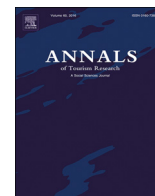


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RESEARCH NOTE

Minority languages as sustainable tourism resources: From Indigenous groups in British Columbia (Canada) to Cimbrian people in Giazza (Italy)

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ABSTRACT

Cultural aspects of a destination have always been part of the discourse on sustainable tourism, i.e. tourism that attempts to preserve cultural and environmental resources for future generations. Particular attention has to be paid to Intangible Cultural Heritage, especially languages, since they will be available to future generations only with daily practice. Through twenty semi-structured qualitative interviews, the paper considers two Indigenous languages in British Columbia (Canada) and the Cimbrian language in Italy and concludes that the genuine interest shown by tourists contributes to language revival in contexts of minority cultural groups by strengthening the sense of pride and identity of members. This study hopes to be a stepping stone in the analysis of minority languages as sustainable tourism resources.

Introduction

Minority languages have already been discussed in the literature on the sociolinguistics of tourism. Some authors have defined their use in contexts such as advertising or tourism as a double-edged sword since such uses can impact the status of the minority language, and its preservation and revitalization, both positively and negatively (Kelly-Holmes, 2006; Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2011). On the one hand, an increasing number of visitors from outside the community reinforces the value of official or global languages, like English (Bruyèl-Olmedo & Juan-Garau, 2015). Minority languages may become commodified products, used to attract customers through the authentication of experience (Heller, Pujolar, & Duchêne, 2014; Zhu, 2012). On the other hand, tourism can impact minority languages positively. Previous studies have shown that minority languages are a pull-factor for the growing number of tourists looking for unique cultural experiences (Greathouse-Amador, 2005; Whitney-Squire, 2016), since they represent a unique worldview, deeply connected with a particular culture (Fishman, 1991; Krauss, 1992). Tourism can thus help to raise awareness among minority groups of the value of their culture and, by enhancing pride and sense of identity, create a virtuous circle of cultural and language revival (Cohen, 1988; de Azeredo Grünewald, 2002; Greathouse-Amador, 2005). According to Kim, Whitford, and Arcodia (2019), tourism that contributes to the maintenance of intangible heritage, including languages, is sustainable, because it increases the likelihood that this heritage will be preserved for future generations.

Following this second approach, our study will analyze whether/to what extent tourism in British Columbia (Canada) and Giazza (Italy) contributes to minority language preservation.

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Case studies and methodology

The idea for this study originated in British Columbia, where the authors were involved in a project at the Thompson Rivers University (Kamloops). Having made some significant findings in the course of this research, we decided to consider another case in Italy, to see whether a completely different socio-cultural background would produce similar results with regard to the relationship between language preservation and experiential tourism.

British Columbia is home to approximately 200 First Nations, each with their own unique (and threatened) language (Statistics Canada, 2016). Giazza is a little town in Italy, where Bavarian settlers, arriving between the 11th and 16th centuries, maintained their Upper German dialect - now described as the Cimbrian language - for centuries. Now, however, the language is only spoken by a few old people (Bidese, in press). In both British Columbia and Italy, the main threat to these languages is posed by the culture standardization policies of the two countries (Heller et al., 2014). Both minority communities, for instance, suffered physical abuse because of their language, although to different degrees. Indigenous children were confined to residential schools and beaten when heard speaking their own language (Partridge, 2011). Similarly, if Cimbrian children spoke Cimbrian at school, they were hit on the hand. Minority language speakers in both countries were seen as ignorant and backward, and therefore marginalized (Partridge, 2011; Stringher, 2018).

Their great natural beauty has made both British Columbia and Giazza well-known tourism destinations, particularly popular among mountain and/or sport lovers. In British Columbia, however, a new branch of tourism, related to Indigenous culture(s), has started to emerge.

Qualitative methodologies are extensively used in tourism studies, especially when analyzing cultural and anthropological aspects, since they enable the collection of rich data (Jennings, 2004; Richards & Munsters, 2010). For this study, twenty in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out. In British Columbia, Nk'Mip Resort and Quaaout Lodge & Spa (both Indigenous owned and run), were chosen as case studies, and managers and Indigenous cultural representatives were interviewed ($n = 12$). No specific company was selected in Giazza, which is a very small village. There, key-players in the tourism field and Cimbrian speakers were interviewed ($n = 8$). The British Columbian data was collected in the fall of 2017, and the Italian in May 2018.

All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed by the first author. The transcriptions were coded to identify the concepts that emerged, and the similarities and differences between the two locations.

Findings

Our results confirm previous findings that minority cultures and their languages, represent an asset for a destination (Greathouse-Amador, 2005; Whitney-Squire, 2016). The minority culture and its language help to create a particular tourism experience unique for guests:

“I think we have something to offer that other wineries don't. [...] it's not just another winery. [...] You're actually seeing some of our culture.”

