

WHAT SOCIAL MEDIA TELL US ABOUT THE HERITAGE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract:

Tourists have happily embraced the possibilities of interactivity and publication provided by social media and Web 2.0. The last decade has seen a massive increase of digital content generated by tourists online. This paper examines the digitalization of tourists' heritage experience, analyses the impact of social media and user generated content in the consumption of heritage sites, and discusses new forms of technologically mediated authenticity in tourism. Netnography and a constructive approach have been adopted for the examination of online communities and social networks. There are different types of tourist generated content online. This study focuses on the review genre and examines a purposive sample of data collected from Tripadvisor which, with over 30 million contributions, is the largest online community focusing on tourism and travel. Through a systematic analysis of tourists' narratives and socio-technical structures, this study assesses how technologies influence tourists' heritage experience. The research findings provide insights into the role that tourists' online reviews play as mediators of the tourism experience and illustrate the features of an emerging virtual tourism culture.

INTRODUCTION

Many people use the Internet to tell about their tourism experiences. Tourists' digitalized stories and images are in turn being read and consumed by others. The new Web 2.0's wikis, online communities, social networks and media sharing sites have become platforms to create, upload and publish individuals' tourism experiences in a plethora of digitalized forms. The development of a more interactive and user-based web has altered mediation processes in tourism, from more traditional information sources such as word-of-mouth, guide books, tour guides, analog media and a Web dominated by content of organizations, to a new Internet which expands the impact of individual tourists' opinions and experiences.

Recently there has been an increase in literature that deals with social media as a phenomenon. Some of the popular viewpoints among analysts of Web 2.0 are that the new Internet represents the beginning of an era of participation and democratization (Qualman 2009), and that it increases transparency and empowers the customer base (Israel 2009; Tapscott 2009). A recent example of the impact Web 2.0 has on political participation is the presidential campaign of Barack Obama, which was characterized by an intensive use of social media (Brogan & Smith 2009). Other authors discuss how

the digital revolution has shifted from a technology based on ‘command and control’ to a technology based on engaging and empowering individuals (Shih 2009), as in the case of Wikipedia. There are also emerging studies that challenge popular optimistic views on social media and Web 2.0. These authors point to poor security of content and identity theft (Poster 2006), the possible misuse of increased transparency to achieve greater centralized control (Hand 2008; Miller 2010; Munar 2010a), issues related to the ownership of the content displayed (Aspan 2008; Tierney 2010), and the lack of quality of the amateur contributions (Keen 2007). The popular social network, Facebook, for example, has received hard criticism for claiming ownership over content uploaded by its users (Stone & Stelter 2009).

The Internet is becoming an increasingly popular topic in tourism research. A large number of scholars now focus on how tourism is being transformed by information and communication technology (ICT), and this effort has resulted in a number of articles, books, conferences and specific journals dedicated to the topic. Tourism research addresses the impact of ICT on the supply and demand of tourism products, and the findings show, for example, how the Internet is important to the areas of e-commerce (O'Connor 2003; Weber 1999), destination image formation strategies (Frías, Rodríguez, & Castañeda 2008), intermediation and distribution (Buhalis & Licata 2002; Buhalis & Law 2008; Mills & Law 2004), and tourist behavior (Luo, Feng & Cai 2004; Mattila & Mount 2003).

Explorative social media research examines the diversity of genres and types of tourist created content (Munar 2010b), tourists’ weblogs (Pudliner 2007) and the impact of social media on search engine results (Xiang & Gretzel 2010). Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) focus on online shared videos as new technological mediators, providing an analysis of the audiovisual tourism content and the tourism experience. Other recent research gives insights on the impact of social media and virtual experiences in destination branding (Hyun & Cai, 2009; Munar 2009; Munar 2011).

