Implicit Cognitions in the Experience Economy: Assessing travelers´ implicit attitudes toward (social) travel experiences

Abstract

Tourism and travel are at the forefront of the experience economy, with consumers articulating growing interest in responsible and social experiences. However, most travel products still provide basic aesthetic experiences, such as e.g. beaches and club settings, along with traditional entertainment. This disparity between travelers' stated needs for more life-changing travel experiences and their acceptance of underwhelming travel offerings might be explained by shortcomings of the traditional survey-based methodology of assessing travelers' attitudes. Therefore, this study uses implicit attitude measurement to elicit consumers´ underlying attitudes toward travel experiences. Findings show that travelers associate aesthetics more with positive and education more with negative travel experiences. Comparing escapism and entertainment motives, respondents have more positive associations with passive, absorptive entertainment than with active, immersed escapism experiences. Thus, implicit cognitions may explain observed attitude-behavior gaps in responsible tourism.

Key words: Implicit Association Test, experience economy, travel motives, experimental study

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1. Introduction

In the experience economy, consumers value the associated experiences of product offerings more than its simple functional value (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). Tourism and travel are at the forefront of the experience economy, with offerings increasingly addressing 'experiences, fulfilment and rejuvenation' instead of 'places and things' (Kind, 2002). Innovative service providers design responsible travel offerings, which entice travelers to experience travel in novel ways and learn about different cultures (Hanna et al, 2018). In spite of responsible travel's media acclaim, the majority of travel offers however still focus on providing simple aesthetic experiences, such as beautiful beach and club settings and traditional entertainment offers. A possible explanation for this gap between articulated needs and realized offers might be that the experiences that travelers´ truly search for are not well captured by traditional surveys. Unconscious desires as well as social desirability biases can lead to an overestimation of the importance of higher-order, politically correct travel experiences. The question then becomes whether travelers truly search for the experiences that the travel firms are offering to them. This questions can be formulated also as a trade-off questions: Which experience is more appealing for a traveler, traditional entertainment providing aesthetic experience, such as a beautiful beach and club settings, or more active experiences, such as escapist and education ones (e.g., hiking, skiing, or even cooking the traditional cuisine).

To answer these questions, previous studies have attempted to capture travelers' attitudes using traditional surveys (see: Hosany & Witham, 2010; Oh, Fiore & Jeoung, 2007; Manthiou et al., 2014). These traditional measurements rely on self-reported ratings, where people rate particular items, such as tourism brochures, web-based advertising using bi-dimensional judgments like 'favorable/unfavorable', 'good/bad', 'useful/useless' (Jang, 2016), This self-report measurement focuses only on capturing the respon¬dents' explicit cognitive process (Yang, He, & Gu, 2012). A major drawback of using self-report measurement is the inability to retrieve and analyze the respondents´ implicit memories.

A traveler' attitude, corrected for potential social desirability biases, can be measured indirectly. This process is known as implicit attitude measurement. Implicit attitude is a person's unconscious view toward an object, and is triggered automatically by the mere presence of objects outside its attentive oversight (Bohner & Dickel, 2011; Jang, 2016). Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz (1998) thus introduced the implicit association test (IAT). Today IAT is one of the most widely used instruments when measuring individual's implicit cognition. However, there remains a lack of studies that use this robust tool to measure attitudes implicitly in tourism – destination research field (Lee & Kim, 2017; Kim, Chen, & Hwang, 2011; Kim & Chen, 2010). The purpose of this study, therefore, is to utilize Greenwald et al.'s (1998) Implicit Association Test to elicit travelers´ true attitudes toward different types of travel experiences by incorporating Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy framework as a supporting framework

2. Literature

2.1. Experience Economy Framework

Pine and Gilmore's (1999) experience economy framework provides a well established theoretical lens to examine consumption experience via its four realms, namely, education, entertainment, escapism, and aesthetics (see **Figure 1**). According to Pine and Gilmore, in the context of tourism destination, travellers are absorbed in the experience when engaging in an entertainment or an educational activity, whereas those travellers who participate in an aesthetics or and escapist activity are more likely to be immersed in the environment around them (Tercia et al, 2020).

