

Tourism Affordances as a Research Lens

Introduction

We propose that the concept of affordances can be useful in tourism research, for two reasons. First, it integrates recent theoretical progress in a range of related fields, across tourism, recreation and leisure research. Second, it provides new practical insights into the tourism industry, notably the importance of comparing tourists at home and on holiday.

The term affordance is a theoretical conceptualisation of a common vernacular phrase, room to manoeuvre. It represents the interaction between an individual's capabilities and their circumstances. It originated in ecology, to describe the opportunities available to different species in different environments. It was taken up in sports science and outdoor recreation, focussing on training to improve capabilities. It was expanded into the social sciences, through recognition that individual circumstances include social as well as physical context. Each of these phases is reviewed briefly below. We propose to apply it broadly in tourism.

A general model of tourism affordances integrates several previous theoretical concepts, including: tourism freedoms (Caruana & Crane 2011); leisure or tourism constraints (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey 1991; Nyaupane & Andereck 2008); and social affordances (Akcaoglu & Lee 2019). We argue that freedoms and constraints differ between home and holiday; and that tourists gain expanded affordances relative to home life, depending on activities, destination countries and cultures, and individual circumstances. Tourism can therefore be analysed as a mechanism to extend affordances. This suggests that we need to study tourists at home, as well as while on holiday.

Affordances Integrate Freedoms and Constraints

The affordances framework integrates theoretical analyses of freedoms and constraints. Tourist freedoms include both liberation, freedom from everyday routine; and license, freedom to engage in behaviour forbidden at home. The liberation aspect has been analysed as escape (Crouch 1994; Dann 1977; Uysal & Jurovski 1994; Vidon & Rickley 2018); the licence aspect as hedonism (Calver & Page 2013; Carr 2002; Malone, McCabe, & Smith 2014; Shakeela & Weaver 2018). Freedoms differ between destinations, affecting both inbound and outbound tourism (Gholipour, Tajaddini, & Al-mulali 2014; Liu, Li, & Fu 2016; Saha, Su, & Campbell 2017). There are also events, venues and activities in domestic tourism that offer enhanced freedoms, either physical (Kane & Tucker 2004), or social (Griffin et al. 2016; Li, Chung, & Kim 2016; Kearns, Collins, & Bates 2017; Mikkelsen & Cohen 2015). Tourism research has used a freedoms framework, since a holiday involves a choice and change from the norms of home (Xiao et al. 2013).

Leisure studies research has used a constraints framework (Crawford et al. 1991; Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey 1993). Leisure time is free choice, but choices may be restricted. The constraints model has been adopted, adapted, applied and critiqued very widely (Alexandris et al. 2017; Godbey, Crawford, & Shen 2010; Ito, Kono, & Walker 2018; Kazeminia, Del Chiappa, & Jafari 2015; Kono, Ito, & Loucks-Atkinson 2018; Kyle & Jun 2015; Lai, Li, & Harrill 2013; Samdahl & Jekubovich 1997; Scott & Lee 2018). One such adaptation is the tourism constraints model (Chen, Chen & Okumus 2013; Kazeminia et al. 2015; Nyaupane & Andereck 2008).

Evolution of Affordances Frameworks

The concept of affordances originated in ecology, under the former name of ecological dynamics (Gibson 1979; Chemero 2003, Chemero & Turley 2004; Shaw, Kinsella-Shaw, & Mace 2019). It has been adopted extensively in sport and recreation (Araujo & Davids 2009, 2011; Brymer, Davids, & Mallabon 2014; Davids et al. 2013; Fajen, Riley, & Turvey 2009; Lopez-Rivera & Gonzalez-Badillo 2012; Rantala 2010). Affordances can include social or moral aspects (Akcaoglu & Lee 2018; Molz 2013; Usher & Gomez 2018). These have been analysed for communications (Cabiddu, De Carlo, & Piccoli 2014; Fox & McEwan 2017), and education (Akcaoglu & Lee 2018; Sharma-Brymer et al. 2018). Two tourism studies have suggested that individuals may have different affordances within the same experience, either adventurous (Peacock et al., 2017) or cultural (Ackerman, 2018).

