

Your Guess is as Good as Mine: Finding Your Way on Board a Cruise Ship

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INTRODUCTION

Wayfinding on board a large cruise ship might be mistakenly thought to be easy and straightforward, and this may well account for the absence of literature on this topic. This paper will address this gap by exploring and exposing the influences that shape our everyday practices while cruising, itself a moving experience, carrying us by consent across the seas to distant shores. The need to address on-site experiences is not as Pearce (2011) points out, always fully investigated in post-holiday satisfaction surveys, and so this exploration of how passengers react and respond to their cruise ship surroundings exposes the scale, and sometimes overwhelming enormity, of some of these vessels now selling a mass tourism product.

There is reporting upon wayfinding elsewhere, in which there are accounts that examine other similarly large spaces, where it is more readily acknowledged that people may need help—for example in large care homes (see Caspi, 2014) or where they may be in a hurry, like airports (see Symonds, 2017). Such literature will be drawn upon here and supplemented with a cruising context.

To understand a mass cruise holiday experience, it is important to acknowledge that this holiday comprises a complete package for the customer. This may include travel to the point of boarding the ship, a specific itinerary for the duration of the trip, many inclusive services and amenities, the cabin of a particular category, plus supplementary services that have additional fees according to the operator policy (Gibson, 2006). This all-inclusive offer, plus easy access to some of the world's most popular destinations, has led to greater demand. So great is this demand,

that cruising holidays increase in number each year, with American passengers in the main (CLIA, 2019). Passenger growth has taken place worldwide, however, within what Dowling (2006) describes as one of the star growth industries of the early 21st century and indeed, the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) projection for 2019 was that 30 million passengers will take a cruise (CLIA, 2019).

This research acknowledges this phenomenon and employs a sociocultural lens. This approach of using ethnographic research is because much of the extant literature uses a more internal cognitive approach (see Haldrup, 2004), and in this way, there is an opportunity to explore what Crouch (2000) describes as “close-up space” (p. 65). Within the research findings there is evidence that suggests a more external, somewhat manipulative, approach to the way we experience this far more intimate space and an evident power relation (Kauffman, 2002) to wayfinding, which is supported by explanation of data collection, analysis, and findings that are divided into two for the purposes of this paper; these are, either passive or active wayfinding experiences on board ship. This understanding of the two aspects is important in two ways: 1) wayfinding knowledge informs mobility, and the meaning of mobility is unpacked further in this paper by our discussion of how wayfinding enhances the existing interpretation of the word mobility, described as an “evocative keyword for the twenty-first century” (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006, p. 1); and 2), for the more dominant economic discourse, as Yarnal (2004) indicated, successful wayfinding is invaluable for mass market leading cruise companies to ensure customers are positive about their experiences and their commercial possibilities are exploited (Weaver, 2005a).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Finding our way around is evident in all aspects of daily life, but “the seas and all that moves in, on and across and through them, have not been embraced with the same enthusiasm as mobilities ashore” (Anim-Addo, Hasty, & Peters, 2014, p. 337) despite almost three-quarters of the world’s surface being covered by water (Gibson, 2006). Authors documenting the finding of our way in and across the water include Gladwin (1974) who highlights, in particular, the culturally revered

navigation practices of the Polynesian islanders, who like all sailors, took their cues from nature including following wind patterns and the stars. This important ability and skill to traverse difficult waters or terrain was not called wayfinding until after Lynch (1960), and more recently Haldrup (2004), who see present-day tourists literally drifting along, ‘absent-mindedly’ inhabiting chosen spaces with social life and meaning. In 2004, Yarnal called for more investigation into what happens in tourism spaces and why. While arguably, there may be a view taken that there is much that is predictable (Ritzer, 2000; Weaver 2005b) on board ship, a changing and evolving consumer on board a huge vessel (itself a product of a dynamic market) endorses Yarnal’s (2004) view.

It is noteworthy to mention here the very practical responses that have appeared in recent years, including the pioneering work undertaken by Valencak (2014), a student studying Industrial and Strategic Design in Denmark, who realised people get lost on large cruise ships and who made practical suggestions to enhance lighting in hallways to show how the wayfinding experience could be improved. One of this paper’s authors, too, has been a consultant who audits the wayfinding experiences of tourists in different contexts and locations (see <https://www.travelwayfinding.com/audits/>). These pioneering activities highlight how there is a very real problem on the very large vessels, and it is possible to make substantive changes to the passenger experience.

