Destination Weddings: A Journey That Comes with a Price

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1.   Introduction

Weddings have been a significant tradition in many cultures for centuries. It is a cause for celebration- to share a couple's new journey with friends, families and relatives and create memories together (Breg, 2013). Destination weddings, on the other hand, are a fairly new concept, but one that has been growing significantly in the past few years (Micallef, 2017). The rise in demand for this niche market has had impact on destinations worldwide (Vidauskaite, 2009). As the wedding tourism industry sees a potential for growth within this market, destinations are being transformed in various ways to attract consumers (Micallef, 2017).

Destination wedding tourism requires the same or more components to that of a traditional wedding, therefore, a destination is required to have all the resources to satisfy the demands of a couple (Micallef, 2017). In the process of beautifying a destination to meet the different requirements, the consequences may have led to neglection of impacts that may follow (Vidauskaite, 2009; Deng, 2012).

The purpose of this paper is to study the negative impact of destination weddings, specifically, the generated economic, environmental and social impacts, as well as the approaches that could be taken into account when considering how to minimize risks.

2.   Literature Review

Wedding tourism has gained boost over the past decade and has helped several destinations gain significant market segment (Deng, 2012; Micallef, 2017; Vidauskaite, 2009). As the trend for getting married at an exotic destination continues to grow (Deng, 2012; Micallef, 2017), the higher impacts it is likely to have. This literature aims to firstly study the nature of this kind of tourism, followed by the consequences generated from it.

2.1   Concept

Destination wedding occurs when a couple decides to get married outside the zone of their permanent residence. Most of the time, destination weddings are combined with a honeymoon, also termed as 'weddingmoon', where couples get married and spend their honeymoon in one location (Micallef, 2017). Destination wedding couples usually choose exotic landscapes as it is believed that the alluring beauty of nature can trigger emotions, erotic, sexual and sensory, whilst glorifying the love a couple has for each other (Johnston, 2006). According to the Fairchild bridal group, out of 86% of couples who dream of having a destination wedding, 16% have made it a reality (Micallef, 2017).

2.2   Why choose destination wedding?

There are several reasons for the growth in demand for destination weddings. First, getting married away from home saves money. Many couples who choose to have a destination wedding say that it is easier to have a smaller destination wedding than a bigger domestic one. The couple is thus able save costs as the number of guests attending are much lower (Breg, 2013).

Second, destination weddings are less stressful. A destination wedding is an escape from nuptial drama as it allows the couples to decide how they want to get married, rather than how society wants them to get married (Breg, 2013). In many cultures, weddings involve a lot of preparation, tradition and social protocol. For instance, weddings in Japan are considered sacred, and come with a lot of traditions. It is customary to invite families, relatives and business colleagues. Family members are actively involved in all the preparation and this can result in unnecessary drama (Schumann and Amado, 2010). In the case of destination weddings, couples are in charge of the things they want done and how they want it done. As weddings are arranged at exotic locations, the ambience is much more relaxed (Breg, 2013).

Third, change in consumer preferences are now playing a more important role. Millennials have evolved ideas associated with weddings. With more education and consciousness, millennials tend to have special demands, seeking something different – something that shows their personality (Wall and Mathieson, 2006) and these could be in terms

of wedding themes, dresses, music, flowers, and even decorations, must be unique (Questex, n.d).

All the reasons mentioned above imply that the evolution of destination weddings is not solely cost related but also suggests that socio-cultural factors are now playing an important role in the process of decision making for these events (Atzori, Fyall and Miller, 2018).

2.3   Previous Research

A destination wedding is a fairly new concept; consequently, very limited studies have been done on the impact of such events on this tourism sector. Although a few studies have been done on wedding tourism, most of them either focus on the positive images of weddings or on how weddings are celebrated differently in different cultures.

However, in 2018, when destination weddings started gaining more attention from people, many tour operators attempted to collect data on the demands for destination weddings. Results show that North and Central America had the highest market with 30%, Asia 22%, Europe 20%, South America 12%, Australia and New Zealand 6% a and Africa and the Middle East at 5% each (Restanis, 2018).