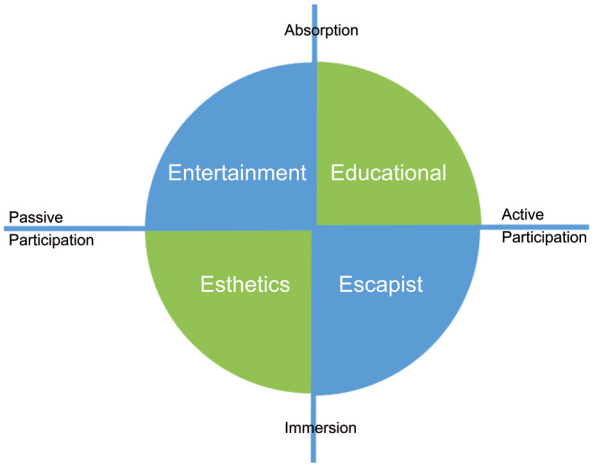


Figure 1: The four realms of an economy experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999)

Pine and Gilmore (1999) differentiate four realms of the experience economy as follow:

Entertainment experience is about sensing (e.g. watching a circus, enjoying music concert). Entertainment is classified as passive participation and a reflective absorption. Travellers become just observers of or listeners to an event, and they internalize the experience that they view or hear (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Oh, Fiore & Jeoung, 2007; Hwang & Lyu, 2015).

Educational experience is the desire to learn something new (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), and it is classified as active participation that enhances a traveller's knowledge. Education is characterized as an absorptive experience because travellers have to absorb the obtained input and then store it in their memory (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007). Different tourist activities are considered as educational experience are, for instance, visiting museum, taking a local cuisine cooking course.

Esthetics experience is about being in the presence of something (e.g., laying on the beach) where the travellers immerse themselves and passively enjoy watching or are influenced by the sensory appeal of the scenery surrounding them (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007).

Escapist experience is about performing the activity at hand (e.g., trekking a rice field, horseback riding, or skiing). When having an escapism experience, a traveller actively participates and becomes immersed in these activities during a vacation (Hosany &Witham, 2010; Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Researchers have thus far linked Pine and Gilmore's concept with the attitude and intention to visit or revisit a location for specific travel purposes (e.g. Chang, 2018; Park, Oh & Park , 2010; Manthiou et al., 2014). Oh, Fiore and Jeoung (2007) found that an *esthetic experience* constitutes an important aspect for travellers staying in B&B´s and not so much escapist and *entertainment experiences*. This result is reasonable since the esthetic experience is a focal marketing strategy of the B&B industry, thereby linking guests' needs and the travel operators' investment. In contrast, Mehmetoglu and Engen (2011) found that *escapism and esthetics experiences* are a driver of visitors´ satisfaction in the context of music festivals, whereas *education and aesthetics* become the focal point of experiencein the the context of museums. In the context of the cruiser experience, Hosany and Witham (2010) confirmed that *esthetics experience* is its main motive, followed by *the entertainment experience and the educational experience*. In the context of sport tourism, Hwang and Lyu (2015) revealed that sport tourism operators should offer experiences for the three dimensions of the experience economy, namely, *education, entertainment and escapism*, in order to enhance (the perception of) well-being by (golf) sport tourists. These findings indicate that the various experiences that tourists strive for depends on the tourism activity that they will undertake during their visits to a destination.

