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# Visitor Narratives: Researching and illuminating actual destination experience

Cathy Guthrie and Alistair Anderson

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper argues that whilst destination benchmarking and visitor surveys seek to measure the visitor experience, they privilege the destination manager or researcher rather than taking the visitor's viewpoint. It suggests that capturing and analysing visitor stories whilst in the destination can facilitate understanding of how destination image changes with actual experience, and what factors or attributes are important, thereby offering a deeper insight into the process through which destination experience is transformed (sense making) and transmitted (sense giving) via those stories, that all important word of mouth publicity.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Unstructured interviews were recorded with visitors in Edinburgh and Greenwich. An interpretive approach was employed in analysing the interview data to uncover facets of visitor experience affecting the image conveyed through the narrative.

**Findings:** The research reveals three elements involved in the sense making and sense giving process and sets out the three categories of visitor consumption characteristics which are implicated in the process.

**Research implications:** Although the outcomes of the sense making and sense giving process are mediated by the incidents, interactions and characteristics of the individual visitor, the process itself is common to all visitors. Analysing visitor narratives to uncover the mediating factors illuminates the visitor's actual destination experience and its impact on their understanding or image of a destination. Narratives proved to be a useful research tool.

**Practical implications:** The interview and analysis techniques used could be readily adapted for use alongside existing standardised visitor survey tools to provide destination managers and marketers a greater understanding of the impact of customer care and visitor management programmes and how narrative may be useful in tailoring destination marketing to meet the requirements of specific visitor groups.

**Originality/value:** This research demonstrates the utility of capturing and analysing visitor narratives at the point of destination consumption for understanding actual destination experience and the way in which it is transmitted as word of mouth information to others.

**Type:** Research paper

**Keywords:** visitor experience; narrative; destination image; word of mouth publicity; consumer behaviour; interview research

## Introduction

Tourism destination management and marketing organisations devote considerable resources to promoting and maintaining the image of their destination. At the national level within the United Kingdom, for example, VisitBritain invested £35 million in 2006-07 in destination marketing (VisitBritain, 2007). Destination benchmarking exercises and visitor surveys allow marketers to evaluate the impact of marketing campaigns and visitor perceptions, in the main by asking visitors to rate facilities and attractions according to scales and criteria which have been predetermined by the researcher or destination manager. Such studies thus, in the main, answer “What?” questions: what is attractive/ or unattractive; what services have visitors used; how much have they spent or do they intend to spend? Although destination benchmarking surveys seek to measure visitors’ experience, they do not take the visitor’s perspective as a starting point for investigating and understanding “How?” or “Why?”: how does image change with experience of a destination; why are some attributes important and other not in the destination experience. What is the sum of the visitor’s experience and how will they recount it?

This paper argues that whilst these studies undoubtedly yield useful information, they are informed only by the researcher’s own judgement about what should be enjoyed. Moreover the discrete elements of a visitor’s experience, whilst individually important, do not in themselves produce the experience, but only in combination. More seriously, these studies privilege the destination manager’s perspective above that of the visitor; as a result they do not generally deliver much understanding of what brings visitors in the first place, how their experience affects the way they think about the destination or the vitally important transmission of that image through their retelling of their experiences. The destination manager may believe, for instance, that the range of attractions or four star rated hotels is a key factor in the visitor’s assessment of the

destination whereas in fact these may be marred by the presence of beggars; or indeed by how that visitor is treated by a resident when asking for directions, or the attitude of shop assistants. Moreover to get some understanding of what visitors tell others, we need to get some understanding of how they themselves understand their experiences.

From a research perspective, the stories that people tell, their narratives about their destination experiences, are a remarkably useful way of capturing what was significant for them. Their narratives not only represent their commentary on what they enjoyed or disliked, but also tell us how they did so. Thus narratives can encapsulate key points and how elements combine in a destination experience. Moreover, from a market research perspective, they also tell us a great deal about what visitors will tell their friends - the word of mouth that can be an important factor in other peoples' choice of destination. Accordingly we argue that our methodological approach of collecting, sorting and analysing visitor narratives provides a unique way of tapping into visitor experiences. Whilst such techniques do not allow us to measure, or generalise, save conceptually, they do enable us to see the sum of the experience in a way that leads us to a deeper understanding of the processes. They also present us with the stories that visitors are likely to tell to their friends.

Such word of mouth information is widely recognised as an important factor in destination choice (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Beerli and Martin, 2004; Bigné et al., 2001; Gunn, 1972; Guthrie and Anderson, 2007). Gartner (1993) categorised it as an element in induced organic image formation, but considered it was beyond the control of marketers. This paper, however, puts forward evidence to suggest that analysis of visitor narratives about their destination experience can assist marketers to understand the way in which visitors make sense of and transmit their destination experience to others. This approach provides destination managers and marketers with information

not readily accessed through traditional visitor surveys. If added to benchmarking data, it allows them to build a more complete view of the visitor experience and its affect on image. Moreover, our methodological approach may identify unanticipated aspects of the visitor experience. Armed with this understanding, marketing practitioners could effect beneficial change within the destination or their marketing messages.

In this approach to understanding destination images we employ the oldest information transmission system: narratives. Importantly, narrative is recognised as a way in which individuals make sense of their experience. Padgett and Allen argue that people have a natural propensity to organise information in a story format, and categorise narrative as “the primary form through which people communicate and comprehend experience” (1997, p.56). Narrative provides a fundamental method of linking individual human actions and events with interrelated aspects to gain an understanding of outcomes. This means that it has the capacity to present the relatedness between interdependencies (Smith & Anderson, 2004). According to Barry and Elmes (1997, p. 3) narrative serves as a lens through which “apparently independent and disconnected elements of existence are seen as related parts of a whole”. Stories are a natural vehicle for relating events (Buckler & Zien, 1996), creating themes and plots and in so doing, the story tellers make sense of themselves and social situations. Goossens (2000) also considers that mentally reliving experience is an important part of making sense of it. Conversation thus becomes the means to capture the tourist’s frame of reference and experience, as has been advocated by Ryan (1995) and more recently by Selby (2003). Van Manen (1990, p.227-228) recommends the phenomenological researcher to “gather and reflect upon stories, anecdotes and recollections of live experience”. Such experience is understood in retrospect (van Manen, 1990, p.35-36). Not surprisingly, then, most use of narrative in research tends to be captured some time after the events or experiences being retold. Such post experience

narratives, however, can be unconsciously manipulated for a variety of reasons. Whilst valuable, these stories become a reflective resource, a means of collecting opinions, experiences and reflections on that experience.

