

Cultural resource valuation in tourist destinations

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Abstract:

Tourism affects the perceived value of cultural resources within a destination through a process of commoditization (e.g., Baron, 2010, Bunten, 2008, Greenwood, 1989, Macleod, 2006, Zhu, 2012). There are competing reports of both positive strengthening of cultural assets and devaluation or transformation of cultural assets due to tourism (Lehman, Wickham, & Fillis, 2014). This research note attempts to rationalize these seemingly contradictory outcomes, by examining how cultural management strategies relate to the form and function of cultural assets in the presence of tourism. The case of heritage languages will exemplify the commoditization process modeled in the paper, given that tourism influences how heritage languages are prioritized within a society.

Keywords: tourism | commoditization | cultural resources | cultural assets | cultural management strategies

Article:

Tourism affects the perceived value of cultural resources within a destination through a process of commoditization (e.g., Baron, 2010, Bunten, 2008, Greenwood, 1989, Macleod, 2006, Zhu, 2012). There are competing reports of both positive strengthening of cultural assets and devaluation or transformation of cultural assets due to tourism (Lehman, Wickham, & Fillis, 2014). This research note attempts to rationalize these seemingly contradictory outcomes, by examining how cultural management strategies relate to the form and function of cultural assets in the presence of tourism. The case of heritage languages will exemplify the commoditization process modeled in the paper, given that tourism influences how heritage languages are prioritized within a society.

Canziani (2011) diagrams a commoditization process that transforms cultural identity markers into cultural profiles for tourism production, emphasizing valuation as a discrete sub-task of the commoditization process. The concept of valuation is expanded in this note. Valuation of a cultural resource such as language employs two relevant steps: (a) valuing the intrinsic utility of the cultural asset based on its cultural identity-bound form or meaning and (b) valuing the asset for its extrinsic utility or tourism function. Cultural assets can have high intrinsic utility when a majority of stakeholders assign high value to the host community's representation of the cultural asset. Cultural assets have high extrinsic utility if an economic opportunity exists for the exchange of the cultural asset for something else of value. Both types of utilities manifest in the tourism setting. Fig. 1 depicts this valuation process:

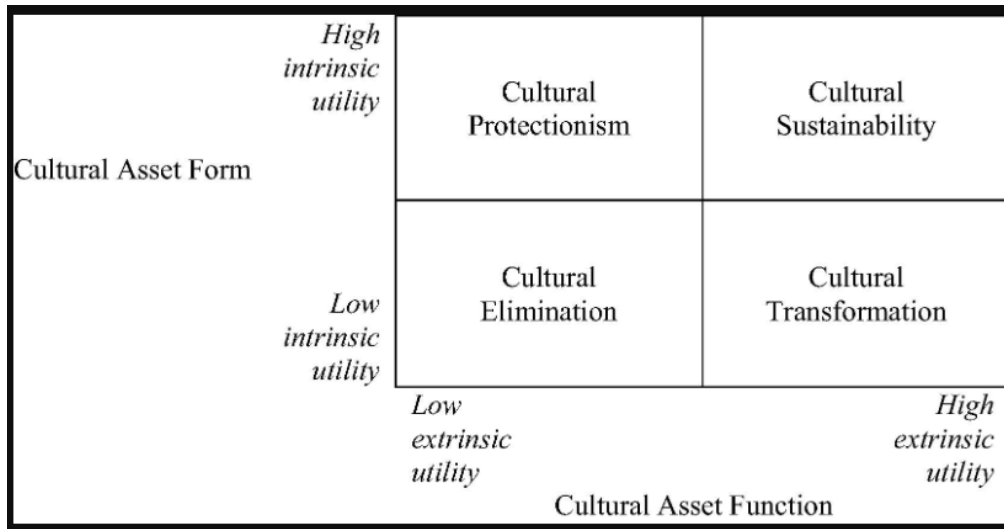


Fig. 1. A cultural resource valuation process model.

Four propositions derive directly from Fig. 1. The term strategy is loosely employed as a classification term.