Although the above research shows an increased awareness of social media, none of these studies focus on social media and heritage tourism. However, the evolution of tourism is interlinked with the commercialization of history and culture. From the ancient Acropolis in Greece to Ground Zero in New York, places and buildings of historical and cultural importance have acted as important magnets to attract tourists. Historical and cultural resources play a significant role in the bundle of products that constitute a tourism destination because they are capable of defining the place’s brand, characterizing the place and offering unique products. Thus, many destinations use history and heritage as a way of achieving a competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive environment.

There is much debate about why people are fascinated with gazing upon heritage sites and about the relationship between the historical and the ‘authentic’ (MacCannell 1976; Tim Knudsen & Waade, 2010; Urry 2002). However, there is no doubt that commercializing, visiting and conserving historical assets are prevailing trends in tourism. A large number of tourists visit museums and historical sites, and their travel souvenirs, photo albums and diaries have long been part of tourism memorabilia and word-of-mouth promotion. Social media offer an innovative element to these personal travel reflections by providing digital global platforms on which tourists can create and publish their travel stories. Social media therefore transform the traditional creative processes, distribution mechanisms and consumption patterns of these stories.

Digitalized tourist content is an ever-expanding database about heritage tourism products that has great potential for analysis. But, to date, the study of digitalized tourist content in relation to heritage and cultural tourism is still in its infancy stage. This chapter is a contribution to this emerging field of study. It analyses how participative information technology and tourists’ reviews of heritage sites contribute to the tourism heritage experience. In addition, it examines how social media and user generated content contribute to an understanding of the consumption of heritage sites and discusses new forms of technologically mediated authenticity in tourism.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND HERITAGE TOURISM

Web 2.0 is described as a part of the Internet that is “increasingly influenced by intelligent Web services that enable users to contribute to developing, rating, collaborating and distributing Internet content and customizing Internet applications” (Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent 2007, p. 9). The expansion of social media is Web 2.0’s main asset and the consequences of this development on both society and the market place have received increased attention in the literature (Brogan & Smith 2009; Li & Bernoff 2008; Qualman 2009; Weber 2009).

Social media include a mix of different types of ICT tools and take many different forms. Some of the most popular of these forms are wikis (Wikipedia), blogs (Travelblog) and microblogs (Twitter), social networks (Facebook), media sharing sites (Youtube), review sites (Tripadvisor) and voting sites (Digg) (Stillman & McGrath 2008; Zarrella 2010). The main characteristic of social media is that they enhance collaboration and sharing of information online because they are built around software which makes it possible for individuals to communicate and form communities using their computers (Cooke & Buckley 2008). User generated content (UGC) is an important source of value to these media. User contribution systems “aggregate and leverage various types of user input in ways that are valuable to

others” (Cook 2008). Examples of very successful websites which feature users’ contributions as their core source of content are eBay, YouTube and Facebook.

UGC is related to the digital transformation of text, sounds and images to form creative media content (Poster 2006). Tourist created content includes various types of creative media content that are produced by tourists and published through the Web (Munar 2010b). Compared to traditional methods of sharing travel experiences, digitalized tourist created content demands a more sophisticated use of creative and technological skills. Published digitalized reviews, travel videos, online diaries and blogs are examples of this enhanced personal creativity.

There are four different streams of heritage tourism research that offer valuable perspectives that can be used to understand the relationship between Web 2.0 and the heritage experience. However, none of these streams specifically addresses the impact of social media on heritage experiences.

The first stream of research indicates that a heritage product is unique and is part of the tourist’s quest for cultural authenticity. A popular view is that leisure tourists go on trips to get away from their own mundane everyday lives and come into contact with different cultures (Urry 1990). These cultures, however, must be seen as being authentic (Errington & Gewertz 1989; MacCannell 1992; Waller & Lea 1999). Many tourists want to engage with the host society; for instance, they want to experience the local culture. Heritage tourism allows tourists to understand a destination better because it offers a historical foundation of a place and an impression of its people’s culture. Social media are now avenues for people to evaluate and express their experiences of authenticity at heritage sites. Web 2.0 platforms allow almost everyone to discuss and state their personal interpretations of an attraction, which often involves contrasting heritage sites with their own cultural backgrounds. This aspect of the research poses the question: Is the authenticity of the heritage experience being affected if tourists’ online descriptions of heritage sites are pedestrian or contradict established historical expertise?

