The Business Traveller Experience: Nexus between Tourism and Work

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

The number of individuals who travel abroad for work is continuously increasing. According to the World Tourism Organization report, business travel accounts for 13% of the international tourism market (UNTWO 2019). Yet, business travellers have received little attention in tourism research. In response to this gap in tourism scholarship, the present study provides a phenomenological portrayal of subjective experiences of frequent international business travellers (FIBT). The main goal of this exploratory study is to shed light on the unique features and consequences of business travel experiences, especially with respect to the following aspects:

- Division between work and leisure over the course of the trip
- Intercultural encounter and interaction with the local population
- Sense of authenticity at the travel destination
- Sense of familiarity/strangeness at the travel destination
- Effect of frequent international travel on business travellers' national identities and their self-perception as "citizens of the world"
- Effect of frequent international travel on family and social ties

Methodology

The mixed-method research was conducted in two phases: (a) a qualitative phase, which included analysis of n=28 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and involved a combination of thematic and categorical data analyses; and (b) a quantitative analysis of responses to a questionnaire-based survey of n=231 participants, using SPSS software.

All study participants were business travellers whose positions required at least six work-related trips abroad annually.

Results

Regarding the division between work and leisure, the study explores the business travel experience across three phases: airport experience, in-flight experience, and destination experience. The study reveals that the phase that FIBT associate most with leisure and recreation is the in-flight experience. During this phase, the FIBT enjoy the comfort and status provided by the airlines as well as the limited Internet and cellular connectivity during flights. The other phases of the trip are associated mainly with work-related activities.

With respect to intercultural encounter and interaction with the local population, especially colleagues, the findings show that FIBT are exposed in an unmediated way to local cultures and face personal and business cultural gaps. To succeed professionally, FIBT are required to have knowledge and understanding of how certain practices differ across cultures, and to adapt themselves accordingly. The study also suggests that although "personal relations" are often considered to be crucial for success, as indicated by the interviewees, the exposure of business travellers to their colleagues' personal lives appears to be rare, as indicated by their responses to the quantitative questionnaire.

Concerning the sense of authenticity at the travel destination, the study findings indicate that FIBT perceive their experiences as authentic with respect to the visited place but inauthentic in terms of "true" self-expression.

Regarding the sense of familiarity vs. strangeness at the travel destination, the study findings indicate that FIBT can "feel at home" in different places around the world, but at the same time "hypermobility" is associated with strangeness and foreignness.

The findings also reveal that frequent travel strengthens the FIBT's sense as citizens of the world, as well as their individual national identities. The findings indicate that these identities are not alternate but complementary, and both strengthen as a result of travel. The study focuses on Israeli business travellers and identifies four strategies in approaching the controversial image of Israel around the world: (a) moderating the Israeli identity, (b) grudging ambassadors, (c) enthusiastic ambassadors with a business motive, and (d) altruistic enthusiastic ambassadors.

Regarding the consequences that frequent international travel has on family and social ties, the findings indicate that frequent travel generates difficulties and challenges the work-life balance.

Theoretical conclusions

With respect to the literature on business travellers, the present study indicates that despite the decreasing distinctiveness of business travellers (Gustafson, 2014), their travel experience is still unique, at least as far as the division between work and leisure across trip phases is concerned. With regard to tourism and "mobilities studies," this finding suggests that the blurring of the distinction between types of travel in the postmodern era is an ongoing process, in which distinctions change rather than completely disappear.

The study confirms the importance of periodic face-to-face meetings ("meetingness") in business relationships (Urry, 2003). At the same time, based on the interpretation of Georg Simmel's notion of "sociability" (Hughes, 1949), the study questions the claim that meetingness in the context of business relationships requires concrete personal ties. The findings of the study suggest instead that although the call for personal ties in business relations is a common expression in business culture, real personal ties are uncommon between business travellers and their colleagues.

The study provides empirical support to Ning Wang's distinction between objective, constructed and existential authenticity (1999). The findings are consistent with his argument that authenticity is no longer associated only with destinations or objects (objective or constructed authenticity), but it is also closely related to the sense of self (existential authenticity).

