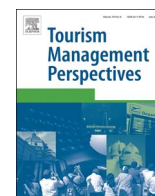


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Making sense of heritage tourism: Research trends in a maturing field of study

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A B S T R A C T

This essay examines several emerging research trends in the field of heritage tourism. These trends, including experiential connections with heritage, blurred boundaries between tourisms, more accurate portrayals of the commodified past and technological advancements, demonstrate a precipitous growth in heritage tourism scholarship that focuses more on experience, identity, stewardship, place and empowerment than the more descriptive supply v. demand work that preceded it. Changes in how researchers treat the cultural past indicate a maturing field of study that is increasing in popularity as a focus of academic research and also as a consumable tourist product.

1. Introduction

Heritage tourism, one of the oldest and most pervasive forms of tourism, has become a buzzword in the travel industry and within the research academy. Heritage involves an inheritance from the past that is valued and utilized today, and what we hope to pass on to future generations. This patrimony may be tangible or intangible, abstract or concrete, natural or cultural, very old or rather recent, and it may be quite ordinary, although the extraordinary tends to sell better. Heritage tourism is based upon the utilization of historic resources and forms the backbone of the tourism economies of many destinations. Some studies suggest that upwards of 80% of all trips taken involve some element of cultural heritage (Timothy, 2011), which is not surprising when heritage is understood holistically. This commentary examines heritage tourism as a subject of academic research that has undergone a significant evolution since the 1980s and today reflects a scholarly sub-field in the early stages of maturation.

2. A chronology of thinking

The earliest academic observers of tourism, leisure and culture between the 1930s and the 1970s acknowledged the importance of cultural resources as recreational and educational assets. Concepts related to visitor use, museum management, conservation, interpretation and authenticity—all of which are directly related to tourism—became increasingly a part of the academic lexicon in the 1960s and 1970s. During the same period, many non-academic reports and ‘how-to’ documents related to heritage conservation and visitor management

surfaced to satisfy the growing needs of heritage stewards as they managed patrimonial resources for tourism.

However, as an explicit type of tourism, heritage tourism was only acknowledged, defined and researched in the mainstream as recently as the 1980s, with a rapid rise in academic interest in the 1990s. In common with many areas of tourism studies, research into heritage tourism began as extremely descriptive accounts of supply and demand (Herbert, Prentice, & Thomas, 1989). This approach dominated the work of the 1980s and 1990s as scholars attempted to identify what heritage meant on the ground, how it was spatially distributed and delineated and who its consumers were. Since the late 1990s, however, the research has become more analytical and focused on theoretical and conceptual development. Increasing emphasis has been placed on understanding important concepts such as the cultural experience, people's relationships with the heritage they consume, identity reinforcement through heritage visits and intra-group solidarity.

Owing to a heightened interest in cultural heritage as a tourism product, and given its pervasiveness now as a salient concentration of academic studies, thousands of research articles, books, presentations and conferences have been produced to focus on this imperative theme of tourism studies. The bulk of research articles on this topic has appeared in more than 90 tourism, hospitality and leisure journals, with a secondary record having developed from journals in geography, sociology, political science, anthropology, archaeology, cultural studies, art, theater, history, economics and architecture.

An often cited sign of a maturing research field is the emergence of specialized journals. As the greater field of heritage studies universalized in the 1980s and 1990s, a few journals appeared to satisfy

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the early needs of heritage scholars, but few, if any, of the papers published dealt directly with tourism. *Historic Environment* (first published in 1980) and the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (beginning in 1994) were two of the first journals to focus on cultural heritage resources and their uses. Several other generic heritage management journals appeared after the turn of the millennium with much of their content being devoted to the visitor industry and its impacts and management. These include, among others, the *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* (2006), *Heritage and Society* (2008), *Journal of Community Archaeology and Heritage* (2014) and the *Journal of Heritage Management* (2016). From a tourism-specific perspective, the *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, established in 2006 and initially published by Channel View Publications (now published by Routledge), has become the leading international journal devoted to this academic subject.

As noted above, most heritage tourism research from the 1980s until the 21st century was especially descriptive. From the supply perspective, researchers spent much effort defining heritage resources, their scales, locations and market reach, and identifying simplistic typologies. Research on the market and other elements of demand likewise lacked conceptual strength and theoretical potency, with most studies describing market characteristics, behaviors, satisfaction, expenditures and intent to return, resulting in an over-saturation of the field with repetitious and predictable case studies of visitor satisfaction, market segmentation and demographic profiles. For their time, and in the normal chronology of things, these studies were important in forging the foundations of this field. During the early 2000s, however, we saw a change from purely descriptive empirical case studies to efforts to understand cultural heritage tourism on a deeper level, such as the experiential dimensions between people and the resources they visit, as well as the broader societal implications of heritage-based tourism.