Individual, Social and Material Affordances

Both freedoms and constraints models recognise individual, social, and material categories. The material or structural category includes economics and logistics, such as visas, infrastructure, travel and accommodation. These are analysed in tourism economics, planning and geography (Font & Hindley 2017; Seetaram, Forsyth, & Dwyer 2016). The social or interpersonal category includes opinions of leisure and tourism activities held by: co-participants in those activities; friends or relatives; colleagues or workmates; and the institutional structures of society, such as law enforcement personnel. These are addressed as host-guest and client-guide interactions, tour group dynamics, and social capital (Lawton & Weaver 2015; Needham et al. 2017). The individual or intrapersonal category includes personal desires, capabilities, and beliefs, studied as tourist motivations and experiences. Every individual has freedoms and constraints in each category.

We propose here that individual, social and material categories of tourism freedoms and constraints may be seen as three types of affordances. Each type of affordance can differ between individuals, and between their countries and societies. Wealthy individuals have greater material freedoms, and fewer material constraints. Individuals with strong religious adherence may have greater internal constraints and fewer freedoms, in regard to some more hedonistic activities. Individuals with demands and social pressures, from family members and social circles, must negotiate social freedoms for tourism. Every country determines behaviours that are legally and socially acceptable for its residents and domestic tourists. In most countries (Demir & Gozgor 2018), though not necessarily all (Shakeela & Weaver 2018), these rules are also applied to international inbound tourists.

We propose that tourism opportunities for any individual represent the intersection of their individual, social and material affordances: i.e., room to manoeuvre between each of these three sets of constraints and freedoms. For individuals, the three affordances are theoretically independent. Wealthy individuals may or may not have greater social as well as material affordances; strongly religious individuals may or may not have reduced social as well as individual affordances. At broader social scale, however, the three affordances are likely to be correlated, because wealth, social circles, and individual beliefs are all strongly influenced by socioeconomic circumstances and cultural context.

Tourism as a Mechanism to Expand Affordances

We can analyse tourists as seeking different expansions of their affordances at home. Some want to visit friends and relatives, whom they cannot see whilst at home. Some want to buy clothing or other items more cheaply, or from a greater range, than are available at home. Some want to take part in experiences that are either entirely novel, or in new places, or with greater opportunities, than at home. Some want new social opportunities, from meeting like-minded individuals engaged in the same activities, whom they would not meet at home. All of these involve expansion of affordances, from home to holidays. Equally, some types of tourism involve a trade-off of affordances, with opportunities balanced by restrictions. For example, nature or adventure tourists travelling internationally, may accept greater cultural restrictions as the price of new experiences.

An affordance expansion that is powerfully desired, eg through an emotional or addictive component, can command a higher price premium than one that is purely utilitarian (Buckley 2015). Expansions of individual affordances may be valued more highly than expansions of material affordances, but this has not been tested. Escape-style expansions of hedonistic social affordances may be more valuable to people who live in restrictive societies. VFR-style expansions of family-related social affordances may be more valuable in cultures where family interactions are frequent and important. There are thus many tourism research issues where new insights could become available through an affordances lens.

There is little research to date, contrasting the behaviours of the same individuals at home and on holiday respectively. There is extensive research on both liberation and licence aspects of tourism freedoms, but with a focus on the destination, not comparison between destination and origin for the same individual tourists. The tourism affordances framework can refocus research on tourism motivations and experiences, to grant more explicit recognition to the reasons why tourists choose particular destinations, tours and holidays. Motivational research asks what tourists want to do; behavioural research asks what they actually do. Affordance research could ask more fundamentally, why they do it: what specific affordances in their home, work and domestic life do tourists want to expand whilst on holiday?

Implications and Conclusions

From a practical perspective, a tourism affordances framework can pinpoint: what contributes most critically to tourist satisfaction; what different tourists are most prepared to pay for; and what tour operators and destinations must make available, to attract clientele with specific origins and interests. As one example, outdoor tour operators offer portfolios of products, some for skilled exponents, others for neophytes (Buckley 2012). The former seek expansion of individual affordances. The latter may want either expanded social opportunities (Buckley 2012), or safe and comfortable access to nature (Peacock et al., 2017). These are different affordances, affecting safety, marketing and management, pricing and profitability. It is therefore valuable to know which affordance most accurately reflects tourists' intentions.

In summary, we conclude that the theoretical concept of affordances, adapted to a tourism context and incorporating tourism freedoms and tourism constraints, can provide a valuable and novel perspective on tourism analysis, with both practical and theoretical implications. In particular, it indicates that tourism research should pay greater attention to tourists at home, as well as on holiday. To achieve this, we shall need to address new and difficult, but not insurmountable, design considerations and ethical concerns.

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