The importance of supporting the wayfinding experience as these authors suggest cannot be underestimated. The structure and organization of the mass packaged cruising experience appeals to tourists wanting a home away from home and has been referred to by Berger (2004) as “floating utopias” (p. 65) because all passenger needs are met. Gibson (2006) too, remarks that the ship is the real destination, and his belief is developed further in Chin’s (2008) discussion of the “McDisneyization” (p. 84) of cruising, a context that demonstrates “efficiency, predictability, calculability and controllability,” all factors that influence the daily experience of a cruise holiday as a comforting space. As such, interesting insights into tourist expectations are revealed. Indeed, there is a suggestion that these experiences offer an “intersection of travelling and belonging” (van Bets, Lamers & van Tatenhove, 2017,

p. 781). Such a viewpoint reflects something of what Harvey (1989, cited in Hannam et al., 2006, p. 3) refers to as a “spatial fix” where there is a restricted mobility within the confines of a particular locale. These observations about the cruising experience endorse the work of Mancini (2000) and his 14 reasons why people cruise stating, “There’s a cruise that can satisfy virtually anyone,” and he continues, “Few other vacation experiences can make that claim” (p. 16).

Despite such bold statements at the turn of the century and Berger’s (2004) discussions of “the cruise phenomenon” (p. xii), Peters (2014) discusses how the ship “surprisingly gained only occasional consideration until recently in social scientific study” (p. 417), building upon her previous work where she highlighted that ships were slow and old-fashioned (Peters, 2010). She continues by saying that ships “make a world of people,” and this observation was also highlighted by Hannam et al. (2006) stating that “places are like ships” (p. 13), so the movement on water and the sense of the body drifting is a language that has enriched the study of tourism. As such, this offers us an opportunity for an examination of mobility experience in a very different type of space, comprising the ship, the sea, and the shore (Gray, 2016).

The American cruise market is the one that has been the most mature to date (Chin, 2008), but as cruising has evolved and developed there is a much greater complexity in evidence. Van Bets, Lamers, and van Tatenhove (2017) attempted to unpack the complexity of cruise travel by highlighting the number of stakeholders involved and their desire to help understanding and interpretation by introducing a conceptual framework for what they call the marine community, identifying the layers of governance at local, national, and international levels and the importance of the preservation of the environment. The case study they used cited Schep et al.’s (2012) research, which showed how the island of Bonaire gained a 400% increase in cruise ship arrivals between 2005 and 2010. Such exponential growth is clearly evidence of how cruise travelling experience is worthy of greater attention in the literature.

The decreasing costs of cruise holidays, as operators benefit from economies of scale (Gibson, 2006), along with increasing capacity and route networks, have obviously been factors in the considerable growth in

this form of tourism (Lloyd, Henry, & Thyne, 2011). However, one other significant contributing factor to the growth in cruise tourism has been the recognition of the profit potential of the retirement community (Bartling, 2006) and encouragement by the cruise lines for retirees to become repeat passengers. These repeat passengers then bring differing behaviours, and Chin (2008) has noted how passengers seek experiences outside of the bubble of their tourist experience, but again, her intimation is that this comes with familiarity and a greater confidence in the experience.

Alongside the increase in passenger numbers is the increase in the size of ships, which have gained in their overall capacity, dimensions, tonnage, and speed (Robertson, 2004 cited in Gibson 2006). The following note from Asa Berger’s (2004) cruise journal states: “The waiter says there are 100 cooks on the ship. It has almost 1,500 passengers and a staff of more than 500. A little city. A floating hotel, actually...” (p. 121).

This increasing size has continued into the super-cruisers (Gibson, 2006), which Weeden (2015) refers to as Royal Caribbean Cruise Line’s Oasis of the Seas: Allure of the Seas with 6,296 passengers and approximately 2,300 crew. These much larger vessels, incidentally often too large for many of the world’s harbours, are inevitably going to offer challenges to the cruise passengers, and there are a range of emotions that accompany the movement of the body in such spaces. Berger (2004) describes how he and fellow passengers were constantly consulting maps and goes on to say,

“In a sense a ship is a labyrinth, a puzzling maze through which we wander, in search of some lounge or bar, not being certain at times whether we are heading toward the front or the back of the ship.” (p. 75)

Passini (1996) summed up human responses to getting lost as “unpleasant, irritating” (p. 319) and creating a negative attitude, so the need to find a way around, expressed here as the embodied sociocultural dynamics of wayfinding, is important.

