

Crónica de evento

Destination Branding, Heritage and Authenticity: Theme of a new international conference

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The growing academic dynamism and the concomitant scientific “effervescence” that shapes the tourism domain invite us to consider certain concerns and assumptions of the classical authors, especially those from the Anthropology and Sociology, highlighting once more the crucial question: , does it still make sense to coordinate efforts aimed to get consensus on a desired general theory of tourism in the current postmodern perspective/paradigm?

The relevance of such crucial question is very evident if we consider the discrepancy between the concepts of place branding versus destination image. The first concept is taken from the marketing research literature and the second one is more studied by the tourism researchers.

The place branding experts tend to “hide”

the concept of destination under the cover of geopolitical frames. They assimilate every tourist destination to a country or a city, and they use more frequently the conceptual tools of “country brand” and “city brand”. Being defined by administrative or political criteria, a destination becomes a “top down concept”, created in the head of political administrations or marketing departments. In the opposite direction, as a “bottom up concept”, a destination is primarily what is represented in the mind of real or potential tourists.

Indeed, from the point of view of tourism researchers, the tourist destination is more attached to the tourist resources and products existing in a given territory. These resources and products are considered as the basic elements of the tourist destination concept, and



this is why the tourism researchers usually and carefully employ the geopolitical frameworks of country or city to describe tourist destinations, keeping a certain analytical autonomy between these two territorial realities. In fact, every destination includes a set of tourist products that do not necessarily overlap (e.g., religious tourism, cultural tourism, golf, sun and sea, etc.), and do not necessarily correspond to a specific country or city. For example, if one asks a sample of experts or consumers to inform about the most prestigious destinations for: (a) golf, (b) surfing, and (c) mountain ski; there should be a high probability that the answers for these three tourist products (golf, surfing, and skiing) will not coincide at all, and there is also a high likelihood that the evoked destination will not match with the geographical scales of the country or city.

This simple example reinforces our conviction that it is really necessary to coordinate efforts to get basic consensus in the tourism research community to develop integrative theories, creating with this a shared conceptual platform in the study of such complex issues like tourist destination. Such theories will allow harmonizing so many different scientific codes, from the more culture-oriented concepts of anthropologists and sociologists to the more business-oriented concepts of marketing experts and tourist managers.

Conference Themes

The subject of this conference was meant to bring together three important themes of tourism research that usually are studied separately: destination branding, heritage and authenticity.

Destination branding

The concept of 'destination brand' is often misunderstood, not only because of the term of "brand" or "branding", but much more because of the concept of destination.

In fact, from the point of view of clients, a destination can be a very large and imprecise territory, not easy to define. If in some cases the destination can be seen as an entire continent, or significant parts of it (e.g., for Asian citizens Europe itself may be seen as a tourist destination), on other occasions the destiny may be formed by a set of two or three countries (e.g., a week tour in the Baltic countries or a boat trip to the Danube capitals). In some other perspectives the single country or nation geographic scale is the more suitable to express the concept of destination, but also the city or even some spots may be more easily associated with what one may consider as the tourist destination.

Although the character of contingency and relativism concerning the geographic scale of destinations, the majority of researchers continues to link the concept of tourist destination to the concept of country (in the sense of state or nation).

In fact, if it is true that the brand equity (or positive image) of a destination must be measured in the mind of the current and potential clients – and not in the mind of

staff of Destination Marketing Organizations – the question of relative character of geographical scale of every destination becomes very pertinent and it must be considered in the research of such topics: destination awareness, prestige of tourist destinations, perceived quality of tourist destinations, etc.

One of the goals of the Conference is to raise a reflection on the most appropriate methodologies to assess the brand equity of tourist destination, releasing this concept from the operational constraints that have prevented a more holistic analysis.

Heritage

The cultural heritage (in both its dimensions: material and intangible) and natural heritage are the most valuable "raw material" of modern tourism. The cultural heritage is the basic element or the most important resource for many forms of modern tourism, including the cultural tourism, the religious tourism and the city tourism. Natural heritage is the basic resource for other important forms of tourism: sun and sea, nature tourism, eco-tourism, mountain tourism, etc... Many tourism modalities, like for example wine and gastronomic tourism, rural tourism and village tourism, present a specific combination of both natural and cultural heritage.

