Cultural Influences on Memorable Tourism Experiences

Samira Zare

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of culture on memorability of tourism experiences. Such understanding sheds light on memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) research. The study employed Iranian culture as its context. Participants were asked to write a narrative text of their memorable experiences detailing why that experience was special for them. A grounded theory approach was adopted to extract themes from data. Results indicated that there were four unique themes related to the Iranian culture that made tourism experiences memorable: togetherness, independence and control, spontaneity and flexibility as well as distinctiveness. The paper initiates discussion for culture as a neglected influence on memorability of travel experiences.

Keywords: cultural influences, tourist experiences, memorable tourism experiences, travel memory, Iran, Iranians.

1 Introduction

What tourists remember from their trips and how they remember it, are important for tourists’ future travel behaviours and subjective wellbeing (Barnes, Mattsson & Sørensen, 2016; Filep, 2014; Ritchie, & Tung, 2010; Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, & Diener, 2003). A key to survival in the competitive tourism business world lies in facilitating experiences that can stand out in the memories of tourists and thus build recommendations and repeat visits (Kim, 2014; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012; Pearce & Packer, 2013). In recent years, there have been attempts to understand the factors creating positive memories. Tourism researchers have been investigating tourists’ direct recall of what is now labelled as a “memorable tourism experience”. The definition of memorable tourism experiences (MTEs) is as follows: “tourism
experiences positively remembered and recalled after the event has occurred” (Kim 2014; Kim et al., 2010; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). This simple definition effectively highlights reflection on experience rather than the immediacy of experience.

Studies of MTEs started with identifying the characteristics which can be used to design such occasions in order to increase chances of desired future behaviour (Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012). Therefore, for a while, the focus of these studies was on optimizing factors of tourists’ autobiographic memories, to manage a positive retrieval (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2013; Chandralal, Rindfleish, & Valenzuela, 2015; Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012; Zare, 2019). Common themes related to the type of activities or destination attributes that are both mentally and physically engaging and can lead to focused attention, encoding, and memorability were found through these research. Recent research in this area have attended to other aspects of MTEs such as sequential (Park & Santos, 2017), reminiscence function (Kim & Chen, 2018), destination image, attachment, nostalgia, satisfaction, subjective well-being, and loyalty (Lee, 2015; Manthiou, Kang, Chiang, & Tang, 2016; Sthapit, Björk & Coudounaris, 2017; Sthapit, & Coudounaris, 2017; Tsai, 2016; Zhang, Wu & Buhalis, 2018).

Nonetheless, an important dimension of MTEs, the role of culture on creating positive memories have not received much attention. Except for a few cross-cultural studies on previous MTEs (Kim, 2013; Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Mazлина, & Ahmad, 2016), there is not enough knowledge about how culture may play an essential role in determining what we remember the most. This research is, therefore, an attempt to make a case for the extent that a culture may have influences on the memorability of travel experiences by a deep investigation of cultural traces in such events.
2 Literature review

2.1 Memorable Tourism Experiences

“Experiences in general and tourism experiences specifically are personal, subjective, and importantly, not necessarily easily shared or understood by others”. The implication of this view is that creating and measuring experiences are sensibly difficult because everyone’s experience is unique (Larsen, 2007; Pearce & Zare, 2017). Nevertheless, the studies of tourism experiences as the focal point of tourism and hospitality research have become increasingly popular (Morgan & Lugosi, 2010; Pearce, 1988; Ryan, 2002; Uriely, 2005). Although every travel memory may be used for future decisions, there are some memories that are more positively remembered, and therefore, more important in their further applications. Considerable impacts of unforgettable or extraordinary experiences on satisfaction, loyalty, revisit intention and word of mouth, have stimulated researchers to pursue studies of the components of experiences. (Caru & Cova, 2003; Kim et al., 2010; Sthapit, 2017; Wirtz et al., 2003).