3. A maturing field

There are several signs that the field of heritage tourism is reaching a certain level of maturity. Underscoring most of these new directions is the notion that the supply of cultural resources and the demand for them are not mutually exclusive, as the previous paragraph denotes. The sections that follow highlight four indicators of maturity, namely growing research on tourists' experiential engagement with heritage, the crossover between heritage and other types of tourism, tourism stimulating more accurate portrayals of the past, and technological innovations in heritage tourism. These four prospects represent an increasingly holistic view of heritage tourism and the development of the field, although I recognize that these are in no way exhaustive. Instead, they serve as representative examples of broader trends in the tourism academy.

3.1. Experiential engagement with heritage

The first sign of maturation expressed here is the move beyond pure description of visitor experiences and heritage places towards efforts to understand more deeply how engaging with heritage can bring about change within individual visitors and more broadly within society. One example is some observers no longer being satisfied with the overly generalized and supply-oriented definition that heritage tourism entails common visits to historic sites and locales (Timothy, 2011). Poria, Butler, and Airey (2003), for instance, refuse to take for granted this generally recognized definition. Instead, they argue, from a demand perspective, that the heritage tourism experience is determined by people's personal connections to the place they visit rather than the innate historical attributes of the site or object itself. This unconventional view of heritage tourism is unique but illustrates emerging new ways of thinking about supply, demand and the visitor experience.

Relatedly, increasing numbers of studies hone in on personal and national identity formation through heritage experiences (e.g. Butler, Khoo-Lattimore, & Mura, 2014). Visiting cultural sites helps bolster

many consumers' own distinctive identities and self-actualization. Research also shows that social solidarity can be encouraged through cultural tourism experiences, as well as through the manipulation of heritage tourism by authorities in power. The notion of individual experiences helping to define what is or is not heritage tourism, or how people's own connectedness to the past determines their experiential outcomes, has provoked a healthy and robust academic debate around the concepts of heritage contestation, authenticity and nostalgia (Timothy, 2011).

3.2. Heritage and other tourisms

Given the generally accepted definition of heritage—that which we inherit from the past, use today and pass on to future generations, potential heritage resources are vast and widespread, and they include many objects, places, events, persons and phenomena not heretofore considered to be traditional heritage tourism products. By the same token, people are becoming more sophisticated in their travel tastes and desires; many are showing more interest in the deeper meanings of places, local identities and their own connections to the places they visit. These changes indicate a growing recognition that other types of tourism fall within the purview of heritage tourism and cannot be separated from it (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). For example, pilgrimage or religious tourism, is an important form of heritage tourism wherein people travel to gain access to divine blessings, draw closer to deity, satisfy religious requirements, seek forgiveness for sins or simply to improve their spiritual selves. Beliefs, rituals, rites, celebrations, foods, sacred sites and buildings are important elements of the patrimony of places and the heritage of specific faiths. For non-pilgrim tourists, visiting the same sites can be an important part of a cultural experience that helps them appreciate better the heritage of the destination. Regardless of why one visits sacred locales, pilgrimage is a salient form of heritage tourism that draws millions of travelers to many faith-oriented destinations each year.

Likewise, dark tourism is based upon the notion of people consuming dark heritage places, events and artifacts (Stone, Hartmann, Seaton, Sharpley, & White, 2018). For some people, visiting sites of human suffering, death and disaster satisfies a morbid curiosity about a specific event or person. For others, visits to battlefields, cemeteries, war zones, places of incarceration or sites of natural disasters are more educational in nature and may fulfill their desire to understand history better. Growing interest in visiting sites of human suffering and death has spurred much research recently on the unique challenges of managing 'difficult' heritage.

A third example is sport tourism. People traveling for sport purposes may simultaneously be involved, wittingly or not, in heritage tourism (Ramshaw, 2014). The famous sporting venues they visit may be significant heritage attractions in their own right and feature prominently in a destination's recommended itineraries. As well, the events and athletic activities observed and undertaken, as well as the sites and happenings associated with sport celebrities, are by definition a part of the intangible and tangible heritage of regions and countries. Sport and its associated patrimony are known to help reinforce national identities and build solidarity among fan groups and communities. Pilgrimage, dark and sport tourism are not the only forms of tourism that depend on heritage resources or which intersect with heritage experiences, but they are illustrative of the point. Volunteer tourism, food tourism, shopping tourism and agritourism, for example, all embrace components of the cultural past and its consumption that place them squarely within the broader constructs of heritage tourism.