In the second stream of research, Prentice and other researchers show that tourists want to experience authenticity based on their own preconceived images of what is authentic about a particular destination (McIntosh & Prentice 1999; Prentice 2004; Prentice & Andersen 2007). During their trips, these tourists will intentionally seek to affirm their own notions of authenticity. These tourists find their heritage experiences richer when they confirm their expectations and see familiar aspects of the heritage

sites they visit. Often, their preconceived ideas have been nurtured while talking to family and friends, consuming popular culture and reading reviews travel sources on the Internet. Some of these preconceptions can be idealized and reflect a sense of nostalgia (Gyimothy 2005). Social media is playing an increasing role in shaping travelers' expectations, and thus in shaping their heritage experiences.

The third area of research on heritage tourism acknowledges that experiences must be managed. To provide for a memorable heritage experience, the heritage site must be accessible and meaningfully conserved. Blatant commercialization and 'touristification', meaning an abundance of visitors, stalls and tacky souvenirs, can destroy the heritage experience (Cohen 1988; Moscardo 1996; Watson & Kopachevsky 1994). As a result of good management, heritage tourism can rejuvenate a destination, help improve its infrastructure and environment, and become a revenue generator and employment provider (Roche 1992; Willim 2005). Otherwise, historically significant but derelict buildings, existing but vanishing craft expertise and increasingly esoteric traditional performances may disappear because of the lack of social, political and financial support. Tourism gives heritage sites more reasons to remain relevant and vibrant in the present era. A balance must however be found (Burns 2004; Chang 1997; Costa, & Gotti 1996; Garrod & Fyall 2000; Nicholas, Thapa & Ko 2009; Newby 1994; Teo 2002; van der Borg, Costa & Gotti 1996). What constitutes that balance is politically defined (Ooi 2002). Although tourists often cause heritage sites to become commodities, reviews show that they are also concerned with conservation; tourists are thus not "enemies" of heritage.

The fourth stream of research claims that heritage is about presenting the self and nationhood, and creating senses of patriotism and identity (Morgan & Pritchard 1998; Ooi 2005b; Park 2010; Selwyn 1996; Silver 1993). Heritage sites are often used to represent and symbolize a society and culture; they are even used as social engineering devices (Ooi 2005b). Thus, the heritage experience is not just for tourists, but for locals too. However, locals and tourists may not agree on each other's interpretations of heritage (Ooi 2005b; Prentice 1993; Teo & Yeoh 1997). Tourists may even belittle a locally significant and well-regarded cultural object. Social media provide arenas for locals and tourists to interpret heritage sites in different ways. A virtual community evolves as different people recall and interpret their heritage experiences. The construction of heritage has now extended into cyberspace.

STUDY METHODS

The methodological perspective adopted for this study is the constructivist approach (Markham 2004). This approach understands the Web not as a neutral technological tool, but as a social construct and context that facilitates the examination of the creation and evolution of social structures such as relationships and communities. The specific method used to examine tourist created content in heritage tourism is netnography. This method consists of participative observation and examination of one or several online communities and it has been used by social scientists in conducting Web research (O'Reilly et al. 2007). Kozinets (2002, 2008) describes this methodology as an online evolution of ethnography and defines it as an application of methods of cultural anthropology to on-line cyber culture.

The social media platform selected for this study is Tripadvisor, which is the largest networking site focusing on tourism and travel. The main type of content presented in Tripadvisor is the review of tourism products. Tripadvisor has over 11 million members and in February 2010 it claimed to have more than 30 million tourism product reviews (TripAdvisor 2010). Contrary to other social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter, Tripadvisor is an open network and it is not necessary to register or become a member in order to access the published content. However, it is necessary to create a virtual identity to upload content onto the site.