One important perspective missing in the conceptualization of MTEs is attached to the socio-cultural aspects. The way individuals interpret tourism services and products is shaped by both personal idiosyncrasies and socio-cultural frames (Jensen, Lindberg & Ostergaard, 2015). Arnould and Thompson (2005) built on the ideas of consumer culture theory as a set of theories explaining the dynamic relationships between life experiences and cultural meaning. Based on this theory, it can be suggested that the cultural norms of a group of tourists from a certain culture, frame their interpretations and approaches to the meaning of travel experiences. That is, an individuals’ response to a tourism offering is built on aspects of social capital; in effect, sociological and macro frameworks provide content for the psychological processes and frameworks (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Gnoth & Matteucci, 2014; Pearce & Zare,
Besides cultural differences in interpreting experiences, cross-culture psychology has also suggested that everyday autobiographic memory (including travel memories) differs across cultures (cf. Jobson, 2009; Zare, 2019).

### 2.2 Culture and Tourism Experience

There are over 160 definitions for culture across the disciplines (Reisinger & Turner, 2003). In one view, culture is “the collective mental programming of the people in an environment” and everything “that people have in common” (Hofstede, 1980). The values held by the majority of the community, which are acquired in early childhood through common experience. Further, people in the same cultural group share a specific understanding of themselves and of others (Samovar, Porter, & Jain, 1981). The cultural values and beliefs that make up societies have been shown to shape an individual’s thoughts, wishes, perceptions, and behaviour (Berry & Sam 1997; Donthu & Yoo, 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Accordingly, cultural values held by tourists from different cultures produce diverse interpretations of a single tourism product. Ashworth (2003) supported this notion, namely, that tourists from different cultures perceive and encounter heritage spaces in different ways. As a result, tourists have different experiences even if they perform the same activities in the same environments.

By understanding tourism experiences of visitors from different cultures, destination managers and service designers can create more effective tourism programs that ensure memorable experiences and a high chance of satisfaction, revisit and recommendation. Recognizing such implications, a substantial body of cross-cultural research has been conducted in tourism. These studies have consistently revealed that tourists’ behaviours and vacation patterns are culture-specific (Chen, 2000; Pizam &
Nevertheless, cross-cultural studies are scarce in the contemporary domain of memorable experiences (Kim & Ritchie 2014; Chandralal et al., 2015; Pearce & Zare, 2017). In fact, cultural elements of tourists’ recollection of memorable tourism experiences has rarely been studied. Therefore, this study initiates discussion about a culture-specific dimension to the memorable tourism experiences (MTEs). The argument is that there are shared elements of making a trip memorable within a culture. Similarities in the ways people value their experiences, will likely cause common themes in the ways these experiences are remembered. In summary, the research emphasizes on building a case for the tourist’s culture as an important but neglected dimension of memorable tourism experiences by the previous studies. The context for this study is Iranian culture, a nation selected because of its documented position as being distinctive from the cultures already studied in memorable tourism experience research.

2.3 Iranian culture

Iran has long served as a nexus for trade and culture between East and West. This country along with several others such as India and Pakistan are grouped as a South Asian state by the World Tourism Organization (2017). Cluster analysis also shows that although Iran is a Muslim country near the Middle East, but it is culturally part of the South Asian cultural cluster. Therefore, Iran has more cultural similarities to its eastern neighbours rather to those in the west (Butler, O'Gorman, & Prentice, 2012; Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003; Morakabati, 2011). The position of Iran serves as an example of a country outside of the North American and East Asian locations previously explored in memorable tourism work. It is, arguably, unlike either of these previously studied locations and thus operates as a good test case for exploring the generalisability of the
dimensions of MTEs revealed to date.

3  **Methodology**

Qualitative data collection and analysis are central to this study. It is argued that the experiential and sociocultural dimensions of a consumption such as travel are not fully accessible through experiments, surveys, and modelling (Sherry, 1991). Symbols, rituals, and deeper meanings of products and brands could be missed in a quantitative investigation; therefore, this study has embraced a qualitative approach to reach its goal.