There are further obvious reasons: firstly safety; secondly, operational efficiency; and thirdly, commercial viability, e.g. encouragement of repeat visitors, customer satisfaction, and purchasing behaviour.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Anim-Addo et al. (2014) pose the questions: what does the movement of people on board cruise ships tell us about the way that we move around?; what do these spaces prompt in our behaviour?; and how are ship-based mobilities different from other spaces? The potential for mobility and movement on ships is different and more than just moving. Ingold (2011) describes this difference as having a “logic of inversion,” seeing a complex inhabitation of a world that has what he describes as a “meshwork” of connections and experiences (p. 150).

This complexity of experience while travelling has been discussed by Cresswell (2010) who suggests a range of different aspects, such as route and speed, that combine to inform meaning through movement. In thinking about how cruise travellers experience the cruise ship (especially as first-time passengers), Bourdieu’s “theory of practice” is employed here because Walther (2014, p. 7) believes it is a generic tool that can be applied to a range of different contexts. This has been selected because it is insightful in its sociological interpretation bringing forth the interplay between agency and structure.

Bourdieu (1984) encapsulates his theory with the following equation: $\{(habitus)(capital)\} + field = practice$ (p. 101).

For the purposes of this paper, our interpretation reduces his thinking loosely to an understanding that habitus is our disposition, capital our knowledge, and field the place of interactions. Bourdieu (1992) has explained his thinking about the importance of agency and how agents will use their capital to improve their positions in the field. Within the cruise ship context Bourdieu’s equation is: $\{(Passengers\ as\ embodied\ agents\ with\ dispositions\ and\ some\ knowledge)\} + ship = wayfinding\ experience$.

RESEARCH APPROACH

At the time of writing, the mass tourism cruising experience is dominated by very large cruise line operators, and as such, these companies act as gatekeepers for the transparency (or lack of it) in cruising operational and behaviour research. Difficulty in

gaining access to information from cruise line operators is an issue that has been highlighted before (Weaver, 2005a; Papathanassis, Lukovic, & Vogel, 2012), and as Wood (2004) and Foster (1986) before him point out, the cruise market is known to comprise poorly paid workers and oftentimes rich customers, although the pricing has decreased of late with the advent of the enormous cruise liners, some with population sizes of small towns (Chin, 2008). Despite the offer of an investigation to help commercial interests, access was denied. Therefore, the decision was made that for this type of investigation, where a more upfront and personal experience is required, it should be close to an auto-ethnographic fiction (Sparkes, 2002). This is similar to the style adopted by Symes (2012) who refers to himself as the passenger researcher/researcher passenger, and as such, combines ethnography and autoethnography. He includes himself as one of the researched, adopting a pseudonym and claiming he is undertaking analytic autoethnography, as suggested by Anderson, 2006 (cited in Symes, 2012). Like the researchers of this paper, he believes that being on board rather than at a distance brings considerable insights to his notes and offers the chance to provide first-hand assurances to fellow passengers that anonymity and confidentiality are preserved. This paper also follows the example of Berger (2004) in becoming what he calls a “cruise ethnology,” in which the writing is informed by “ideas, information, and insights” (p. xiii) that occurred while cruising and also relates some personal experiences.

The information gathered draws from five cruises taken by two of the authors between 2010-2017, together equalling one calendar month of cruising experience in either Europe or the Americas. In the manner of Klein (1993), these experiences are presented as one. In common with Foster (1986), the initial experiences were drawn upon retrospectively, and the more active participant observation was developed over time. The authors also took the view that the “community being researched is not a passive component,” and that rather, “the informants were also agents in the shaping of the data, the data-collecting opportunities and the course of the fieldwork” (Goodwin et al., 2003, p. 576). As Goodwin et al. (2003) discovered, in the cruising context it seemed far more natural to engage in naturally occurring dialogue rather than to press people who were on holiday. In actuality, upon discovery of the topic of

research, many were willing to share, but these were the customers not the employees.

Gathering data took the form of diary entries, and in the case of the retrospective cruising, examining photographs and sharing memories. Diary entries were informed by handwritten notes either on paper or on a mobile phone. Accompanied by photographs, these proved to be insightful. After Yarnal (2004), some re-examination happened after each cruise, and afterwards, some supplementary information was co-written by the travelling companions. These were all uploaded electronically, and using the tool of a bibliographic manager (in this instance Zotero), all the transcripts were cross-referenced, which allowed some emerging interpretations.