This paper argues that the “on the spot” interview, undertaken while the visitor is in the process of the destination experience, captures the immediacy of that experience before it has been filtered through self image, social image, distortions of memory or the impact of other, post visit images (Braun-LaTour et al., 2006; Jenkins, 1999; Sirgy and Su, 2000). Analysis of narratives recorded whilst the visitor is engaged in the destination experience can give an insight into the immediate impact of that experience and allow us to tease out the ways in which it is processed. From this, we are better able to understand the mechanisms visitors use in making sense of their experience and, indeed, to see those mechanisms at work. In short, it gives us a window onto the formation and transmission of word of mouth publicity: sense making becomes sense giving.

### **Narratives and Marketing**

Because we are arguing for the utility and explanatory power of narrative, it is helpful to define what we understand by narrative and review its use in marketing and tourism research. Smith and Weed (2007, p.252) note that it is difficult to give a precise or clear cut definition of narrative, partly because it can be considered both as a vehicle through which individuals articulate themselves and their experiences and as an activity in itself, a form of social action which is constructed between individuals. Gubrium and Holstein (1998) talk of narrative practice, which encompasses storytelling as an activity, the resources used to tell stories and the situations and conditions in which those stories are told, whilst Callahan and Elliott (1996) regard narrative as both stories and accounts, but Barry and Elmes (1997) discern a trend towards narrative as

communication. Importantly for our work, Smith and Weed (2007) argue that the use of narrative has value for understanding experience. This echoes Lawler's (2002) view of narratives as containing transformation, action and character brought together within some form of plot, but which may be captured by the researcher as fragments or partial accounts rather than complete life histories.

Narrative, however, is not only a means of communicating to others, it is a way for the individual to make sense of that experience to themselves (Callahan and Elliott, 1996; Gyimothy, 2000; Padgett and Allen, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1988; Wiles et al., 2005; Woodruffe, 1997). Indeed, Polkinghorne (1988) argues that narrative is the primary means by which the meaning of experience is constructed. It is by reflecting on experience that individuals come to understand its meaning, and this reflection often takes the form of talking about the experience to others. As Wiles et al. note: "Narratives reflect, communicate and shape the world and our understanding of it" (2005, p.90).

Human beings, then, communicate their experience through narrative, talking about what they have seen and done. The importance of this for tourism marketers is that visitors communicate their destination experience through the holiday stories they tell to family, friends and colleagues. At the same time, however, it is acknowledged that recollection and retelling can change with the passage of time, different audiences and the impact of other information and images of the same experience. Jenkins (1999) notes that post visit images, although more complex, may suffer from fading due to time elapsed since the visit. Indeed, Braun-Latour et al (2006) found that post experience information could distort the visitor's personal memory and change their holiday stories. Moreover, they also found that the more post experience information a visitor received, the more their own recollections were changed (Braun-LaTour et al., 2006, p.365). Bendix (2002, pp.473-474) suggests that there may also be a pro-

active, if unconscious, manipulation of our visitor experience, in that we reshape our stories to compensate for unpleasant or negative feelings which may have been aroused by incidents whilst on holiday.

Of course narratives are never “pure” accounts of activities, but are stories about experiences which are formed in the light of self awareness. Image and experience are blended together in these narratives. For example, a person who likes to consider and portray themselves as well travelled might play down an incident in a café or restaurant where a misunderstanding arose over whether service was included in the bill, because this might not accord with their view of themselves. On the other hand, if that person wanted to demonstrate their familiarity with the language and culture, they might tell the same story in a different way, emphasising the conversation rather than the cause of the discussion. Sirgy and Su (2000) suggest that tourists choose destinations to conform to their self image, whether that is their own ideal self image or the social self image, the way they hope to appear to others. Thus it can be argued that in making sense of experience, people might consciously or unconsciously form their narrative to reflect that same self-image (Guthrie, 2007). Nonetheless, these narratives can present the nature of the experience as it is experienced; the what and how of experiencing.

We argue that for some purposes there is much to be gained from the analysis of narrative which is retold almost in real time, i.e. almost immediately after, or even during, the experience. In this paper, we illustrate how visitor narratives captured whilst the destination experience is still happening can illuminate our understanding of the processes by which the visitor understands and talks about the destination. We will demonstrate that such insights into the freshly minted accounts of experience and the factors which influence them have implications both for product development and destination marketing.

Narrative has been used in marketing and tourism research. Thompson et al. (1989, p.144) used interpretation of consumer narratives to expound the benefits of understanding consumer experience in their own words, arguing that for “consumer researchers to understand experience, they must first employ methods and assumptions that allow for experience to exist”. Obenauer et al. (2006) used a meaning-based approach to analyse backpacker experiences of hostel service quality, using open ended statements or questions to initiate conversation with backpackers. Tucker (2005) analysed narratives captured through participant observation and interviews to achieve an understanding of individuals’ experience of package coach tours in New Zealand, and Ryan has repeatedly advocated the use of conversation as means to capture the tourist’s frame of reference and experience (Ryan, 1995, 2000; Ryan and Cave, 2005), as has Selby (2003; Selby, 2004). Whilst not specifically advocating narrative approaches, Otto and Ritchie recognise the need to capture the service experience while the “evaluation remains fresh in consumers’ minds” thereby keeping the research as “real and as recent as possible” (Otto and Ritchie, 1996, p.173). The benefit of narrative research is that it affords an insight into the destination experience from the visitor’s perspective in a way that is not achievable through surveys.