Cultural influences on remembering experiences are best manifested in the meanings people give to the elements of such experiences when they are telling their travel stories (Reisinger & Turner, 2003). In other words, the narratives describing travel memories reflect the wider frame in which tourists live and move socially and culturally (Pearce & Zare, 2017). First-person accounts of experiences have been seen as useful to unravel the cultural meanings behind a story (Elsrud, 2001; Riessman, 1993; Thompson, Stern, & Arnould, 1998). In the context of this study, narratives provide a pragmatic access to Iranian respondents’ memorable tourism experiences, offering insights into the ways their travel experiences were actually remembered. Importantly, narratives provide an emic and natural point of view of what is perceived as memorable to the tourists during their tourism experience.

3.1  **Sample and questionnaire**

A sample of 100 Iranian travellers using the professional contact of the author were selected for the study. Respondents were sent the link to the online questionnaire privately and assured that their accounts would remain anonymous and no identifying questions were asked. 70 correctly completed responses returned.
A questionnaire was developed in English, then translated from English into Persian. Another person translated it back to English without knowing the original English version. Such translation and back-translation process was followed to ensure language equivalence in the questionnaire (Roster, Albaum, & Rogers, 2006, p. 750). The two English versions were then compared and adjusted to ensure the same meaning in the two languages (Schwartz & Oyserman, 2001).

In the main section, respondents were asked to describe their most positively remembered experience with as many details as to why that trip was memorable. This is a standard question used by previous MTEs work (Kim et al., 2010; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). However further guidance was given to the respondents to choose an experience that they re-live more often and enjoy remembering it. With such instruction, highly descriptive stories were received and probing was possible to a good extent. The accounts were between 500-1000 words and specifically contained the reason(s) for the experience to be the most special. The online questionnaire was constructed with Qualtrics software and the data were collected in two weeks on November 2016.

Demographic questions about age, gender and travel experience were also collected. Respondents consisted of 60% females and 40% males. Subjects ranged from 20 to 60 years old, with the majority between 28 to 40 years old. They had both international and domestic travel experiences: 15% were rated as highly experienced (more than 10 trips per year), 62% had a moderate level of experience (5-10 trips per year) and 23% had low travel experiences (less than 5 trips per year).

3.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis was based on the principle of grounded theory method and was conducted in three stages (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In the first stage, memorable
experiences accounts were translated to English from Persian by the author then another researcher read and compared the respondents’ notes for possible differences in the interpretations and emerging themes. Second phase was coding and conceptualizing the stories. As recommended by Corbin and Strauss (1990), three types of coding processes were employed; open, axial and selective coding. The line-by-line coding (which is a method of doing the open coding) was the initial step. This approach involves examining each line of the data and defining the actions and events that are represented in them (Charmaz, 2006). In this case, each line was searched for whether there was an implicit or explicit reason given for the trip to be memorable.

The initial open coding led to the axial coding of the data which reconstitutes the data in new ways by making connections between categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 97). For instance, initial line-by-line coding, such as “singing”, “laughing”, “chatting” and other similar initial codes were grouped to form the theme “togetherness”.

A selective coding was also applied by integrating the various axial categories. In this phase the non-cultural reasons (for example natural sceneries) given for the memorable experiences were excluded to only address the impact of culture on the memorability of the experiences. Finally, the different themes and concepts were compared with the extant literature. The process of conceptualization and integration of the data resulting in four emergent themes is illustrated in table 1.

Insert Table 1 in here please.

4 Results and discussions

The aim of present study was to investigate the cultural aspects of positive tourism experiences, factors unique to each culture that can make the trip unforgettable only
for that specific culture. Such elements in the Iranian context are presented in Figure 1.

Please insert figure 1 here.

4.1 Togetherness

The theme “togetherness” was reflected upon as a critical components of memorable tourism experiences for Iranians. There were statements mentioning the importance of travel companions in 80% of the nominated stories. This theme was implied in the fun and enjoyment experienced by just being with friends and relatives during the trip or in doing group activities such as singing, laughing and playing together on the road or at the destination.

