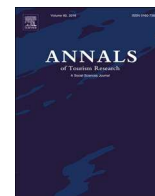


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## Research note

# Place disbelief: A tourism-experiential perspective

Prokopis A. Christou

Lecturer in the Department of Hotel and Tourism Management, Cyprus University of Technology, 30 Archbishop Kyprianou Str., 3036 Lemesos, Cyprus

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## Introduction

*Prima facie*, the tourism research community has overlooked the state of “disbelief”. This, despite its importance in any type of institution or societal structure (Batle, 2017). For instance, the fact that it provides information that can subsequently inform behavior (Harris, Sheth, & Cohen, 2008) while shaping the actions of societies and people within them. Even so, the tourism research community has devoted a generous amount of attention to the mental processes of tourists (Denstadli, Jacobsen, & Lohmann, 2011; Paris, Nyaupane, & Teye, 2014). Although studies in this area have produced some useful findings, they have not facilitated greater understanding of why a person may experience a state of disbelief triggered by initial contact with particular places. Besides, the (initial) contact with destinations and settings, shape the overall experience of visitors (Christou & Farmaki, 2018). The tourist experience has been a key relevant research issue, yet provides opportunities for further research (Uriely, 2005), such as on aspects related to the interface of tourists with surroundings (Christou & Farmaki, 2018). Hence, the primary aim of this research note is to commence filling the aforementioned gap by placing disbelief within an experiential milieu, while providing relevant theoretical and practical implications.

## Disbelief within an experiential context

Despite disbelief remaining an under-researched notion, it has received a degree of attention, mainly from a cognitive perspective; the human brain is a prolific generator of beliefs (Harris et al., 2008) that are describable as mental representations of an attitude positively oriented toward the likelihood of something being true (Schwitzgebel, 2006). Disbelief requires a subsequent process of rejection (Harris et al., 2008), which may be the outcome of personal denial; The common response to diagnosis of a life-threatening illness, is disbelief (Saldinger & Cain, 2005). Furthermore, impossibility may be understood as disbelief. Qualitative possibility theory is closely related to the theory of belief revision (Dubois & Prade, 2012), which is the process of changing beliefs by taking into account new pieces of information. Disbelief has been associated with the theory of epoché, which may be translated as “suspension of judgment.” The notion was developed by Pyrrho of Elis (Popkin, 2003) and according to the theory, a kind of bracketing exists within the natural attitude in which people may suspend their disbelief that the world is other than how they interpret it. For instance, patients assuming that their consultant has their best interests at heart; hence, may “bracket” any disbelief that this

E-mail address: [Prokopis.christou@cut.ac.cy](mailto:Prokopis.christou@cut.ac.cy).

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assumption is correct and hold on to the belief that any failure of care is humanly unavoidable and not blameworthy (Edwards & Titchen, 2003; Schutz, 1962). In other cases, disbelief has received attention through a mainly religious/spiritual prism (Beck & Miller, 2001); it has been associated with atheism (Guenther, 2014), while it often carries a negative sense, since it is associated with lack of faith or infidelity (Boudry & Coyne, 2016; Isaak, 2016). According to the teachings of Ephraim (2001), disbelief derives from the free choice of a person captured in the vanity of the ephemeral things of this century (which implies this life and not life after death). People may indulge in egocentric and gluttonous actions because they have not considered punishment in the afterlife.

