Research Paper

Conscious travel and critical social theory meets destination marketing and management studies: Lessons learned from Croatia

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A B S T R A C T
When one dives into the questions of imagin(ing) place and reputation, destination marketing, management and branding, two key clear trajectories of the relevant literature appear to prevail. One is underpinned by critical social theory in order to deconstruct political processes of power behind the formation of place identities, while the other sits on the (post)positivist platform to discuss business issues of destination competitiveness. And the two rarely meet, existing in their respective paradigmatic and ideological bubbles, each expressed in separate vocabularies. Moreover, their scientific division extends beyond academic outlets of journals and education programs. The former hardly ever speaks to the business community for the reasons of its often abstract and/or radical criticality while the latter is rarely aware of its deep “enchantment” within the apparent “neutrality” of discourse market philosophy. In the current context of the alarming state of the world affairs that screams for change in our business practices, this paper will discuss the urgency of the need to bring these two views together. We do this by providing three forms of disclosure: (1) an overview of the two literature camps through a juxtaposition of their specific lexicon and concerns; (2) an insight into the emerging notion of transformative and conscious tourism that demands a “revolution” in our destination marketing and management thinking; and (3) a cumulative, ethnographic, and multi-authored account of authors’ field experiences with destination marketing and management practice in Croatia.

1. Introduction

To speak today about destination marketing, management and branding the most immediate starting point has to be the current disquieting state of the world system. It is becoming increasingly obvious that our current world practices are not sustainable, nor healthy, nor just. As Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2011, p. 3) clearly capture: ‘we live in sharply transitional times which may well prove to be one of generational economic and social change during which people, communities and places will need to find alternative ways of living and working’. Indeed, considering the facts and scientific warnings a logical question emerges: where are we going and what are we doing as a single humanity? Let the facts speak for themselves.

The structure of the world’s ecosystems has transformed more rapidly in the second half of the 20th century than at any time in recorded human history (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). The world population is growing rapidly, putting more pressure on the earth’s resources, there are many oil spilling disasters, we produce huge amounts of waste and also plastic, causing, for example, “plasticsoup” in the oceans, there is loss of habitat and thanks to our life-threatening practices are added in terms of pesticides, pops and other poisons in our waters and food chains, acidification, etc., it is not surprising that some prestigious scientists are warning us that the face of humanity and Gaia (the Greek name for the Earth) as we know it is quickly disappearing (Lovelock, 2010). In fact, scientists claim that humanity has pushed the earth’s biosphere into a new geological era known as the Anthropocene (Crutzen, Steffen, & McNeill, 2007). These detrimental impacts on the body of the earth are inevitably reflected in the state of our social and individual human bodies. For example, according to the OECD (2013) edition Health at a Glance the human consumption of anti-depressants is rising in developed countries (OECD, 2013). The organization’s annual report on world health trends found that antidepressant consumption has been on continuous rise in the last few decades. Furthermore, since 2000 it has increased significantly in most (Western) countries with Iceland reporting the highest prescription rates in 2011, followed by Australia, Canada, Denmark and Sweden. While depression as well as cancer have been claimed to be the primary cause behind the steady increase in the global suicide rate since 1950 (World Health Organization, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2014.12.002 2212-571X/© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
2. Literature review: we either compete, manage and market, consultants, practitioners, and scientists. Finally, we give an insight into our own work in tourism as a conscious consumer/traveler's emergence that urgently invites the reconciliation between the two approaches or critical social science perspectives.

We will describe and articulate what this potentially may mean for – from the futurist scenarios from the field of more complex processes of branding, business studies of tourism have followed in the same vein.

2. Literature review: we either compete, manage and market, or endlessly deconstruct and criticize?

Theories of place/destination promotion, their imaging, branding and formation of their identities can be broadly divided into two key schools of thought that have formed our dominant tourism conceptualizations. The first one stands within a (post)positivistic camp that has been primarily concerned with the effectiveness of destination marketing and management practices and chiefly originates from a strand of interdisciplinary business studies within tourism. The second one, on the other hand, comes from multi-disciplinary perspectives of socio-cultural geography, sociology, urban studies, political sciences, cultural studies, post-colonial studies (to name a few), who stand for more critical views of deconstructing the cultural discourses of tourist destinations in the wider context of social and political processes. Essentially, these two camps represent the historical divide between business and non-business studies in tourism research in general (Tribe, 2006).

2.1. Destination marketing and management trajectory

The first camp had begun to be developed in the late 1970s and 1980s when primary concerns of tourism promotional imagery were focused on the economic interests and advertising (for example, Goodrich, 1978; Woodside & Lysonski, 1989) or the social psychology of consumption (for example, Mayo & Jarvis, 1981). What had at the time began to be a more multidisciplinary perspective (from either economics or psychology disciplines) this trajectory slowly grew more into an interdisciplinary marketing and management view which fully boomed in the 1990s, parallel to the growing work in the general field of marketing. Tourism scholars who have been mostly situated within business schools of marketing and management departments naturally focused on what has been their dominant ideology and training (for more detailed discussion on academic entanglements see Ateljevic, Harris, Wilson, & Collins, 2005). In order to serve the dominant system of the market economy, their job has been to assist business studies students and marketing practitioners in their (prospective) jobs of managing tourism business and destinations. Reflectively, as the marketing field has evolved from the concerns of promotion, advertising, and consumer understanding into the evolving field of more complex processes of branding, business studies of tourism have followed in the same vein.

To review such a burgeoning literature goes beyond the objectives of this paper yet one of the most cited works of Blain, Levy, and Ritchie (2005), serves the point here. Building on the definition of Ritchie and Ritchie (1998), they set the following comprehensive definition of brand marketing activity that (1) supports the creation of a name, symbol, word mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates a destination; (2) conveys the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; and (3) serves to consolidate and reinforce the collection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience, all with the purpose of creating an image that influences consumers' decisions to visit the destination in question, as opposed to an alternative one. This explains why the concept of branding is often associated with the term “competitive identity”. To create such an identity, destinations need something special that truly represents them and that is relevant and attractive to tourists.

Obviously, branding has built on the earlier research of tourism imagery, thus it is often concerned with the relationship between the image and the brand in terms of their approach and conceptual differences with an ultimate aim to attract and retain consumers. Thus, for example Hosany, Ekincy, and Uysal (2006) investigate the relationship between the brand of destination image and the brand of destination personality. For the purpose of exploring the brand of personality, the study adapted the scale of the product and reduced it to three elements: sincerity, excitement, and companionship while the scale of destination image was observed through emotionality and accessibility. The authors emphasize that their research has shown that these two concepts are closely linked, which confirmed previous studies of Plummer (1985) and Patterson (1999). They also stress that the brand of image is a more comprehensive concept while the brand of personality has more emotional components. Studies that look at the relations and differences between the concepts of image and brand (Hosany, Ekincy, & Uysal, 2006; Konecnik Ruzzier, 2010; Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011; Nikolova & Hassan, 2015; Usakli & Baloglu, 2011) often start from the perspective of tourists. Observing the personality of the brand, and which dimensions help to create it, is it believed that consumers tend to choose destinations that reflect their personal characteristics. Thus Ekincy...
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