3.   Negative Impacts

Destinations weddings are 'once-in-a-lifetime' event that holds significant importance for a couple (Wall and Mathieson, 2006; Deng, 2012). People are willing to invest more in order to have the most perfect dream wedding (Deng, 2012; Micallef, 2017) but like a double-edge sword destination are being severely damaged due to the effects of destination weddings (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). This paper focuses on the three major impacts caused by destination weddings, including economic impact, environmental impact and social and cultural impact.

Firstly, the paper looks into the economic impacts and the harms it can cause on the destination of the couple and the host destination and community. It also takes into account other external costs that can incur from the destination wedding activities.

3.1   Economic Impacts

It is unarguable that destination weddings can give an economy a big boost. It increases the employment rate and can open up new opportunities for both the destination and the people in the host country. However, it could also have a negative impact, such as the effect on the economy if people decide to go back to traditional weddings (i.e. over dependency). Such economic uncertainty could be very unfavourable for the destination wedding sector.

3.1.1   Over dependency on the destination wedding market

Durinec (2013) suggested, "wedding coordinating companies, airlines, cruise lines, hotels chains, resorts and other stakeholders are discovering that they can profit sustainably by making destination weddings …part of their tourist offer." A lot of investment and effort is put into embellishing a destination to attract more customers. Over depending on the destination market can adversely affect the host country as well as its residences.

- *Effects on the host country*

Other than availability, many destination wedding couples look for other components to make their day special. According to Kuoni, the Caribbean was voted the perfect place for destination weddings (Kuoni, 2015). With its charm, and the availability of the 3S (Sun, Sand, Sea), it is at the top of the pick list. However, due to socio-economic changes, couples now also consider destinations such as Maldives, Hawaii, Mauritius, Bali and Phuket, which can offer the same ambience at a lower price, to have a perfect beach wedding (Vidauskaite, 2009). Therefore, the Caribbean, with its smaller scale, is an easy target to be affected in the case of economic uncertainty. A destination as a tourismproduct is perishable and starts losing value when the demand is lower than supply (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). With greater demand for destination weddings comes more hotels, wedding venues, food and decorations and all sorts of raw materials are necessary to satisfy consumer needs. For instance, couples who desire to get married in the rainforest would prefer a bouquet of unique wildflowers rather than regular red roses. Destination weddings extract local resources from those landscapes and overusing these can result in a shortage of resources to meet demand in the future (Wall and Mathieson, 2006).

- *Effect on residences*

The tourism sector is price and income elastic (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). With an increase in employment rate, local residences are also required to pay higher taxes. Prices of goods and services also increase when demands are higher than supply, leading to a higher cost of living (Ap and Crompton, 1998). In addition to higher costs, many service sector jobs offer lower rates of pay. For instance, the food and beverage department require more people to work but the locals are often paid lower than the national minimum wage. Local residences are also at highest risk of losing their job if the demands for the destination falls (Wall and Mathieson, 2006).

3.1.2 Cashflow

Weddings do not only contribute to their own industry, but rather, change in that sector can affect the tourism industry as a whole. This will include travel agencies, accommodation, tour operators and flights (Kuoni, 2015). Additionally, destination wedding sector does not only impact the economy of the host destination, but also the couple's residential destination.

- *Impact on both parties*

In the past 10 years, New Zealand's wedding industry has grown by 300% and the industry itself has contributed almost 30 million dollars to the economy (Johnston, 2006). The host country has obviously benefited from the money inflow from destination weddings, but the other party, the country in which the couple are residents of, is losing money. The issues associated with the cash flow are difficult to measure. The inaccuracy in establishing the balance of such payments can influence the figures on the country's GDP (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). Therefore, as more couples are keen on having destination weddings, the more currency goes out of their home economy.

- *Impact on wedding organizations*

As much as destination weddings can affect the economy on a global scale, it also generates impacts on a national and international scale. Wedding organizers, wedding planners, event organizers and almost the whole tourism sector can be affected by destination

weddings. Many couples now prefer wedding planners to do most of the preparations for them because it is convenient and, most of the time, it all comes in a package at a cheaper price (Questex, n.d). When a couple buys a destination wedding package, they are obliged to use the products and services offered within the package. The services range from wedding locations to flights and hotels, all of which are booked through agencies abroad. Domestically located wedding organizations are thus losing their market share (Britt, 2013).