(Winemaker, Nk'Mip Cellars – British Columbia)

“With globalization, people realized they needed to find something typical of the territory and started promoting local products and some aspects of the local culture too.”

(Museum director – Giazza)

“It [...] ties to that time a bit more [...]. It's not a winter home, it's a *kekuli*.”

(Manager Quaaout Lodge – British Columbia)

Language is particularly important in the promotion of minority culture. Both companies selected in British Columbia, for instance, have Indigenous names. The minority language (plant and animal names) is also used during cultural tours to explain concepts related to the Indigenous lifestyle, to designate particular artifacts and to brand cultural festivals and gatherings.

“We want to reach the common people [...] through festivals and meetings too.”

(Museum director – Giazza)

“[Tourists] get what they paid for. Especially on the reserves, they want to hear the stories, [...] the words.”

(Marketing Manager, Desert Cultural Centre, Nk'Mip Resort – British Columbia)

Many interviewees indicated that direct contact with tourists, genuinely interested in their culture and language, has rekindled their understanding of the value of their language. This increased awareness has renewed their sense of pride in their culture and identity and encouraged many to learn more to preserve this valuable heritage and to deliver authentic experiences (Whitney-Squire, 2016), thus reversing the process of cultural denial that followed century-long discrimination.

“I don't think I'd be learning the culture if I wasn't doing what I'm doing today.”

(Cultural representative, Quaaout Lodge – British Columbia)

“There were experts who visited the village because of the Cimbrian language. I think it helped.”

(Cimbrian speaker – Giazza)

“Quaaout Lodge definitely gives me that opportunity to build a platform where we share our history with everyone.”

Table 1
Impact of language preservation on the destination.

Contribution of the language to the development of the tourist destination	Low impact	Medium impact	High impact
Distinctiveness and competitive advantage			British Columbia
Local pride and identity		Giazza	British Columbia
Authentication	Giazza	British Columbia	
Preservation/sustainability		Giazza	British Columbia

(Cultural liaison – Quaaout Lodge)

This renewed interest has spread throughout the whole society and is transmitted to younger generations, who learn the Indigenous language at school.

“I learn more and more of the language, through my children now.”

(Cultural liaison – Quaaout Lodge)

Findings demonstrate that more attention is being paid to the authenticity of the culture presented, especially in British Columbia. Examples include changing the name of an item on the menu (Nk'Mip Resort), and removing teepees erroneously erected somewhere that they had never traditionally been sited (Quaaout Lodge). Indigenous people also wish to present a ‘living’ culture:

“[you] learn about present, past and future.”

(Review on TripAdvisor – Nk'Mip Resort)

Language is used not only in the branding of tourism products but also that of other, related, products. The Nk'Mip Cellars used Indigenous words when naming their two premium wines. In Giazza, branding also uses some traditional Cimbrian words, and ‘cimbri’ is now an extremely popular designation (in Italian), especially for local food. Cimbrian people have a long tradition of cheese-makers, their produce is now known as Cimbrian cheese. Visitors can, moreover:

“now find ‘aperitivo cimbri, pizza cimbri’ but these did not exist [formerly]. The word Cimbri is widely used, it is thought to stand for genuineness.”

(Museum director, Giazza)

Our results, however, reveal that languages and other elements of traditional culture are not used as folkloristic embellishments to please tourists but as symbols of a growing awareness of, and pride in, Cimbrian/Indigenous heritage.

The importance given to the authenticity of the traditional language is noteworthy. People who are not Indigenous/not fluent in Cimbrian do not feel comfortable using the minority language.

“I can't promote the Cimbrian culture and language if I don't speak it myself.”

(Restaurant owner, Giazza)

“All I have ever known is English. So, [...] I can't say ‘[...] this is how important it is.’”

(Manager, Quaaout Lodge)

Finally, some research has linked language preservation to the authenticity of the tourism experience, since a flourishing language keeps a culture alive (Kim et al., 2019).

Conclusions

The following table (see Table 1), which reveals the impact of minority language preservation on the two destinations and their respective communities, summarizes the main findings of this study.

While preliminary, this research contributes to the body of knowledge on the subject since neither of the two case studies had ever before been investigated; our comparison of them, moreover, provides a richer overview of the topic. The interviews confirm that many tourists are genuinely interested in experiencing the unique connection with a culture expressed in a (in this case, minority) language. Albeit limited, the use of minority languages in tourism has had a positive impact on their preservation, especially thanks to the strengthened sense of pride and renewed interest that it has generated in the populations concerned.

Although further research is needed to achieve a deeper understanding of both local communities' perspectives and tourists' preferences, this research provides preliminary insights into how to overcome the negative outcomes identified by previous studies. Tourism must not modify the socio-cultural balance of the local population and compromise traditional customs and practices (including languages), exclusively aiming at tourists' satisfaction – the so-called commodification. Tourism practitioners must preserve the cultural authenticity, which depends, *inter alia*, on the actual use of the language, considered part of the cultural heritage.

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