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Trends in family tourism

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Abstract

Purpose – Families represent a large and growing market for the tourism industry. Family tourism is driven by the increasing importance placed on promoting family togetherness, keeping family bonds alive and creating family memories. Predictions for the future of family travel are shaped by changes in demography and social structures. With global mobility families are increasingly geographically dispersed and new family markets are emerging. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the trends that shape the understanding of families and family tourism.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper examines ten trends that the authors as experts in the field identify of importance and significance for the future of family tourism.

Findings – What emerges is that the future of family tourism lies in capturing the increasing heterogeneity, fluidity and mobility of the family market.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to the understanding about the changes taking place in family tourism and what it means to the tourism industry in the future.

Keywords Tourism, Children, Mobility, Trends, Families, Demography

Paper type Trends paper

Introduction

Family travel is predicted to grow at a faster rate than all other forms of leisure travel, partly because it represents a way to reunite the family and for family members to spend time with each other, away from the demands of work (Schänzel *et al.*, 2012). At the same time family tourism is phenomena shaped by changes in demography and social structures which are slow moving. These include higher rates of female participation in the labour market, higher divorce rates, rising and longer enrolment in tertiary education, growing numbers of elderly people, more foreign-born members of the population, and so forth. As a consequence of demographic changes, the concept of the family unit might be in question. However from another perspective, family relations may in the future be reconfigured on new, more sustainable foundations. We may increasingly see networks of loosely connected family members from different marriages, partnerships and generations emerging, who devise fresh approaches to cohesion and solidarity. Growing better-integrated ethnic communities may help to instil more positive family values (old and new) into mainstream society. Children and families form the closest and most important emotional bond in humans. This relationship is what drives humanity and society, and as such the family is the centre of human activity (Yeoman, 2008). Families include single parents, blended families, involved fathers and same sex parentage. Families, like other market segments, seek travel destinations that offer relaxation, novelty, outdoor activities and arts and heritage sites. However, families are less likely than other segments to indulge in the local culture. Seeking destinations for relaxation is the largest differentiator for families compared to non-families in Australia, the UK and the USA, whereas, shopping was the top holiday activity for families in China and Columbia (Euromonitor, 2013). Then there are families without children.

Family tourism is one of the most important sectors of the tourism industry around the world and accounting for about 30 per cent of the leisure travel market (Schänzel *et al.*, 2012). Looking to

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the future, what are the trends that will shape the future? This paper examines ten trends that the authors, who are experts in the field, identify of importance and significance for the future.

1. Changing family structures

Longevity and smaller core families have led to the family becoming more vertical rather than statically horizontal in form. Grandparents are enjoying more time with their grandchildren as they live longer. Consider the following; in 1960 the life expectancy of a UK woman was 73 and the mean age for giving birth was 27. Presently, the life expectancy for a woman is 81.9 and the age for giving birth is increasingly in their 30s. Present day grandparents can expect to enjoy several more years with their grandchildren than those of the 1960s (Yeoman, 2012). The verticalisation of the family is apparent through more grandparents becoming involved in caring for their grandchildren. Where siblings within a larger family would have previously been responsible for baby – sitting duties, grandparents in the vertical family are now taking their place. As Briggs (2001) points out the prominence of these inter – generational relationships play a central role in the family network due to this verticalisation. Indeed, as people live to a greater age and childcare becomes more expensive we expect grandparents to continue to play an active role in their grandchildren's life.

2. Immigration

According to the World Bank, in 2010, more than 200 million people (or 3 per cent of the world's population) lived outside their country of birth. Of these, two out every five immigrants had moved from emerging and developing countries to developed countries. The growth in the number of residents living abroad has been beneficial to travel and tourism as people tend to return home to visit friends and family and vice versa. From the USA with 23 million foreigners to Saudi Arabia where 30 per cent of residents are non-Saudis, there is no corner in the world that remains untouched by migration.

According to Euromonitor (2010):

In 2009, 20% of Spanish departures were made to visit friends and relatives, according to the Institute of Tourism Studies. Roughly 7% of the Spanish population is of foreign origin, with Moroccans accounting for 19% of foreign citizens in the country. Germans, French and British are the next largest source countries, accounting for 8.7%, 7.0% and 6.6% of foreign citizens in 2010.

According to the UK's Office for National Statistics, departures to visit friends and family accounted for 19.8% of UK departures in 2009, but only 13.9% of spending. In 2010, the percentage of outbound trips made to visit friends and relatives dropped to 19.4% due to the ongoing economic recession in the UK. Residents from India and Poland are the largest groups, with around 650,000 foreign citizens from each country living in the UK in 2010.

