

# Evaluative Dimensions of Urban Tourism in Capital Cities by First-Time Visitors

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## INTRODUCTION

Information science and technology have a tremendous impact concerning a place, given the fact that online resources, such as websites, portals and engine searches shape the potential and future visitors' expectations. Numerous factors converge when it comes to evaluating such a complex scenario, yet most often tourists are asked to rate their experience on a scale or a series of scales. Although such data appears as fairly easy to gather and analyze, it does not reflect various dimensions of the encounter with the city, including aspects mediated by technology. In order to provide a deeper, social psychological view of the evaluative dimensions of urban tourism, the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 2000) offers a sound epistemological foundation. It has a long tradition, after its birth more than a half a century ago (Moscovici, 1961), of focusing on how people perceive places and cities in particular (Milgram, 1984). However, the theoretical construct of social representation in tourism from a geographic perspective (considering geo-cultural differences between urban locations) has not yet been fully developed, in spite of the fact that various scholars have been applying it to guide empirical research (D'Hauteserre, 2010; Monterrubio & Androtis, 2014). For example: de Rosa and colleagues for decades have worked on social representations of European capital cities and place-identity

among first-visitors from different nationalities (de Rosa, 1995, 1997, 2013; de Rosa, Bocci, & Dryjanska, in press; de Rosa, Bocci & Picone, 2013; de Rosa, & D'Ambrosio, 2011). Moscardo (2011) has concentrated on social representations of tourism planning; Lai and colleagues have applied the construct of social representations of services in context of a national park (Lai, Hsu, & Nepal, 2013), while Dickinson and Dickinson (2006) considered the social representations of transport in tourism.

The strength of the theory of social representations applied to urban tourism lies in its interdisciplinary approach that bridges sociology and psychology, based on the premise that social reality is being continuously constructed (Wagner, 1996). Technology has certainly transformed urban tourism, not only concerning online sources of information, but also when it comes to using smartphones for photographs and video-conversations that add a new dimension to interpersonal virtual communication about the city. In such a dynamic scenario, social representations undergo transformations and as a consequence their evaluative components change.

The online tourism domain integrates a number of theoretical perspectives, including: the *industry perspective*; (2) the *symbolic representation perspective*; (3) the *travel behavior perspective*; and, (4) the *travel information search perspective* (Xiang et al., 2008). Their research demonstrated

that the representations change through technological interfaces, i.e., a search engine, reflecting the idiosyncratic nature of destinations and travelers' heterogeneous information needs when considering IT applied to urban tourism (Xiang, & Gretzel, 2010).

The aim of this chapter is to provide such a multi-dimensional outlook on the evaluation, including not only the internet and the collection of data electronically, etc., but especially the impact of the interactive sources as social media, rooted in the dialogical epistemology that permeates the theory of social representations (Markova, 2000). In particular, whether reality confirms the expectations of tourists concerning a place influences the outcome of this process. In order to explore concrete examples, this chapter concentrates on how tourists evaluate historic capital cities of London, Madrid and Warsaw, emphasizing the difference between initial technologically-mediated virtual expectations and actual first-hand experiences. As demonstrated by Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009, p.37): modern technology, such as videos shared on YouTube.com (and potentially other such sites) can be regarded as a means of "transportation" to destinations, and "facilitating the sharing of such experiences through videos can be viewed as a process of opening or providing access to (realistic and imaginative) tourist experiences".

## BACKGROUND

Social representations have been described by the founder of the theory, Serge Moscovici, as "system(s) of values, ideas and practices" (1973, p. xiii). A group of renowned scholars in the field has proposed the following definition to further clarify the term: a social representation is the ensemble of thoughts and feelings being expressed in verbal and overt behavior of actors which constitutes an object for a social group (Wagner, Duveen, Farr, Jovchelovitch, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Marková, & Rose, 1999).

A wide range of research tools, from structured to open has been implemented in this research in order to examine the interactions between expected results and methods, taking into account diverse constructs, such as place-identity, time, space and place-memory.

## Methodology

### Research Participants

The data has been collected in 2011-2013 in three capital cities: London, Madrid and Warsaw from the total of 420 participants from seven different EU and extra-EU countries (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, United Kingdom and United States). Each respondent, contacted using the snowball sampling technique, was visiting the city for the first time. On a voluntary basis, the participants filled out *questionnaires in their native language*, starting from *socio-demographic information*, reason of residence in their current location and the additional reasons for visiting the city apart tourism (study, work, etc.). It is important to notice that even the first-visitors, who had additional reasons other than tourism, actually spent their time dedicated to sightseeing and other typical tourist activities, in line with the contemporary trend that urban tourism is often interwoven with other activities, such as business meetings, conferences or studies. Concerning gender, two thirds of participants are women in case of each city. According to age, the research participants have been categorized in three groups: less than 26 y.o.; 26-40 y.o.; 41- 60 y.o. The average age was 27 for London, 26 for Madrid and 34 for Warsaw.

### Multi-Method Research Tools

In line with the *modeling approach*, different tools are applied to detect the social representations and their evaluative components within the multi-method questionnaire - created according

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