1. Proposition One: A cultural sustainability strategy will arise when cultural assets are viewed as having both high intrinsic and high extrinsic tourism value.
2. Proposition Two: A cultural protectionism strategy will be employed when cultural assets have high intrinsic value but low extrinsic tourism value.
3. Proposition Three: A cultural transformation strategy will surface when cultural assets have low intrinsic value but high extrinsic tourism value.
4. Proposition Four: A cultural elimination strategy will appear when cultural assets have low intrinsic value and low extrinsic tourism value.

Heritage languages illustrate the point. Language herein comprises words, symbols, gestural signs, their articulation and meanings, and the methods of using them shared by a community. Heritage language denotes languages that residents acknowledge as part of their cultural identity. While a community's languages generally evolve in response to migrations and interactions, tourism accelerates language shift by systematically altering linguistic hegemony in a region (Dann, 1996). Destinations commoditize language to support the creation of tourism services. In rare cases of cultural sustainability, a host community strengthens its cultural identity through commoditization when traditional cultural forms are valued both intrinsically and extrinsically. Heritage languages have been reinforced through tourism, i.e., the Nahuatl language in Mexico, (Greathouse-Amador, 2005); Creole in Costa Rica and Panama (Aguilar-Sánchez, 2005, Snow, 2003); Tlingit in Alaska (Bunten, 2008); and Sámi in Sámiland (Pietikäinen, 2010).

The second strategy, cultural protectionism, comprises policies or guidelines for preserving the use of heritage language forms in the destination, e.g., a signboard tax favoring heritage languages over foreign languages (Horey, 1991). In addition, deliberately separating "ritual and ceremonial language from ordinary speech acts" can be useful in conserving traditional linguistic

performances by making them more resistant to linguistic assimilation or cultural transformations (Graburn, 1984).

Cultural transformation is common in tourist destinations. It manifests when the meaning of the asset or the actual asset itself is transformed into something new in service of tourism. For example,

... T-shirts with Okinawan words such as *shimanchu* 'islander' and *uminchu* 'fisherman'In the past, those words were derogatory terms. No one was proud of being *uminchu*. Yet teenagers wear these shirts proudly as a symbol of their cultural identity (Heffernan, 2006, p. 645).

Continuing this vein, Boxill and Hernandez (2002, p. 55) illustrate new Spanish constructions, i.e., *hora feliz* (happy hour), even though the locals already had the expression *barra libre*. Also, translators have intentionally distorted language meanings or uses for the benefit of tourism (Phipps, 2007).

In cultural elimination, when heritage language speakers cannot facilitate communication between tourists and workers, the industry imports or trains foreign language speakers (Blazevic and Blazevic, 2007, Bruyèl-Olmedo and Juan-Garau, 2009). Host community links to heritage languages can be severely diminished if foreign languages are required for economic progress, as in the cases of tuk tuk drivers (Wongthon & Sriwanthana, 2007); Botswana tour guides (Mafela, 2009); and China's Dai people (Cable, 2008). Heritage speakers become marginalized and the heritage language is devalued or lost (Heffernan, 2006; León, 2007).

This research note has contributed a refined theoretical explanation of how valuations of the form and function of cultural assets converge over time to transform or stabilize a destination's cultural resources. Cultural sustainability is more harmonious than the other strategies presented in Fig. 1 since cultural resources hold extrinsic value in the tourist destination yet are permitted to evolve naturally. Encouraging diaspora tourists who highly value heritage assets may be a sustainable strategy. Cultural preservation, in turn, presumes that communities exert power over the cultural asset in the form of institutional caretakers of their cultural resources, even in the absence of tourism interest in the resources in question.

In cultural transformation, tourism objectives for using a cultural resource overshadow the intrinsic utility of the resource as a marker of cultural identity. Strategies for managing cultural assets should safeguard communities' rights to specify how they wish to employ or develop the cultural resource. Lastly, cultural elimination may be an inevitable outcome that happens at a faster pace when tourism is present. Nonetheless, cultural traditions can be strategically revitalized by actively managing intrinsic value perceptions of both residents and tourists. Questions of interest for future research include: How does tourism impact hegemony among cultural resources in a destination? What shifts in resource preservation allocations occur in direct response to tourism activity?

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