3.1.3 Creation of external costs

Not all destinations have the available resources to attract customers, whilst some are rebuilt or adapted accordingly to the changes in consumer demands. More and more destinations are also being used in campaigns to promote themselves as the perfect destination wedding location (Durinec, 2013). New Zealand, with its white glaciers, rugged mountains, green tropical forests, blue coastlines and sandy beaches (Johnston, 2006) can easily attract destination wedding couples, but there are other destinations that require a substantial transformation to gain a competitive edge. To provide a more realistic example, Pattaya was once a peaceful city which was redeveloped to attract more tourists. Beaches were beautified for wedding venues; more accommodation and facilities, such as airport, was built for the convenience of consumers. The transformation did capture destination wedding market, but the once peaceful city lost its charisma (TAT, n.d.). Like Pattaya, many destinations were transformed, and money was being invested in order to promote these destinations for weddings. However, not all destinations were successful; not because they lacked beauty but because they lacked the resources upon which to build. Ultimately, the money invested could have been better used on another sector of the economy. There are a lot of opportunity costs associated with external costs (Wall and Mathieson, 2006).

3.1.4 Discussion and Recommendation

Economic consequences are always mentioned, whether or not they are relevant to destination weddings. It can be noted from this section that destination weddings can generate several negative impacts, but the size of the impact is determined by the size of the destination. Most often, the larger the destination, the smaller the impact (Wall and Mathieson, 2006).

Sustainable approaches

Not all countries have the ability to deal with economic uncertainty and overcome it successfully. Developed destinations such as France, Italy and USA do not rely on wedding tourism because they have diversified economies. However, developing countries and smaller destinations heavily rely on the destination wedding market, making them vulnerable to all sorts of changes (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). Small destinations need to spread their risk to sustain profitability.

To minimize the impact on both parties, a cost- benefit analysis approach could be applied (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). To apply this strategy successfully, the potential costs and benefits for both parties should be thoroughly weighed up; not only on a national but also on a global scale. A properly considered strategy could then be formed and applied. The approach should be flexible in how it could be implemented.

3.2   Environmental Impacts

More recently, studies are including environmental impacts as part of their discussion, as environmental concerns are beginning to play a major role. The environment is not limited only to air, land and water but also flora, fauna and people are a major part of it (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). For destination weddings, the environment of the host countries plays an important role in attracting tourists.

Destination wedding is a synonym for natural tourism. A destination's landscape must be 100% natural to attract tourists (Johnston, 2006) but many destinations are losing their charm because of tourist activities. Millennials prefer themed weddings, be it mountains, beach, cruise or even Disneyland, to make their wedding day special (Fromm, 2018). The emergence of such themes can significantly damage the environment in which they take place and the people at those destinations.

3.2.1 Overuse of land

Tourism has one of the most complex sets of land uses (Xi, Zhao, Ze and Kong, 2014) and one of the most common resource problems as a result from tourism activities, is land

degradation (Healy, 1994). Land resources, including minerals, fertile soil, fossils, wetland and forests, are losing value (Sunlu, 2003). More couples are now choosing to get married in natural settings because they believe nature can help restore well-being and reduce stress (Richins and Hull, 2016). Destination weddings are a major cause of land degradation because; first, couples now tend to celebrate their wedding for more than one day. In Indian culture, for example, weddings are usually 6-7 days long as there are so many traditions to carry out by both bride and groom (Micallef, 2017), but now longer weddings are preferred by all couples as it gives them a longer time for celebration. Increase in the number of wedding days means that a destination needs to be quickly turned over ready for the next use. Soil and vegetation are destroyed in the process. Soil is an important component of land, but over use of the soil weakens it and its ability to recover, leading to soil erosion and a lesser ability to withstand natural disasters (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). Second, congestion from crowds are another issue. Often, the number of guests at a destination weddings can be far less than expected, but there are occasions where the number of guests exceeds a destination's carrying capacity (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). Although the number of guests attending a couple wedding can imply a greater social status, environmentally, overcrowding is equivalent to congestion and can seriously damages natural resources. For example, Lake Tahoe, a mountain in California, once a beautiful and peaceful mountain has, since becoming a destination for weddings, lost its scenic quality (Healy, 1994).

