MYTHS AND MISREPRESENTATIONS IN THE IMAGE OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS

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8 May 2018

MARKETING: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

MA Marketing Communications and Branding

Edge Hill University

INDEX

INTRODUCTION

Places such as the Dominican Republic or Tahiti, separated by more than 6000 miles, may seem to have little in common, but both represent the same concept; they embody the tourist myth of paradise.

According to Tresidder and Hirst, "the experience of tourism, events and hospitality is underpinned by a complex historical and cultural discourse that forms the expectations and experiences of the consumer" (2012: 37). On many occasions, these narratives are based only on myths created by the economic elites and the media. They act as ideological superstructures by building the reality of tourist destinations and influencing individual agencies. These structural institutions, in their quest to prioritise their economic interests, promote certain images in the collective imagery (Ooi, 2005).

This paper will prove that these myths –based or combined in facts– become a simple form of reality interpretation (Amoamo, 2011) and that, in many cases, those images only try to obscure it rather than represent reality. As Kahn states, "images that present Tahiti as a paradise not only misrepresent the 'reality' of Tahiti but can also shield unfavourable truths from view" (2011: 96). In this way, the study will place particular emphasis on the myth of paradise that, for decades, has represented small island states both in the Caribbean and in the Pacific, with the aim of achieving customer engagement.

In the pages that follow, the consequences of misrepresentation will be highlighted through a critical analysis addressed by means of a revision of specialised literature, which will demonstrate the impacts of globalisation, the definition of power relations and the creation of oppression and domination discourses. To this end, the study will begin by examining the stereotypes which encourage the myth-making, as well as discovering what types of discourses they favour. Later on, the role of economic agents and the media in the creation of myths will be analysed and the authenticity of tourist destinations will be discussed. Finally, the main drawbacks of misrepresentation in tourism will be summarised and improvements with which to promote more sustainable tourism models will be proposed.

Myths and misrepresentations generated around different destinations seem to be intrinsically related to the emergence of certain stereotypes about the tourist scene.

Daye (2005) suggests that stereotypes appear in response to the commodification of destinations. On the other hand, Anholt (2011) claims that they arise from the complex reality of the world, which is simplified by clichés that lay the foundation of our opinions. Moreover, he states that "most of us are much too busy worrying about ourselves and our own countries to spend too long trying to form complete, balanced and informed views about 6 billion other people and nearly 200 other countries" (Anholt, 2011: 293). It may be questioned whether tourists should be thoroughly informed of the reality of the country before choosing a destination that matches with their values and expectations, or whether it is sufficient to rely on the preconceived images they have.

The image of a tourist destination, "shaped by stereotypes" (Moufakkir, 2008: 89), is a nontrivial issue. Nowadays, those clichés play a very important role as they act as enablers of the choice of destination and they are the main incentive to attract tourists (Hakala and Lemmetyinen, 2011), as well as "tourism revenues and foreign investment" (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010: 1282). Accordingly, the future of these places and their local populations depends, to a large extent, on the image the world has of them and their 'competitors' (Tegelberg, 2010 and Amoamo, 2011). Thus, certain tourist destinations can benefit from the worsening image of neighbourhood countries, which may be caused by war, instability or violence.

While some holiday destinations may benefit in some way from stereotypes, such as Nordic countries seen as avant-garde nations or Canada as a safe country, many others weigh down negative stereotypes that hinder their commercial and touristic development, e.g. Mexico seen as insecure or Morocco as a sexist country. In fact, Kotler and Gertner (2002) note that riots, violence and degradation of the environment negatively affect people's perception of certain places. In Ooi words, "the Orient is also seen as inferior, despotic and uncivilized" (2005: 4). In this way, "Africa has been orientalized towards branding the continent as a land of unusual adventure. Drawing from travel brochures, informants described Africa as a 'primitive,' 'sexy,' 'adventure-ridden,' 'rugged' and distant land" (Bonsu, 2009: 11). The author argues that the negative image of Africa and Africans, in part, is due to their

representation in the media, which shows them as inferior in order to justify colonial and domination discourses.

