EPIPHANY TRAVEL AND ASSISTED-SUBJECTIVE PERSONAL INTROSPECTION

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ABSTRACT

The study uses assisted-subjective personal introspection (ASPI) to analyze, assess, and critique a traveler’s adventure as well as uncover the rationale behind why participating in a long trip with global implications was important to this traveler. Coupled with a thorough ASPI analysis, the study constructs an autoethnography: a form of autobiographical personal narrative that explores a traveler’s experience of life. To equip the traveler with the necessary skills and tools to perform this analysis, the study includes research using ASPI and autoethnography. Finally, participating in Harvard University’s “Implicit Association Test” (IAT) provides an external analysis and better understanding of own conscious–unconscious divergences. Using causal mapping, the study delineates a 14-week trip into weekly increments identifying positive and negative relationships while assessing the strengths of those relationships. The goal of this exercise is twofold: (1) to increase understanding of the human condition and (2) how that understanding can influence international marketing.
Keywords: Assisted-subjective personal introspection (ASPI); autoethnography; conscious–unconscious

INTRODUCTION

Epiphany is a sudden intuitive leap of understanding, especially though an ordinary but striking occurrence. Epiphany travel includes (1) engaging in virtual or real-life travel to seek an intuitive leap of understanding or transformation in psychological well-being and (2) the felt occurrence of intuitive leap of understanding or transformation in psychological well-being associating with virtual or real-life travel – whether sought through such travel or not. Gilbert’s subjective personal introspection and best-selling book (2006; http://www.elizabethgilbert.com/eatpraylove.htm) Eat Pray Love is an example of trip-taking that includes the principal features of epiphany travel – she goes on a yearlong journey to seek relief from a painful divorce and to learn if happiness is achievable in the remainder of her life.

Epiphany travel may include both planned seeking of intuitive leaps of understanding and transformations in psychological well-being and unplanned occurrences of such events. Religious pilgrimages are examples of planned trips to experience epiphanies. Movies often depict unplanned occurrences of epiphanies involving travel (e.g., Casablanca, East of Eden, and Sideways) where the story lines reveal to the protagonists what they really feel and believe that they consciously were unaware of, or the trips in the stories reveal new information that causes intuitive leaps in understanding or psychological transformations for the protagonists. Using “visual narrative art” – a technique for interpreting unconscious–conscious thinking processes, Woodside and Megehee (2010) decode how a week’s trip to California wine country in Sideways is a vehicle for the protagonist to right himself after a painful divorce – through the trip the protagonist experiences an epiphany that he must move on psychologically and new happiness is available via a new relationship with a woman that he met on the trip.

The present article serves to describe the relevancy of ASPI in epiphany travel. The article reviews relevant ASPI research and illustrates the formal use of ASPI in epiphany travel. The ASPI report describes the value of and research approaches useful for seeking conscious and unconscious meanings in ASPI and epiphany travel.
Following this introduction, the second section offers a brief review of the subjective personal introspection (SPI) literature. The third section describes an ASPI by one of the authors (Chad Muller). The fourth section provides a general discussion of ASPI in travel research. The fifth section concludes the report.

SUBJECTIVE PERSONAL INTROSPECTION
THEORY AND PRACTICE

Shankar (2000) defines SPI as the examination of an individual’s own mental processes. When conducting SPI, an individual analyzes his/her own experiences regarding a topic being researched. SPI is a controversial consumer research technique because some researchers question the legitimacy and authenticity of this exercise and suggest steps aiming to increase the quality of the finding when using the method (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993; Woodside, 2006). Critics of SPI question data generation that lacks objectively confirmability and fails to explicitly consider unconscious beliefs and attitudes in processes whereby the person leading the research effort is also the person upon which the research is being conducted – self-delusions – as well as the overconfidence in one’s own ability to recall events accurately and to understand one’s own biases are likely to dominate SPI (see Woodside, 2006 for a discussion of these points). On the opposite end of the spectrum, proponents of SPI believe this form of study generates introspective data in its purest form (Gould, 1991, 1995, 2005; Holbrook, 2003; Shankar, 2000, p. 27).