Other researchers have tried to investigate elements of word of mouth publicity by asking visitors whether they have any intention either to return or to recommend the product, destination or attraction to others (Baloglu, 2001; Bigné et al., 2001). However, such studies throw more light on intention than actual behaviour, as they are measuring the likelihood of recommendation, as in speaking positively about the destination. We argue that marketers and destination managers could use narrative to know whether those visitors are likely to promote the destination. In other words,

whether their experience turned them into proactive ambassadors or, indeed, dissuaders.

## **Methodology**

Having argued for the utility of narrative as a means of understanding the development and transmission of word of mouth publicity, the question arises of how best to capture and interpret those narratives. Shankar and Goulding (2001) suggest that the qualitative researcher is able to maintain an objective position, but not in a positivistic sense. Rather, by virtue of being outside the immediate experience the researcher is able to remain alive to various interpretations. Our objective was to seek out explanations of how visitors experience a destination and try to establish in what ways they might describe this to others. Our tools are the collection of narratives from visitors and the analysis of themes which emerge from the narratives. Thus we analyse visitor narratives to explore the relationship between destination experience and destination image, and try to understand how that image is transmitted through those visitor stories. Our intention was to capture the immediacy of experience, thereby reducing the impact of accretions and unconscious adaptation.

### *Sampling and site selection*

The destinations selected, Edinburgh and Greenwich, were destinations in their own right, rather than places which might be visited only as an adjunct to a visit to friends and relatives, or to a business trip. Edinburgh attracted 3.52 m staying visitors trips in 2006 (VisitScotland, 2008) and Greenwich 3.7 m visitors, including day and staying visitors, in 2004 (London Development Agency, 2006). Both are “must see” destinations and encompass a variety of heritage and other attractions, as well as accommodation and other visitor facilities. Interviews were carried out at different

locations within each destination to maintain a destination, rather than attraction, or facility focus.

Because we sought a purposeful sample, that is to say one where the respondents were likely to have the characteristics we needed, we were able to use a convenient technique. Our sampling strategy was to approach potential respondents, discover whether they were visitors or residents and, if visitors, invite them to participate. The primary objective was to capture visitor stories with the aim of exploring the process by which destination experience is understood. A pilot study had shown that respondents were happy to give their stories but reluctant to provide personal or contact details. It was therefore decided to record only age group and home location. Initially we had decided to use only UK domestic visitors. As interviewing progressed, however, it became clear that it was not always possible to identify whether a potential interviewee was British, and the overseas visitors approached expressed interest and willingness to talk about their experiences. We then decided to include native English speaking visitors, i.e. from Canada, the USA, or Australasia, and also non native speakers who were comfortable expressing themselves in English as these might shed some additional light on the way in which experience is transmuted into word of mouth. Patton (2002, p.240) notes that such opportunistic, emergent sampling allows the researcher to take advantage of unfolding opportunities. Details of our 56 respondents, together with interview locations are summarised in Table I.

Take in Table I Here

### *Interviews and data collecting*

We conducted 56 unstructured interviews with visitors who were on holiday in a destination. Maxwell (1998) suggests that unstructured approaches are particularly useful for understanding processes, as they permit contextual understanding and

provide internal validity, albeit at the expense of generalisability and comparability. Opening questions (Table II) were used to initiate the interviews and elicit narratives about the areas of interest, but then the interviews were allowed to develop as free flowing conversations. This allowed us to follow the natural course of the narrative and enabled us to capture word of mouth image as it was formed. As the conversation developed, we were able to record the significant events of the visitor's experience by their stories about that experience.

Take in Table II here

The interviews were recorded, transcribed as soon as possible after the event, and the transcripts imported into QSR Nivo 2.0, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis package, which facilitated reading and re-reading to identify themes both within individual interviews and across the interviews, moving from detail to the wider picture and back again (Guthrie and Thyne, 2006). As will be seen, this process brought to light some interesting facets of the experience which affected the image being conveyed.

### *Analysis*

The analysis of all qualitative data, but especially narratives, is interpretative. We rely on the skills of the researcher to explain and present the process in a way that helps to overcome claims of bias or merely seeing what you are looking for. Yet the counterpoint, indeed the strength, of a subjective interpretation is that it brings into play the skills, knowledge and insights of the researchers. With the caveats that it must be done transparently, logically and well, this can result in a fuller, deeper and better understanding of the phenomenon. To demonstrate that it is "done well", because we lack many of the convenient protocols of quantitative analysis, the processes involved need to be explained so that readers can judge for themselves how soundly the

processes have been employed. Readers need to be convinced that the descriptions of the data are accurate; the categories are valid and that the relationships are soundly demonstrated. Only in this way can the “insights” be useful and understanding of the phenomenon enriched. Most telling is the power to be convincing in the arguments proposed. Accordingly, we try to explain our analysis by setting out the categories we saw in our data; how we sorted these into themes on the basis of the patterns we noted. Our contribution is to draw these elements together to show how they combine to synthesise a visitor's experience and how this is retold. Of course, we recognise the fallibility of our analysis, but the human sensibilities that we seek to understand are complex and inconvenient for analysis. We argue it is better to try to make sense of this complexity than to reduce it by forcing it into the researchers' predetermined categories that may, but may not, reflect this complexity.

### **Elements, themes and patterns in the data**

Informed by our literature review about narratives, our overarching research question was, “How do visitors make sense of their experience?” Goossens (2002) had usefully pointed out that narratives provide such a mechanism, so we first sought themes in the data that explained the process of how they consumed the visitor experience.

All of our respondents talked about what they expected to find, but seemed to temper this with how they had expected to enjoy it. Our initial analysis indicated two strong patterns in how different respondents approached the consumption of their holiday. Some (10 interviewees) seemed to want to catch everything possible; but others, contrastingly, wanted to savour a limited number of places (7 interviewees). Because we were examining how they consumed their experiences it seemed useful to categorise these as gourmands and gourmets, thus reflecting not just what they consumed but how, and how much they wanted to consume. These proved useful

descriptive categories because we could begin to discern explanatory categories. We provide examples in Table III to show how we arrived at these categories.