All the previous measurement relied on traditional surveys,which cannot capture the unconscious desires or the social desirability of potential travelers. Kim, Chen and Hwang (2011) argued that questionnaires cause respondents to ignore their feelings and rationalize their thoughts either because of expected social norms or their own individual standards. Thus, obtained findings may encounter potential biases, resulting in an overestimation of the importance of higher order, politically correct travel experiences. To overcome this limitation, this study utilizes an alternative measurement approach to assess people's true attitudes. To shed light on possible hidden desire of travelers, this study combined the four experience dimensions offered by Pine and Gilmore with implicit association measurement.

2.2. Implicit Association Test

Indirect approaches of attitude measurement aim to uncover affective associations (Fazio & Olson, 2003) as well as unconscious cognitive associations (e.g., attitude, self-esteem, and self-concept) by using reaction time data (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). The Implicit Association Test (IAT) developed by Greenwald et al. (1998) is by far the most prominent, even if not undisputed measurement approach (Kurdi, 2020) which compares implicit associations with two categories. Relative response speed thereby reveals the strength of respondents' mental association between a target concept and its evaluative attribute (Sookeun, Liu & Dae-Young, 2015). This measurement paradigm is well recognized and has been adapted to different contexts (Friese, Wanke & Plessner, 2006; Maison, Greenwald & Bruin, 2004), e.g. for measuring consumers´ implicit preference for specific products or services. These studies´ results show that the IAT can improve the predicition of behavior as compared to relying on explicit attitude measurements.

The IAT procedure involves a computerized task where participants are exposed to a series of stimuli, which can be either pictures and/or words. Those stimuli are grouped into four different categories: (a) two contrasted target concept categories consisting of objects being evaluated (here e.g. education and entertainment) and (b) two contrasting attributed categories (e.g., pleasant and unpleasant words). On each side (left and right) of the display screen, the names of one of the target categories and one of the attribute categories are presented (e.g., "education" and "unpleasant" on the left and "entertainment" and "pleasant" on the right). Then, participants are asked to assign each of stimulus to a particular category. Participants' responses are measured according to their reaction time of how quickly they assign the stimuli to a particular category correctly.

Researchers have widely used the IAT in social psychology research (Greenwald & Banaji, 2000), even using it to investigate personality traits (Asendorpf, Banse & Mücke, 2002). In the context of marketing research, e.g., Maison, Greenwald and Bruin (2004) employed IAT to investigate implicit brand attitudes and their relation to explicit attitude, product usage, and product differentiation. Within the context of the tourism field, the IAT was used to measure tourists' sub-consciousness association with international destinations (Choi, Liu & Kim, 2015) and tourists' attitudes toward destinations (Kim & Chen, 2010). The study by Choi, Liu and Kim (2015) sugested that the IAT would enhance researchers' understanding of the tourist perception on promonent international destinations that were particularly related to familiarity issues. Moreover, Kim and Chen (2010) revealed that explicit measures were unsuccessful in revealing the differences in travelers´ preferences toward two country destinations, whereas the IAT proved the presence of an implicit preference for England over China by American and Korean travelers, and China over England by Chinese travelers.

Despite its promising potential for the tourism domain, only a limited number of tourism researches have adopted the IAT to try and understand travelers' behavior and its underlying psychological contruct. Therefore, the current study adopted the IAT to measure tourists´ anticipation of desired travel experiences.

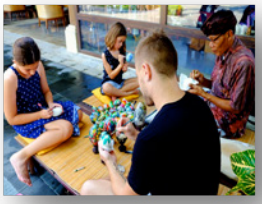
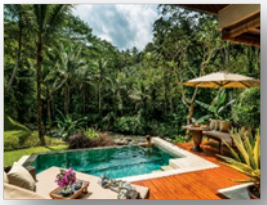
3. Methodology

This study applies the IAT to Pine and Gilmore's four realms of the experience economy to reveal travellers' implicit associations with education, entertainment, escapist and aesthetic experience. We split the IAT into two experiments that contrast the opposite dimensions of the framework: In the first IAT, educational experiences are been compared with aesthetic experiences. The second IAT then contrasts entertainment with escapist experiences. A total of 411 participants were recruited from three different universities in Indonesia. The experiment was conducted online using the research software AskYourBrain (Teichert et al, 2019), the survey link was sent via participants' emails, and needed information was provided at the beginning before the respondents started to participate in the experiment. Both IAT are composed of five blocks, and the average response times for each block were compared (Jang, 2016). A variance-adjusted difference score (D-score) of average response times is calculated for a precise comparison.