For its part, the stereotype of paradise is associated with certain islands of the Caribbean and the Pacific and, according to Daye (2005) the appeal to these clichés occurs more frequently in the lesser-developed islands. One might wonder if the reason is a consequence of the lack of complementary economic activities for their subsistence. In either case, "the islands were portrayed as reflecting the Western archetype of paradise in many ways; they were warm, bountiful and promised a life free from anxiety and need, and full of leisure and sexuality" (Costa, 1998: 323). In fact, for Kahn, who studied the Tahiti case, the main objective of these countries is to maintain those representations where the land is "a place of blue lagoons, powdery white-sand beaches, exotic men, and seductive women" (2011: 97).

With this in mind, tourism is understood to be an imaginative process (Crouch, Jackson and Thompson, 2005) that form the images of the world and the cultures as a "kind of exotic image perpetuated in tourist postcards" (Edwards, 1996: 216). However, one could wonder if, understanding tourism as an imaginative process, users have decision-making power in interpreting the images associated with tourist destinations. In this sense, Fish (2005) maintains that people can choose between accepting the interpretations of the tourist discourse or entering a more delicate terrain when trying to recognise the true reality of tourist destinations.

Nevertheless, as will be seen below, those stereotypes not only do not appear spontaneously, but are a construction carried out by certain political and economic interests, which by promoting – imposing– certain interpretations try to complicate reaching alternative discourses. It would be seen, then, how structural institutions influence individual agencies.

STRUCTURAL INSTITUTIONS
MOULDING THE IMAGERY

The images we have of tourist destinations are partial in that they are created by certain agents: tour operators, hotel companies, real estate agents, etc. Through their own tools and the media, they influence the representations people have of places, fostering myths and creating stereotypes to favour their economic interests. As Kahn suggested in 2011, "keeping these dreams alive is a constant challenge that relies on ever more premeditated and mediated –and government orchestrated– manipulations" (97).

Although Delfin (2006: 139) takes the view that "the greatest contributor to tourism fantasies in decades has been advertisement", the image we have of the different places is also constructed through the media and tourist institutions (Davin, 2005). Thus, Crouch, Jackson and Thompson, indicate that "discursive structures of the media can thus provide their own formal constraints to the tourist imagination" (2005: 6) and, even though Costa (1998) asserts that movies, television or literature encourage myths, he also believes that interpersonal relationships such as "the stories and photographs of friends and relatives [...] stimulate the homology" (326-327).

Finally, it should be noted that the image of countries is also shaped by trademarks. The study by Hakala and Lemmetyinen (2011), based on Finland, shows the influence of national products in the co-creation of a country's image –and its stereotypes. In this way, Korea's modern positioning is represented by Samsung, as Barceló or Brugal represent the fun, pleasure and exoticism of Dominican Republic. Likewise, the brands can benefit from the preconceived images of a country: "Toblerone Swiss chocolate, Foster's Australian beer and Sony Japanese televisions show that Brand origin can constitute an important personality characteristic of each brand" (Kim, Shim and Dinnie, 2013: 36).

The tools employed by the structural institutions to influence the tourist imagery are vast and diverse. The first of these tools is its gate-keeping function, when deciding which destinations to promote (Daye, 2005). In addition, one might ask to what extent visitors find partial discourses and sugar-coated images when the editorial policies avoid talking negatively about holiday experiences (Seaton, 1991). In this respect, Tegelberg (2010) declares that the agenda-setting of guides like Lonely Planet moves away from the socially responsible promotion of tourist destinations when they avoid, in a strategically way, controversial topics and expose their audiences "to a limited range of perspectives without being subject to questions about the validity of their content" (Tegelberg, 2010: 493). Not only that, but as we have seen, the media reduce representations to simple stereotypes (Young, 1999), putting an accent mark on the images that match their interests (Crouch, Jackson and Thompson, 2005).