As we can see from these European statistics, Europe is a place without migration boundaries. As European Union citizens, people in the UK can take advantage of free movement and are resettling, often in the preferred destinations of Spain and France. Indeed, the landscape of the UK is changing as inbound migration has made London, for example, a melting pot of international inhabitants from a multitude of countries, anywhere from Poland to Somalia. Simply put, people no longer live next door to many of their family members.

3. Multi-generational travel

Increasingly re-connection holidays across generations become a way for extended families to spend valuable time together (Butlins, 2012). A survey in the USA by Trip Advisor (2011) reveals that 37 per cent of respondents plan to take a multi-generational family trip in that year. Today, an estimated 75 per cent of travellers plan their holiday around a milestone event such as a birthday, reunion, wedding or anniversary, and even a holiday, to bring family members together. Several demographic trends are behind this growth: migration, longevity and lower birth rates. Today most extended families live geographically apart and increasing longevity has led to stronger multi-generational ties combined with smaller families (OECD, 2008). Fewer children in society mean they become more important and the focus across generations. More baby boomers are becoming grandparents who are typically healthier, mobile and want to spend quality, fun time

with their grandchildren. The trend is that with increased mobility inter-generational re-connection holidays allow geographically dispersed family members to bond and create lasting memories. It, thus, achieves multiple goals.

4. Social capital and creating memories

The social benefits of tourism for its participants have been identified for some time within family tourism as opportunities for bonding, communication and strengthening of relationships (Carr, 2011; Shaw *et al.*, 2008). Holidays are often the only time the whole family spends together for an extended period without the distractions of work and school. Holidays then are considered a symbolic time out of the normal that warrants remembering and are used for generating social identities in family members. (Re)connecting social relations on holiday is behind the meaning of social capital construction here which make a valuable part in the social identity formation. Photographic images capturing these intimate and meaningful family interactions help in the creation of social identities through producing rather than reflecting family life (Larsen, 2005). Family holidays then increasingly serve a purpose of integrating people through tourism and can be seen as a social practice that involves social capital formation and memory creation that becomes integral to social life.

5. Helicopter parents

The phenomenon known as helicopter parenting has become well and truly entrenched in the US cultural lexicon. Appearing first in the 1990s, the term is used to describe how some parents “hover” above the lives of their children, ready to swoop at a moment’s notice to either intervene in their child’s interest or contribute to key life – decisions traditionally taken independently by the young adult (Yeoman, 2008; Fingerman *et al.*, 2012). From a business perspective, parents’ anxiousness means a level of reassurance, particularly from sources that can relate first-hand experiences before they make the final decision. Parents will search different channels for recommendations, for example from www.tripadvisor.com or from friends and family. As the internet is an important source of information, tour operators and travel agents need to host online forums (where consumers exchange ideas and have a source of truthful information) and virtual tours of properties. All of this provides parents with reassurance in making a decision.

6. Experiential family holidays

The core product of tourism are the experiences gained (Prentice *et al.*, 1998). For families the holiday experiences centre on spending time “with” the family doing fun activities that are different to normal and which create positive memories (Schänzel *et al.*, 2012; Shaw *et al.*, 2008). International holidays are perceived as offering more novel or grander experiences than those closer to home. The propensity for overseas holidays generally increases with the age of the children, as families with older children seek more exotic or grander experiences (Blichfeldt, 2007). In affluent societies about 90 per cent of people agreed in a survey that luxury for them meant time for themselves and with their family, and family holidays topped the list (Visa, 2013). Life is then about sharing great experiences for those who can afford it. Families are also increasingly seeking adventure travel experiences. There is a trend towards families looking to be active together and having more authentic experiences on holiday.

7. Children as sophisticated consumers

Eager to grow up, today’s children, like youngsters before them, are zealously trying to emulate the consumer habits of those older than them. Businesses have been quick to recognise that the growing distinction between children’s ages is pronounced enough to warrant products and services specifically focused on those tweens who are aspiring to become more like teenagers and adults (Yeoman *et al.*, 2012). Children have always had specific consumer needs. The difference today compared with earlier is perhaps that more and more products are targeting these tween needs from an earlier age. Whether we think this a blameworthy development or whether children are just evolving faster than before,

something of a shrinking of childhood seems to have taken place. This phenomenon is often referred to as “age compression” or “children growing older younger”. In the 1960s, childhood was a distinct stage and it had been only roughly a decade since the world had discovered or invented the “teenager”. Today, children seem to adopt the habits and attitudes of what has so far been considered the teen domain at an earlier age than previously – hence the emergence of the “tween” (preadolescence, that is, the stage between middle childhood and adolescence in human development, in the range of 8-12 years old). There can be no doubt that the concepts of both “childhood” and “youth” are being redefined and that, as consumers, today’s kids are very different and do not hesitate to use “pester power” if needed (Euromonitor, 2014a, b).