This study had two different streams of data analysis. The first was an analysis of the structure and possibilities of Tripadvisor to map how tourists make use of this website to present their travel experiences. The analysis was conducted by making several visits to the website between January and May 2010 with the aim to examine the processes and regulations of digital review making.

The second stream involved an extensive documentary analysis of a sample of travelers' reviews of two heritage attractions: the Acropolis in Athens, Greece, and the Forbidden City in Beijing, China. The sample was established using the Tripadvisor's search engine and classifying the reviews of these heritage sites by date and language (English). The search specifications were "Acropolis, Athens" and "Forbidden City (Imperial Palace), Beijing". The quotes used in this chapter were extracted from two search results of TripAdvisor. We analyzed a total of 34 reviews for the Acropolis and 59 for the Forbidden City¹.

¹ The complete sample of reviews from Acropolis can be found in http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g189400-d198706-Reviews-Acropolis_Akropolis-

REVEALING TOURISTS' HERITAGE REVIEW MAKING

Heritage research has long focused on the relevance of conservation and management of heritage sites and on the importance of cultural tourism for local communities. In many instances, tourists are seen as the enemies of heritage conservation – their presence will not only enhance wear and tear of the sites, but visiting tourists also change the aura of the heritage site. Researchers have advocated that heritage sites should be conserved in a sensitive manner; commercial gains should be secondary to people's respect for the culture and history of the sites (Burns 2004; Chang 1997; Garrod & Fyall 2000; Newby 1994; Nicholas, Thapa & Ko 2009; Teo 2002; van der Borg et al. 1996). However, we argue that finding a balance between conserving a heritage site and taking into account the needs and wishes of the tourists is also important. The tourists and their digital contributions to the heritage experience are the focus of our study here.

The online reviews we have studied are dialogs among tourists generated for tourists. The examination of the reviews shows how tourists understand themselves as part of a community of fellow travelers who come together to create, share and exchange information. Tourists are not passive spectators at the heritage site. The exchanges in the virtual community reflect many of the concerns and issues tourists have and also reflect their roles as co-creators of heritage experiences.

These tourist-to-tourist dialogs have inched into tourism, while tourism businesses, destination marketing organizations and academics have in turn aimed to influence the social media sphere. The main story behind the great success of review sites such as Tripadvisor is that they have opened a new communication platform that empowers the tourist and challenges some of the tourism players and traditional expert systems in tourism. The innovative feature of tourists' online review making is that this new form of mediation of the tourism experience neither represents the industry nor the cultural industry, but people's personal reflexive considerations. Tourist created content functions as virtual mediator. Sharing digital reviews broadens the access to experiences of 'touristhood' so that tourists do not only see their travel experiences in contrast to their own day to day activities, but also in many different contexts based on other travelers' experiences (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier 2009).

Tourist review making

The following sections examine the main features of the digitalized mediation of review making in heritage tourism.

Tourist Review 1: Partial views on heritage

Tourists' reviews are not centered on traditional, cultural or historical expertise but on personal experiences. Tourists expect to find historical knowledge and cultural information elsewhere.

Acropolis, WestSaxon - "I will not go on about the individual buildings as others have already described them far better than I can do";

Forbidden City, Mr-Maggot - "Needless to say, the Forbidden City is one of the great historical sites that we have on this planet."

The focus on the experiential value of the visit is the opposite of what can be seen in other types of user contribution systems in social media such as Wikitravel or Wikipedia, where heritage related articles provide wide-ranging historical information. In Tripadvisor the value of the review is based on the personal expression of feelings and emotions brought about by the travel experience.

The lesson for heritage managers and experts is that tourists in their review making focus on closing a gap between the historical significance and their personalization of a heritage experience. They are not interested in expanding their knowledge bases about the cultural and historical value of the site, but on sharing real-time experiential information. This is also the type of information that cannot be delivered by the traditional knowledge base in heritage tourism or by scholars or cultural managers.

