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Facilitators and Inhibitors of Host-Guest Understanding: The case of Lazise (Italy)

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ABSTRACT

Past research related to host-guest relations has been heavily influenced by the host-guest paradigm, a binary concept assuming a reciprocal relationship among two clearly distinct communities. Recently scholars have questioned the validity of this notion in a contemporary context, but have not widely succeeded in showing what facilitates/inhibits host-guest understanding. Lazise, a popular holiday destination on the shores Lake Garda/Italy is the case study taken in order to identify and understand facilitators/inhibitors of host-guest understanding through an interpretive approach. The study has resulted in identifying three core themes which facilitate host-guest relations in the context of Lazise, namely romanticization of local lifestyle, self-criticism and perceived authenticity of local culture. Furthermore, two inhibitors for host-guest understanding have been identified, namely lack of cultural sensitivity, and open display of sexual encounters between locals and tourists. The findings are useful for tourism policymakers in Lazise and elsewhere, while a further academic step towards a better understanding of host-guest relations is offered.

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Keywords: Host-guest Relations; Interpretive Approach; Host-guest Paradigm; Lake Garda; Italy.

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Introduction

In 1989, Valene Smith's milestone 'Hosts and Guests' had given birth to the host-guest paradigm, a binary concept based on a reciprocal relationship among host and guest, which has echoed since through tourism studies. Nowadays, the paradigm has been widely criticized for being simplistic and in extremis has been deemed as ready to be dismantled (NcNaughton, 2006). Maoz (2006) introduces a new concept which possibly able to reinvent the host-guest framework, namely the 'mutual gaze'. The host and guest encounter each other in a mutual contemplation, rather than only locals are being gazed upon as previously assumed. The mutual gaze is therefore believed to affect and feed from its mutuality, creating a complex reality in which relationships among host and guest are continuously negotiated rather than fixed in a paradigm (Maoz, 2006). This research argues that there is a need for establishing an effective method to better understand and interpret this complex network of mutual understanding and misunderstanding. An interpretive approach is chosen in order to identify facilitators as well as inhibitors of host-guest understanding in the context of the Italian town of Lazise, a former fishing village changed into a tourist-Mecca due to its favorable position on the shores of Lake Garda, Italy's biggest lake.

The goal of this research will consequently be to identify facilitators and inhibitors of the mutual understanding of host and guest communities in a tourism context. The current lack of research in regard is especially critical because in the case of developed countries host-guest relations tend to frequently be neglected and overlooked (Boissevain, 1996). The lack of directions on how to deal with host-guest interactions creates practical problems for tourism policymakers and businesses alike*.*

1. Literature review

1.1 Lazise and Lake Garda

Lazise is a North-Italian town with approximately 6.960 inhabitants (Comuni italiani, 2013). Located at the South-Eastern shore of Lake Garda, Italy's biggest freshwater lake, the former fishing village has undergone an intense touristic transformation since the end of World War Two. Up-to-date, Lazise's economy is highly dependent on tourism, with more than 400.000 annual arrivals registered in 2010, of which 304.253 were international tourists, spreading mainly over the high season from late spring until early autumn (Comune di Lazise, 2010).

Most of the tourists arriving in Lazise come from Northern Europe, with Germany showing the largest number of annual arrivals (approximately 150.000), followed by the domestic market (approximately 140.000 arrivals) and Danish and Dutch tourists (approximately 140.000 arrivals). In addition, the town also attracts a high number of seasonal workforces, mainly from neighboring cities and other European countries. Many of these former seasonal workers have moved permanently to, or acquired second homes in Lazise, with more than 10% of the town's residents being of foreign origin in 2010 (Comune di Lazise, 2010). The high number of non-local residents and

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guest workers is important to be taken into account for this research as McNaughton (2006) had suggested in her Indian case-study that guest workers are possibly seen as outsiders by both, the host and guest community. Their role in the host-guest understanding in Lazise should also be explored.

1.2 Understanding the host

Before looking into literature which has been written on the host community it is necessary to look into the root of the thought, which in its most simple is the term 'community'. During the last century several scholars have been concerned with what constitutes a community and if this idea exists at all. On the core of the community concept lays what German idealist philosopher Hegel had described as 'objective spirit'. This is the sharing of ideals and goals, combining single individuals into an objective subject which shares moral laws since infancy (Wassler, 2010).