Four types of introspection are available (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993): researcher introspection, guided introspection, interactive introspection, and syncretic introspection. Researcher introspection (typically referred to personal introspection or SPI) exists when the participant acts as both the researcher and the subject. Essentially, the researcher conducts an interview with herself. Guided or assisted SPI) is when a researcher leads other participants in an introspection exercise – the present report provides a detailed example of this approach. Interactive introspection is when the researcher and participants conduct a normal dialogue pertaining to a particular topic. Finally, syncretic introspection is any combination of the aforementioned forms on introspection (Shankar, 2000, p. 27). The present article includes an ASPI report on travel behavior that is unique in illustrating research attempting to explicate unconscious as well as conscious introspection.
SPI Theory and Research

Holbrook (2003) introduces the concept of autoethnography that he uses interchangeably with SPI. Porter (http://anthropology.usf.edu/cma/CMA-methodology-ae.htm) defines autoethnography as “a form of writing that makes the researcher’s own experience a topic of investigation in its own right.” Holbrook (2003) describes SPI as valuable for marketing research because it sheds light on humanity that is reflected in the lives of consumers. Although valuable, Holbrook (2003) acknowledges limited trustworthiness in data collected from an individual’s own memory without external stimulation (Holbrook, 2003, p. 45). In order to conduct an effective autoethnographic analysis, Holbrook uses family pictures taken by his late grandfather to help define consumer value as well as provide insight into his personal life (Holbrook, 2003, p. 46).

Holbrook (2003) defines consumer value as having four components: interactive, because such value involves a relationship between a consumer and a product; relativistic, because it compares objects and differs between people; preference, because of likes and dislikes as well as positive attributes and negative attributes; and experience, because consumer preference aligns with the consumption experience rather than to the object itself (p. 46). Holbrook conducts an autoethnographic analysis employing his grandfather’s photographs using this definition of consumer value. The purpose of Holbrook’s research is to “convince the reader that customer value serves as a framework that furthers the objectives of SPI toward illuminating relevant meanings in the photograph collection” (Holbrook, 2003, p. 47). Holbrook’s SPI analysis is quite vivid and forthright. His reflection on the significance of each picture supports what effective stimuli pictures serve for explicating his memory. The photographs and his use of these photographs is a step toward transforming and deepening his SPI to an ASPI.

Gould (1991) takes a very different approach to understanding SPI and its significance related to consumer research. Gould focuses on energy that he describes as the pervasive dimension in consumer research. Gould believes products provide consumers with vital energy and various products bring consumers to various energy states. In his analysis, Gould describes how energy and consumer products affect his life (Gould, 1991, p. 194).

Eastern philosophies, especially Tibetan and Japanese, influence Gould’s analysis of energy and consumer behavior (Gould, 1991, p. 195). The following statement articulates this point, “Product use may be defined as a process in which consumers engage to manipulate their vital energy”
(Gould, 1991, p. 196). Following this definition, a variety of energy states are outlined such as tense-energized-absorbed, calm-tired-absorbed, and tense-tired-not absorbed. Gould uses imagery when he describes a high when he is in a state of absorption listening to music and tension oozes out of his body (Gould, 1991, p. 198).

Additional highs by Gould include maintaining and accentuating sexual energy via a variety of foods consumed. For example, “I remember experiencing sensation running throughout my body, including my genitals, so that I felt something akin to sexual feelings through eating” (Gould, 1991, p. 201). Gould was consuming products that took him to different energy levels. Finally, Gould reflects upon how LSD, marijuana, and alcohol helped develop his concept of energy and consciousness (Gould, 1991, p. 204). The point of Gould’s analysis is that consumer research needs to focus on understanding energy sensations in consumer’s lives and then utilizing that knowledge to develop the most potent energy products for consumers (Gould, 1991, p. 205).

Woodside (2004, 2006) advocates multiple-methods SPI, while Holbrook (2003) and Gould (1991) advocate single-method SPI. Multiple-methods SPI entail using both explicit and implicit personal introspection in order to attain the best consumer behavior information. Implicit and explicit data collection gets to the crux of true consumer meanings and explanations. According to Woodside (2006), single-method SPI does not provide detailed customer information as does multiple-methods SPI and for this reason advanced overconfidence bias (AOB) is seen in single-method SPI analysis. Cognitive science supports the view that humans guard themselves against unconscious thinking in order to provide politically correct and self-nurturing answers. This conclusion is the reason multiple-methods SPI is critical to gathering accurate consumer data (Woodside, 2006).