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We found that these preliminary descriptive categorisations of our respondents allowed us to begin to see how this worldview affected their experience. We see these categories as helping to explain how they experienced or consumed their visit. But these categories did not fit all of the data. Unsurprisingly, the remaining majority of respondents seemed to lie somewhere between the extremes of our categories. For example, one respondent told us, “I’ve just been kind of wandering around.” (G-12 Para 23). It became apparent in our constant comparative analysis, the iterative reviewing of data with emerging themes, that our initial categories were not capturing the characteristics of all our respondents. Consequently we developed a third category, “grazers” to fit the data and describe this descriptive category.

#### *Gourmets, Grazers and Gourmands*

Our analysis showed that the visitors could be categorised into one of three “ideal types” (Weber, 1964) related to their consumption characteristics: Gourmets, Grazers or Gourmands. As with all ideal typifications, not all visitors will necessarily fall precisely into one of these types; rather that the three typifications are points on a spectrum of destination consumption styles, from the Gourmet at one end to the Gourmand at the other. Table IV summarises the consumption styles of our respondents. Grazers appear to browse across a destination, without the drivers evinced by Gourmets or Gourmands. Thus for us, these categories help to describe how they make sense of their experiences.

Take in Table IV here

Table IV provides some examples of the distinctions between how people consume when we look through the lenses of the consumption characteristics. Thus Gourmets see themselves as discerning. Note how the respondent is disparaging about “edutainment” where pageants are acted out in costumed dramas. He even “makes allowances” for restaurants as a necessary commercial element, but note how he points out the difference between different monastic orders, perhaps to demonstrate his knowledge. In contrast our Grazer is very open about what sort of experience she seeks. She is not driven in any direction, neither in terms of what to see or even how to find it. Note how she talks about back street pubs - hidden but waiting to be discovered. The Gourmands on the other hand, are quite prescriptive in wanting to see it all and have it all set out for them. In terms of sense making, we can see how expectations might be formed differently for each category.

A Gourmet will make sense of the experience in line with the perceived quality, but quality will be discerned in relation to their (superior) tastes. Clearly a judgement will be made about how well, or not, the experience relates to their views. So restaurants are ok, but we would expect an ice cream van might be disapproved of; certainly candy floss would be beyond the pale. They seem to know what they should see but emphasis is on how they see it. Thus sense making is established in terms of how well a place demonstrates its suitability. Gourmands seem to be collectors of experience and sense is made in terms of the number of experiences rather than quality. Note how vividly the first respondent in this category expresses this, “*I’ve been here, and I’ve done that*”. So sense making is achieved through the range and number of experiences. Clearly the Grazers have a different motivation and are distinctive in not seeking out any previously prescribed experience. They seem to be driven by what they discover and make sense of it in terms of its unusualness for them; “*it’s amazing the things that you find. Nice little pubs, you know, little back streets, it’s fascinating.*” From a marketing perspective, we can discern how a destination would have to be

“described” differently to appeal to each category. For the Gourmets, culture and authenticity would have to be writ large; for the Grazers, things to be discovered; but in contrast, the Gourmands would be attracted by the range and extent of “sights”.

### *Comparisons*

Although we had argued that interviewing people who were actually on holiday captured the freshest impressions of their destination experience, it became clear on reading the transcripts that some visitors (40) were trying to make sense of their current destination experience by comparing it with previous ones. They used a range of different reference points: internal, such as their own previous experience or their own standards and values; and external, such as information gathered from other people, the media or guidebooks, and web sites.

At the simple level, interviewees used comparison to convey a context for their comments or reactions. For example, the sense of awe, of touching history expressed mainly by overseas visitors, arose from the physical power, historical attributes or authenticity of a particular site, and gained added value from the contrast with the perceived lack of history or heritage of their own country. Other interviewees used comparison with other aspects of their home situation to make sense of their current destination experience, such as being impressed or overwhelmed by crowds, or other sociological aspects. Two ladies on holiday from Australia commented on the number of “black-skinned Britons” (G-01, Para.84) they saw in London doing jobs like street cleaning:

*“Jemima: Well it’s not really a job you’d like to do... A lot of Australians would take the dole rather than do that...”*

*Paula: Well, no, but some people, their pride... they would rather take a job that pays them money, an honest shilling, rather than claiming a handout... “*

(G-01, Paras.79-82)

The interviewees recognise there are similar situations at home, or in other destinations they have visited, so by creating the comparison they are able to rationalise the presence of the potentially unusual element as nothing which should disturb their holiday experience. These elements are thus accepted and even forgiven by the visitor but still form part of their holiday story and the resulting perceptions of the destination transmitted to their audience. The comparison process is summarised in Figure 1.

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The general examples cited above have little relation to whether the interviewee shows Gourmet or Gourmand tendencies. However, other instances of comparison were related to consumption style. For example, some interviewees appear to compare their own attitude towards the experience of visiting a particular site and what they think other people's purposes, intentions or motivations might be. Here Rowena, a Gourmet, questions what some of the other visitors to the National Maritime Museum might be getting from their visit:

*"I mean, it's quite specifically maritime, really, it's not going to be good for everybody. I mean, I sort of looked at the people and wonder why they want to be here"*

G-19, Para.62

The implication, conscious or otherwise, is that she has the interest, knowledge or understanding to benefit from the exhibits, but that perhaps other visitors do not. Christine and Henry, Gourmets, are quite specific that they want to see fewer things in depth, considering themselves different to people they talk to who seem to have been to a lot of places but not really seen them. Barbara and Carol, on the other hand, are Gourmands who want to see as much of Edinburgh as possible, and so recognise that

unlike their friends, they need to spend more time there to experience all that Edinburgh offers:

*“Someone else said we had to go to the Highlands, the Scottish Highlands, all that sort of stuff, so its kind of hard because as Carol says, a lot of people said, “Oh you know, two days is enough”, but I think it depends on what sort of person you are, you know, whether you want to get the whole history and culture and all that sort of stuff, and we are. And so I think you’ve got to take your time, a lot longer than someone who doesn’t. I definitely need more time here.”*

E-Castle-05, Para.74

Comparison played a part in processing the experience of interactions with people within the destination in that interviewees were either applying a set of standards or judging one experience by comparing it to a previous one: Alison (G-35), a Gourmand, compares the way she feels about the welcome in various hotels whereas Anthony, a Grazer, tends to benchmark against a set of national standards for accommodation quality. Edgar (G-11), a Gourmet, retains the memory of an Athenian guide who gave him the level of information about a historic site which suited his self image as an educated traveller and this becomes a positive benchmark against which to assess future destination experiences and interactions. This brings out one of the key differences between the two ends of the consumption style spectrum: the degree to which Gourmets tend to the ascetic, slightly distanced, the intellectual, in the way they experience and the destination, whereas the Gourmands are more immediate, perhaps more visceral and sensual in their appetite for what the destination has to offer. Nonetheless, all groups make sense of the experience by comparisons.