William and Lawson (2001) show a related viewpoint, in stating that a community can be defined by shared opinions among its members. While according to this definition a community should be bound in morals and most likely culture, other scholars have argued that a community is a group of individuals who exist in one particular location and is therefore merely geographically bound (Sherlock, 1999, Swarbrooke, 1999).

Other researchers, among which Aramberri (2001), have argued that host communities are made of one piece and can thus be defined as a relatively homogeneous entity. Others have underlined the polyphony of voices which constitute the host community and have put into doubt that there is something like a community conscience shaping the object as a whole (Wassler, 2010). In the context of tourism, McNaughton (2006) highlights the polyphony within communities by underlining how outsiders can be perceived as hosts by the tourists, while the locals see them as strangers to their community. It is therefore possible that the host community in neither geographically or culturally bound, but rather exists only in the eye of the beholder: among which the internal perspective of its own presumed community members.

Indeed, tourism scholars have offered a wide and frequently incoherent definition of what constitutes a host. Davis, Allen, Cosenza (1988) and Krippendorf (1987) rank among the earliest contributors to this topic. Hosts have been categorized in four clusters (Davis, Allen, Cosenza, 1988) which became fairly popular in host-guest related research, namely (1) In direct contact with tourists, (2) In unrelated business, (3), In partial contact and (4) In no contact. Tucker and Lynch (2004) took a deeper look on the first category of 'hosts in direct contact with tourists' and subdivided it into five more clusters. On these, the host can rank from a socially open people-person on one extreme, through five stages to a pure business man at the other. While the first is keen to meet new people and will treat tourists as guests, the latter is purely money-oriented and will provide pure service rather than honest hospitality (Tucker & Lynch, 2004). It is possible to assume that the concept of host and guest are closely intermingled, with different types of hosts being able to transform customers and guests too.

Most past studies aim anyhow at measuring only residents' attitudes and their subsequent effects on tourists, defining hosts by their perceptions of the guest (Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006). On the other hand, the host community's' perspective and perception of the guest are believed to be under-researched (Getz, 1994). Faulkner and Tideswell (1997) state that the hosts' reaction does not depend only on economic disparities, but also on the perceived benefits the guests bring to an individual within the local community. This implies that there exist disparities in attitudes within the hosts, depending on their personal involvement and profit from the tourism business.

Swarbrooke (1999) adds that in addition to economic factors also social factors play a role in this, depending on what the locals observe in tourists and eventually adapt or want to copy from them. Wassler (2010) sums up a twofold distinction among factors which influence the hosts' perception of the guests, namely intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors constitute of age, gender, dependency on tourism, education and community attachment, while extrinsic factors can be summarized as seasonality, overcrowding, cultural differences among host and guest and their levels of interaction.

The hosts' attitude towards the guests has also been suggested to be positively influenced by benefits of tourism such as improving income, education, employment opportunities and local infrastructures (Lankford, 1994. McCool & Martin, 1994; Ross, 1992). Subsequently, it can be assumed that the hosts' gaze on the guest is of a highly complex nature, and is continuously negotiated among the respective communities' members.

Other scholars have underlined certain negative aspects which might influence the hosts perceptions, among which challenging of cultural values, new powerful economic groups emerging and the need to adapt to suit the tourists (Ap & Crompton, 1993; Johnson, Snepenger, & Akis, 1994).

The most considered model in measuring hosts' attitudes towards the guest is probably Doxey's Irridex (1975). Accordingly, by increasing the amount of tourism, the host community passes through the four stages of (1) 'euphoria', 'apathy', 'annoyance' and finally 'antagonism'. In other words, more guest numbers increase, more hostile the host community will eventually feel. Although the Irridex is widely known among scholars, the model has been criticized a number of times. Wall and Mathieson (2006), as well as Zhang (2006) underline that the Irridex fails to address the host community as a heterogeneous entity and assumes that all its members will react in the same, linear way. Shaw and Williams (1994) add that the model fails to tackle management strategies which alleviate the pressure on the host community, which might therefore not necessarily fall into hostility.

1.3 Understanding the guest

The previously mentioned issues in defining the host community are largely applicable also to the guest. The first question to ask is whether or not the term 'guest' can be used as synonymous with 'visitor' or 'traveler'. It has even be suspected that, in reality,

the terms 'stranger' and 'foreigner' are frequently more applicable than guest (Pi-Sunyer, 1978). Berno (1999) amplifies the problem, by stating that there is a lasting confusion among academics, with even researchers occasionally being mistaken as tourists or guests by the host community.