3.3. More accurate portrayals of the past

Another indication of maturation is that tourism appears to be reflecting more accurate and balanced portrayals of the past. While staged, whitewashed and stereotyped heritage has been the norm for many

years, we are now beginning to see that more accurate depictions of the past are pervading the tourism narrative. For instance, the industry has long focused on the most extraordinary and iconic, built and tangible, and very old heritage as the most marketable cultural products, usually at the expense of ‘throw-away’ or backstage elements of the past in which tourists have little interest and which the industry has managed to ignore. Today, however, demand is expanding beyond the normative heritage itinerary that focuses on castles, cathedrals and fortresses with an emphasis on the nobility and wealthy elites of past societies, as the traveling public becomes more aware that these heritages are skewed representations that symbolize a very small portion of the earth's cultural heritage indeed (Timothy, 2014). The branding of cultural heritage with national and international trademarks such as UNESCO World Heritage or National Historic Landmark status has contributed appreciably to lopsided measures of heritage tourism and its over-emphasis on iconic and exceptional places. The very process of accentuating extraordinary pasts as the tourism industry and branding agencies have done has simultaneously disinherited the legacies of ordinary people and places to the point where much of it has disappeared.

Nonetheless, some market segments are beginning to demand more balanced memories and impartial narratives, which has started to lend credence to the notion that the vernacular heritage of ordinary people, younger heritage and intangible heritage are also important in the tourism landscapes of places. Fortunately, UNESCO has recently recognized the need to draw attention to the salience of other heritages beyond the most iconic, tangible and ancient patrimony to include more colloquial elements of the human past, such as music, dance, traditions, folklore, games and cuisine.

A prominent example in the United States is the Southern slave plantations which have long been an important tourism resource, but the narrative has heretofore focused on the lives and activities of the white slave owners. Today, however, a more accurate representation of plantation life has emerged with increased emphasis on the everyday struggles of the slaves (Alderman, Butler, & Hanna, 2016). Similar examples can be found among ‘marginal’ peoples through the world, including indigenous peoples as the tourism machine is finally beginning to recognize their property rights over spaces, artifacts, signs and symbols.

3.4. Technological advances

Another sign of this advancing and relevant subfield of tourism is the accumulation of research on technological advancements, especially how innovations influence tourists' experiences (Arnold & Kaminski, 2014). There are at least three research streams on the convergence between heritage tourism and technology. The first is the use of social media as an instrument for marketing cultural destinations and attractions. Word-of-mouth promotion is very different today from what it was 20 years ago. Social media is now the key word-of-mouth medium for travelers to disseminate information, opinions and ratings related to their experiences. Tourism-specific applications, such as TripAdvisor, which allow travelers to post their own information, ratings and opinions, are important venues for this, as are Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter and other social media platforms. In addition to user-generated information, individual heritage sites and destinations and service providers now commonly use social media as a marketing tool that can be easily manipulated to target specific niche market for direct promotion.

Secondly, there is now a robust volume of research which looks at technology innovations that help enhance the visitor experience and intensify the learning value of museums, historic sites and cultural performances. Research on augmented reality and virtual reality, electronic guides, QR codes, mobile phone apps and other such apparatuses that help people navigate historic cities, archaeological sites and museums is growing exponentially in the literature.

Finally, much scholarship currently focuses on certain technologies

that may be useful for tracking visitors and monitoring behaviors in an effort to help in conservation efforts, visitor congestion and flow management, interpretation effectiveness and other data collection exercises. Without doubt, as technology continues to play an increasingly prominent role in heritage management and consumer experiences, the number of academic studies will continue to grow.

4. Concluding comments

Earlier research focused descriptively on the supply side of heritage, providing an understanding of attraction types, locations, policies and scales, and on descriptions of market segments and the demographic characteristics of heritage consumers. Although scholarship is becoming increasingly sophisticated, one-off case studies with limited theoretical strength and generalizability still dominate most academic research on heritage tourism, but these should be seen as building blocks in a field that is still in the early stages of maturation. Bigger picture research is starting to emerge, and concepts are being developed that emphasize both the products being consumed and the people who consume them.

Contemporary scholarship continues to provide more critical evaluations of heritage tourism in recognizing that people's own expectations, cultural norms and emotional baggage may genuinely determine the outcomes of their heritage visits. As well, national, regional and societal identities may be strengthened or weakened through the production and consumption of heritage resources. Current research also points to a more inclusive examination of cultural heritage that entails a wider range of resources and experiences, as well as a growing desire among producers and consumers to focus on, and interpret, more truthful and balanced narratives of the cultural past. Research on the effects, opportunities and challenges associated with modern technology, likewise, is a clear indication of the prominent status of heritage tourism in the academy.

Cultural heritage is one of the most pervasive tourism products throughout the world and is among the most researched subjects in the field of tourism studies. The representative trends described in this essay illustrate a complex research field that reflects changing principles and embraces stronger associations between supply and demand, evolving human experiences, politicization of places and events, blurred boundaries between tourism types, broadening interpretations of the past, heritagization of marginal peoples and their patrimony, empowered communities, technological advancements, truth in storytelling, marketing and branding, sustainability, resource management and stewardship, economic development and much more. We are just beginning to understand this multifaceted area of tourism studies. As tourism continues to grow and as people turn to the past to contextualize their present and their future (Lowenthal, 2015), heritage tourism will continue to develop, and increasing numbers of destinations will realize the socio-economic potential of sharing their stories with the outside world.

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