## Study methods

An anthropological, ethnographic approach was employed (McCabe, 2007), due to the internal nature of the enquiry while it has proved particularly beneficial in experiential inquiries (Kozak, 2016). The study was supported by informal interviews with tourists on the island of Ithaca; that is, tourists were explained the purpose of the study, and those who agreed to participate were interviewed in their natural setting, at their ease, allowing concepts to emerge naturally (Christou, 2018; Christou & Farmaki, 2018). Interviews were conducted in English (some in Greek), and included the following questions: Did any states of disbelief occur while you were at a particular place? If such states occurred, at which point in time were they experienced? How would you describe this state of disbelief? What precisely triggered this state of disbelief? Experiences employ a unique combination of cognitive and emotional processes, each influencing the other (Calhoun, 2001), while belief carries substantial emotional content (Lund, 1925). Goldstein (2010) referred specifically to a perceptual process that determines our experience and our reaction to environmental stimuli. Ithaca, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, was selected because of its idiosyncratic landscape and its mythical and historical associations, such as *The Odyssey*. The destination was reached by ship during peak season (mid-June). Tourists, were approached in public areas, by an experienced researcher. Responses provided, were transcribed in English and analyzed using an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006), condensing raw textual data into a summary format. Topics that emerged were grouped into interrelated themes, while thematic categories were developed by capturing the core messages of respondents (Christou & Sharpley, 2019) followed by a comparison with relevant literature, to reach conclusions (Table 1).

## Findings, discussion and conclusions

As the informants admitted, the frequency of states of disbelief was higher during the initial contact with the destination, during the first day of the visit and particularly during the first 9 h. The responses indicated that initial place contact evoked emotions such as, “joy” and “excitement”- supporting the consensus that places are capable of evoking emotions (Moal- Ulvoas, 2017). Emotions were found to be triggered by different intrapersonal and external factors, such as previous experiences and environmental stimuli. In more detail, the dramatic landscape and attractive surroundings, were perceived (Goldstein, 2010) by visitors as “beautiful,” “amazing,” and “astonishing.” This contributed to a state of disbelief; as the visitors explained, although they were aware of being at the particular setting, they “struggled” to become fully cognizant that they were physically present there. For instance, the dramatic cliffs of Ithaca (refer to Photo 1), triggered a state of disbelief to Ethan (40–49, Australia). Informants clarified that they were trying to take in as much information as possible from the sensory world, opening their eyes wide and trying to take in all the smells of the environment. For some seconds at least, they remained speechless and static, incapable of any further action because of their disbelief (Fischer, 1998). Those who admitted to experiencing a state of disbelief referred to a sight or experience as appearing unreal or bizarre to them, and to finding it hard to believe what was actually taking place; A feeling of rejection (Harris et al., 2008) of the fact that they were involved in the particular experience:

It was a surreal experience, as if I was watching a movie ... [pause] that it wasn't me living the moment, but someone else. As if I was seeing the place through the eyes of someone else...

(Emi, 30–39, Greece)

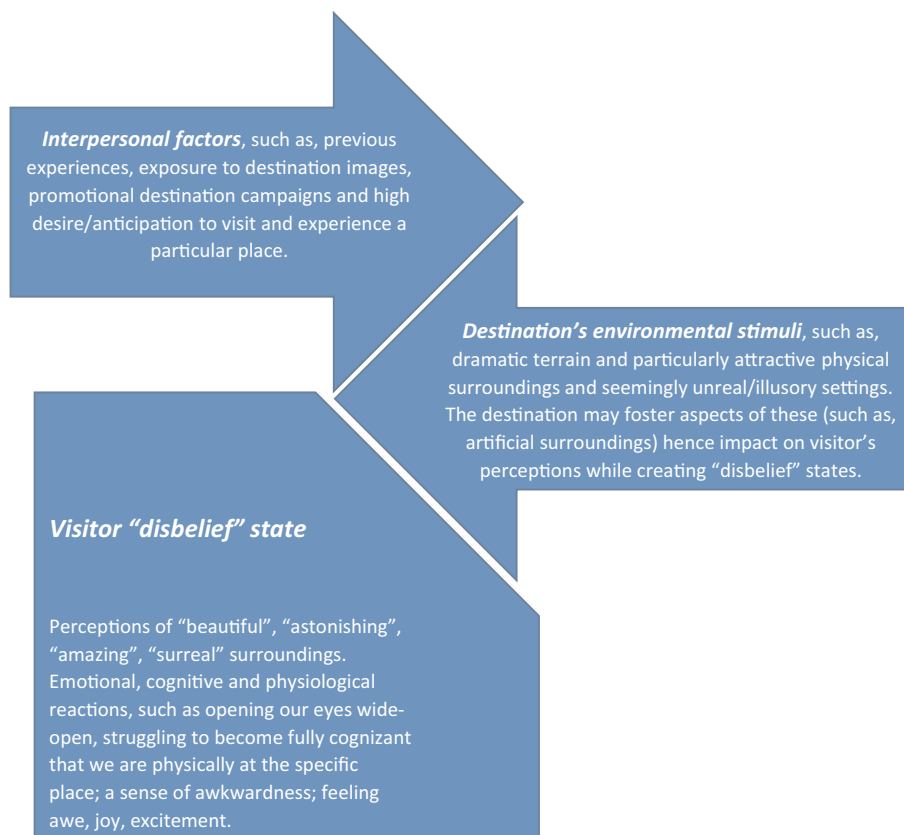
Although emotional experiences did not necessarily coincide with states of disbelief, in several cases visitors referred to a combination of emotions while describing disbelief, such as “awe,” “wonder,” “excitement,” “joy,” “awkwardness”; Hence, within the