“We laughed so hard over a simple joke that we couldn’t eat. We were in the restaurant for 2 or 3 hours! It was excellent, the food, the atmosphere, and our moods.”

Humour, as shown in number of recent studies builds emotional rapport and group bonding (Pearce & Pabel, 2015). The joy of being together for Iranian respondents was also observed in traveling with a large group of companions. This is especially the case for the younger members of the family during Nowruz (Iranian New Year holidays). Therefore, traveling in a smaller family group can sometimes be considered as a downside:

“My best travel memory goes back to when I was a teenager...Memories made with my cousins of same age and the excitement that we all shared during that long trip have never been repeated again”.

Furthermore, the importance of sharing similar interests and views with the travel companions as a reason to remember the trip was expressed in the following ways:
“My most memorable trip is the one I had to Mashhad last year. All seven of us could agree on almost everything and we were happy all the time.”

Finally, the value of togetherness for Iranians was also uniquely illustrated in the recasting of undesirable events into the joyful moments:

“We didn’t know that the train we end up going with is a second class bus-train that doesn’t have air conditioning in the summer! Every one of us got heat exhaustion. My aunt who was in charge of buying the tour was feeling so guilty. In spite of this we were still laughing and talking all the way to Mashhad which made the trip more memorable. We are reminded of this trip every time that the weather is hot”

“When we arrived there, it was rainy. At first we got sad that we couldn’t see the dreamy sky of the desert. Few minutes later, it didn’t matter as we enjoyed staying out around a camp fire for the whole night singing songs”.

“Togetherness” as a general theme have been previously found in the reviews of tourists’ motivation (Goolaup & Mossberg, 2017; Pearce, 2011; Sthapit, 2017), perception to attend an event (Xu, Morgan & Song, 2009) and now as a memorable part of the experience. A work by Chandralal and Valenzuela (2015) emphasized that the enjoyment and excitement caused by the social dynamics among travel companions can create more memorability for travel experiences. Similarly, spending time with family and friends while tasting local food and visit wineries creates extraordinary and memorable food experiences (Goolaup & Mossberg, 2017; Ignatov & Smith, 2006). The local hospitality embedded in the “togetherness” is another important factor discovered by previous MTEs’ scales (Kim et al., 2010; Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2015). Tourists tend to feel comfortable, safe and happy when they are welcomed and assisted by locals.
Togetherness, however, has been conceptualized under different names in tourism studies. Urry (1990) identified two forms of gazers; collective versus romantic. Collective gazers are those people whom appreciate the settings and the atmosphere built by the company of others in their holiday experiences. The romantic gaze, on the other side, emphasizes the solitude and privacy at the time of the experience. Similarly, there is a conceptual idea named “orchestra model of travel experience” by Pearce (2011) that explains the importance of travel companion in making positive experiences. He describes tourist experiences as an orchestra with sensory, cognitive, behavioural, affective and relationships instruments. In his model, there is a strong emphasis on appreciating that experiences are frequently affected by travel companions, a finding likely to be reinforced when social ties are culturally important (Pearce & Zare, 2017).

4.2 Independence and control

The theme “having independence and control over a trip for the first time”, appeared to be the second important theme for the memorability of a trip by Iranians. 35% of the nominated experiences included first independent trip after high school, first trip with a partner, and first trip as a university student with a classmate. The context that the keyword “first time” has been expressed in it, reveals that these stories mean beyond experiencing novelty. The explicit keywords such as “independence”, “having control”, “planning and deciding by own” were clarifying the actual meaning behind this theme which is having independence from family and its controlling effect.

“One of my most memorable experiences was after I finished high school… It was the first time that I was away from home for several nights with people my age and we had own control over our plans”.

In this category of stories, most reviews were about solo trips or the trips with only one travel companion. In this group of accounts, there were also unforgettable memories of difficulties overcome such as first time communication through a newly learnt language, first time socializing with the opposite sex and first time finding one’s own direction in a remote area.