The study conforms to recent portrayals of business travel as a diverse experience with costs and benefits (Gustafson, 2014). This observation provides a balanced view that sheds light on both the bright and the dark side of "hypermobile" lifestyles.

Practical application of the dissertation

The study points out at commercial and marketing opportunities for the tourism industry and for organizations in which international flights are part of business routine. The study shows that FIBT use their time in airports mainly to work. Airports worldwide invest great effort in improving the leisure experience of business travellers (e.g., luxury business lounges, spas, bars, etc.). The present study indicates that it is also crucial to improve workspaces in airports to allow FIBT to effectively use their time spent waiting for flights. By contrast, the findings indicate that the time during flights is perceived as "time off," and business travellers experience the lack of connectivity as an advantage rather than a disadvantage. Therefore, the study challenges the current direction followed by airlines to enable full connectivity in the air.

Regarding the hospitality industry, the findings indicate that business travellers want to feel at home in their accommodations, and prefer familiar places with warm personal service over luxurious conditions. The study also stresses the importance of cultural differences in the global business world. The results emphasize the need to provide instruction about cultural differences, and the requirement that travellers adjust themselves to the culture of their hosts.

Content of the dissertation

The thesis consists of three chapters, as described below:

Abstract of Chapter 1

The Division between Work and Leisure during Trip Phases

This chapter describes the division between work and leisure across three phases of travel: airport experience, in-flight experience, and destination experience. The findings indicate that for FIBT, the airport experience is associated with a luxury experience and is used mainly for work. By contrast, the in-flight experience consists of “moments of relaxation,” and it is often perceived as a sort of “time off,” in which the FIBT enjoy the comforts provided to privileged passengers, as well as the limited Internet and cellular connectivity during flights.

These findings point to a significant difference between FIBT and other tourists, who may find the time spent in airports and flights stressful and anxiety-provoking. In addition, the destination experience, which is usually the core of tourism-related experiences (sightseeing, pleasure, relaxation, etc.), is associated in the current study with long working hours and a heavy workload.

Abstract of Chapter 2

Beyond the “Tourist Environmental Bubble:” Encounters with Locals and Destination Experiences of Business Travellers

This chapter examines the encounter of FIBT with their local colleagues, and the way in which it shapes their experiences at the visited destination. The findings indicate that by experiencing the visited destination beyond the “tourist environmental bubble” (Cohen, 1972), business travellers believe that they have the opportunity to experience the visited destination “as it really is.” Thus, they appear to sense what Wang (1999) called “constructed/symbolic authenticity.” The chapter also shows that business travellers feel that they are constantly “on stage” and need to “perform” while interacting with their hosting colleagues. Therefore, the destination experience of business travellers appears to be inauthentic as far as their perception of their “true self” is concerned (Wang’s “existential authenticity”). This chapter also indicates that the encounter between business travellers and their colleagues takes place at a level that is only marginally personal. Business travellers and their colleagues interact to facilitate “workability” rather than to engage in “sociability” (Simmel’s notion of the most personal sort of social interaction).

Abstract of Chapter 3

Hypermobility: Foreignness, Identity, and Social Connections

This chapter examines the costs and benefits of the “hypermobile” lifestyle experienced by FIBT in the form of familiarity and strangeness during travel. FIBT are familiar with various places and cultures worldwide, and as skilled travellers, they feel comfortable even in unfamiliar places. The findings also reveal the importance of providing FIBT with a sense of “feeling at home” while staying “away.” This chapter also reveals that the self-perception of FIBT as “citizens of the world” does not stand in contrast to their strong national identity. Furthermore, the chapter points toward various strategies that FIBT implement to serve as ambassadors of their home country.

Finally, the chapter identifies the difficulty in coping with absence from home, and discusses the challenge in finding a balance between work and private life. Similarly to claims of Willis, Ladkin, Jain, and Clayton (2017), the findings reveal how FIBT try to be present while they are absent.

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