With these institutions coming into play, certain ethical implications appear. For example, the fact that tourist activity, so indispensable in the economy of many countries, depends exclusively on the decisions of the ruling class. Also, that the images or representations promoted by them are biased and they only show a westernised representation of reality. In this sense, and using India as object of study, Tegelberg (2010) and Bhattacharyya

(1997) agree when they point out that readers of tourist guides only receive a specific image of the country, characterised by westernised discourses. Thus, discourses of colonialism, power and oppression promoted by ideological superstructures emerge.

At this point, one might ask to what extent these structural institutions offer visitors what they are looking for or just those images and misleading representations that they have made them desire.

THE AUTHENTICITY OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS
FANTASY OR FALLACY?

TOURISM AS AN IDENTITY CREATOR

Before discovering what tourists are looking for when travelling and what they finally find when they arrive, the fundamental role of tourism as an identity creator should be taken into account, since tourism is understood as a "public statement about your cultural knowledge, desires and aspirations" (Tresidder and Hirst, 2012: 128). According to the authors, with the development of the Internet, travel has become, more than ever, a way to promote levels of cultural capital; "we often communicate our experiences and preferences by showing our holiday photographs, using social media and blogs such as Twitter, Facebook or TripAdvisor to express our views about restaurants and hotels etc" (128). In this way, tourism consumption, which is usually associated with group consumption, influences the creation of identities and their external communication.

Costa (1998) sparks an interesting debate when suggesting that when consuming tourism, in addition to a confrontation with the 'other', there is a reaffirmation of the 'self'; "the separation from home, the journey, the temporary residence in other space, the confrontation with other environments, experiences and people emphasize both the parameters of Other and the definition and identity of Self" (Costa, 1998: 339). That creation of the self expressed by Costa coincide with the vision of Inglis, for which the holiday imagery promoted by the media "is one of the best places to find our fantasies of the free and fulfilled life" (Inglis, 2000: 5).

Once all of this is understood, one could decipher the motivations that lead tourists to leave their homelands. In 1979, Cohen classified tourist experiences into five modes of experience: recreational, diversionary, experiential, experimental and existential. These reflect a wide spectrum that goes from the tourist "who does not care for the authentic, but is eager to accept the

make-believe in order to enjoy it as a re-creative, entertaining or relaxing experience" to the tourist that "embraces the world of the other as real and fulfilling to the point that there may be willingness to live and become a part of the host community" (22). The problem faced by many holiday destinations is that most of the visitors they receive do not seek to live authentic experiences, but they are included into the first of the modes (Daye, 2005), which is associated with mass tourism (Ryan, 1997) and criticised for its lack of authenticity and superficiality, according to Cohen (1979).

It seems that visitors are not interested in authenticity because "after all, tourism destinations are, if nothing else, places where people are encouraged to craft there own ideal temporary realities" (Delfin, 2006: 141). Thus, "the places and people are soon transformed into 'sites' and 'attractions'" (Brown, 1996: 37). Or whether there is a need to seek realism if people want to disconnect from their day-to-day life? Will they not find more satisfaction letting themselves be driven by the magic of a reality "where fantasies are superimposed on landscapes" (Delfin, 2006: 141), based on myths like paradise? In such way, tourists can satisfy their hedonistic motivations without facing moral contradictions.

The tourist's disinterest in the search for authenticity becomes evident when certain places accept to misrepresent their reality and caricature it with the aim of meeting tourist expectations.

MISREPRESENTATIONS AND CARICATURES
MEETING TOURIST EXPECTATIONS

Daye's study on the representation of the Commonwealth Caribbean in British media shows that landscape representations are dominated mainly by "coastal depictions, especially that of sun, sand and sea" (2005: 18), leaving aside the urban reality of countries. One might wonder if it is precisely because the metropolis, far from the 'cities for tourists', is where most of the problems accumulate. Or would it be acceptable that juxtaposed to the concept of paradise –embraced by myths– tourists find poverty, corruption, crime, insecurity or delinquency?