The theme “independence and control” may seem counter-intuitive to “togetherness”, however, a consideration of some cultural nuances has important implications in understanding these seemingly paradoxical themes around MTEs. Independence and control in the Iranians travel context is beyond the need to gain skills and exercise independence through travelling (Falk, Ballantyne, Packer & Benckendorff, 2012; Pearce & Foster, 2007). In this specific case, this theme was recognized as merely cultural because the independence Iranian travellers referred to, was defined as freedom from their family traditions and responsibilities. There is a constraint coming with the benefits of having very strong family bonds. Individuals have to be careful not to disappoint other members of the family especially their parents. Satisfying family members’ expectations in all time leads to a strong sense of group control. Therefore current generation is pushed towards independence as a reaction to the traditional responsibilities pressure. Young Iranians may be pushed to loosen their ties to the family and have more control over their own life through traveling independently (Dastmalchian et al., 2001). There is also a pull factor in play, which is driven by industrialization, urbanization and exposure to the western media (Jalali, 2005).

Satisfying in-group members’ expectations has also substantial undesirable consequences at work, especially in a high power distance culture (Kabasakal & Dastmalchian, 2001; Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). Employees feel restricted in
expressing their ideas freely and making decisions individually. Therefore, they may feel a sense of dependence and being controlled at all times. To be relieved of all the family and work pressures, young Iranians seem to seek the most control during their holidays.

4.3 Spontaneity and flexibility

As the third major theme, “Spontaneity and flexibility” appeared in 30% of the stories reported. Such trips were especially memorable because they were not planned or they did not have a set itinerary but enabled participants to be flexible. Such travels were not restricted by tight schedules or the demand of a fixed program. Among the keywords defining these journeys were “unplanned”, “unexpected” “last minute”, “unknown” and “unclear” destinations.

The lack of planning was not only in the preparation phase of the stated stories but the respondents specifically expressed unforgettable feelings of being spontaneous on the road when driving towards indeterminate destinations.

“One of my best trips was an unplanned trip to Shiraz. It was unexpected because it was 3 AM that I saw a cheap flight to Shiraz. My roommate and I decided to take it so we were there by 7 AM. ... What made this trip unique was the fact that we didn’t have any advance plan for it plus having a flexible travel mate along.”

“One of my long-lasting memories is related to the trip that two of my friends and I had to several undecided destinations... I liked this trip because it was not planned till the end and we were deciding about where to go next right at the last moment.”

Although Iranians score relatively high in uncertainty avoidance spectrum that means they feel less comfortable with unfamiliar or unstructured situations
(Dastmalchian et al., 2001; Hofstede, 2001) the results showed that this cultural trait is less applicable when Iranians are traveling. Travel inevitably includes some ambiguity and risk especially without having a fixed destination and taking spontaneous stops along the road. However, having “Flexibility” during a trip, may as well be associated with the desire of freedom and not being controlled by rules, traditions and power distance. It can be also related to how different cultural groups have different norms or practices regarding the concept of time and its’ associations. Punctuality or being flexible by time is different in Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, and Northern European countries. Time is linear in these cultures and being punctual is highly valued. However, for Latin cultures, Middle Eastern and many African cultures time is more flexible (Meyer, 2014). People from latter cultures often believe that time cannot be controlled and days are planned based on events rather than the clock. Such flexibility can be manifested in not having a time restricted agenda for a trip.

4.4 **Distinctiveness**

Finally there were references exhibiting how some respondents travelled differently from other Iranians (25%). Such statements were showing a sense of pride and achievement for not following the common ways of traveling, therefore, enjoying and learning more. For instance, many Iranians use travel agencies in their outbound trips. One individual who didn’t use such services differentiated himself as follows:

“...the way we travelled was also different. We didn’t book a tour and it was an exciting first experience to find and arrange everything by ourselves. We had to find the right bus, right tickets, and the right drivers at the border to bargain with...This is while many people travel to Armenia through tour packages.”
Another person made herself distinct with the choice of destination which was not where most Iranians travel to:

“Unlike most Iranians who just go to Phuket and Pattaya, my friends and I went to Koh Chang Island in Thailand. It was an extraordinary place. We were in this virgin forest with few tourists and we were the only Iranians among them.”