*Justification*

There were instances where interviewees talked about mildly to completely unpleasant or negative experiences, but at the same time appeared to react with a degree of empathy with either the situation or the other person involved. This understanding, coupled with a refusal to allow the incidents to create a negative image of the destination, suggested the destination was being forgiven in some sense. Nevertheless, these incidents still form part of the story the interviewees were telling about the destination, so although they might have explained or justified the incident to their own satisfaction, they had not forgotten it.

For example, Charles and Sara (E-Castle-06) recounted an incident in a fish and chip shop in the north west of Scotland when local people had switched to speaking Gaelic, which they felt to be unwelcoming, if not downright rude:

*“If someone is very, very friendly, even if he was speaking Gaelic, and someone comes in that’s speaking English, maybe he would switch to a language and speak less. For example, when French tourists come in, you make an effort to speak their language. And it seems really doubly unfriendly to switch to the language they can’t. If someone does do that, really they are being rude, there’s no two ways about it. I mean, it doesn’t really matter, and we’ve only ever had it, come across it once, and that was right at the northern part... when we went to the fish and chip shop...”*

*Charles: We went to the fish and chip shop..*

*Sara: In fact, we didn’t, it was the chap who understood enough to realise, it was a chap from Dumfries, and he understood enough to come out and say “They’re talking about us in there”*

*Researcher: Does that colour your whole recollection of the Highlands, or is just something you recognise?*

*Charles: No. We travel a lot.*

*Sara: No. Maybe if you didn't travel so much. Someone that rarely goes, its their first time in Scotland, it may make them cross and they'd be convinced that all Scots are like that. But no. no more than if you walk into somewhere in England and someone is rude to you, you would think that everybody in London is stuck up." (E-Castle-06, Para.151-161)*

This couple consider themselves to be well travelled and experienced, and in consequence, do not let this incident put them off that part of Scotland. They use their experience from other parts of the UK as a reference point for making sense of the apparent unfriendliness, tempering the initial unpleasantness.

In a similar way, other interviewees commented upon aspects of the destination such as crime or begging, but accepted them and were not put off by them. Two couples interviewed in Edinburgh had encountered begging, being "approached in the street for money" (E-SW-02, Para. 54), but both went on to immediately to say that this was unfortunately commonplace now. Gareth came from "Matlock, and there can be people, you know, begging in the streets there. It's just a common thing, isn't it?" (E-RYB-08, Para.41). Although they may have explained or justified this aspect of the destination to themselves, nevertheless, like Charles and Sara, these incidents still feature in their holiday stories. As their audience is likely to have a different set of experiences, knowledge or standards when hearing the tale, the image they receive may be different, and potentially more negative, than that retained by the storyteller.

We note how a visitor's motivations and concerns in relation to their travelling companions have an amplifying effect on the visitor's own destination experience. This interplay also appears to affect the outcome of the comparison process. Two ladies interviewed in Edinburgh were unimpressed with the treatment they had received in their hotel when their husbands, one of whom was diabetic, were ill and

they asked for food. The staff did not appear to empathise with their concerns, and all they would provide was:

*“toast and some butter, and I mean it was the only thing on the whole menu that they could actually offer him... it was disgusting”* (E-RYB-04, Para.62)

The ladies might not have emphasised the offhand attitude of the hotel staff if their own perceptions had not been coloured by concern for their husbands' wellbeing. However, having received poor treatment, they now felt that they “wouldn't like to come back to Hotel A” (E-RYB-04, Para.80). Similarly, their previous good opinion of that particular hotel chain might not have been revised downwards: “If they were going to Edinburgh, you wouldn't say go to Hotel A” (E-RYB-04, Para. 88). The two ladies had enjoyed other aspects of their Edinburgh visit, such as the attractions and the places, but the hotel incident was nevertheless something they talked about. The impression they were conveying to others was that people in Edinburgh were offhand and unwelcoming, even if the attractions are worth a visit.

These incidents are not only incorporated into the visitor's own dataset for use in assessing future destination experiences; as elements of their holiday stories, they are incorporated into the datasets of the friends and family who listen to those travellers' tales, and become part of the set of anticipations based on word of mouth information which they carry into their future destination experiences. The act of retelling may even be the means whereby the visitor realises why the particular experience or incident was good or bad. Although they may have been aware of their feelings or reactions at the time, the motivations, anticipations and values through which they evaluate that experience become clarified, consciously or unconsciously, through the post hoc narrative.

### *Reporting*

This process was most evident in the answers to the general question “What would you say about *destination?*” which revealed five different styles of answer. The majority of interviewees (60%) responded by talking about things to see and do. Some of these interviewees started off with, effectively, a tour guide list of options. Many people (38%) referred to things which they had experienced, starting with a list of places or things to see and do, then illustrating them with their own experiences or reflections. A variation on this was that some people (31%) launched straightaway into positive recommendations based on their own experiences and perceptions, rather than the standard tour guide style list.