Consequently, if the guest community can supposedly be identified with a tourist community, the first step to attempt a definition could be found in tourist related literature. Regrettably, there is plenty of academic disagreement also in this field. Lanfant (1993) had stated earlier that there is a growing need for finding a unanimous definition for the term 'tourist'. Indeed, several scholars have attempted to do so during the last fifty years.

In reaction to early structuralist definitions of the term (e.g. Boorstin, 1964, MacCannell, 1976), Selwyn (1996) goes so far as stating that there is no such thing as the tourist at all. The term is rather used to describe different kinds of people who altogether look at different things. Cohen (1988) reaffirms that sound definitions of the term have to be rejected in a postmodern world. Other post-modern scholars (e.g. Baudrillard, 1988) argue that the modern tourist is merely a 'monitoring screen', driven only by consumerism and not by the internal search for a seemingly lost structure. In other words, the tourist is not nostalgically looking to restore something past but rather looking for something new to be consumed.

On what most scholars tend to agree on is that the guest community can not be seen as wholly homogeneous. Cohen (1972) ranks among the pioneers in segmenting the guest, grouping tourists into familiarity and novelty seeking individuals along a continuum. Mass tourists are believed to look mainly for familiar experiences, while explorers and drifters search for something totally new. Unfortunately, this continuum seems to be based on observed behavior rather than on motivational processes and an efficient psychological categorization is therefore questionable.

Smith (1989) re-elaborates Cohen's tourist typologies in a more host-guest related context. While the novelty seekers normally try to adapt fully to local norms and customs, the other end of the continuum demands a highly familiar environment. In other words, novelty seeking guests will look for a higher amount of contact with the guest community, while familiarity seekers will try to minimize interaction. Recalling the Irridex (Doxey, 1975), it is therefore questionable if novelty seekers or familiarity seekers would cause more irritation among the host community. The former have a higher degree of contact and therefore influence on the local community, while the latter is larger in numbers. Mehmetoglu (2004) criticizes Smith's typologies further, by defining the clusters as not easily distinguishable and highly context-specific.

Plog (1974) proposes another milestone in the categorization of the guest/tourist community. He is among the first scholars to relate tourist experiences directly to the chosen destination and indirectly to the host community. Similar to Cohen's (1972) earlier typologies, tourists are lined along a continuum between being of allocentric and psychocenric orientation. Allocentrics are somehow synonymous with novelty seekers, while psychocentrics prefer a higher degree of familiarity.

Shortly after, Cohen (1979) proposes another framework, being focused more on host experiences than host behavior. In other words, the guest community is distinguished

more by the 'why' than by the 'what' (Wassler, 2010). On one extreme, the recreational tourist seeks mainly pleasure and is not interested in deeper experiences. The other end sees the existential traveler, being fully committed to a spiritual quest. Also, Mehmetoglu (2004) proposes in similar fashion to categorize guests by their experiences, namely as 'individualistic' and 'collectivistic' oriented. Individualistic tourists tend to see their trip as a cultural investment, and search a learning more than just a leisure experience. Collectivistic tourists, on the other hand, travel for a short break from routine, only. Also, Mehmetoglu (2004) admits that there are several midlevels between the two extremes.

Following the line of tourist experiences, Oberg (1960) proposes the U-curve of culture shock. Accordingly, tourists go through five emotional phases when they clash with the host community, namely (1) euphoria, (2) disillusion, (3) hostility, (4) adaption, and finally (5) assimilation. In its most simple, this model proposes that tourists start their encounter with an emotional high, which later sinks to the lowest point and eventually rises again. Similar to the Irridex, the U-curve assumes that all tourists go through the same stages, putting the community on a homogeneous level. It is therefore highly questioned if the model can have universal validity (Hottola, 2004).

2. Methodology

2.1 The interpretive approach

The On the core of the interpretive approach lies the belief that 'our knowledge of reality is gained only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, documents, tools, and other artifacts' (Klein & Myers, 1999, p. 69). As such, the interpretive approach focuses its core on human sense making, understanding phenomena through meanings assigned to them and in which context these meaning-makings take place and is based more on intersubjectivity than on objectivity (Klein & Myers, 1999; Walsham, 2006). Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 9) has given a summary of interpretive sense making by stating that 'what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to'.

Walsham (2006) states that, although the interpretive approach has gained a considerable amount of attention from researchers, there is not much practical information on 'how to do it'. Subsequently, he proposes a rather practical step-by-step guide on how to conduct an interpretive study effectively. This guideline has been followed and adapted to the context of this study.

