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## Touristification. Empty concept or element of analysis in tourism geography?

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### ABSTRACT

Since the end of the last century, geographers have been using the concept of touristification understood as a complex process in which various stakeholders interfere, transforming a territory through tourist activity. However, over recent years, this word has become popular in other areas with a distinct connotation, understanding touristification as a negative idea of tourism, like the massification of a destination or as a synonymous for gentrification or tourism-phobia. This situation discourages the use of the term and causes the necessity to question the usefulness of the concept, considered as too ambiguous or even empty. We argue for a correct use of the term touristification, focused on the territorial phenomenon and process it is meant to describe in a geographical approach without ideological preconceived notion, to construct knowledge from a territorial understanding of tourism in an ever-globalized world.

### 1. Introduction

This paper discusses the concept of touristification in tourism geography, its meaning and how it is used by other disciplines. We also review what is an empty concept and, analyze other questionable concepts applied to the study of tourism, to take part in the discussion about the validity of the concept of touristification.

The importance of tourism on an international scale is an undeniable fact. The numbers published by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) show a sustained growth both in the number of tourists on the international scene and in the economic repercussions of tourism. This growth is due to international policies that eliminate and make more flexible the tariff barriers for goods and services, especially as far as financial capital is concerned, combined to an ever-growing amount of social relations facilitated by the speed of transportation and communication (Lauer et al., 2013; Sugiyarto et al., 2003). This set of social, economic, financial and political changes of the last decades is named globalization.

In this sense, tourism works as a catalyzing agent for that materializes the effects of globalization on local spaces globalization (Córdoba and García de Fuentes, 2003). This means that tourism is conceived on global terms and manifests itself on local sites, creating transformations in host territories, promoting new ways of using space and modifying cultural landscapes as well as the territoriality of the tourism destination (Jansen-Verbeke, 2009).

The analysis of an isolated element of the tourism system, for example the economic repercussions, marketing, transportation, among others, is called a *management approach*. However, the study of tourism from a geographical perspective implies an integrative comprehension of the phenomenon. Jansen-Verbeke (2009) explains that the geographical approach has not to be reduced to a regional analysis, but instead must consider the relationship between society, identity, environment and cultural heritage in an ever-globalized world, which tends towards homogenization. It is thus an analysis of the changes in the territoriality of the tourism destination. Saarinen et al. (2017) understands it as a synthesis of historical processes and power relations, to understand tourism in the territory and the territory with tourism. Those changes, in tourism geography, are called touristification (Fournier and Knafou, 2013; Jansen-Verbeke and Dewailly, 1999; Lazzarotti, 1994).

The relationship between tourism and geography lies in the fact that there cannot be a tourism activity without a spatial manifestation, which means that in turns one cannot understand the significance of tourism without first identifying its territorial impacts. (Miranda and González, 2006). Knafou and Stock (2003) and Jansen-Verbeke (2008) explain that the expansion of tourism fostered devising a new geographical approach, going from descriptive to integrative, in the process of trying to understand synthetically the complex relationships between stakeholders, economic flows, appropriation of space, and transformations in the landscape.

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In geography, saying that tourism is a global phenomenon lacks originality, but demonstrating how tourism transforms the destination areas in global spaces goes a step further (Duhamel and Boualem, 2011). In other words, touristification implies processes of change in the socio-economic dynamics and the components of the landscape and environment of a territory. However, this neologism has many linguistic variations. For example: in English, touristification is also known as tourismification, touristisation, touristifying, in Spanish known as *turistificación* and *turistización*, in French can be used the concept “*mise en tourisme*”, as well as *touristification*. Therefore, facing this abundance of synonymous words, added to the overuse of the concept in erroneous ways, many consider the term touristification as an empty concept.

## 2. What is an empty concept?

Since tourism is an emerging field of study, a multidisciplinary approach is necessary, with an emphasis on social sciences and humanities (Jafari, 2005). In this sense, new concepts and theories may inevitably emerge about tourism and its impacts on space and society. However, some of them fall into what Edwards (2010) and Offe (2009) call empty concepts or empty signifiers, which are words and ideas that have no clear empirical determination, are self-referential or fail to refer, polysemic terms whose meaning is ambiguous, subjective, open to too many different interpretations or definitions and finally fail to designate something that exists in the material or immaterial realm. An empty signifier, as defined by Laclau, “gestures towards the failure(s) of signification itself” (Brown, 2016); and thus, indicates a difficulty not only to name a phenomenon but also to conceive it. In the academic field, one can mention as examples the concepts of sustainability, intermediate ecosystem services, climate protection, just to name a few. (Methmann, 2010; Brown, 2016; Potschin-Young et al., 2017).

### 2.1. Misused concepts in tourism investigation

The incorporation of geography, anthropology and environmental sciences in the study of tourism translated in a more complex vision and critique of the phenomenon (Jafari, 2001). And still, the variety of approaches generated a proliferation of concepts, some of them lacking a definition or with an intelligible definition, in other words empty. Furthermore, multidisciplinary approaches tend to adapt concepts taken from other sciences and force them into tourism studies, which sometimes confuses instead of building meaningful knowledge.

In this sense, one can find some terms that have been heavily criticized in the field of tourism studies because they trigger circular discussions due to their conceptual lack of precision; and others that produce some questioning since they became too ambiguous in their definitions.