Feeling distinctive by the way people travel or make destination choices can be supported by the savouring literature. Savouring refers to the active process of enjoyment and the ongoing interplay between a person and an environment. It attends to both sensory and more complex cognitive associations of an experience (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). One dimension of savouring past experiences is basking that is having pride in the occasion, one’s performance or achievement. Few Iranians implicitly expressed a sense of pride in what they perceived to be a unique experience that the others did not have. That fits the definition of basking. Similarly the ability to travel abroad symbolizes prestige and statue in Iranian culture and it is linked with social approval (Riley, 1995).

Please insert figure 2 in here

5 Conclusions and implications

This study intended to make a case for culture to be an important missing consideration in the recollection of memorable tourism experiences. The research initiated a discussion on how in some cultures some of the previously found elements of creating a memorable experience may be added or replaced by unique cultural values of those societies. Previously found generic themes in MTEs and the culture-specific dimension proposed by this study are displayed in figure 2.
The results of this investigation emphasize on how the dimensions of MTEs are malleable, and that exploring themes and forces which drive such memories could be sensitive to multiple cultural values and ways of life.

From managerial implications point of view, in any specific target market within a cultural frame, there are likely to be some common dimensions of memorable tourism experiences. For example, in one cultural sub-group the dimensions may be hedonism and novelty while for another cluster of tourists engaging in activities and the realization of memorable times through quality interaction with guides may predominate. Promotional efforts by tourism marketers may suggest the potential for select dimensions of experience in their specific destination to create a subtle addition to their approach to attracting target groups.

In spite of offering new insights on the memorability of tourism experiences, some limitations to the study are recognized. First, the findings represent only a small sample of Iranian people. Validation of the present results with larger samples is a recommended direction for further research. Next, the questionnaire was designed and completed in Persian and the responses were translated into English. There is sometimes a subtlety in the literal translations of cultural concepts that have no easy counterparts in English. Third, the online survey may have influenced the access to a relatively younger sample of respondents (28-40 years old). In all of the above, there are
opportunities for further investigations of memorable tourism experiences considering both psychological biases of survey design (Zare & Pearce, 2018) and cultural context.

6 References


![Diagram of cultural themes of Iranian Memorable Tourism Experiences](image-url)

**Figure 1**: The cultural themes of Iranian Memorable Tourism Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample story</th>
<th>Open coding</th>
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**Table 1**: An illustrative sample of the coding process (after Corbin & Strauss, 1990)
“Unlike most Iranians who just go to Phuket and Pattaya, my friends and I, went to Koh Chang Island in Thailand. It was an extraordinary place. We were in this virgin forest with few tourists and we were the only Iranians among them.” It was an extraordinary place. We booked chalets only 50 meters far from the sea for two nights. You could be reminded of the island in Lost Television Series especially when you were at the beach with a dense forest behind you... Most interesting thing was the intense tropical rain every once in a while that was forcing us to go back to the chalets and watch the rain from there. Massages and breakfasts at the beach were great... The reason why this trip is sticking

| Extraordinary place; dense forest; tropical rain; massages and breakfasts; first trip abroad; being in a beautiful place with friends | “First time abroad” | Distinctiveness’ |
| “unlike most Iranians” | “we were the only Iranians there” |
| “First time abroad” | Independence and control |
| Being in a beautiful place with friends | Togetherness |
more to my mind is because it was the first time for me to go abroad and I was with friends in a beautiful place like Thailand so it was a complete package.”

Table 2: Commonalities and differences in MTE themes between the present study and the past work.

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<th>Comparing Iranian MTE themes with previous studies themes (Kim, 2009; Kim, 2014, Chandralal &amp; Valenzuela’s, 2015)</th>
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