



Cultural Representations and Experience in Tourism: Two Forms of Mimesis

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Abstract

This paper fills a gap in smart tourism research by investigating the link between online representations and their physical counterparts. This sort of phenomenology visualizes a doubled cultural mimesis that can be described by the story of the ship of Theseus, where the original is replaced by an ongoing process of installing new components. In this sense, social reality is conceptualized as having real cultural events and the production of cultural items as well as having digital reproductions that appear and circulate online. These are accessed by a variety of platforms where reality is simulated onsite through augmented reality technology or remotely through forms of virtual reality. This paper seeks to frame and to present this notion and its potential impacts on destination culture particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic in Korea.

Keywords

culture; mimesis; representations; smart tourism; social reality

1. Introduction

The representation of culture in tourism has always been problematic. Traditionally, tangible and intangible forms of culture are transformed into souvenirs and performances and now there is a virtual doubling of these, and other forms, on smart tourism city platforms. These layers of cultural mimesis expose both problems and opportunities for destinations, particularly under the current COVID-19 pandemic. The essential problem in tourism has been that of identity, where the link between the mental and physical states of phenomenal events is brought into question (Braddon-Mitchell & Jackson, 2007). The tourism industry and tourism researchers are always trying to figure out the relationship between the visitor as a person and the physical events going on at the destination (Berent, 1983). Smart tourism seeks opportunities for destinations to digitally package their cultural resources as virtual representations that are highly visible and accessible (Hwang, Park, & Hunter, 2015). The conundrum is that there might be an unassailable gap between the reality of destination culture experiences and its commercial provisions to tourists.

The problem in transforming cultural representations for tourism is like that of the Ship of Theseus. To keep that Greek hero's legacy, his ship was preserved by replacing its various components over time until everything had been replaced and nothing original remained. In addition, all the old planks were reassembled into the exact form of the original, resulting in two ships (Hosey, 2018). The question arises, is the Ship of Theseus a matter of material, or identity. Is it the sum of its original parts or is it a representation of Theseus and his heroic endeavors? What makes an entity what it is? Is it the physical event or its effect on the individual (Heiphetz, Strohminger, & Young, 2016)? Each layer of reproduction or replacement, while getting closer to the visitors' needs and expectations, moves away from the original. There is a slippage of the real (Baudrillard, 1983). Under the

COVID-19 pandemic, societies have polarized, moving from imposing mitigation measures to contain the virus through social distancing, quarantines and travel bans (Cohen & Kupferschmidt, 2020). Visitors in urban areas have disappeared, leaving tourist attractions empty or temporarily closed and whole shopping districts abandoned. Cultural mimesis, under the present circumstances, seems to have become less a problem of identity and more of preservation, or hibernation.

In this conceptual chapter, these problems concerning the transformation of cultural representations for tourism are considered. Two forms of cultural mimesis are considered, namely, their virtual reinterpretation versus culture as direct experience. Additionally, smart city platforms are considered as showcases and as means of cultural preservation that can only work to augment, rather than replace the original. Like the Ship of Theseus, there must be two versions.

2. Smart City Platforms

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic sparked an unexpected paradigm shift in international tourism as travel bans were imposed along with other policies associated with social distancing. In many destinations, major tourism attractions and dedicated shopping areas stand empty or abandoned. Travelers are conspicuously missing. In these new circumstances there seems to be a creeping slippage in reality, as a significant portion of the physical act of travel and its associated activities have been temporarily fixed or mediated with smart technologies. In other words, virtual representations are increasingly replacing the physicality of the real world. Remote or "untact" meetings and events replace gatherings at destinations. Onsite, augmented reality-based technologies for tourism are dormant. However, smart city technology has unexpectedly become invaluable in virtually preserving its spectrum of destination cultural

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representations and making it visible and accessible from remote, globally, online.

The smart tourism city relies on a constellation of technological and social elements that works to channel multidirectional flows of information to support onsite navigation through augmented reality, to facilitate e-commerce, and to provide remote views through virtual reality and user created content via social media (Hwang et al., 2015). Augmented reality systems, presently semi-dormant, are designed to enable the visitor to visualize and navigate the destination using highly integrated information networks that link the entire city to co-create value for residents and visitors (Um & Chung, 2019). These smart systems work to mitigate social and logistical problems for residents while maintaining a space for tourism destination identity and sustainable development (Lee, Hunter, & Chung, 2020). Before the pandemic, destinations were enthusiastic about augmented reality technology that could replace or “augment” the services of tour guides and place specific resources such as directional signs and maps (Jung, Chung, & Leue, 2015). Smart tourism city systems, particularly those associated with electronic commerce have become highly valued during the lockdown. The task-technology fit (Lin & Huang, 2008) for e-commerce has shifted in emphasis from tourism products to the needs of residents where smart platforms have become invaluable for residents during lockdown and quarantine periods and highly trusted for online product and service provision reliability (Kim, Chung, & Lee, 2011).