3.2.2   Effect of themed weddings on wildlife and marine life

Wall and Mathieson (2006) suggests the new generation can be described as experience seekers; as such, what could be better than getting married in a tropical forest or underwater. The demand for rainforest weddings and underwater weddings has indeed been on the rise, the consequences of these are, however, profound. This section summarizes the impact of rainforest themed weddings on wildlife and underwater themed wedding on marine life.

Many tropical rainforests are now being exploited by the tourism sector. The wedding industry has also been trying to capture new market by introducing all sorts of different wedding ideas, including getting married in the center of a tropical rainforest. Trees are being

cut down to clear spaces to make wedding venues. Wedding planners at those destinations also offer inclusive camping packages in order to add a wow element to the couple's, and their guests', experience. Nonetheless, no consideration had been given to impact this may have on wildlife, whose habitat is being shut down in the process. Cutting down trees destroys the habitat of many small animals and primates (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). Some wildlife are very sensitive to change and therefore, migrating from their habitat can cause modifications to that species. Many species of wildlife, especially those that depend on specific food, habitat, and season, when disturbed by such tourist activities, often die or become threatened by extinction. Other than physical interference, some wild species can become mentally and physiologically disturbed in the process. Symptoms can include increased stress rate, heart rate and eventual death (Buckley, 2004). Music and bands at weddings can also produce different behavioral changes in different species (Wall and Mathieson, 2006).

Lakes, streams, oceans and seas are major water attractions (Wall and Mathieson, 2006) but people often neglect the importance of water and contaminate it. The Caribbean is now more popular than ever for cruise weddings (Hall, 2001) but cruises are also one major reason for the death of coral reefs and marine life. Reefs in coastal areas such as Miami and Alaska are being damaged by cruise ships anchoring in deep-sea water (Brida and Zapata, 2009). Waste from cruise weddings are also dumped into the sea, killing fish, and contaminating the water with different species of fungus. Other than cruise weddings, getting married underwater is also becoming a new trend. Many beautiful destinations have started offering underwater weddings for couples. For example, the Tourism Authority of Thailand organizes mass underwater weddings for couples, every year, on valentines' days (TAT, n.d.). Scuba diving and snorkeling not only affects the reefs but marine creatures are physiologically disturbed as well.

3.2.3   Discussion and Recommendation

Sea, scenery, water and wildlife, forest and mountains, are major destination wedding attractions and with the shift in preference to more eco-based weddings, environment is a big influencer in choosing a destination (Cooper and Hall, 2007). Several destinations are waiting to be explored, especially in developing countries. Destination wedding tourists, however, come

from developed countries (Simmons and Becken, 2004). Many environment analysis frameworks have been introduced for sustainable development but again, these frameworks are less effective because developed countries have less exposure to the risks from the wedding sector. On the other hand, developing countries are at higher exposure to environmental impacts (Cooper and Hall, 2007).

Sustainable approach

Destinations and world heritage sites in both developing and developed countries are well preserved (Cooper and Hall, 2007) because of proper regulation from government bodies (Xi, Zhao, Ge and Kong, 2014). Such areas are well protected from over exploitation. However, many other small parks and conservation sites are at risk of being destroyed through tourism activities. A sustainable approach to this problem would be privatizing the land (Healy, 1994). It is impossible for the government to buy, or own, all the green areas within a destination, but it is possible for them to regulate use of such properties. Setting up authorities to protect these conservative areas will help a destination protect more of the environment from being exploited by damaging and illicit activities.

3.3   Social and Cultural Impacts

Tourism has been a major source of intercultural contact (Dogan, 1989). Bodies are shifting towards a focus on tourism that is more social and cultural (Johnston, 2006). Consequently, many theories are now trying to study social changes, within family values, culture, beliefs and habits (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). The social impact of destination weddings can be at many levels, ranging from the individual to the community and global level.