Some concepts that emerged as operative tools to describe new phenomena and build knowledge about them in specific disciplines are sometimes recuperated by other less theoretically exigent discourses and may become misleading. The following examples refer to concepts that could be useful to analyze the impacts of tourism on destinations that are transformed by its implementation. However, they are often misused in the media and on the internet, which puts their meaning at risk.

- *Overtourism*. A recent concept which gained a large scope in tourism investigation. It refers to a destination, especially urban, that went beyond its capacity to carry out the social load that the local population can handle. However, there is no consensus on the definition of the term, and no clear parameters to establish or measure it. (Koens et al., 2018; Muler et al., 2018; Namberger et al., 2019).
- *Gentrification*. As a proposal made in England in the '60s to describe the process of upper-class population moving in working-class neighborhoods in British cities. During recent years, the term has

been used in the context of urban conflict related to space, especially in historical centers of European cities, where the conversion of housing in vacation rentals or businesses stir a rise in the cost of living and rents, generating constant expulsions of people who used to live in those places. The term is also associated with the concepts of tourism-phobia and touristification. (Benach and Albet, 2018; Garnier, 2017; Jover and Díaz, 2019).

- *Solastalgia*. A concept used to refer to the collective melancholia that part of society feels after tourism has established in its close urban neighborhood. People feel they are deprived of something when their daily activities and services go through the changes brought about by tourism and are nostalgic for the past that preceded the massive arrival of tourists (Lalicic, 2019). The concept has been used to refer to the citizen's attitude of rejection towards tourism.
- *Capacity of charge*. Some authors criticize the use of this engineering term, complex calculations and unclear relations between the selected variables. The concept lacks a model or consensus on a formula, which leads to a variety of methodologies that express distinct results on the same site. It is considered that the calculus of a “magic number” is not a functional tool in tourism management, since not every tourist has the same behavior or impact (McCool and Lime, 2001).

## 3. Touristification; an empty concept?

In the past recent years, the concept of touristification has generated debates and discussions due to its recent association, especially in the media, with tourism-phobia and gentrification (Jover and Díaz, 2019; Torres-Outón, 2019). In the same way, one can notice that the term is associated with a hostile posture towards tourism, which gives the concept a negative charge as documented by Sanmartín (2019) who states that the term gained a lot of popularity in recent years, especially in the media that use it as a synonymous of rejection of tourism, especially from the host population. This overuse of the term has permeated society in general and even different academic fields, especially in anthropology, where the term is used with a conceptual, emotional and ideological sense that diverges from the one proposed by the geographical approach (Sanmartín, 2019).

From a geographical point of view, approaching tourism as a phenomenon implies a holistic vision through the territorial analysis of the activity, using with seriousness and care the adapted concepts and criteria. For example, Duhamel and Knafo (2003), state that the concept of *vocation touristique*, the idea that some places are drawn to become touristic, applied to any kind of space has been used in political and academic discourses. However, it lacks a geographical sense, since it refers to a determination or predisposition of space itself, which does not exist and refers to a debate that geographers got over with a long time ago and ended in the discredit of the term as an empty concept.

Saarienen et al (2017) argue that a geographical understanding of tourism involves a model that can explain the spatial organization to understand how the activity develops, integrating power relationships, public policy, resources management, among other factors, to identify the territorial impacts generated by the sector.

In this sense, thinking in terms of touristification becomes a valid method, since it promotes the analysis of the phenomenon in a specific and concrete territory. Touristification tends to be enacted in a local manifestation at a regional level, in an urban context and smaller scales, such as heritage, archeological, natural and bio-cultural levels (Jouault et al., 2018; Romero-Renau, 2018; García de Fuentes et al., 2019; Gravari and Jacquot, 2019; Gregory et al., 2019; Enseñat et al., 2019).

Pickel-Chevalier (2012) argues that touristification is not an abstract process, but one which proposes to analyze how different stakeholders and factors propelling the transition to an economy based on tourism activities in a determined territory. Therefore, the processes must be understood in a historical moment of a specific territory. One cannot talk about touristification without a context, i.e. without

identifying first the distinct elements and stakeholders involved in the process.

#### 4. Conclusions

The uncontrolled proliferation of concepts in the field of tourism research is the cause of the appearance of many unclearly defined concepts and eventually their classification as empty or non-referential concepts. However, from a geographical point of view, we still consider that touristification can be a valid concept as far as it refers to the complex processes of territorial transformation brought about by tourism on a determined geographical space. Studies of touristification of a territory can be the conceptual basis to strengthen the geographical approach in tourism research since they analyze the relationships between stakeholders and their relationship to a specific space.

We must insist on the fact that one cannot talk about touristification without referring to a concrete actual geographical space. To study touristification processes one must identify how discourses and global policies apply in local areas. At the same time, the concept goes beyond the over-development of the tourism activity and should not carry any value judgment exercised beforehand of the phenomenon. In other words, analyzing a touristification process does not mean to give a negative or positive sense to the phenomenon without first realizing a territorial analysis.

We call for adequate use of the concept, avoiding to use it as a synonymous for gentrification, although there can be cases of a relation between both phenomena (Gotham, 2018); and to stop referring to the rejection or hostility towards mass tourism as hostility towards touristification, because this would comfort the erroneous idea that it is an empty or too ambiguous concept, making it useless for geographical research. We additionally call to keep investigating this concept because after the CoViD-19 pandemic there shall be a reorganization by the stakeholders in the touristification of many spaces.

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