First (1), the researcher needs to choose a style of involvement. There are two main ways in which this is possible. A researcher can be 'outside' or 'involved' into the context of the study (Walsham, 1995). While the former gains information through formal interviews and does not provide feedback to respondents, the latter is actively involved through action and participant observation (Walsham, 2006). Higher involvement does facilitate access to data and provides a more personal and confidence-inspiring environment for the respondents. Nonetheless, it is also highly

time-consuming and can be costly under certain circumstances. In this stage it is highly important that the researcher is aware of his own subjectivity and his responsibility in filtering and interpreting relevant information (Walsham, 1995). In this specific case, the researcher has been highly involved into the context of the study for years preceding the research and has decided to spend additional four weeks on site for conducting the interpretive approach. In the last 10 years preceding this study, the researcher himself had spent 5 summer seasons (approximately five months each) in Lazise, working for different hospitality organizations and had first-hand seen and experienced the development of the destination. Although this has facilitated understanding of the context, there is the danger that this long involvement might bias a fresh outlook and critical distance from the value of the researcher's own contribution (Walsham, 2006). This point was considered with critical reflection on the researcher's own background and the context of the study (Klein & Myers, 1999).

Next (2), the researcher has to gain and maintain access to the study site. This is highly dependent on good social skills, chance, luck and serendipity but also on the respect the researcher earns on site (Walsham, 2006). In this case, the researcher's past on site and the fact that he is a native Italian and German speaker, as well as being fluent in Dutch and English, has facilitated access and communication with the respondents as well on the interpretation of their answer. Access to various campsites and hotels was obtained and no major obstacles in terms of accessibility were encountered.

Also, the collection of field data (3) needs to be considered when choosing for an interpretive approach. The most common way of doing so is through interviews (Walsham, 1995; 2006). Other possibilities include the consideration of documents, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts (Walsham, 1995). When opting for interviews, the researcher can tape record the full length or take extensive notes on site (Walsham, 1995). For this study, 20 unstructured interviews were held with stratified respondents, 10 of them with locals and guest workers (host) and 10 of them with tourists (guest).

The number of interviewees was not chosen beforehand but rather determined on the stagnation point of information reached on site. Respondents were selected on site and dependent on the momentary context. Especially when interaction was noticed, as for example an older tourist-couple asking a policeman for information, the researcher approached the potential respondents and asked for interview permission. The length of the interviews was highly context-dependent, varying from 10 minutes up to an hour depending on the situation and momentary context (Bailey, 2006). It was opted to take notes only and not tape-record the interviews, due to the fact that interpretive studies do not focus only on verbal expressions but also capture other facets such as expressions. Furthermore, it has been suggested that tape-recording often limits the willingness of respondents to speak freely, a feature which is essential for an interpretive study (Walsham, 1995). Except with the Danish respondents, every interview was held in the native tongue of the interviewee, which was deemed as appropriate to facilitate communication.

Last, data was analyzed and written into a final interpretation (4). This stage is highly important for interpretive case studies because not facts, but interpretations of other

people's interpretations are reported (Walsham, 1995). It is therefore essential to describe in detail how and why certain interpretations have been made in order to gain credibility. This was done through coding the obtained information into central themes affecting the host-guest relations in Lazise, providing a subsequent number of direct quotes from respondents, studying and providing background information on the roots of the interpretation, and finally by seeking out the understanding and misunderstanding of multiple discovered viewpoints on central themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Klein & Myers, 1999; Walsham, 1995; 2006). Participant observation which has been additionally conducted throughout the researcher's stay in Lazise was also incorporated in the final stage of data analysis.