The valorization of both cultural and natural heritage creates the pillars of any strategy based on tourism development. Nature and culture are the most important asset value of the host communities and are both the raw material to produce tourist attractions. Moreover, both these assets put into relief the fundamental aspects of community life, particularly its collective memory and its identity.

This is why the preservation of heritage is scrutinized by many social groups and has acquired a high political relevance. At the same time, the commoditization of the cultural and natural heritage has been a topic of criticism, and nowadays becomes an important issue in every programs of sustainable tourism.

Authenticity

The search for authenticity is a predominant driving motivation in tourism because tourists are looking for unique and authentic experiences. In the heritage tourism literature one can find a fundamental tension over the use, function, and degree of authenticity, because of commoditization of historic resources, used for tourism development.

From the point of view of the so-called "objective authenticity" or "authenticity of touring object", one can raise important questions as following:

- How can the stakeholder beliefs regarding the historical authenticity influence the heritage tourism products, services, and experiences created for visitors?
- What is the value of historical authenticity to community stakeholders in comparison with other factors related to heritage tourism development?

In line with the constructivist perspective, which aims to transcend the binary distinction between the authentic and inauthentic as found in the concept of authenticity,

this dichotomy also has to be overcome in the approaches to the tourist role. The authenticity can be linked to an experience of collective identifications, and such experience is constituted in social processes. This processual approach suggests that the authenticity is influenced by subjective and collective views on consensus, creativity and existentialism in the tourist role.

Half a century after the publication of the seminal book "The Tourist", by McCannel, the abundant literature on the topic of authenticity in tourism presents at least five different meanings of this concept: objective authenticity, constructive authenticity, simulacrum, existential authenticity and performative authenticity.

Are these meanings of authenticity mutually exclusive or complementary? This is another important topic for discussion in the Conference.

Bringing together destination brand, heritage and authenticity

Although these three conference themes seem very different, there are strong points of contact between them. In fact, these three concepts (destination branding, heritage and authenticity) are interdependent to create and to maintain the tourist attractiveness of a specific territory.

A destination brand generally cannot be created like a consumer product brand. It inherits its core assets: landscape, people, culture and history. It exists in the way in which these assets are perceived by potential visitors and it depends on the emotional value they attach them. The cultural and natural heritage becomes not only the basis for the tourist attractiveness, but also for the core essence and the enduring characteristics of a destination. The perceived authenticity of tourist products (objective and constructive authenticity) and the authenticity of tourist experience (existential and performative authenticity) are important tools for assessing the brand equity of a destination.

Religious tourism

Far away from its traditional character of popular piety, religious tourism has shown in the last decade a real rebirth. Nowadays, in the more secular society, the rediscovery of ancient sanctuaries and the search for spiritual fulfillment remains as an important reference for culture and tourism.

The religious tourism encompasses a journey that allows participation in a genuine and authentic spiritual experience, but also allows interaction with participatory forms of artistic expression, cultural heritage and with the specific products of the territory. This kind of tourism is more sensitive to the balance between body and mind, involving the religious and spiritual needs of the human condition, but it is also alert to the changing needs of society.

It is therefore a tourism which also considers the health care and the supply of local products (food, beverages, handicrafts), being therefore complementary to other forms of tourism, now very popular and rapidly growing

as health tourism and agrotourism.

If well managed, it is an area that can produce important results for the environment and local economy, especially in remote areas, which are unknown to the traditional tourists.

There is a copious literature of travel and an extensive bibliography on the pilgrimage, produced by historians. However, one can note a certain lack of studies on travel and tourism in places of faith. Research in this field has been increasing, but remains fragmented and uneven, requiring holistic conceptualizations and specific approaches that will provide more information to define a common methodology to support the empirical research in this field.

Conference Information

The Conference will take place at the University of Santiago de Compostela, 21st – 22nd June, 2012. It is promoted by the European Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Recreation, and it is co-organized by:

- CETUR – Tourism Research Unit at the University of Santiago de Compostela;
- GITUR – Tourism Research Unit at the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria;
- Department of Heritage, Arts and History at the University of Salento.

All the information about the conference is available in the website www.ejthr.com.

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