8. Blended families

There is recognition that the definition of family has changed, to the effect that most refer to “families” rather than the “family”, in that different family members are likely to perceive the composition of their families in different ways (Dumon, 1997). This is reflective of the decline of the nuclear family, increasing divorce rates and the rise of reconstituted or blended families. While families are separating through divorce, people are forming new families, while often still being networked to their old ones through their children. Social, as opposed to biological, parenting is an increasing phenomenon in family life. More and more men and women raise children who are not biologically their own. This has implications on family holiday behaviour with more complicated travel arrangements needed and presenting different family group dynamics. There is also a trend towards children from divorced households getting extra and more enticing holidays with their respective blended families as each parent tries to out trump the other.

9. New family markets

As world travel continues to grow, fundamentally driven by the increased wealth from markets such as Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC). New tourists see new places, whether travelling as individuals, groups or families. In China, family tourism in 2013 represented 23.9 per cent of all international arrivals. With rising disposable incomes and the improving living standards of Chinese consumers, domestic leisure tourism was welcomed by Chinese consumers and registered healthy growth of 12 per cent in 2013 in terms of the number of trips (Euromonitor, 2014a). India, like other countries is seeing the emergence of a wealthy middle class who see travel as the new luxury shaped by a desire for new experiences and new destinations. Due to the relative low price package, holidays are very popular amongst Indian families with domestic destinations such as Kerala, Puri and Madhya Mahal the most popular holiday spots. Yeoman (2012) points out that as wealth increases the families of India and China become the new family markets for the Disneylands of Paris, Los Angeles and Tokyo. The future of world tourism will be shaped by these and other emerging markets.

10. Gender

The continuing change in gender roles and parenting behaviour can have significant influences on family holiday experiences. In contemporary society, both mothers and fathers are expected to embrace more equal responsibilities at home and with childcare. These societal changes have led to intensive mothering (Arendell, 2000) and involved fathering (Kay, 2009), implying a more concerted and time consuming effort in raising fewer children than in previous generations. This implies that the traditional roles of parents are extended to encompass a wider variety of parental behaviour towards children on holidays. Increasingly this involves resistance to traditional parental discourses, such as snowboarding mums (Spowart *et al.*, 2008) and shopping tour dads. Fathers become more actively involved with their children in sport, leisure and on holiday, as entertainers and educators (Schänzel and Smith, 2011). Females represent the fastest growing demographic participating in physically demanding leisure pursuits which are typically viewed as male-dominated domains (Roster, 2007). In the future, gender constructs will become more diversified not just

for parents but also for the children and centre more on having active fun together no matter what the activity.

Conclusions

Families play an important role for the tourism industry despite the demise of traditional family models. There is a myth of the decline of the family when in fact families today are just differently connected than previously. Families can range from a minimum of two (single parent with one child) to multi-generational families (any number of adults and children) and increasingly move away from traditional family sizes and gender orientations (two heterosexual parents and two children). Holidays can play an important role in strengthening family relationships and building of social and family capital within the immediate and extended family by overcoming increasing mobility issues. Family travel and visiting of friends and relatives (VFR) travel then are more resilient than other forms of tourism, as people will always travel to reconnect. There are new family tourism markets emerging and traditional family markets are venturing further and becoming more adventurous. This means that the tourism industry needs to better cater to this increasing diversity of the family market in the future.

The tourism industry also requires better understandings of the complex purchasing decisions as families are becoming more democratic and destination choice and holiday activities are discussed among all family members, including children. However, children cannot be considered as a homogenous group and age can be a big differentiator as toddlers have very different requirements to teenagers. This should lead to more creative and innovative marketing campaigns that engage the young tourists at their appropriate ages, especially as they are the next generation of tourists. Investing into the travelling children of today then will shape the future of tourism. If the tourism industry gets it right and minimises inconveniences and conflicts for families through better planning, success will follow as the family market is economically substantial and predicted to grow in the future. Increased life expectancy, shifting grandparent and parental roles and more emphasis placed on fewer children will fuel that demand. While the focus on holiday is on relaxation and engaging in novel family activities to create happy memories, it is just as important to ensure children can have fun in safe environments while the rest of the family can pursue their own interests. The future of family tourism then lies in capturing the diverse needs of children and adults of different ages, from diverse ethnic backgrounds and with diverse family structures. The trends then point towards increasing heterogeneity, fluidity and mobility in families who travel in the future.

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