3. Findings

3.1 Facilitators of understanding

As a result of the participant observation in loco and the 20 in-depth interviews, three facilitators of understanding have emerged as central in the host-guest relationship in Lazise (see figure 1)
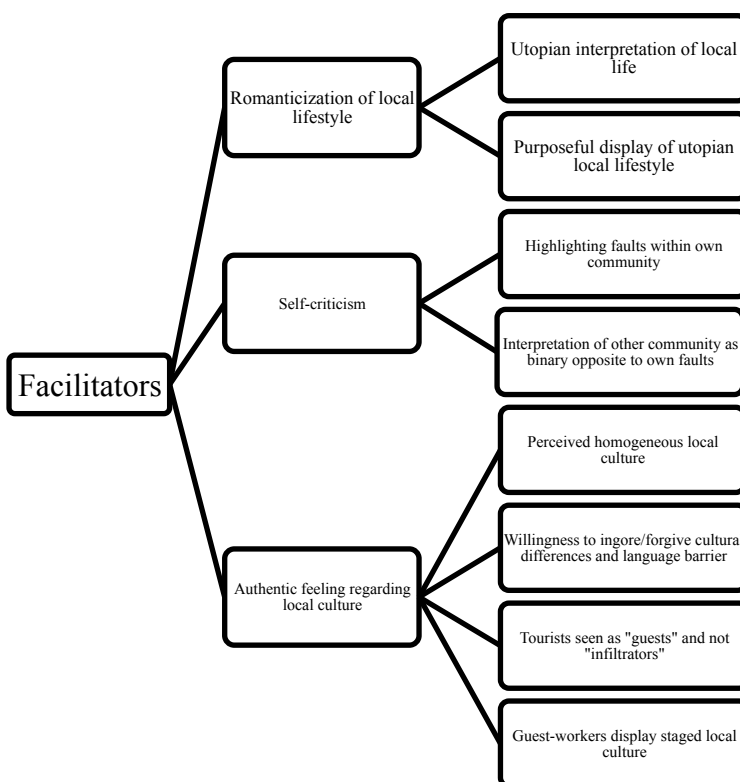

Figure 1: Facilitators for host-guest understanding

Most respondents have put the interpretation of 'lifestyle' as a facilitator of mutual understanding. The concept has strongly emerged in the majority of the interviews, and it has been suggested that the positive interpretation, or the perception of positive interpretation, of the local lifestyle create a base for good host-guest relations. As such, a 36 year old German solo traveler had mentioned that the host community is perceived as 'very relaxed and friendly'. When asked if the relaxed way of dealing with guests can be a bother at times, he replied that 'This is not a problem at all for me. Even if in a shop the service takes longer than at home its fine by me. I am on a holiday. I think people in Germany could learn from this lifestyle, at home everybody is running all day long'. Several tourists have indeed mentioned that they feel Lazise has an 'idyllic' and 'somehow romantic' lifestyle, while in their home countries life was often explained to be 'hectic' and 'frenetic'. When compared to their usual working environment, Lazise was described as a sort of utopia, where people can actually teach outsiders how to live a relaxed and fulfilling life.

Not only tourists but also locals have mentioned in how far the perceived appreciation of their lifestyle positively influences their understanding with the guest community. Locals have expressed to highly value the tourists' opinions about their way of life. A 22 year old bicycle salesman went so far as saying that tourism has not been able to change the local culture and that 'the Italian tradition and way of life is alive in Lazise. Also this is unlikely to change. After all, that's what tourists are here for.' While most locals are happy with the tourists admiring their supposedly relaxed lifestyle, some of them had to admit that this utopia is not always true. A local shop owner explained that tourists seasons in Lazise are 'hard, crowded and stressful'. This was anyhow seen as tolerable, considering 'the money which tourists bring to the town'. A hotel receptionist added that 'we work long hours but the tourists appreciate that we take our time for food and coffee even during peak season. I think that's what they feel is truly special about us'.

In addition to this, it was observed that locals do show a great amount of pride in their supposedly traditional lifestyle and often purposely display its manifestations throughout the day. As such, employees of a two star camping would often set up large tables where they would hold public lunches with numerous colleagues for several hours. Tourists would often come by and take pictures of the whole group eating and chatting. This appreciation of the local lifestyle (which in the hard reality of Lazise's high-season has been observed to be a rarity), was perceived as creating a strong bond amount the guest community and the hosts. Often tourists would indeed be invited to join the table and have a drink or try some food. Efforts were observed to publicly display as many things as possible which may allude to a supposedly 'relaxed lifestyle' in the harsh reality of peak season.

Respondents have also suggested that self-criticism plays an important part in facilitating the understanding among host and guest. While not being specifically critical of the other community, both host and guest respondents have shown to show more tolerance towards the other if they see more faults in themselves. A German tourist states that 'tourists come here and try to show off. They rent big boats and spend lots of money going for dinner. It seems they want to be the boss here. In

understand that they are on a holiday but when they come home they are broke. I think the locals deal better with money than we do.' This attitude was found more frequently among tourists, some of them being explicitly critical of their own nationality while others refer to other inbound nationalities as being 'impolite'. Interestingly, the criticism of their own community was found to reinforce the notion of the host community by contrast, such as 'showing-off' tourists and 'money-aware' locals. Others have mentioned tourists to be 'careless about their appearance', while hosts were described as 'elegant and stylish'.

