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Tourism Representation and Semiotics – Directions for Future Research

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Resumo

O objectivo desta breve nota de pesquisa é dar a conhecer ao leitor um método de pesquisa científica em turismo relativamente pouco utilizado mas com um grande potencial – a análise semiótica, ou análise semiótica de conteúdo. Conquanto existam alguns estudos em que a análise semiótica é utilizada como método de pesquisa científica, nomeadamente na area da representação turística, o seu potencial permanece relativamente pouco explorado. Esta nota de pesquisa sumariza a literatura relevante nesta área, sublinha a sua importância, e apresenta uma serie de possíveis avenidas de pesquisa futuras. Implicações práticas e académicas desta linha de inquérito são discutidas no final do artigo.

Palavras-chave: turismo, semiótica, análise semiótica, pesquisa científica em turismo.

Abstract

This short research note aims to acquaint the reader with a promising yet underused tool of scientific inquiry in tourism research, namely semiotic analysis. Whilst the use

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of semiotic analysis by tourism researchers is not new, particularly in regard to tourism representation, the full potential of this method of inquiry remains untapped. This research note presents a brief overview of the tourism representation and semiotics literature(s), underlines the importance of this line of inquiry, and puts forth a number of research questions worthy of future consideration. Implications for tourism scholars and researchers are discussed.

Key words: tourism, semiotics, semiotic analysis, tourism research

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“All over the world the unsung armies of semioticians, the tourists, are fanning out in search of signs of Frenchness, typical Italian behaviour exemplary Oriental scenes, typical American throughways, traditional English pubs”

(Culler, 1981, p. 127)

Introduction

The use of content analysis and semiotics as instruments of analysis in tourism inquiry and research has been widespread, particularly in the last two decades (e.g. Echtner, 1999; Mehmetoglu & Dann, 2003; Sternberg, 1997). It is understandable why it is so (Echtner, 1999). At the heart of travel and tourism is the desire to see something new, something that is missing (Pearce, 1991), but the destination is chosen based on pre-existing images, or symbols of representation provided to the would-be tourist by a number of sources (e.g. Bruner, 2005; Urry, 2002). Furthermore, the tourist tries to make sense of what he or she sees through signs and symbols, which themselves provide meaning and tangibility to what is essentially an intangible experience (MacCannell, 1976; Urry, 2002). Thus semiotic analysis, or semiotics, understood as “the science or doctrine that studies signs and their uses in representation” (Danesi, 1998, p. 290; see also Eco, 1979), reveals itself as a useful tool in the study of tourism in general and tourism representation in particular (Echtner, 1999).

The aim of this paper is to provide a brief overview of the

tourism representation and semiotics literature, pointing out strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in this body of research, and finally put forth a number of research questions worthy of future consideration for both scholars and practitioners.

Review of the Literature

Semiotics and Tourism

Beginning with MacCannell's seminal work *The tourist* (1999), and Krippendorf's *The holidaymakers* (1987), semiotic interpretations of tourism or tourism-related phenomena have been plentiful (cf., *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 16, issue 1 (1989)). Because of the intangible nature of the tourism experience, signs and symbols assume a decisive importance for both hosts and guests (Krippendorf, 1987). From the ubiquitous souvenirs, to photographs taken of tourist sites, to travel brochures and advertisements, tourism is awash with a myriad of signs and symbols (Berger, 2004). Tourism possesses its own particular language, Dann (1996) argues, and meaning is created, interpreted and lost through a number of (often contradictory) signs (Berger, 2004), that constitute a veritable semiotic system (MacCannell, 1999). MacCannell (1999) elaborates on this system thus:

The tourist (...) [is] involved in the production of culture by his movements, markings, deployments of souvenirs, and, of course, the creation of entire environments for his pleasure. (...) The system of attractions as signs that mediate between the consciousness of the tourist and the other is (...) an enormous deferral of the question of the acceptance of otherness. (p. xxi).

Both Berger (2004) and Urry (2002) have built upon Baudrillard's "system of objects" (1956), to develop semiotic theories of tourism. Berger (2004) regards tourism symbols and activities as "camouflaged myths and rituals" (p. 6), oversimplifications of ancient desires and cosmogonies, that reach the masses, in filtered form, via a number of cultural outlets. Ultimately, little is left to the tourist but to consume a "universe of signs", and the end result is that "tourism becomes (...) a succession of photo opportunities" (p. 33). Urry (2002), on the other hand, has developed his theory of tourism based on what he coined "the tourist gaze" (p. 1), a peculiar way of looking at things when away from one's usual environment, reflective of one's "society (...) social

group and(...)historical period” (ibid). Supporting a semiotic approach to the study of tourism, Urry (2002) posits that

The [tourist] gaze therefore presupposes a system of social activities and signs, which locate the particular tourist practices, not in terms of some intrinsic characteristics, but through the contrasts implied with non-tourist social practices, particularly those based within the home and paid work (p. 1-2).