Overconfidence bias is the mental state whereby a person’s subjective confidence in their judgments is reliably greater than their objective accuracy (Hoffrage, 2004). AOB is the failure to recognize overconfidence bias is occurring in oneself and how such a failure can result in making decisions with highly negative consequences (Woodside, 2006).

“Ninety-five percent of thinking takes place in our unconscious minds—that wonderful, if messy, stew of memories, emotions, thoughts, and other cognitive processes we’re not aware of or that we can’t articulate” (Zaltman, 2003, p. 9). This quote provides a compelling perspective for the importance of multiple-methods SPI. Multiple-methods SPI uncovers critically important conscious and unconscious information about consumer decision
making (Woodside, 2004, p. 987). Daniel Kahneman describes these two systems of thinking and decision making in his 2002 Nobel Prize lecture:

System 1, the experiential system, is “fast, automatic, effortless, associative, and difficult to control or modify.” System 2, the analytical system, is “slower, serial, effortful, and deliberately controlled.” (Mauboussin, 2009, p. 48)

Woodside (2006, p. 993) proposes that multiple-methods SPI research is necessary to collect data for accurate and deep understanding from both system 1 and system 2 thinking and attitudes, “Behavioral research methods that enable consumers to access their unconscious thoughts need widespread adoption in studies on product and brand knowledge held by consumers. CPI [confirmatory personal introspection] research includes methods designed to reduce the inherent attempts to self-edit and block unwelcomed, or socially unacceptable (see Fisher, 1993) thoughts, and to stimulate informants to report reasons for their actions seemingly ‘too minor to mention’ in open-ended written responses.”

Subjective Personal Introspections in the New and Old Testaments and by Executives

Reports using SPI in travel contexts include Jesus’ report on his experiences while traveling in a wilderness over a span of 40 days. Also, in Jewish tradition, Moses is referred to as “The Lawgiver” for his singular achievement of ascending Mount Horeb and receiving the Ten Commandments directly from God, whereupon he brought the Ten Commandments down to the Children of Israel.

Here are the details often told of Jesus’ trip into the wilderness. Jesus reportedly had no human companionship during this trip and his experiences (visions and discussions with the Devil) resulted in substantial sense-making (i.e., catharses). Note the following etic (i.e., researcher) interpretations (quotes) apparently from Jesus’ own emic (self) interpretation – including Jesus’ direct quotes with the Devil.

After His baptism, the Lord Jesus Christ went into the wilderness in order to prepare in solitude by fasting and prayer for the accomplishing of His great work for which He had come to earth. For forty days and forty nights, He was in the wilderness with the beasts, not eating any food. Then, the Devil came to Christ and tried to seduce Him into sin with cunning questions and delusions as he does to every man.

The Devil said to Jesus Christ, as if to say, in vain do You torment Yourself with hunger, “If Thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.” The Savior said to him in answer, “It is written (in the Bible), man shall not
live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God’’
(Deut. 8:3).

... Thus, the Savior conquered temptation from the Devil and demonstrated in so
doing that He came to free people from the power of the Devil without any concessions
to evil. (http://www.orthodoxphotos.com/readings/LG/wilderness.shtml)

The catharsis include Jesus’ demonstration to self that (1) he can conquer
temptation, (2) concessions to evil is not a requirement in doing so, and
(3) this ability is teachable/learnable to/by others. Consequently, SPI can
provide substantial impacts to the researcher-as-informant as well as unique
contributions to folk theories of explanation (Malle, 1999, 2010). “Folk
theory” is explanation and research on how informants explain their own
behavior to themselves and others (see Malle, 1999, 2010).

Additional widely known SPI reports include Sloan’s (1963) and
DeLorean’s (in Wright, 1979) reports on their respective lives in General
Motors Corporation as well as Drucker’s (1998) report on his life as a
bystander observing the minds’ of executives.

EPIPHANY TRAVEL AND SPI BY CHAD MULLER

This section includes a first-person report by Chad Muller of his 14-week
trip to Beijing, China. His introspection includes collecting conscious and
unconscious interpretations about this trip with the second author providing
sources and examples of methods available to Muller for his SPI. Thus,
guidance and insights in using the tools for his SPI informs and transforms
Muller’s observations into an ASPI.