Moreover, the organization of the information gathered in this way follows a thematic approach because this style of information gathering and storing allowed all the authors to immerse themselves in the data and identify its key features (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Achieving depth in the interpretation meant that the application and relevance of the conceptual underpinning was explored more fully, and consequently, led to a more theoretical interpretation of the field notes gathered on board ship. This way of researching, documenting, and interpreting leads to an understanding of the social life by expressing the lived experience itself, and it is hoped to achieve what Richardson (2000) alludes to as a substantive contribution.

The phases of the research are identified in the diagram in Figure 1. In reality this was not so linear and phases 1 and 2 were connected.

WHAT WAS DISCOVERED ABOUT WAYFINDING ON CRUISE SHIPS

As Bourdieu (1977) highlighted, there is some homogenisation of the dispositions and interests on the cruise (see also Papathanassis, Lukovic, & Vogel, 2012). The thematic analysis found these to be both passive and active (see Figure 2).

Being passive

Group behaviour and being herded were evidenced on board as many people shared and populated the same spaces. This is demonstrated by passengers following the crowd to reach the swimming pool or the dining area, for example. This mindless and docile behaviour is criticized by Culler (1988), but as one passenger explained, he is relaxing and doesn't want to be switched into decision-making as is expected in his job back home and is, therefore, happy to be led while on holiday (Goh, 2014). Similarly, not wanting any anxiety or the unexpected during a holiday appears to be the norm, endorsing the view that the absence of time constraints and the bounded environment of the space on board ship makes the whole experience far more recreational (Fewings, 2001).

Phase 1: <i>Immersion.</i>
Phase 2: <i>Generating initial codes.</i>
Phase 3: <i>Searching for and identifying themes.</i>
Phase 4: <i>Reviewing themes.</i>
Phase 5: <i>Defining and naming themes.</i>
Phase 6: <i>Writing the report.</i>

Figure 1 / Phases of thematic analysis, adapted from Sparkes & Smith, 2014.

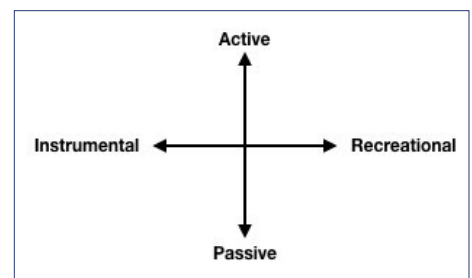


Figure 2 / Dispositions of the wayfinding habitus, expressed as continua.

Those with mobility issues are required to take some responsibility for the routes used around the ship, but one passenger who uses a wheelchair stated to the authors that she had been fully informed about the limitations of the access available and found the crew to be helpful; the best description of her behaviour would therefore be passive and instrumental.

Elsewhere, roll-on/roll-off ferries often utilize color-coded routing, usually by painted lines on the floor, but our cruise researchers found limited use of this simple wayfinding technique on board their cruises ships, with evidence of color-coding used only for some staircases and decks. There is a sense that passengers can simply suit themselves, and even with days spent at sea, there is no real sense of any directed encouragement to familiarize with the entirety of the ship. However, blue routing lines were in evidence at the ports themselves implying their functionality rather than an additional support for a leisure experience.

The confines of the ship space rely on cooperation in emergencies, and adherence to rules is vital. Passengers were aware of the importance of safety procedures and were willing to be led in drills; this was reported as instilling confidence in their operators. Here, the significance of crew members as wayfinding informants is paramount, and technology and signage are often seen as insufficient for real emergencies.

Crew member Patrick told us, “I help them find their way.” He sees this in two forms: one getting around the ship, and the other when they disembark at ports and he’s not there.

As Weaver (2005a) states, cruise ships have captive consumers, and consequently, operators use “steering behaviours” (p. 168), which are used to influence behaviours, and “Typically, casinos, bars and boutiques are situated in areas close to frequently used pedestrian walkways” (Weaver, 2005b, p. 353). The researchers for this paper, too, were oftentimes unintentionally walking into the casino having followed a particular route through the ship.

This sense of control and self-management that cruise line operators use is evidenced further by their purchase of islands and/or adoption of their own routes and stopping points, which are believed to be points of disembarkation where “nothing can go wrong”

(Löfgren, 1999, p. 260). These shore excursions and tours are often guided to ensure what Gottdiener (2000) highlights as “relative safety” (p. 145). Added to this, the possible punishment of missing the ship’s departure, plus all the related expenses to rejoin (Douglas & Douglas, 2004), compliance is really expected and sits well with the commercial drive to sell shore excursions. As cruise passenger James states, the convenience factor is worth paying for: “I would rather pay £50 to avoid having the hassle of trying to find my own way around,” and Patrick, the crew member, illustrates how the cruise operators use this situation by selling tours to passengers. He says,

“For the port of call, we don’t give maps for several reasons. Firstly, we don’t want people to know that the city center is so close and it’s so easy to reach. We prefer them to buy the shuttle service.”