In fact, this is implied in the tourist brochures themselves. Dann's 1996 study examines the image promoted through them, distinguishing four types of paradise –or four distorted pictures of reality. The study suggests that when focusing on nature –paradise contrived– the brochures represent the place in an artificial and idealised way "by presenting a series of empty sights which somehow encapsulate their essence", and avoiding "references to mosquitoes, scorpions, skin cancer etc" (69), nor humidity or storms

(Kahn, 2011). With the second and third type of paradise, paradise confined and paradise controlled, the brochures depict tourists "on the encapsulated existence of the tourist ghetto" (71) or interacting with natives, who are seen as servants, "linked to the tourist by their service roles" (73), promoting a discourse of dominance by the West. Finally, when locals take a predominant position –paradise confused–, brochures usually show a sexualised representation of them, as will be explained in detail below.

In other words, the image that visitors have of tourist destinations is only partial. For example, countries such as the Dominican Republic or the Bahamas, instead of showing the wealth of diverse countries, are only positioned in the luxury and pleasure of a heavenly destination. This causes misleading and misrepresentation by not creating a faithful, but biased image of the reality. Nevertheless, in a way this is the fault of the visitors, who do not seek to intermingle with the cultures, but to find the myth of paradise to which they have been exposed to for so long (Nettleford, 1993). In light of the issue, one might well ask if this is a concept of authenticity as a constructed reality (Duval, 2004), a fantasy or just a fallacy (Delfin, 2006).

Tourists, due to those representations and myths that influence their perceptions, have some expectations that the destinations will try to meet (Costa, 1998, Delfin, 2006 and Ooi, 2005). If the visitors are attracted to exotic images of paradise (Ooi, 2005), both the structural institutions and the locals will work to recreate this paradisiacal experience in order to meet the expectations while ensuring revenues.

On many occasions, the myth-making leads to a caricature of certain tourist destinations. For example, "the tourism authorities in Singapore have found that the city has become too modern and western for many tourists, and the destination has embarked on a campaign to make Singapore more oriental" (Ooi, 2005: 1). Thus, the country opened three new national museums in which to promote a more 'traditional' and orientalised vision of the country. In the same way, when tourists arrive in the Dominican Republic, they expect to find merengue, rum and seductive women. They may not feel attracted to a country where commercial music is heard, beers are also consumed, or exuberant locals do not fall in love with them. Thus, the trap of globalisation and the imposition of pro-orientalist and pro-paradise discourses leave a mark in the future of the countries, which are under the yoke of economic powers, when they modify, according to their interests, the realities and perceptions thereof.

In addition, the influence of these "abstract, one-sided and superficial" (Ooi, 2005: 5) representations goes further. Costa points

out how powerful they are when he emphasises that "in the process, the created image of paradise may also influence the impressions of local residents have of themselves and of their home" (1998: 326). In Ooi words, "in an insidious manner, simple, superficial and orientalist images that tourists may have of a destination are being translated into reality" (2005: 7).

THE DRAWBACKS OF MISREPRESENTATIONS IN TOURISM

The myth-making and misrepresentations entail a number of consequences. Firstly, these discourses generate "cultural degradation" (Briguglio et al., 1996: 36). They produce a serious loss in the cultural identities of the destinations when they try to fit into a certain type of stereotypes and myths promoted by elites and economic actors in order to meet visitors' expectations, as seen in the previous section. In Costa's view, "it is ironic that the search for and consumption of paradise may actually lead to the destruction of paradise" (1998: 336).

In addition to this cultural loss, Costa adds that orientalist discourses justify "colonial and neo-colonial varieties of political and economic power and domination" (1998: 305). As a kind of concept of Orientalism, the westernised concept of paradise also serves to show the privileges of the West over the subordinated local residents (Costa, 1998). In this way, discourses of domination and oppression would emerge. Furthermore, Amoamo (2011: 2), in his study of the Pacific microstate of Pitcairn, adds "neo-colonial exploitation, dependency, resource depletion" as another negative impact of this type of tourism, which generates an increase in inequalities between the East and the West, and even racist discourses (Moufakkir, 2008).