The same has been found to be true from the host communities' perspective. A young local stated that the people of Lazise are generally 'obsolete' and 'outdated', while tourists and their avant-garde attitudes are able to 'open the door to the world'. It has further emerged that several locals believe that the tourism business in Lazise is run by an 'elite' of 'hoteliers and farmers'. These were perceived as not being open to suggestions from the local community, as well as negligent especially when concerning the interests of local SMEs. A 33 year old local newspaper salesman suggested with some irony that 'there are no major issues with tourists. Even if they behave disrespectful we still prefer them to our own people.' It was found that several respondents deviated from talking about the opposite community to eventually end up talking negatively about their own. As a consequence, hosts and guests alike have pointed out their 'own' failures by contrasting them with the seemingly better characteristics of the opposite community.

Finally, perceived authenticity of the host culture has been found as a major facilitator of mutual understanding. As such, if the local culture and society was perceived to be authentic, more room was given for tolerance towards behavior which could otherwise create friction among the communities. Understandably, this concept has emerged mainly from the guest perspective. A German couple highlights that 'if the place gets sold out there is a serious possibility that all this (unique culture) will disappear like it happened to some other holiday destinations at the Adriatic coast. People look for authenticity and this can still be found here. We don't need everything perfect but that's part of the experience'. Other respondents suggested that there have been several 'Chinese shops' opening in Lazise during the last years. This was perceived as negatively 'altering' the local culture, which for most tourists is likely to be a major point of attraction when choosing Lazise as a destination.

Several locals have voiced similar concerns. Some 'former tourists' were reported to have bought up shops in Lazise, which was perceived as an 'infiltration' in the local culture. A 35 year old local explained that 'I have heard several complaints about a shop in Lazise which has been bought by Germans. They try to sell things the German way, business-focussed, not interacting with customers. It is not a frequent phenomenon but if we allow more foreigners to buy shops here, it might change our image permanently. It might work their way in their country, but not here in Lazise. We are famous for our friendliness and this is what locals and tourists like about this place. If we make it a business we will only loose our character'. It has emerged several times that tensions among host and guests tend to rise when the community borders seem to 'blur'. So speaking, there was a mutual tolerance for forgiving differences, as long as

the image of an 'authentic' host community was upheld. Especially for the locals, it was underlined how important it is to keep and display their 'italianità', a word which can be roughly translated to 'Italian-ness'. The concept usually includes language, food, live and family values as well as religion and is crucial to Italian culture (Bona, 1999). It was also observed that in Lazise it is not uncommon to train foreign guests workers to display a rather staged 'italianità'' in front of tourists by speaking Italian and showing distinct local mannerisms. The owner of a local camping site stated that 'I sometimes prefer employees who do not even speak foreign languages. The tourists don't mind if we cannot immediately understand them but they do mind getting an answer in their native tongue if they expect a real Italian atmosphere'.

3.2 Inhibitors of understanding

In addition to identifying facilitators for understanding between host and guest, it is also necessary understand the related inhibitors. Two inhibitors have been identified in this study (see figure 2).
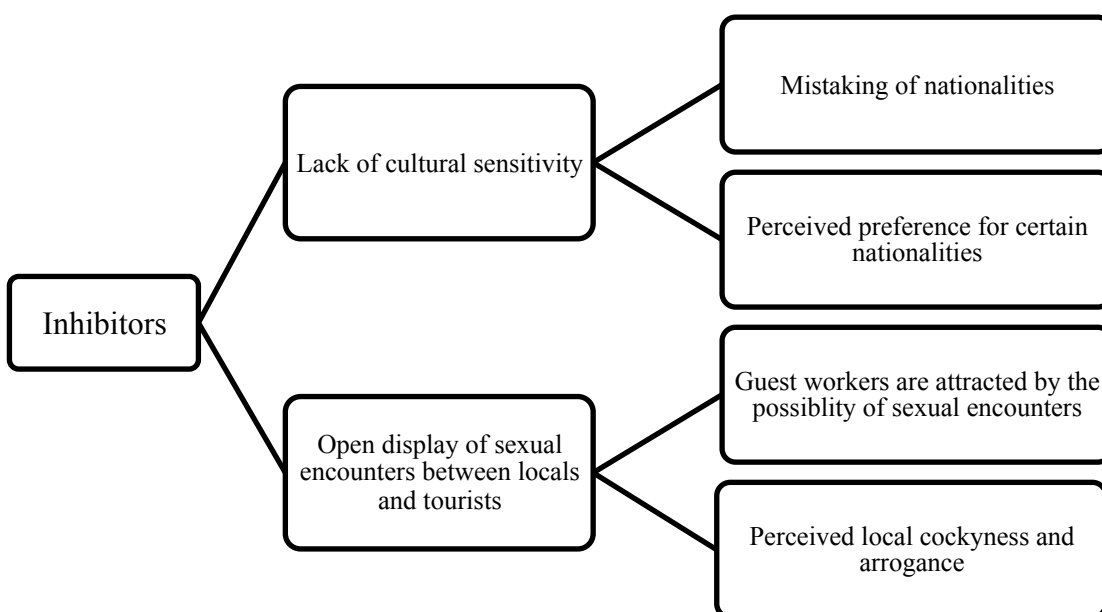