Finally, semiotics has been used to study the importance of nostalgia (Frow, 1991) as both a motivator and a component of the tourism experience. The photograph, the postcard and the souvenir are not only means of representation of a visited destination, but are also used by the tourist to facilitate reminiscence (Frow, 1991). All three respond to the “necessary insatiable demands of nostalgia” (Stewart, 1984, cited by Frow, 1991, p. 145) and, what is more, they respond to the quest for the authentic (Frow, 1991; Krippendorf, 1987).

Tourism Representation and Semiotics

Although the tourism representation literature is vast (e.g. Adams, 1984; Bruner, 2005; Echtner & Prasad, 2003; Henderson, 2001; Hughes & Allen, 2005; Mellinger, 1994; Santos, 2004; Thurot & Thurot, 1984), few studies have incorporated semiotics and/or content analysis as a valid tool for scientific analysis within that body of research (e.g. Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005; Berger, 2004; Jenkins, 2003; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001; Mehmettoglu & Dann, 2003; Santos, 2004). One notable exception is the increasing importance given to tourism images, particularly when related to advertising and marketing (e.g. Cho & Kerstetter, 2004; Echtner, 1999; Echtner & Prasad, 2003; Sternberg, 1997). The issues of representation and authenticity, in particular, and their link to a number of symbols of power (e.g. travel narratives – see Bruner, 2005), have merited the attention of scholars throughout the world, and a great deal of literature is available in this area (e.g. Adams, 1984; Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005; Bruner, 1996, 2001; Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003; Cohen, 1993; Silver, 1993; Taylor, 2001).

Films, newspaper and magazine articles, postcards, travel guides and brochures, travel narratives and photographs, are symbols of a representative system (Bruner, 2005;

Jenkins, 2003), and, as such, susceptible of being analysed through semiotics (Mehmettoglu & Dann, 2003). Such cultural representations are rarely unbiased (Bruner, 2005), and more often than not, tend to serve the interests of a number of entities, often with the exclusion of the tourism hosts (e.g. Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005). What has been of concern to some scholars is the appropriation of traditional symbols (e.g. Ayers Rock in Australia, Edinburgh Castle in Scotland), or the outright creation of new (i.e. "fake") ones (e.g. *The Lion King*®, *DaVinci's Code*®), for purposes other than those intended by the people to whom they refer (e.g. Adams, 1985; Berger, 2004; Bruner, 2005; Henderson, 2001; Hughes & Allen, 2005). Although we know that such "representational dynamics" (Santos, 2004), often serves corporate and ideological interests (Bruner, 2005), few studies have discussed, or even hinted at, the managerial implications of such practice (e.g. Cho & Kerstetter, 2004; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001).

Directions for Future Research

In summary, we can say that semiotics has been proven to be a reliable tool with which to analyse tourism representation issues (Mehmettoglu & Dann, 2003). With notable exceptions (e.g. Cho & Kerstetter, 2004), such semiotic analyses have been conducted from critical, post-modern and post-colonial perspectives (e.g. Bruner, 2005; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Mellinger, 1994; Pratt, 2005). Missing from the literature are, on one hand, studies that present the managerial point of view of tourism representation, and, on the other, adopt more scientific (read positivist and empirical) methodological approaches to the semiotic study of tourism representation, in order to make replication and refutation, (tenets of any sound scientific theory – see Popper, 1979) possible.

It would be interesting to ask tourism practitioners (e.g. tour operators, travel agencies, tourism boards, etc.) whether the (inaccurate) representations portrayed by the media of tourism destinations and host cultures are intentional or merely a reflection of the tourists' pre-conceived ideas and prejudices (MacCannell, 1999). Furthermore, what are the long-term economic and managerial implications of such representation practices? To what extent are they intentional? We know they are successful in the short term,

otherwise they would be discontinued, but what will happen in the future when, as Urry (1990) argues, all that there will be left for the tourist is a entangled system of signs to be consumed and nothing else? A magnificent case study to look at is, of course, Las Vegas. It would be interesting to replicate Moore's (1980) study of Walt Disney World in Las Vegas, but broadening the scope of the subjects to include CEO's, managers, owners, travel agents and other stakeholders in the tourism system (cf. Mill & Morrison, 1998).

Finally, tourism researchers should strive to increase the sophistication and replicability of their methods as much as possible (Mehmettoglu & Dann, 2003). Although semiotics lends itself to subjective interpretation, a number of qualitative software packages are now available (e.g. Atlas/ti®, Nvivo®, Nudist® – see Barry, 1998), rendering the transition into a scientific mode of enquiry possible. Without such an effort from the researchers' part towards a more scientific approach to the semiotic study of tourism representation, this promising field of study will always fall short of its potential.

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