Smart tourism cities also support a remote view that is available online to anyone with the means to access and to add to it with various forms of user generated content. It is a collection of virtual representations that simulate an idealized reality that potentially resembles that which can be experienced directly, onsite at the destination (Chung & Koo, 2015). This remote view consists of platforms for photo, video and other information sharing (Chung, Tyan, & Chung, 2017). It also includes websites that work to influence users’ attitudes and choices concerning identities in virtual communities, the sharing of experiences and their roles in these creative economies (Chung, Lee, Lee, & Koo, 2015; Snieska & Normantiene, 2012).

This convergence of image and technology is highly fluid and changes in emergent and unexpected ways based on cultural styles and expectations, competition with other cities, disasters or epidemics, and developments in information systems (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007). At the same time, this view works to create an illusion of material stability by freezing its own image in time. A semiotic representation of the urban environment is created by matching its physical environmental features with the abstract and disjointed views available through various platforms (Hunter, 2016). This destination image is much more a collaboration of perceptions and expectations than it was when projected through more traditional forms of broadcasting and print media (Hunter, 2008). However, the virtual destination image may not reveal the whole truth regarding destination culture as some views might be favored over others. This question is addressed in the following section.

3. Destination Experience

While social media and other websites might enable communities of practice to come together remotely to share their information and to build identity (Zhang & Watts, 2003), the content they share may be shaped more by its medium than determined by the real representational characteristics of the destination (Chung, Han & Koo, 2015). Users, separated by time and distance, may intentionally or unwittingly collaborate to exchange representations signs of the destination based on recycled information that is more relevant to group identity than it is to any attempt at destination image mimesis (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007). In this sense, smart cities can only go so far in their digital self-representation. It is unlikely that any

attempt at a complete and total collection of online representations could substitute for the physical and direct destination experience. In addition, the virtual doubling in cultural representations could threaten the identity of the phenomenal events upon which they are based. In tourism, representations are self-referential or true descriptions of the cultural and natural features of a destination, and the subjective perceptions or beliefs of residents and visitors as they appear visually and verbally (Brown, 1995). In this sense, some tangible or experiential link must be maintained between the original and its many copies (Beerli & Martin, 2004).

This was originally accomplished in tourism by real interactions between host and guest where destination culture could be directly experienced. However, the veracity of this ideal is largely contested for various reasons. First, culture is largely syncretic in that power relations can affect its development or mutation, especially in tourism where intercultural brokers might be motivated to represent the destination in ways to enhance positional advantage (Scherle & Nonnenmann, 2008). Second, tourists may have been conditioned to expect a certain set of cultural features – a standardized cultural product – that will be available to them at any destination (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). Third, residents or the destination community – as a general whole or as driven by dominant opinion leaders – may self-gravitate toward a redefined cultural source delineated by a selection of representative “contents” (Teo & Li, 2003). The inevitability of cultural change, or reproduction (Jenks, 1993) can only be navigated, it cannot be prevented. Conscientious tourism practitioners and researchers must be vigilant in maintaining a reflexive view on past and present social forces to ensure that they influence a better path for cultural change. But like the Ship of Theseus, the identity of the real will always be in question.

4. Discussion

In this chapter, some of the problems with cultural representations have been described. In tourism, culture is located between some form of an imagined original (Hunter, 2011) and two forms of mimesis, namely, in the virtual representation and in the experience of the other – the outsider or visitor. Both forms provide hints as to what the contours of a destination culture might be, and each offers opportunities to make that culture more resilient. Smart tourism works to make destination culture more accessible through augmented reality, and more accessible to industry. Smart cities also rely upon virtual platforms to maintain visibility and continuity, especially in times of crisis such as that of the current pandemic. More traditional or experiential forms of tourism establish and maintain behavioral feedback loops that test the competing and shared subjectivities held between groups and choices made in the representation of culture (Yang, Ryan, & Zhang, 2013). Neither form of cultural mimesis, however, seems to be complete in itself, and perhaps, COVID-19 offers an opportunity to explore ways in which to bridge the gap between representation and experience. In conclusion, a visual depiction summarizes and compares these two forms of mimesis is offered. In Figure 1 (following), cultural representations and experiences in tourism are compared.

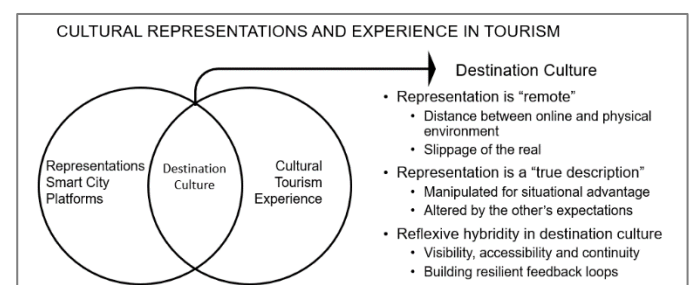


Fig. 1. Cultural representations and experience in tourism

Declaration of competing interests

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