In 1993, Poon asserted that tourism in Caribbean countries, in which, as has been seen, the myth of paradise predominates, is characterised by being "mass, standardized and rigidly packaged" (131). Twenty-five years later it seems that reality has changed little. Globalisation and uncontrolled tourism promotion –derived from myth-making– is still generating congestion and environmental damage (Briguglio et al., 1996).

To this should be added a final consequence of the myth-making. As stated by Tresidder and Hirst (2012), the ultimate objective of tourists when visiting a place is to satisfy their desires, have fun and achieve the highest possible level of pleasure, as today's societies are governed by hedonism and the pursuit of self-welfare. Taking the concept of hedonism to the extreme, in a context of paradisiacal imagery, the concept of sex is inextricably

linked to the concept of sun, sea and sand (Cabezas, 2004 and Said, 1978). Of those hypersexualised representations of contemporary tourism –that try to meet visitors' fantasies– social, political and economic implications emerge (Brennan, 2004 and Cabezas, 2004). These include prostitution, sex tourism or different discriminations, e.g. the fact that in tourist cities such as Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, female employment ratios are higher than in other cities not dedicated exclusively to tourism (Cabezas, 2004 and Chant, 2013).

Before concluding, some recommendations will be presented to counteract these negative effects of tourism discourses based on myth-making and misrepresentation.

IMPROVEMENT PROPOSALS

Part of these problems could be solved by carrying out a more faithful and accurate representation of the cultural reality of each destination, not only based on stereotypes and the economic interests of a few. In addition, as it is difficult to change an image once established (Chi and Qu, 2008), the process of creating the images of a tourist destination should involve the setting of core values which were "durable, relevant, communicable and hold saliency for both stakeholders and potential tourists" (Morgan and Pritchard, 2005: 23). Hakala and Lemmetyinen (2011) maintain that the point of departure could be a stereotype that reinforces the positive aspects of the destination and minimises the negative ones, trying to create empathy with the destiny (Morgan and Pritchard, 2005) and create desire in potential visitors while stimulating the tourism industry of the place (Kahn, 2011).

In order to establish these representations and create a more realistic image of the places, it will be crucially important to focus on the competitive differences, avoiding the homogenisation of experiences (Daye, 2005). To this end, co-creation would be desirable: besides involving governments, economic agents and the media –or structural institutions–, different social actors, interest group and local populations should be taken into account. In fact, Anholt believes that locals, companies and government institutions should endeavour to reflect "the spirit, the genius and the will of the people" (2011: 294). This approach might result in the creation of a reputation that satisfies economic, political and social objectives.

In this sense, different authors agree that the branding process should start 'bottom up', from the people (Hakala and Lemmetyinen, 2011 and Payne et al., 2009). In fact, if the image of the tourist destinations was created together with the inhabitants, it would be more real and there would be a co-relationship between

the identity of the people and the identity of the country (Keller and Lehmann, 2006), allowing the stories of the locals to be told and listened (Tegelberg, 2010) and not only benefiting a few elites. However, it would be interesting to see how to develop a process of participation in which the inhabitants are invited and in which all the realities of the country arising from this process of collaboration could be taken into account. Should governments be responsible for this function? How if, on many occasions, they are nothing more than mere puppets of the economic powers?

CONCLUSION

The preceding pages have testified that the images that tourists have of different tourist destinations are socially constructed through the creation of myths promoted by economic and media elites that do not represent the reality of the majority but that support their economic interests. It has also been noted that, in this structural influence on the agency, global inequalities are fostered by means of certain ideological discourses. As seen before, even the seemingly harmless myth of paradise has social costs on local populations. Finally, improvement proposals have been established with which to build more reliable representations of the reality of the countries or tourist destinations and, consequently, favour profitable tourism models based on a more real and sustainable economy.

The Caribbean and Pacific islands, examples of the paradisal discourse, besides promoting themselves as sun and sand destinations, should exploit a cultural tourism that enhance their different traditions and their colonial and pre-colonial pasts, as well as their contemporary realities. In this way, destinations could differentiate themselves from their competitors, engage with customers and create wealth for all.

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