coherent niche tourism markets. This entry discusses the rise in niche tourism, relevant products, and tourists who prefer this type of travel, as well as the marketing and challenges of niche tourism.

Fragmenting Tourism

Tourism can no longer be considered a single phenomenon where the tourist role is prearranged and produced by a dedicated tourism industry and consumed by an unreflexive, habitual population. Almost anyone, at almost any time, can now draw upon their imagination and cross borders to pursue consumerist postmodern aesthetic and intensified forms of individualized identities. The suggestion that the tourism industry is fragmenting is not new. However, social, economic, political, and cultural factors combined with innovations in information, communications, and transport technologies created new opportunities. Individuals can articulate complex affiliations, allegiances, belongings, attachments, and occasioned, intermittent, sustained encounters to multiple issues, pasts, events, people, places, cultures, and traditions. The search for new belonging does not, however, mean the end of mass markets and the systems and structures that organized much of mainstream tourist life. Neither does a fragmenting industry mean tourism has dissipated into shapeless crowds.

This shift away from mass tourism was more of a nudge with a snowball effect slowly developing as more individuals sought better control of their social and spatial positioning. The advent of technological forces, and the Internet in particular, has made many existing and emerging niches visible. This encourages new relationships between consumers, between consumers and small producers, and between producers. Slowly, but with increasing momentum, individuals are influencing the direction of their own travel and experiences. As individuals share similar habits, practical knowledge, assumptions, and routines, new external objective labels emerge. Sometimes, but not always, these are understood and used by niche tourists themselves. The specific nature of the skills, competencies, knowledge, and interactions behind such labels has become an interest for academic researchers searching behind macro-descriptions of tourism.

The term *niche* may be used when a particular social group occupies a space (e.g., Chinatown) or when a subculture (e.g., urban explorers, free-runners) occupies a specific niche within a larger community by appropriating specific places or infrastructure. As expressions of identity and belonging, these niches often encompass alternative spaces and sites of interaction that often work outside mainstream societal codes, regulatory oversight, civic law, or rules. They may even challenge the habitual and the routine. Over time, a niche

might become associated with the language of business and become a specialized market, since niches can be identified with distinct consumption patterns. Such niches may even sustain their own economies that exist under the radar of larger firms. As limited markets, they may be attractive for entrepreneurs or other small, flexible businesses.

When used in the context of tourism, the terms *niche tourism* and *niche tourist* are easily understood descriptors borrowed from the term *niche marketing* (which, in turn, appropriated the term from the discipline of ecology). As labels or categories, the terms *niche tourism* and *niche tourist* can generate debate. Scholars contest the conflicting claims to its origin. Entrepreneurs seek to extend it as a label to tourists who wish to distance themselves from it. From a demand viewpoint, however, niche tourists participate in special interest practices, experiences, products, and services that differentiate them. From a supply perspective, specific interests can coalesce into coherent markets or segments within segments. A business can exploit these by catering to the needs of specific markets through specialized, individualized tourism products.

Such niches may generalize and objectify those who participate in a particular practice or experience a similar product. Tourist product consumption, for example, is often misidentified as niche when, in fact, it may be more related to tourist motivation (e.g., sex tourism). Mike Robinson and Marina Novelli argue that usage of the term *niche* is not without its semantic problems but has a common-sense meaning favored by policy makers, statisticians, academic researchers, and marketing publications. However, seeking to classify particular interests as a form of mass or niche tourism misses the point. This is because there is always a necessity to understand tourists' unifying constructs, behaviors, and interests to subsequently develop products that suit those interests and motivate them to travel. These small, specialized sectors of tourism indicate a quantitative difference in comparison to mass tourism, rather than an opposite or counterpoint, since they appeal to select, smaller groups that geographically span the globe.

Niche Tourism Supply

From a tourism supply perspective, the product range has expanded as special interests have emerged from personal choices in the early 1980s. Although small practitioners have always adopted the notion of differentiation or specialization by catering to niche markets, the unique desires of many niches remained unseen to many large institutions, tourism authorities, and governments. Coming out of a global recession in the late 1980s and early 1990s, businesses became increasingly responsive to those with special interests. Not all individuals with special interests will fit into niche markets that can be selected, grouped, made profitable, regulated, and managed. Still, specific, innovative, and even radical tourism products can be profitably developed. Given the increased recognition of many transborder special interest groups, subcultures, and others with similar affiliations, ideas, tastes, and lifestyle; businesses and destinations may also develop products to emerging niches that have yet to take hold. Niche tourism supports and grows diversity of choice, since each innovation is according to a diverse interest, with many individuals willing to pay premium prices to have their desires met. This has led to niche tourists being characterized as wealthier, better educated, and more desirable consumers than those who consume a narrow range of high volume, low value, largely standardized products.