Others (12%) simply repeated some of what they had said about their experiences earlier in the interview, leaving the interviewer or person listening to draw their own conclusions as to what to visit. The most enthusiastic of these were, in effect, evangelising about the destination:

Ruth: Enthusing from own experience

*“It’s small enough to be able to walk from one end to the other, which is marvellous. I find that fantastic, that you can get the Tube, you can come down here, you can go and see the Cutty Sark... There’s just so much to do. You can go to one of the pubs. It’s really wonderful. I would say to anybody, ‘you must go’ ” (G-03, Para.95)*

Interestingly, only 28% of interviewees mentioned the possible interests or tastes of the listener. Some very clearly recognised that not everyone was interested in other people’s travel tales. Eleven interviewees tempered their recommendations with phrases like “if they’re interested in that sort of thing” or “if you’re interested in history”, whilst in two interviews in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich (G-19, G-23), the interviewees specifically related their comments to the interests of a particular

person such as their son or grandchildren. Rowena enthused about things to see and do

*“I would just say it was a really beautifully done museum, it is very accessible, it’s easy to get here, it’s a short walk from public transport, beautifully set out, just an exceptionally enormous range”* but she commented on who would enjoy it most,

*“I mean it’s wonderful for children. I have grandchildren and I was thinking about them as I came through here, thinking that the older one would just love it. And when they know more about history, you know, for them to come here when they are about ten or eleven would just be wonderful”*

(G-19, Paras.80,84)

Some interviewees seem to understand that other people may view a destination through a different lens. As a result, they temper their holiday stories or recommendations to suit that audience, while others not only view the destination through their own preconceptions but assess it partly with those others in mind. Interestingly, we noted that they did not merely report on the destination, but rather in terms of how they had experienced it: choice, range and content of the destination were all narrated as experiences.

There are thus three elements to the process by which visitors make sense of their destination experience and communicate that experience to others through their holiday stories. They use comparison to contextualise and evaluate; justification to understand and explain; and then convey the sense of their experience through reporting to others. Thus we see that the image of place is not an absolute but rather the outcome of a process whereby the visitor’s motivations, anticipations and predispositions combine to colour their interactions with and evaluation of the people and places they encounter in the destination. This is summarised in Figure II, which

also shows the impact of the anticipations and predispositions on the image forming process. In effect, the narratives capture the sense making process through the sense giving in recounting and narrating of destination experience.

Take in Figure II here

## **Conclusions and Implications**

Our analysis has shown that visitors make sense of their experience in the light of their own dispositions. We noted how a visitor's belonging to one or other of our descriptive categories was related both to what they saw and how they experienced the visitor attraction. Categorisation provided a mechanism to begin to understand the differences in both the sense making and sense giving processes that respondents employed. The concept of sense making was useful in showing how predispositions tailor what people make of the experience. This we think important because it shows that there is not one universal way of evaluating a tourist experience. Rather, we saw how the same things can be seen and hence evaluated in quite different ways. Our use of narratives collected at the destination was novel. However, the anticipated benefits of the immediacy were somewhat dissipated when we found how visitors used comparisons with their previous experience: even in the immediacy of enjoying the experience they employed their own histories as a lens for viewing their current experience. Nonetheless our expectations about the power of narratives to help explain process were justified. The visitors' stories demonstrated how they made judgements about the destination. Our conclusions allow us to present an iterative process diagram (Figure III) of how visitors make sense and give sense to their experiences and how this is transmitted.

Take in Figure III here

Our research into destination experience supports the view (Ryan, 1995) that conversation is a means of collecting data which enables us to uncover and understand the emotions and confusions which are integral to the tourist phenomenon. The study demonstrates and confirms the utility of narratives in discerning the frameworks within which Sirgy and Su (2000) suggest visitors contextualise experience. It also extends the proposition that narrative enquiry has “a role in exploring people’s lived experiences” (Smith and Weed, 2007, p.253) from the field of sports tourism into that of destination research.

In broader terms, we suggest that our findings support the proposition that consumption experiences, in this case destination consumption experiences, can be understood through narrative (Shankar and Goulding, 2001). Van Manen (1999) posits that experience is only truly understood in retrospect. Our finding that interviewees often referred back to previous destination experiences as a context for making sense of current experience, would tend to confirm this. At the same time, we suggest that the very fact of eliciting these stories enables us to gain a deeper understanding of the complex nature of the factors influencing the formation and transmission of destination image.

This we think has implications for both practitioners and academics. For both these groups we argue that we have demonstrated an advantage in the use of narrative for data gathering. For practitioners we have shown how narratives may indicate areas not previously considered. Narratives have the capability to develop a better understanding about the appeal of existing tourist destinations and uncover potential appeal of new destinations or new attractions. Narratives may be useful in tailoring destination marketing to suit particular groups. Thus the use of our categories has highlighted the different groups’ expectations and how the marketing message about a destination should reflect the requirements of the target group. For academics, we

hope to have shown how narratives provide a different type of data that helps theory building. Moreover, we have demonstrated that the variety in consumption patterns indicates that places are consumed in different ways; that the same things may be evaluated quite differently and that one explanation does not fit all visitor experience.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Our interviews took place in destinations whose attraction very largely rests upon cultural and built heritage. This, together with the time of the interviews, may have contributed to the preponderance of older respondents; had the Edinburgh interviews been undertaken in August, there might well have been more, younger respondents whose anticipations might relate more to events and activities. The research could be repeated either in overseas heritage destinations, or in other types of destinations within the UK, or at non heritage sites within those destinations, to give further insights into the sense making process.

The decisions to interview only English speaking visitors can be considered to have resulted in the majority of interviewees coming from a similar cultural background. Further insights into the sense making and sense giving process could be obtained by repeating the research with non English speakers, in their own language, or by interviewing English visitors in overseas destinations. Such extensions of this study might indicate differences or similarities in the way the factors interact in the sense making process. Increased understanding of such differences would enable destination managers to encourage product and service providers to invest as necessary to improve the experience for these groups of visitors.

### **Caveats**

We are not arguing for the replacement of existing standardised, quantitative visitor surveys, which can give valuable data on aspects of the destination product (facilities, attractions, activities) that may contribute to enjoyment of a destination. We do argue, however, that such studies are less helpful in understanding their impact on the visitor experience. We cannot say that an incremental list of features and facilities adds up to a pleasant experience. We recognise that the practical limitations of budget and staff resource may militate against attempting to capture lengthy interviews. However, we suggest that the technique used here of asking specific open questions relating to the highlights and lowlights of their immediate experience could be readily adapted. These could be sampled across a specific number and range of visitors in a destination, using ten – fifteen minute interviews. Analysis to uncover the commonalities across those visitor narratives, which are both sense making and sense giving, can give a much fuller account of the holistic destination experience by capturing what was significant for the visitor. This will illuminate the actual visitor experience, and thus the heart of the visitor journey.