**Table 1**  
Profile of informants.

Number of informants	32
Average days of visitation	4
Males	13
Females	19
Ages	
20–29	4
30–39	5
40–49	6
50–59	7
60–69	6
> 70	4
Origin country (in alphabetical order):	Australia; Cyprus; Germany; Greece; Italy; Netherlands; U.K; USA.



**Photo 1.** Cliffs of Ithaca, that triggered a state of disbelief to Ethan (40-49, Australia).



**Fig. 1.** The disbelief and tourist experiential conceptual nexus.

tourist experiential context, disbelief and emotions are overlapping concepts; Similarly, sincerity and hyperreality were found in the study of Buchmann, Moore, and Fisher (2010), to be overlapping concepts. Nonetheless, following their initial contact with the destination, certain visitors reported disappointment as a result of what seemed to be a “debunking” phase.

... there is no evidence so far to support the fact that Odysseus did actually exist, but most people, by reading Homer's *Odyssey*, believe that by coming here they will see the Odysseus's “anaktoron” [palace] and they get disappointed...(female, 48, museum decontain, local).

In this case, visitors started realizing that what they are living is not an unreal, surreal experience. This outcome adds to the discussion of Jean Paul's *Weltschmerz* (in Batle, 2017) – a kind of feeling experienced by someone who believes that physical reality cannot satisfy the demands of the mind. Therefore, the reason for the occurrence of the state of disbelief is twofold: on the one hand, there is the interpersonal factor, such as fulfillment of a strong desire/anticipation of visiting a particular place; on the other hand, there are specific place stimuli during the tourist experience, that may trigger disbelief. Yet, this study cannot confirm whether that state occurs in cases where either of the above two factors is absent. This nexus of disbelief and tourist experiences is best illustrated in Fig. 1 and aims to stimulate professionals' inquisitiveness regarding triggering factors contributing to visitor disbelief.

Finally, a limitation of the study is the chosen place context; That is, aspects of disbelief may be socially constructed and culturally driven. Ithaca, may evoke mythologies situated within specific, such as, Western groups. Within the context of other groups, myths may vary and so might perceptions, emotions and triggers of disbelief. Nonetheless, researchers may use the conceptual model as a basis to delve deeper into the notion of disbelief. For instance, further investigations may assist in the comprehension of myth-pragmatic actualizations of tourists based on initial perceptions and awareness of reality. This could contribute to the understanding of the part played by fantasy-building in people's perceptions of “enchanted settings” such as Santa Claus Village in Lapland. Furthermore, on the basis of future investigations, academics may be able to provide specific suggestions to the tourism industry on how to trigger disbelief during initial visitor contact, thereby enhancing their experiences.

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