Figure 2: Inhibitors for host-guest understanding

Respondents have suggested that lack of cultural sensitivity can create an atmosphere of tension between host and guest. It was mentioned that especially tourists from not German-speaking countries often feel that they are being mistaken for Germans. A 55 year old Dutch tourist had stated that 'I am Dutch and it makes me angry that when I

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go to a shop people greet me in German. The locals should learn the difference between Germany and the Netherlands. We are not German and if you want to talk to me I would appreciate the use of English or my native tongue'. Also another Dutch tourist has outed her annoyance by saying that 'often locals don't speak English so I have to try to get by speaking some words I know in German'.

On the other hand, it has emerged that most tourists seem not to mind a language barrier or limited knowledge of English. A 70 year old tourist from the Netherlands told that 'I know the owner of the hotel where I am staying now and I know many people in Lazise. Most of them don't speak Dutch or English and I don't speak Italian but we understand each other. People here are anyhow very nice and friendly'.

Locals have confirmed that there is a tendency to study German rather than English. It was explained that this is due to the fact that Germans have been the most persistent inbound market. A young local anyhow stated that 'now we study more English at school. For the older generation German was more important, but now we are shifting the language focus'.

It was observed that lack of cultural sensitivity which is frequently perceived by the tourists in Lazise has caused several displays of nationalism. It is not uncommon to see national flags flying on tents and holiday houses, while tourists often wear clothes which identify them as belonging to a certain nationality. It was even spotted that several cars from foreign countries don't seem to be satisfied with their foreign number plates only, but also display their national flag on the roof or mirrors of the car. Second, display of sexuality was often found to be an inhibitor of mutual understanding. It was observed that Lazise seems to act as a platform for sporadic sexual encounters, mainly for young local males and young foreign females. While the owner of a local camping site has claimed that 'the girls are what mainly attracts young Italians to work here', the open display of obviously sexual relationships is not always taken lightly. Some respondents have claimed that the 'open way' of locals approaching foreign girls seems 'cocky' and 'disrespectful'. A young local told that 'we don't speak the language well but that is not major problem. The girls are what brings us young guys here. In one way or the other, we all interact with tourists'.

Often the sandy beach line on the shores of Lake Garda becomes an open display of these relationships during night time. This is also where most of the tensions between mostly young local males and young male tourists escalate. Several camping sites along this shore line have anyhow hired night guards to minimize related inconveniences.

4. Discussion

Although several inhibitors for the understanding of hosts and guests in Lazise have been identified, the host-guest relations were generally found to be good. By focusing on the facilitators of understanding, this can be maintained and possibly enhanced in the future.

Romanticization of the local life style has emerged as a main facilitator for host-guest understanding. Tourists have expressed that Lazise has a culture which makes them

highly appreciate the local way of life. Locals have shown to be highly receptive of similar praise and also displayed their willingness to show this somehow utopian lifestyle in public occasions where it can be admired. Brewer (1984) had suggested earlier that inaccurate ethnic stereotypes can interestingly be confirmed by interaction among hosts and guests. Remarkable to notice is that this happens in the middle of Lazise's peak season, where most workers stay for long hours and often do not even have a weekly day off. Utopian inferences of meanings on physical tourism places are not a rarity (Andriotis, 2010). It is anyhow important to notice that the mutual upholding of such inferences are likely to facilitate the understanding between host and guest.