**Table I: Summary of Respondents**

	Edinburgh		Greenwich	
Total interviews	20 across 3 days		36 across 5 days	
Interview Locations	Edinburgh Castle (6) Scotch Whisky Centre (4) Royal Yacht Britannia (11)		Visitor Centre (21) Painted Hall (5) National Maritime Museum (10)	
Origin	UK	13	UK	9
	Overseas	7	Overseas	27
Age Range	<24	1	<24	0
	25-34	5	25-34	1
	35-44	4	35-44	3
	45-54	7	45-54	11
	55-64	2	55-64	14
	65+	1	65+	7

**Table II: Interview Questions**

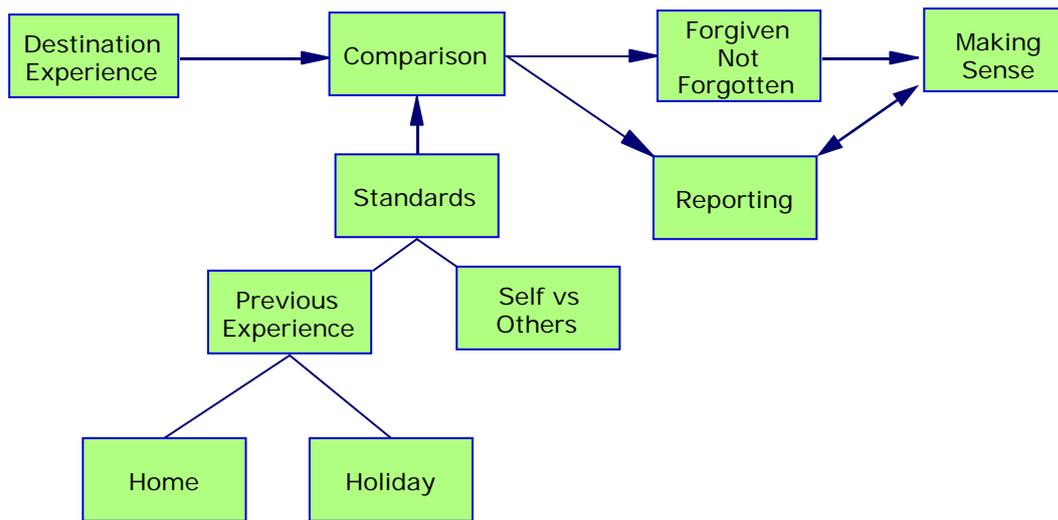
Initiating interview questions	Data sought
What made you choose <i>destination</i> ? What did you expect to find?	What image, understanding, expectations of the destination they had before they came. Probe questions elicited source of these expectations, e.g. Friends, family, internet, guidebooks, news media etc.
Tell me about your visit, the high points, low points, memories you will take away?	Stories, narratives about their visit, encounters they have had
If someone at home\work were to ask you about <i>destination</i> , what would you tell them about it?	Whether initial expectations have been met, disappointed, exceeded. How and why perceptions/image of destination has changed.

**Table III. Descriptive Categories in the data**

<b>Gourmet</b>	<b>Gourmand</b>
<p><b>Key characteristic:</b> Quality not quantity: fewer experiences in depth</p>	<p><b>Key characteristic:</b> See and do as much as possible</p>
<p>Example:   <i>"We'd rather see a little bit less, but see the things properly and not rush through"</i>            G-16 Para 84</p>	<p>Example:   <i>"We kind of wish that we had more time, actually. Some people told, we've been told that a weekend would be enough to see everything but now that we're here we wish we had at least one more day, don't we?"</i>            EC-5 Paras. 71-74</p>
<p>Example:   <i>"We're not the sort who rush through and find that we have been twenty five places but we haven't seen them because we've been rushing through..."</i> G-16 Para 78</p>	<p>Example:   <i>"we were going to see six things in every day, but we didn't manage to do that"</i>            G-20 para 30</p>

**Table IV: Sense making by consumption characteristics**

<b>Gourmet</b>	<b>Grazer</b>	<b>Gourmand</b>
<p><b>Key characteristic:</b> Self Image: Connoisseur, discerning</p>	<p><b>Key characteristic:</b> Self Image: Open to experience, free and easy</p>	<p><b>Key characteristic:</b> Self Image: Well travelled, seen everything</p>
<p>Example:</p> <p><i>"But there weren't people dressed as monks or anything like that, you know. And that's the kind of thing I really like, I really like seeing it. It's like Roman ruins or something like that... yeah, sure, there are a few restaurants, you've got to make a bit of money out of the Cistercian, or rather Benedictine thing, there's a bit of a touristy thing, but it's all on the outside of the actual thing, nothing on the inside but the real thing."</i> G-30 Para 185</p> <p>Example:</p> <p><i>"I tend to be interested in things that most people don't have time for. Most New Zealanders when they come here, they don't come here strictly speaking to revel in the history, or revel in the cultural aspects and the links that we have, or anything that went before."</i> G-30 Para 169</p>	<p>Example:</p> <p><i>"We're like that everywhere, we just tend to walk. We're not very good at reading instructions. But I think you find places by getting lost. I like getting lost. We always get lost when we're on holiday, and it's amazing the things that you find. Nice little pubs, you know, little back streets, it's fascinating."</i> EC-1 Para 147</p> <p>Example:</p> <p><i>"One of the high spots was that group we saw last year, the Saor Patrol, playing the Celtic music, I don't know if you've ever seen it, they play in the old Celtic clothes and they were very good, and we saw them live. We were just passing by, it was at the bottom of the Old Town, and it was a beautiful day, and we heard this noise and it wasn't like the normal bagpipes, and we saw them. They were brilliant and we sat there for about half an hour, and we bought some of their CDs. It was absolutely fantastic, really impressed me."</i> EC-01 Para71</p>	<p>Example:</p> <p><i>"It's just nice to broaden your horizons, to be able to say 'I've been here, and I've done that' and it just gives you more of a scope when you're talking to people. You can say, 'Oh yeah, I've been there and I know about this and I know about that.'</i> EC-02 Para 63</p> <p>Example:</p> <p><i>"Wouldn't it be great if you could get hold of a map that told you what all the little closes were about and give you a bit of history? You're seeing it from like one dimension, and it would be better if you could get, like, some kind of .. or just some more information, that these closes were like this and this ... because I feel that you're missing out on all that."</i> E-RYB-8 Para150</p>