3.3.1   Individual Level

As mentioned earlier, weddings are a celebration for families and friends (Breg, 2013) but, more recently, couples prefer to get married far away from home, which is contrary to this view. Ngem and Elsamadicy (2017) believe that the motivation for wanting to have a destination wedding is linked to Maslow's theory of the 'Hierarchy of Needs". Maslow categorizes human needs into 5 categrories, ranging from basic needs, safety needs, social

needs, self-esteem and self actualization. The motivation for an individual opting for a destination wedding is a product of either social need or sense of belonging. As has already been suggested, couples may opt for a destination wedding to prevent nuptial dramas. However, the concept of destination wedding not only seems to oppose Maslow's theory, as the increase in demand for destination weddings might imply that more couples now prefer isolation rather than being in a group. The tradition of celebrating a marriage with families and friends may, slowly be fading away.

3.3.2   Community Level

Not only do destination weddings affect society's beliefs, habits and values, but social and family lives are being challenged. Communities are reinventing their cultures to suit the changes in tourist demand, thus changing the perception of cultural authenticity of weddings (Brunt and Courtney, 1999). To give a more realistic example, in the past, weddings in Japan were traditionally done in Shinto style, at a Shinto shrine, but over the years, wedding norms have now changed from traditional shrine-based weddings to church weddings or destination weddings. According to the 'I do down under' documentary, figures show that almost 60% of couples who tend to go for destination weddings are Japanese (Johnston, 2006). Brunt and Courtney also mention in their article that local communities, such as those in the Caribbean, are starting to lose their traditions as they try to adapt to the habits and culture as a destination sought by wedding couples (Brunt and Courtney, 1999).

3.3.3   Global Level

For many, 'Wedding' is a term that defines the sacred union of a man and woman, and that tradition has been going on for centuries – that is until recently, when more LGBT couples seek marriage. The function and meaning of weddings have now changed (Johnston, 2006). Increasing numbers of gays and lesbians couples are looking to get married and since the legalization of same sex marriage in the UK in in 2014, society has shifted to a greater acceptance of same-sex marriage (Appleton, 2013). Internationally, LGBT couples prefer to get married outside their destination area for several reasons, including, escaping brutal regulations. Many states in the US, for example, have not yet legalised same sex marriage, with

many pushing legislations against gay and lesbian weddings (Appleton, 2013), whereas some destinations are more open and accepting it. Getting married at such destinations allows the LGBT marriage to be more legitimate (UNWTO, 2017).

3.3.4   Discussion and Recommendation

Changes in social culture can bring about revolutionary change in society. However, societal change depends on wider changes in perception (Kozak and Kozak, 2016). Tourism has now transformed culture into a product (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). Socio-cultural factors have affected the definition and meaning of weddings adversely and these cultural impacts are hard to assess on the global scale as change can take place over a considerable time. If it continues to happen, future generations might not understand the actual meaning of weddings.

Sustainable approach

The meaning of a 'Wedding' has varied over time and across cultures. As stated, the level of impact of a social and cultural change depends on perception. Therefore, a systematic approach to deal with these changes could be setting a more community centralized norm, a culture to which everyone accepts, understands, and adapts (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). For instance, making a compromise towards flexibility in Shinto wedding tradition can help Japanese couples preserve their culture.

4.   Conclusion

This paper explored the negatives impacts of destination weddings and the dimensions of harm it can cause. Destination weddings, as beautiful as they look and sound, can generate enormous impacts on both parties (i.e. the host and the resident country); such impacts can adversely affect the economy, the environment and society. The purpose of destination weddings is to have an isolated, stress-free and relaxing wedding for the reasons, also mentioned above, have put the beauty of destinations at stake. Unfortunately, not much consideration has been given to this factor, therefore its impact is not completely understood.

If destination weddings already pose a high level of negative impact today, what is likely to happen to future generations? Future generations are likely to be more adventurous, more

experience seekers and do things to the extreme. If sustainable approaches are not taken into consideration now, the effect of these impacts are likely to be many times worse.

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