For example, the report includes Muller’s use of the “Implicit Association
Test” (IAT, https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/), a research method to
make explicit unconscious attitude toward products, brands, beliefs,
organizations, and peoples (e.g., African versus European Americans). IAT
is a latency metric to measure the speed in physically matching “good”
versus “bad” associations with concepts by the informant via index fingers’
responses. Relevant literature indicates substantial external validity of the
IAT (Brunel, Tietje, & Greenwald, 2004; Egloff & Schmukle, 2002).

The primary purpose of Muller’s trip was to participate in a summer
internship program with China’s largest localization firm, CSOFT Interna-
tional, Ltd. “My [Chad Muller] reflective thinking indicates a life-long
fascination with international business and even as a little boy, I envisioned
myself traveling the world in a business suit meeting new people and
learning about their culture. My fortunate ability to travel extensively
through Asia, Europe, and the Americas fuels this fervor. But the question remains: Where does this passion come from?” [A question he frequently asked himself before his participation in this ASPI exercise.]

“Understanding the importance of a multiple-method SPI in order to uncover the conscious and unconscious thinking of consumers, I participated in Harvard University’s Implicit Association Test (IAT) as well as used my personal journal as tools to conduct a SPI. Both tools are critical to this analysis to better understand the reasoning why participating in a summer internship in Beijing was so important to me.”

Harvard University’s IAT contained seven subject areas to test my unconscious thinking. Subject areas include my association of thin people with fat people, white faces with black faces, and democrats with republicans. Fig. 1 includes results from Muller’s IATs.

**Fig. 1.** Results from Harvard University’s Implicit Association Test (IAT).

http://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/

1. “Your data suggest a Strong automatic preference for Thin People compared to Fat People.”
2. “Your data suggest a Moderate automatic preference for Novel compared to Familiar.”
3. Results broken into two parts:
   a) “Your data suggest a Strong automatic preference for White Objects compared to Black Objects.”
   b) “Your data suggest a Strong automatic preference for White Faces compared to Black Faces.”
4. “Your data suggest a Slight automatic association of Bill Clinton with Honest and George Bush with Corrupt.”
5. Results broken into two parts:
   a) “Your data suggest a Moderate automatic association between self and Democrat.”
   b) “Your data suggest a Slight automatic Positive association with Social Order.”
6. “Your data suggest little or “No” association between European American and Asian American with American and Foreign.”
7. “Your data suggest a Moderate automatic preference for Straight People compared to Gay People.”
Informant-as-Researcher Analyzing System 1 Self-Thinking

“At first blush, the IAT results concerned and surprised me. Upon further reflection, though, these results do not point to hatred and bigotry, they represent my life experiences. Yes, I am a Caucasian, heterosexual male who is liberal-minded and thin. This is who I am based upon 27 years of living. Of the seven tests I participated in, the results from these four are certainly the most sensitive. In my opinion, though, the results concerning who unconsciously I consider to be ‘American’ are equally important. Per the results, my data suggests little or no association between European American and Asian American with ‘American’ and ‘Foreign’. I believe these results are significant because as a Caucasian male from European descendants, my conscious mind tells me to associate European Americans as ‘more American’ than Asian Americans. I believe living in Asia (Japan and China during different years) for almost one year of my life has opened my eyes and broadened my horizons not to hold such unconscious biases. I am proud of this fact. Had I not conducted a multiple-method SPI in my analysis, my data would be skewed.”

Thus, Muller uses deliberate, effortful, “system 2” (Evans, 2008), to interpret possible attitudes and beliefs that he might hold unconsciously in automatic, unconscious, “system 1,” thinking. The attempt to explicitly collect system 1 thinking separately from system 2 thinking informs reflection – deep interpretation of configurations of system 1 and system 2 thinking.

Causal Mapping of My Mind – Chad’s Beijing Experience

“To better understand consumer behavior, I engaged in a multiple-method SPI to look at my own conscious-unconscious decision making processes and learn why spending my fourteen week internship in Beijing, China was so important to me.”