**Figure I: The comparison process**

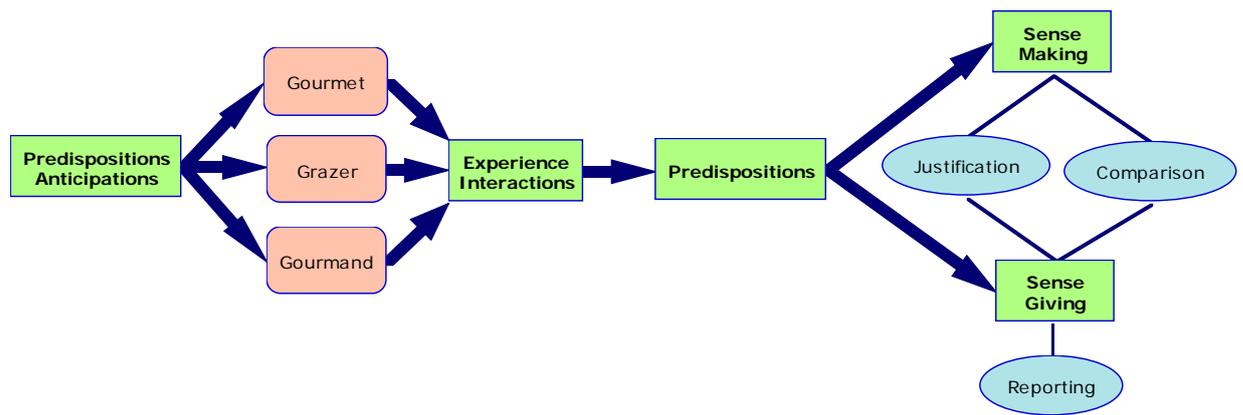
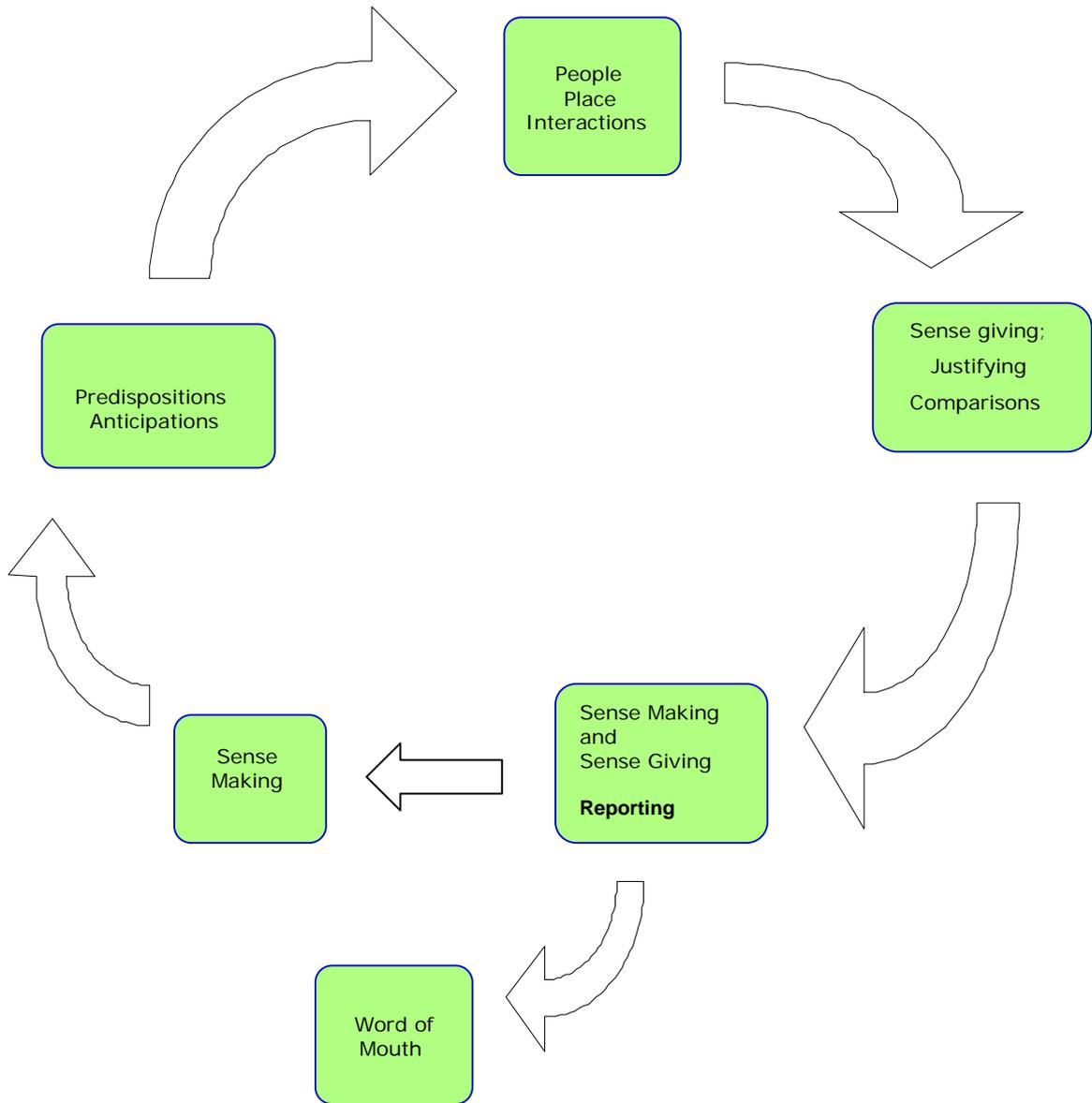


Figure II: The sense making and sense giving process



**Figure III. Sense making and sense giving as a continuing and iterative process.**

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