Moreover, self-criticism has emerged as a crucial facilitator of mutual understanding. It was found that host and guest often create binary oppositions between the others supposedly 'good' and their own communities 'bad' characteristics. As such, the other community is somewhat idealized and this creates a certain amount of admiration. A possible reason therefore might be the 'cultural cushion' effect. On the basis of this concept lies the belief that culture shapes how environments, objects, behaviors, and ultimately experiences are perceived (Hartman, Meyer, & Scribner, 2009). Especially in the context of service experiences, cultural differences have been discovered to play an important role in perception (Stauss & Mang, 1999). Several scholars have suggested that the greater the cultural distance, the more forgiving people tend to be in the evaluation of their experiences (e.g. Weiermair, 2000; Weiermair & Fuchs, 1999; 2000). This suggests that if host and guest are culturally similar, understanding is way harder to achieve than with a more far-off inter-cultural experience. Hartman et al. (2009) suggest in similar fashion that culturally distant tourists relate their own level of dissatisfaction with cultural dissimilarities rather than with bad service. As cultural cushions can deviate attention from other communities, it is likely that in the case of Lazise the most similar members have attracted the biggest amount of criticism, while the 'other' is idealized.

Last, perceived authenticity of the local culture was found to be a major facilitator of host-guest understanding. Authenticity here needs to be understood as a constructivist notion, in the sense that it is individually constructed a negotiated among host and guest (Daugstad & Kirchengast, 2013). From the guest side, perceived authentic local culture was found to be a trigger for forgiving/ignoring misunderstandings such as language barriers and cultural differences. This was strongly associated with 'homogeneous' or 'untouched' local culture. The host community is widely aware of this fact and often tends to display their specific cultural traits. Outsiders within the community, such as guest workers, are often encouraged to show their 'italianità'' to tourists. These finding contrast the findings of McNaughton (2006) which describes guest-workers as outsiders to both, host and guest community. In the case of Lazise significant effort is being made to assimilate them to the local culture. Subsequently, the hosts were found sensitive to foreigners trying to permanently enter the host community as it is often perceived as a threat to local authenticity.

Finally, two inhibitors for host-guest understanding have been identified. Tourists have shown to be particular sensitive to the lack of cultural sensitivity, i.e. cultural

awareness. In the context of Lazise, this has led many tourists to believe that locals actually prefer German tourists as there is a strong German-centric focus on language and culture. Interestingly, language barriers were not found to be perceived as important as long as there is awareness about linguistic and cultural differences.

Last, the open display of sexual encounters between hosts and guests has been found to be a point of criticism. Several cases have been mentioned were locals were described as being 'pushy', 'cocky' or 'arrogant' when trying to approach female tourists. While sex and tourism are intrinsically related (Clift & Carter, 2000) and in the case of Lazise has shown to even attract labor force, the open display of sexual encounters especially at the local beach side has often created tension among host and guest communities.

Conclusions

The goal of this research was to identify facilitators and inhibitors of the mutual understanding of host and guest communities, taking the example of Lazise/Italy. Based on this research goal, an interpretive approach combining an ethnography, unstructured in-depth interviews, participant and direct observation was adopted.

Several specific facilitators and inhibitors of host-guest understanding have consequently emerged in this study. Consistent with the findings of Maoz (2006), the mutual gaze between host and guest has shown to create a mutual reality of diverse interpretations and negotiations which influence understanding among the communities. Based on the identified facilitators and inhibitors, tourism policy makers and marketers can identify specific threats and opportunities related to host-guest relations.

This study also needs to acknowledge several limitations. First, respondents were mostly chosen based on convenience sampling. Although all participants have been very open to share their experiences, a random sampling technique could be more desired and favor more realistic outcomes. Second, although facilitators and inhibitors for host-guest understanding in the context of Lazise have been identified, recommendations for tourism policy makers and marketers have not been emphasized. Also, governing bodies perceptions' in regard have not been included in this study, considering the research goal. Third, Lazise has been chosen as the context of this study. The findings of this research might not be applicable to all other destinations considering that there was no comparative investigation held.

Finally, several possibilities for future research can be suggested. First, scholars could investigate what tourism policy makers or marketers identify as possible facilitators or inhibitors of host-guest understanding. Second, another study could attempt to identify facilitators and inhibitors of host-guest understanding in another geographical and cultural context. Findings can be compared to this study, which would help understanding whether or not the results can have a wider global applicability. Last, the use of an interpretive approach might have biased the results towards the personal interpretations of the researcher. Further studies could adopt a quantitative approach

and test the relevance of the identified facilitators and inhibitors on a wider scale of respondents.

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