

Chapter 41

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

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ABSTRACT

This chapter evaluates the social representations of historic European capital cities, comparing it before and after the first-time visit that took place in the period from 2011 to 2013. Based on the set of empirical data, it presents and discusses the integrative framework for evaluation of a city conceived as a resource in responsible urban tourism. In particular, the social representations of Madrid, London, and Warsaw by 420 visitors from seven different EU and non-EU countries (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, United Kingdom, and United States) are examined according to the modelling approach to the theory of social representations, focusing on the evaluative dimension present in an implicit and explicit way. Understanding how tourists assess the resource that they access, based on previous knowledge as opposed to direct experience, shall lay ground for enabling the policy makers and city planners to take into account the expectations of visitors while pursuing urban tourism development in the geo-cultural locations of European capital cities.

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

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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”.

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