One method used to delineate my experience into 14, one-week intervals is a causal map (Eden, 1991, 1992; Huff, 1990). A causal map includes the use of ovals and arrows to indicate cause-and-effect relationships among concepts according to the thinking processes that an informant tells to herself/himself or another researcher. While frequently used in organizational research (e.g., Huff, 1990), causal mapping also appears in the travel research literature (e.g., Woodside & Martin, 2008).

“The causal map contains the main events, decisions, and people with whom I communicated broken into weekly intervals. Several weeks contain
multiple events. Time is depicted across the x-axis and events, decisions, and people are represented on the y-axis. Relationships are measured by positive (+) and negative (−) markings between the respective boxes. A brief description of the events included in the causal map follows. The primary source for conducting this SPI is my personal journal.” See Fig. 2.

**Week 1.** “Arriving in Beijing at the end of May, 2009 was a surreal experience. I had spent six months living in Osaka, Japan as an undergraduate student but had never been to China. Going to China was meant to diversify my Asian knowledge. Arriving at Beijing International Airport, no one from CSOFT International, Ltd was at the terminal to pick me up. Taking a train to an unknown train station, getting lost upon leaving the train station, roaming the streets of Beijing at midnight, and paying $150 for shelter at the Renaissance Beijing Hotel all contributed to a negative initial experience. Losing face is unacceptable in Asian culture so to make up for the miscommunication during my first night in Beijing, the management team at CSOFT International reserved a room at the Four

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**Fig. 2.** Causal Mapping of Muller’s Trip to China.
Seasons Hotel – Beijing for me for the duration of the company’s Global Summit.”

Week 2. “First impressions are critical so putting my best foot forward during the first week in the office was critical. A strong positive relationship exists between the first impression I made and the elaborate traditional Chinese dinner prepared for my teammates and me at the conclusion of week two. I enjoyed Johnnie Walker Black on the rocks that evening.”

Week 3. “I moved into my own apartment. Chinese housing is very different from housing in America. Average living conditions in Beijing emulate housing projects here in the US.”

Week 4. “The initial negative impression of moving into a Chinese apartment (an American bias) led to a strong positive relationship by getting acclimated with a new community and garnering a strong appreciation for Chinese culture and customs. Finding food to eat at the market is a great challenge for an American living in China by himself.”

Week 5. “One of my favorite activities is developing relationships with diverse individuals. Listening to their experiences and perspectives on life is amazing. I developed this type of relationship with Weiland Huang, a co-worker at CSoft International. This friendship continues to be a strong, positive relationship.”

Week 6. “Professional challenges make me a better employee. Managing a team of four individuals, I led a viral video marketing campaign that was not well received by the CEO. Despite this negative reaction, a trying situation resulted in strong leadership skills as our team re-grouped and assembled a successful marketing video.”

Week 7. “Visiting locations of historic significance is critical to formulating an educated opinion of people’s culture and customs. China’s Tiananmen Square and Summer Place are two such places. Tiananmen Square is the world’s largest public square and can fit more than one million people. Summer Place is the former residence of China’s emperor where just one hundred years earlier, the emperor and his mistresses walked the beautiful grounds.”

Week 8. “A terrible haircut is always a bad experience. Nothing good came out of my first Chinese haircut but the experience is noteworthy. For $3US, a patron receives his/her hair washed twice, a cut, and a style. My hair poses a serious challenge for a Chinese barber.”

Week 9. “After two months in a professional environment, relationships inevitably develop. I am very fortunate to be maintaining close friendships with co-workers and international friends that I met this summer. Regardless of where anyone currently resides, everyone is simply an email away.”
Week 10. “Having started a relationship with a woman in Boston prior to leaving for China, I was confident we could endure being 7,000 miles apart for 14 weeks. Unfortunately, I was wrong. We regularly spoke via Skype but the distance was too much of a burden. Upon returning to Boston, our chemistry was all wrong and what was left of a downward-spiraling relationship quickly evaporated. My time in China and this relationship have a strong negative correlation, a correlation close to negative one.”

Week 11. “Whether working towards my MBA, at work in the professional environment, or in China for an internship, I occasionally need a sense of normalcy where life slows down and I take a step back from reality. With several weeks left in my internship I was tired of Chinese food, public transportation, my internship, and being 7,000 miles away from home.”