Experiment 1 used the IAT to assess the implicit attitude toward a pair of target attitude; thus, 257 participants were involved in this experiment. The IAT consisted of five sequential blocks: (1) initial target concept discrimination; (2) evaluative attribute discrimination; (3) first combined task; (4) reversed target concept discrimination; and (5) a reversed combined task. The two target concepts of the experiment, represented by pictures were *educational experience* versus *aesthetic experience* and two evaluative attributes were *"pleasant"* versus *"unpleasant"*, represented by words (**see Table1**). A balanced set of 12 picture stimuli was chosen with six pictures representing "educational experience"(e.g., painting, cooking, visiting museum, wine review) and six pictures representing "esthetic experience" (e.g., garden, beach, mountain, village). In addition, 12 word stimuli were chosen with six words representing "pleasant"(e.g., awesome, fun, satisfying, comfortable) and six words representing "unpleasant"(e.g., bad, disgusting, pathetic, unfortunate). Manipulation checks were executed to verify the adequacy of the chosen pictures. Experts confirmed that these pictures fit well to the categories of Pine and Gilmore' s realms.

Table 1

Summary of the stimuli used for Experiment 1

Category	Stimuli Used (Pictures or Words)		
"Education"			
			
"Esthetics"			
			
"Pleasant"	Fun, Awesome,Satisfying, Comfortable , enjoyable, nice		
"Unpleasant"	Bad, Pathetic, Disgusting, Unfortunate, Annoying, Irritating		

The IAT consisted of five blocks, wherein respondents were asked to categorize a randomly selected stimulus into its underlying category. Instructions were given at the beginning of each block, describing the two experience categories, then asking participants to categorize each stimulus into one target experience, and explaining on how to respond (i.e., for the left, slide the mouse to the left; for the right, slide the mouse to the right). The image, caption, and category name labels stayed on the screen until the participant entered a response by moving the mouse. If a response was deemed to be incorrect, the image was immediately replaced by an error message for 500 millisecond (ms) There was a fixed 1000 ms. interval between the onset of a response and the onset of the next trial. The trials were also randomized, with an equal number of trials presented for each category.

The detailed procedure used for the first experiment is described in the following section and also visualized in **Table 2**. Three training blocks (blocks 1, 2 and 4) were used to train participants in the categorization tasks. In the first block, the subjects were asked to respond as quickly as possible by moving the mouse to the left when the presented pictures pertained to education and moving the mouse to the right when the image depicted an esthetic one. The location of both categories switched in block 4. In the second block, The two discrimination categories were replaced with two evaluative attributes, namely, "Unpleasant" on the left and "Pleasant" on the right. There were also 20 randomized trials, 10 for each attribute category.

Table 2

The Block Sequence for the IAT

Block	Task description	Left categories	Right categories
1	Initial target concept discrimination	Education	Esthetics
2	Evaluative attribute discrimination	Unpleasant	Pleasant
3	Initial combined task	Education OR Unpleasant	Esthetics OR Pleasant
4	Reversed target concept discrimination	Esthetics	Education
5	Reversed combined task	Esthetics OR Unpleasant	Education OR Pleasant

Remark: The reversed sequence started with Blocks 4-5, followed by Blocks 2-3.