Classifying Niche Tourists and Tourism

According to Robinson and Novelli, there are no rules or criteria for what can or what cannot be referred to as niche tourism. Despite this considerable variation, they did highlight an

important division between macro-niches and micro-niches. A macro-niche is characterized as a relatively large market sectors, such as cultural tourism or sport tourism. A macro-niche is capable of being broken down as micro-niche activities and practices of a particular parent group, for example, cultural tourism may include genealogical tourism and faith tourism as micro-niches. As a niche tourism grows, it may fragment into smaller products and markets, such as faith tourism into pilgrimage and faith camps. Niche tourism can take a geographical or demographic approach, with location playing a key role in tourism consumption, as it is for wine-growing areas and their related activities in wine tourism. Niche tourism can also be a product-related approach when the presence of activities, attractions, settlements, food, and other amenities is emphasized. Finally, it can take a customer-related approach when tourist requirements and expectations are the focus of the niche tourism marketing approach. There are a wide variety of micro-niche tourism markets. These include niches based on hobbies, such as photographic tourism, genealogy tourism, adventure tourism, bicycle tourism, sports tourism, and gaming tourism. Perhaps the traveler's hobby is related to food, in which case he or she might be interested in niches such as culinary tourism, gastronomic tourism, or whisky tourism. If the individual has altruistic leanings, volunteer tourism, pro-poor tourism, or geotourism niche travel could be appealing. Niches can also be associated with the individual travelers or their relationships, as with wellness tourism, health tourism, youth tourism, faith tourism, or LGBT tourism. Niches can be related to learning, as with educational tourism, literary tourism, battlefield tourism, dark tourism, and diaspora tourism. Other established market niches include agritourism, ecotourism, rural tourism, and social tourism, though there are many more as well.

Such adjective-led labels are often deceptive. Many micro-niches remain largely underexplored, especially if they cannot deliver profitability. Some researched niches go unchallenged, with little in the way of a balanced corpus of research and literature surrounding them. The media, entrepreneurs, and the tourism industry are often quick to structure niches as growth markets, even if such analysis leading to that conclusion is based on derived or short-term demand.

Labels that suggest market niche participants share similar traits can be deceiving, given that a label, such as adventure tourism, may encompass hundreds of activities. Other labels overlap so much as to make any distinct understanding of the participants impossible to ascertain, for example, with war tourism or disaster tourism. These labels emerge from literature, the media, and can also be also driven by conceptual research (e.g., existential tourism, experiential tourism). A growing academic corpus investigating niche tourism from demand and supply perspectives has established niche tourism beyond a list of labels. Research on demand systems (e.g., level of involvement, interest and financial situation) and supply systems (e.g., tourism destinations, tourist products) suggests that when you combine all these different niches, it rivals the mass markets in size and span.

Niche Tourism Marketing

Instead of pursuing the whole tourism market (mass marketing), or large segments of the market, niche marketing aims to meet customer needs by targeting niches. By tailoring goods and services for small markets, the focus is on both the customer and profit. As a fragmented industry becomes recognized, businesses are moving away from mass marketing to niche marketing or even micro-marketing. Rather than pursue the whole market (or segments), businesses target niches using bottom-up methods. These start with the needs of a few customers until the business has built up its customer base. The complexities of developing niche tourism markets and communicating with a scattered population means niche marketing interactions must be designed to deliver the right product, at the right time, at the right price,

for the right customer.

Niche tourism has been successful in an increasingly competitive and cluttered tourism environment. Localities, regions, and nations have, after assessment of their resources, created marketing campaigns to focus on economically prioritized, tightly defined niche markets. To do so, they must develop those businesses and make them market-fit for specific niches. It is an approach that has worked at diversifying, differentiating, and rejuvenating tourism products. It can enable destinations to acquire a competitive edge, maximize tourism potential, and even kick-start a tourism industry. Mongolia, for example, seeks to promote horse riding, fly-fishing, cultural expeditions, and visits to nomadic communities to mid- to upscale niche markets. Newquay in the United Kingdom has promoted itself as a surfing destination, creating a network of specialist shops, training schools, and accommodation establishments for surfers. Some destinations, however, have drawn accusations that they market fictional niche products or market niche environments as themes to facilitate place marketing or for political and economic reasons.

Challenges in Contemporary Niche Tourism

Certain niche practices have expanded to impact society at large. These have become embedded in new processes, spaces, and places of regeneration, even in post-conflict zones. Despite claims to its greater sustainability, niche tourism remains burdened with the cultural, political, social, economic, and environmental concerns of tourism in general. Smaller businesses, volunteer groups, and local communities may grant more agency, choice, and inventiveness. However, they are still subject to the coercive laws of competition that may eventually force such independent efforts to behave like large capitalist enterprises. Often undercapitalized and business fragile, when combined with weak regulatory checks, low barriers to entry, competitive intensity, and difficulty of supervision, a short-term profit focus may emerge. As a niche becomes subject to the attention of larger firms with competitive drives to pursue leadership positions, they may also expand each niche to its full potential by exploitative means.

Businesses and the industry as a whole have also struggled to deal with the outcomes if niche tourism practices are found to under-deliver in terms of expected economic benefits. This is exacerbated when niche tourism development has adverse impact on the sustainable development of destinations (e.g., small cruises to Antarctica). Many niches, when developed appropriately, can enhance the local economy, preserve a destination for future generations, and cultivate ethical tourists. Other niche activities, however, may not be suitable for some destinations and their communities. Niche tourism development in communities is also challenging if those involved in tourism, however enthusiastic, lack the professional skills and experience required to successfully attract and satisfy niche tourists. This is especially true if a community seeks familiarity with particular subcultures for marketing and promotion purposes. It can be exacerbated in relation to tourism products and services built around specialist knowledge and training, such as adventure tourism, safari tourism, or photographic tourism. Niche tourism may not offer a solution to those destinations seeking more sustainable tourism, or tourism more integrated to the real economy than mass tourism. Niche tourism and tourists have encouraged a mutual exchange between supply and demand which has enabled tens of thousands of small to medium enterprises (and more recently, large firms) and destination marketing organizations to serve, coproduce, and collaborate on developing niche products into the social, political, and economic lives of communities. The development of, and access to, new tourism experiences has helped integrate localities and consumers onto the wider tourism economy. This has helped extend consumer choice, thereby creating a global consumer marketplace that is a major driver in tourism growth.

Further Readings

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