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Why 'the tourism industry' is misleading as a generic expression: The case for the plural variation, 'tourism industries'

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Abstract

'The tourism industry' is a widely used expression referring to a supposedly single entity operating across all places where tourism occurs. However, for anyone wanting more than superficial knowledge, the singular expression is misleading as a generic, because many tourism industries exist, some large and some small, overlapping in many places and with diverse component organisations. They directly, but only partly, support tourism—a partly industrialised form of human activity. Several theories support the contention that there is not one tourism industry but many. In contrast, the contention that tourism is supported by one giant industry has no robust theoretical foundation. The issue has practical implications for researchers, educators, business managers, planners and policy makers. Questions are raised for schools of tourism in universities. Should we adopt 'tourism industries' as the generic term in research, teaching notes and lectures, and in the brochures advertising our courses? Or should we persist with 'the tourism industry'? Should universities be leaders of knowledge, or should we passively and uncritically follow industrial associations and our own previous habits?
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1. Introduction

Innumerable articles begin with remarks such as "tourism is regarded as the world's largest industry" (Lee, Fayed, & Fletcher, 2002, p. 125) and "terrorism (or whatever …) presents major challenges to the industry" (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998, p. 112, parenthesis added). Via frequent repetition in research publications and in the mass media, the idea that a single industry supports all tourism has been imprinted in the minds of many persons.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that it is an overly simplistic, mistaken and misleading idea, which should be replaced, in generic contexts, by the plural term, 'tourism industries'. The singular term should be restricted to specific cases, to particular examples. This is not merely a matter of semantics; substantial issues are at stake.

Certainly there are difficulties in defining 'industry' in the context of tourism, compounded by apparent difficulties in defining 'tourist' and 'tourism'. These have been noted by many writers. Stear, Leiper, and Maior (2005) took the discussion further, asserting that difficulties in understanding these central concepts should not be lazily relegated to a too-hard-basket and, noting that many academics do this, diagnosed DUDS—definitional uncertainty debilitating syndrome. Previously, Leiper (1979) and Stear (1981) themselves used 'the industry' as the generic but changed to 'industries' in the 1990s. Among academics, three positions can be discerned. Some reject the idea of any industry directly linked with tourism. The majority says that there is an industry, just one, a very large one. While a third alternative is catching on, to date relatively few writers refer to multiple tourism industries.

King and Hyde (1989, p. 3) might have been the first to do so when, commenting on three broad categories of tourism involving Australia—domestic, inbound and outbound—they observed that "the industries which have developed around these three flows have distinct identities

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and have little in common''. Others who refer to 'tourism industries' in generic contexts include Leiper (1994, 2004), Stear (2000, 2004), Tiyce, Dimmock, Douglas, and Knox (2000), Firth (2002) and Maior (2005).

No problem exists in references to 'the tourism industry' as a generic expression in everyday communication; there, the singular form is benign, in a context where superficial information is adequate. Problems can arise when the same expression is applied as a generic in research, education and policy making where precision is desirable for important concepts. The present article argues that the concept of 'the tourism industry' as a single entity directly linked with all tourists is unrealistic, stemming from flawed perceptions and defective understanding of business and industries. Clearer vision, alongside deeper knowledge of business theories and practices, recognises multiple tourism industries.

Professionals, in roles as managers, policy advisors, investment analysts, consultants, planners, researchers or educators, require knowledge of any industry or industries that their work involves. However, when tourism courses drill students with constant references to 'the industry' the students are easily misled. After graduation, working as professionals in tourism-related businesses, they might learn, if only implicitly, that multiple tourism industries exist, perhaps side by side in one town or region but, as King and Hyde (1989, p. 3) remarked, they can have ''distinct identities and little in common''. Accordingly, to better inform students and anyone else with professional interests in the subject, researchers and educators should use the plural expression 'tourism industries' in general contexts. This would encourage the recognition and consideration of differences among these industries, differences that can be crucial for issues at the micro-level (e.g. business strategies) and also at the macro-level (e.g. policies for destinations).

The proposal in this article follows a principle advanced by Cohen (1979) about another elementary topic in tourism research, i.e. tourists. For more than a century, a singular generic had been widely used in messages promoting countless venues (e.g. ''*Xanadu has much to offer the tourist*'') and many researchers followed the custom. Cohen recommended that researchers avoid it, since the singular generic implies, falsely, that all tourists are the same in needs, motivations, interests and behaviour. By using the plural—'tourists'—researchers are more inclined to look for differences. The plural generic also has value in relation to tourism industries, as the discussion below will demonstrate.

The discussion begins by noting when and how the expression 'tourism industry' originated. It then identifies and considers seven possible approaches for identifying one or more industries directly linked with tourism. Four can be rejected. Three others support the argument in this article and, as a set, have the attributes of a robust theory. Misleading ideas flowing from the generic singular are noted. Two questions are explored: who benefits from the misleading idea that one large industry supports all tourism and who can gain if multiple tourism industries were widely recognised?

2. How the expression 'tourism industry' originated

Norval (1936) seems to have been the first writer to refer to an industry linked to tourism but the idea was slow in gaining wide recognition; 45 years after the publication of Norval's book, the idea was being promoted by Burkart (1981a, 1981b) in articles where the tone implies that converting people to the idea was not easy. However, probably due in part to Burkhart's efforts, during the 1980s it gained many followers. Ironically, before the expression 'tourism industry' came into common usage, what it denotes had existed for at least 200 years according to Towner (1985). The widespread recognition of the new expression in the latter half of the 20th century involved a combination of three factors (Leiper (2004, pp. 142–150), as summarised below.

The first was the transformation of a simile into a metaphor. For 200 years after the 1770s when the term 'tourist' was coined by Adam Smith, the commonly agreed meaning of 'tourism' had nothing to do with industry or industries, but referred to the distinctive behaviour of tourists and the ideas or theories shaping that behaviour. This meaning resembles other words with 'ism' as suffix (e.g. idealism, deism, atheism, socialism and so on) where 'ism' indicates ''a distinctive doctrine, theory, practice'' (*Chambers English Dictionary* 2003). Early in the 20th century, according to Wahab (1974) economists remarked that certain activities of tourists have effects like those of industries and later, during the middle decades of the century, the economists' simile—'*tourism is like an industry*', morphed into a metaphor—'*is an industry*'.

By the 1960s Fisher's (1935) concept of 'tertiary industries' was becoming widely recognised, and this provided the second factor. Fisher's research led him to realise that services were becoming industrialised, that businesses providing services were forming what he termed 'tertiary industries', a third category after primary industries (producing commodities from farms, mines, and fishing) and secondary industries (manufacturing goods). Fisher's research was conducted in Australia but he saw that the process was occurring internationally. His concept of tertiary industries remained in academia for several years but gradually spread into the mass media and popular consciousness, so that by the 1960s expressions such as 'banking industry', 'entertainment industry' and 'education industry' were coming into common usage. Suppliers of services intended for tourists fitted into this concept.

The third factor was opportunism among associations of suppliers of services intended for tourists. Taking advantage of the simile/metaphor ('*tourism is* [*like*] *an industry*') and of Fisher's concept of tertiary industries,

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