In the first combined task (Block 3), the categories for discrimination in each block trial were written as "Education or Unpleasant" in the left upper corner and "Esthetic or Pleasant" in the right upper corner. For reversed target concept discrimination, the positions of two categories for discrimination were switched, with "Education" moving to the right and "Esthetic" to the left. Thus, the correct response was different based on the stimuli that appeared on the screen. The reversed combined task block (Block 5) was similar to the first combined task block, except the categories for discrimination became Esthetic or Unpleasant on the left and "Education or Pleasant" on the right. Both the reaction time and the accuracy of each response were measured.

In the subsequent Experiment 2, the procedures were similar to Experiment 1. The two target concepts of the experiment, as represented by pictures were "Entertainment experience" versus "Escapist experience" and there were two evaluative attributes, as represented by the words "pleasant" versus "unpleasant" (see **Table 3**). There were 12 pictures stimuli with six pictures representing the "Entertainment experience" (e.g., watching a music concert, dance performance, and circus) and 6 pictures representing the "Escapist experience" e.g., tracking, skiing, and diving).

Table 3

Summary of the stimuli used for Experiment 2

Category	Stimuli Used (Pictures or Words)		
"Entertainment"			
			
"Escapist"			
			
"Pleasant"	Quiet, Fresh,Excited, Entertaining , Enjoyable, Nice		
"Unpleasant"	Noisy, Boring, Disgusting, Disturbing, Annoying, Irritating		

To control for possible sequence effects in both experiments, the respondents were randomly assigned either to the standard block sequence (the compatible condition shown first, as reported above) or to a reversed block sequence (incompatible condition shown first). Here, the positions of the two categories for discrimination were switched, with "Education"/ "Entertainment" being moved to the right and "Esthetics"/"Escapist" being moved to the left. Thus, in contrast to the initial target-concept discrimination block, the subjects were first supposed to move the opposing category to the left-hand side, matching it in Block 3 with the positive attribute dimension and only later in Block 5 with the negative attribute dimension.

4. Results

4.1. IAT analyses

We followed the IAT scoring algorithm of Greenwald, Nosek and Banaji (2003) and treated the raw data according to the following procedure: First, we eliminated trial response latencies greater than 10,000 milliseconds. Then, we included all response latencies, whereby we could then add a latency correction to the false responses. Finally, we calculated the difference in the score between the congruent and incongruent trial block, divided by the pooled standard deviation in the response latencies across both blocks). The resulting measure resembled the IAT D-score. The D-scores are computed as the mean difference divided by the overall standard deviation (SD) (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji 2003).

The analysis of Experiment 1 compared the relative attitudes for aesthetic to educational motives for travel. The analyses showed that respondents associate esthetics more with pleasant impressions and education more with unpleasant impressions, with a significant D-score of 0.195 (std error 0.050). This second key finding is particularly interesting, given the sample population of students where a desire for learning should have been expected.

The analysis of Experiment 2 allowed us to gain further insights regarding the implicit affective associations with escapism compared to entertainment as a travel motive. When comparing the escapist and entertainment motives, the respondents associated entertainment significantly more with a positive attitude than they did escapism, as manifested by a D-score of 0.182 (std error 0.034). This finding is noticeable, given the sample population of young people who often explicitly state escape and adventure as a self-fulfillment motive (Brown 2005).

Figure 2 summarizes the findings of both IAT experiments in a symbolized figure where the size of each quadrant corresponds to the relative (dis)favouring based on the implicit associations´ D-score. It shows that the four realms of the experience framework are not of equal value for travellers. The two dimensions of passive experiences outweigh their counterparts that need traveller´s active participation. Findings also indicate a small favouring of immersive experiences against absorptive experiences. In sum, an imbalance of travellers´ implicit attitudes towards passive and absorptive experiences has to be stated.