The attempt at deluding the customer (this may well make them happy) is evidenced elsewhere. When after visiting the Bahamian Island of Great Stirrup Cay, it was discovered that the island was owned by the cruise line and that is it is commonplace for the sand to be raked over after a visiting excursion with the sole purpose to obscure the footprints of previous visitors (Jaaksen, 2004; Löfgren 1999; Weaver 2005a).

Being Active

The researchers discovered that the experience before embarkation and on land were far more active experiences. The bounded nature of being on board cocooned passengers, so they engaged in recreational wayfinding (Fewings, 2001), taking pleasure in their personal discovery of the ship. Regular cruise travellers, Sue and Greg, have opted for the smaller ships on European rivers because of the ease in gaining familiarity with their surroundings and the much simpler and less time-consuming access to ports.

This sense of discovery varies depending upon customers’ familiarity with the ship and their own sense of curiosity. Farr et al. (2014) believe that “wayfinding naturally occurs in both familiar and unfamiliar settings” in equal measure (p. 91). What often appeared to happen with many cruise passengers observed was that they used their own particular routes, and if for any reason they were taken off course—as was the case of one passenger who wished to avoid the crowds after

a theatre performance—they could find themselves considerably disoriented (Field notes).

Such heuristic practices, i.e. when we adapt and find our way, demonstrate a far more active disposition and can be daunting for some, but in others they can be the source of relaxation and happiness (Chang, 2013). The following example stated by one passenger shows how some initiative can be drawn upon:

“In Lisbon, we chose the mini-bus transfer to the center offered by the excursion provider because we were unfamiliar with the destination. The transfer took 20 minutes and seemed rather long and complicated. Once in Lisbon city center we could see the ship and saw that we could walk back the distance of one mile or so.”

Interestingly, of those spoken to, the most active were the repeat visitors to the ship because first-time visitors tended to be more content remaining on the vessel. The cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993) that these repeat cruisers demonstrate is worthy of note, for the cruise operators cannot expect the same passivity that is shown by the novice passengers.

OVERALL FINDINGS

The cruise ship represents a bound space where people passively accept their situation and where familiarity encourages a far more active mindset. There would appear to be a continuum showing an adaptability in the consumer that cruise operators need to consider. Will their floating resorts maintain their customer base if the product remains the same?

This evolving recognition of the wayfinding habitus, or more specifically, evolving recreational and active dispositions toward wayfinding through repeated wayfinding practice on cruise excursions, is consistent with Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (1992) description of habitus as an “open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures” (p. 133).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper attempts to address the unexplored topic of wayfinding on cruise ships. How we move around spaces

and interact with others is worthy of investigation, and by drawing upon the experiences of taking cruises, there is an opportunity to think and explore further about what behaviours reveal about human dispositions to cruise travelling experiences and mobilities.

The sheer enormity of the size of ships demonstrated in the current building of cruise ships for the oceans deems it obvious that there will be issues of orientation and sense-making. These ships have become floating resorts, and as such, may limit their ports of call and rely solely on their own internal activities and entertainments to satisfy their customers. That said, the research here found that familiarity leads to a more active participant who may well demand more individual shaping of their experience, as can be seen elsewhere in the travel industry.

Using Bourdieu’s interpretations of a theory of practice, we have identified something of the dispositions that exist on board a cruise ship as being passive or active. Material gathered on board five separate cruises were combined and amalgamated into one. In doing so, there is evidence that there is a fluidity in the behaviour of consumers.

As individual passengers on board a cruise ship may retain and exercise a degree of agency, we are often unknowingly guided, and as such, our “freedom to act otherwise” is limited (Giddens, 1984, p. 9). On board, designated paths control the use of the space, and ultimately conform to expectations. There is the inevitable prospect, too, that smart technology will bring changes (CLIA, 2019) to what has already been described as a maturing industry in need of revitalisation by some (Weeden, Lester, & Thyne, 2011).

Overall, our conclusion is that wayfinding is an emotional and a very human experience demonstrating far more than simply following signs and the transfer from a to b. The research shows room for further exploration into the passive and active engagement of passengers on large vessels, which by sheer size and scale impact upon the overall passenger experience. Travelling on board and floating on water can be meaningful to a wide-range of passenger types in many different ways, but what passengers all have in common is that signage and wayfinding support in the making of that meaning.

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