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Know Your Customer: Sharing Values for Innovation in Domestic Animal-Based Tourism Experiences

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Title: Know Your Customer: Sharing Values for Innovation in Domestic Animal-Based Tourism Experiences

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Abstract:

The constant accumulation of incremental and revolutionary changes continuously redefines and reshapes the arena of tourism occupied by firms, tourists, and other agents (Hall & Williams, 2008). Many tourism innovation researchers have argued that these innovation processes and innovations can only be understood by examining the social interactions of tourism innovators with their environment and especially with their customers (Shaw, Bailey, & Williams, 2011; Cabiddu, Lui, & Piccolini, 2013).

The tourism sector is increasingly based on customer experiences where firms and tourists interact closely at all stages of their relationship (Shaw et al., 2011), and particularly during co-creation. In this paper, we explore the co-created tourism experience as an encounter of values that inspires tourism business to innovate. Firms and tourists interact more closely (than non-service industries) at all stages of their relationship (Shaw et al., 2011), particularly during co-creation. Close interaction between different actors during tourism experiences offers possibilities for knowledge sharing and innovation (Hoarau & Kline, 2014) but also bears the risk for misunderstanding and clashing values.

Actors have different value systems that are translated into behavior and into the design and co-creation of tourism experiences. To understand how to be cognizant of (and maybe to assess) the values (of all stakeholders) is to maximize the transaction for all parties, as well as to create a 'breeding ground' for innovation. The business mindset for success is *how can I help the customer feel good about this exchange/experience?* In order to deliver high-quality tourism experiences, tourism providers need an understanding of their customers' values as well as the value systems from which they themselves operate.

The purpose of this paper is to use the theory of service dominant logic (SDL) for understanding stakeholder value systems. We explore how tourism providers get to know customers and their values and develop a framework that can be applied to various tourism contexts: from low customer participation to high customer participation. SDL is particularly relevant for tourism management because it is based on an understanding of the interwoven fabric of individuals and organisations (Shaw et al., 2011).

We contribute by extending the SDL framework by crystalizing value and other components. As such, we deconstruct and further apply SDL/co-creation to experience tourism. We carry out a study of tourism experiences that are co-created together with domestic animals. The interaction with animals, the role of animals, and the value attached to animals is culturally and personally dependent. This setting allows us to explore how customers, as well as providers, feel about the use of animals in tourism products, how they should be treated, and how they are perceived by the several actors involved. We have chosen to do a cross-cultural comparison of tourism experiences in the United States and northern Europe. By means of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with tourism providers, we shed light on how values are understood by the respondents and observed in their experiences, as well as explore whether awareness of customers' values lead to innovation/change in the co-creation of tourism experiences.