Week 12. “The highlight of my time in China was a ten-day trip to Tibet. Traveling via train for 50 hours from Beijing to Lhasa, Tibet in a train car with five Mandarin-speaking men was a fascinating experience. Watching the countryside pass me by as the train hummed through the Himalaya Mountains was spectacular! Interacting with the locals, visiting temples, eating unique cuisine, and standing awestruck at the foot of Mt. Everest (see Fig. 3) are events that I will cherish forever.”

Fig. 3. Chad Muller at Mt. Everest Base Camp, August 10, 2009.
Week 13. “Personally, I take initiative to accomplish goals whenever possible. When the opportunity to write a white paper on machine translation (MT) presented itself I quickly accepted the opportunity. I take great pride and satisfaction in taking on responsibility and exceeding expectations, so upon receiving confirmation that my MT white paper would be published, I celebrated with dinner and another bottle of Johnnie Walker Black with my boss. Just my boss and I celebrated the completion of the white paper that evening and I was never so hung over the following morning.”

Week 14. “My preparation to leave Beijing was bitter sweet. I could not wait to return home to see my family and friends as well as try to salvage a relationship with a woman I thought to be very special. On the opposite side of the spectrum, I love China. The people, culture, and traditions are beautiful. I miss them every day. But, there is nothing more amazing than seeing your family at the airport marking the end of a 40 hours plane ride and 14 week adventure through China.”

DISCUSSION

Using his personal journal as the primary reference tool for the SPI analysis, Muller believed that he is able to clearly articulate the events, people, and places that left the greatest impression on my time in China. “Without my journal, many of these memories would be lost which strengthens opponents’ view of SPI which questions how objective data can be generated via this process.” As time passes, memories fade and the images in one’s mind become unclear. “Reading the words on the pages of my spiral-bound, hardcover black book allows me to taste the foods, see the mountains, and feel the excitement. I relive the experience all over again!”

“My SPI supports the argument that Woodside (2004, 2006) presents regarding the importance of multiple-method SPI. Incorporating both explicit (personal journal) and implicit (Harvard University’s IAT) SPI into my analysis generates a dataset much more valuable than the use of single-method SPI. Had I not participated in the IAT, my unconscious biases would not have been identified. When unconscious biases are not identified, advanced overconfidence bias (AOB) endures producing inaccurate information.”
CONCLUSIONS FROM MY SPI

“Two reasons exist for the central question of this study. Why spending fourteen weeks in Beijing, China for my summer internship was so important to me? (1) I love Asian culture and I will make a career in international business my life’s work. (2) The challenges faced when I am thousands of miles away from family, friends, and familiar surrounds make me a stronger person.”

Muller summarizes, “Why am I fascinated with global cultures? I cannot be certain of the reason, but my mind, body, and soul tell me that working in international markets promoting global economic development is my true passion. SPI and ASPI are valuable exercises that have helped generate this understanding. My personal experience, though, is that SPI is not an exercise this is completed once and then the researcher moves on to another exercise. SPI is not static; SPI is dynamic. When the temperature in Beijing is 108 degrees Fahrenheit and I am staring at the ceiling trying to figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life, I believe that is practicing ongoing SPI.”

ASPI is an extremely valuable exercise because its process allows the individual conducting the introspection to have a better appreciation of the human condition. Research by Shankar (2000), Woodside (2004, 2006, 2008), and Zaltman (2003) supports the position that researchers may better understand consumer buying habits and needs once they participate in (A)SPI and mixed-methods SPI to gain access to their own configurations of unconscious and conscious thoughts rather than using one SPI method.

REFERENCES


Arch G. Woodside. This volume provides useful answers to the following questions: how do tourists go about seeking high novelty and yet return to the same destination year-after-year? How do some firms in the same industry end up embracing industrial tourism while other firms reject such business models? What simple and complex heuristics do freely-independent-travelers apply pre-trip and during the trip in deciding where to go and what to do? What metrics are useful for measuring the impact of activity-focused tourism on the well-being of regional areas? How do executive leadership styles affect Scilit is a centralized platform for all published research literature, articles with a DOI or in PubMed are indexed within hours. by Emerald. in Advances in Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research. Advances in Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research; doi:10.1108/s1871-31732018000015015. Publisher Website. Google Scholar.