Abstract

Through the influence of recently changing markets in tourism, new products using the engineering of experience are being developed in outdoor activities such as hiking. This is happening even though the possibilities of the creation and the prediction of the character of other peoples’ experiences is highly controversial. This grounded-theory study aims to discuss the potential and limits of experience engineering or staging experiences in outdoor activities especially in hiking.

Focused on the example of hiking on the „Rothaarsteig“ trail the strategies and themes of experience engineering of this trail were extracted from data consisting of planner’s materials, expert interviews and promotional literature. Additional data was collected from a sample of n=31 adult hikers (both male and female), who hiked parts of the trail or the whole trail in the summer of 2008. This was accomplished using qualitative methods such as visitor employed photography, photo elicitation and photograph logs. The data was completed by having the hikers take part in a modified form of focus group at their final destination showing a selection of the hikers’ photographs on a large screen to provoke comments from the hikers concerning their experience during their hike. All data was analyzed using QDA software through which codes, concepts and categories of both expected and actual experiences were processed. Finally, the extracted concepts of experience engineering and the aimed-for-experiences were compared with the actual experiences of hikers. As the main results reveal:

- the existing concepts of experience engineering of the “Rothaarsteig” are based on the layout and the surface of the trail, the construction and improvement of experience infrastructure (e.g. platforms, bridges, info-boards) and human capital (rangers)
- through these concepts the planners and operators of the trail aim for a large variety of experience to occur for the hikers, which can be combined to form ten basic themes (e.g. nature, landscape, culture and history)
- the spectrum of actual experiences of the sample displays an even larger variety of experience, which again can be united to form 15 categories (e.g. nature, landscape, quiet). Most of these compare to motives of hikers and experience dimensions in outdoor activities as proposed in the literature. Eight additional dimensions of experience could be identified for hiking
- that, as most of the actual experiences assimilate to the expected experience, the strategies of today’s experience engineering of the “Rothaarsteig” are working and help to process the hoped for user experience.

The additional experiences identified, which are not yet influenced by experience engineering, as well as recent trends in hiking tourism, provide accessible potential for an extended experience-engineering strategy for hikes on the “Rothaarsteig” trail and for hiking and similar outdoor activities at other destinations.