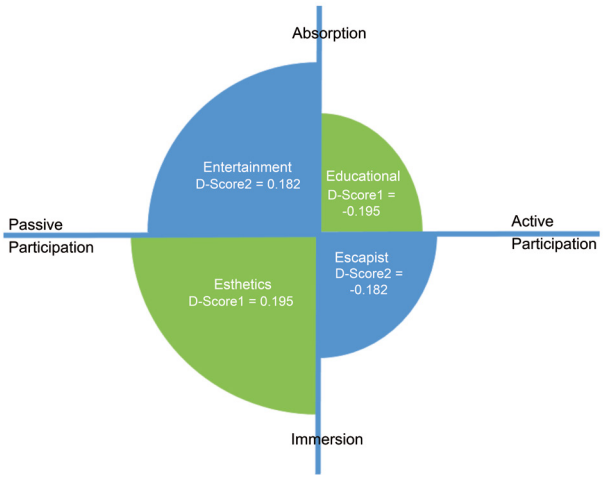


Figure 2: Implicit associations towards experience dimensions

4.2. Robustness Checks

As a robustness check of the findings, we checked for any possible sequence effects of the IAT experiment. Hereto, we analysed the differences in the estimated D-scores across the two settings of the IAT experiment, either starting with the compatible or incompatible task. The following table exhibits the calculated D-scores for the IAT experiment, comparing the educational motives to the aesthetic ones. As can be seen in Table 3, there were no sequence effects present in our study. Thus, findings were not influenced by between-block learning effects.

	IAT results differentiated by sequence of the IAT Test		
Criterion	**Compatible block first**	**Incompatible block first**	**Total**
Mean D-Score	0.199	0.191	0.195
Standard Deviation	0.619	0.614	0.617
# observations	84	66	150

Table 3: A Robustness Check on the Findings of the IAT tests

5. Discussion

Two experiments tested travellers' unconscious preferences toward destination. The results of Experiment 1 revealed that implicitly respondents have a stronger positive association toward esthetic experiences compared to educational experiences during their destination visit. This finding implies that Indonesian travellers' prefer to passively enjoy nature and immerse in the environment surrounding them. Therefore, compared to active involvement in a local cuisine cooking class, consuming the beautiful scenery of the mountains or lying on the beach are more favorable activities for Indonesian travellers. In Experiment 2, the results revealed that Indonesian travellers prefer entertainment experiences more than escapist experiences. Hence, marketer can offer activities that enable travellers to lay back, become passively involved in activities, or just absorb the environment around them (e.g. watching a traditional dance performance, watching the performing arts) rather than active activities like hiking, trekking or scuba diving, all of which require travellers to actively engage in activity.

These insights about travellers' implicit attitudes differed from the prima-facie expected attitudes and from the findings obtained by standard questionnaires. For example, Utomo and Noormega (2020) from the prominent research consultancy IDN Research Institute (2020) recently reported that Indonesia millennial travellers are primarily concerned about authenticity and experiential travel experiences. However, if their findings were reframed in the experience economy framework used by Pine and Gilmore, we expect that Indonesia millennial travellers prefer education experiences (i.e. visiting colonial sites and cultural sites) and escapist experience (i.e., adventure tourism). This result would then lead to a contradictory suggestion, i.e., to design activity-based travel experiences such as cultural/educational and adventure tourism, because our implicit association test suggests that Indonesian travellers prefer to have esthetic and entertainment experiences during their vacation rather than educational and escapist experiences.

This study comparison let us assume that there is an implicit/explicit dissociation for desired travel experiences. Further studies should assess the extent to which marketer reports may have overstated travelers´ desire for active vacations. Since further research is needed to test which method of attitude measurement can best predict ex-post travel experiences, we recommend that market researchers apply both methods to reveal both types of attitudes, namely, travelers´ explicit as well as implicit views.

This study is of exploratory nature and clearly not without its limitations. The use of a student sample is an obvious limitation, however, we deemed it acceptable due to the chosen focus on millennials as our traveler population. More importantly, there might be deep-rooted cultural issues that ask for cross-cultural comparisons. Finally, longitudinal studies are needed to cross-verify the validity of ex-ante travel expectations when forecasting ex-post satisfaction with travel experiences.

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