Tourist Review 2: Immediacy and authenticity

In contrast to professional reviewers, contributors to Tripadvisor take on a more personal and unpretentious tone. They express 'raw' positive and negative emotions such as pleasure, discontent, anxiety and relief. Most of these emotional expressions are not long, guarded reflections, but short, expressive exclamations of immediate pleasure or displeasure. For instance:

Acropolis, VicM - "It's an amazing experience";

Acropolis, KoritsakiGr - "The sight was amazing";

Forbidden City, Ausielea - "All I can say is WOW WOW WOW, it is one of the most amazing places I have been to";

Forbidden City, CRSM - "The forbidden city is SO disappointing! You will think that China will work harder to make this cultural treasure more accessible to tourists. Instead, the English translations of the signs make no sense."

Current research has shown how social media promote the exposure of 'immediate thought' or 'immediate observation' (Munar 2010a). Tourists share impulsive emotional expressions of distress or enjoyment instead of reflective arguments about the authenticity of the sites they visit. In this way social media provide many examples of tourists' 'reflex' behavior as opposed to their 'reflexive' behavior in their individual lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In this digital participatory space, many reviewers are emboldened and encouraged to express themselves in a spontaneous manner.

Seemingly unmediated, such expressions give credibility to the reviews because the reviewers have visited the place, they speak their minds and they do not have vested commercial interests. In other words, the UGC reviews serve the interests of readers who want honest reviews and personal impressions of the attractions. As a result, such reviews complement the professional reviews that they can find in travel guides and travel articles. Professionally written travel guides and articles tend to promote the attractions. UGC reviews are now often used to affirm whether these sites are worth visiting or not.

Tourist Review 3: The practical tourist

In proposing their "MacDisneyization" thesis, Ritzer and Liska (1997) argued that tourists want to see the familiar and predictable. To allay their anxieties, tourists want good hospitality, facilities and amenities, safety and value for money. The promotion of heritage attractions tends to concentrate on the uniqueness of the sites, not on how convenient and comfortable these places are (Ooi 2005a). Tourists, however, are also concerned with practical issues, such as accessibility to water and food, toilets and other amenities, avoiding tourist traps, safety and the weather. Travel can therefore bring about physical and emotional anxiety related to feelings of uncertainty and unfamiliarity in foreign places (Ooi 2005a). So, unlike most professional reviews, UGC reviews offer candid expressions of how a person will feel when they visit the sites. On Tripadvisor, many reviewers provide tips to avoid troublesome and uncomfortable situations. For example:

Acropolis, Priya_T - "Long uphill walk. Recommended to undertake this later in the day as the sun can be really strong";

Acropolis, CalifTravelBuddy- "The main entrance is less steep [...] There is an elevator to the top for handicapped persons";

Forbidden City, John46220- "I'm glad I went, and I may go back. But do not take a bag or purse";

Forbidden City, Aussielea- "Just one important reminder wear comfortable shoes and take some water!!! Enjoy ..."

Such information alleviates the practical levels of tourist anxiety.

Social Mediation: Cultural joint-affirmation and the romance of travel

The previous discussion on the needs of tourists and the features of UGC reviews does not give insights into the social and interactive nature of Tripadvisor. However, interactivity is one of the crucial characteristics of social media and, in the case of tourist review making, it appears at various levels.

Interaction 1: Joint affirmation

Thanks to the digital co-creation, evaluation and discussion of heritage sites, the physical heritage site and the virtual one have come together. Jansson's (2002) study on the mediation of the tourism experience demonstrates how virtual mediation, far from bringing the 'end of tourism', actually encourages the search for an 'on-location' tourism experience. In the case of heritage sites, UGC constructs particular images through part of the heritage experience.

Jafari's (1987) tourism model identifies several components representing the different stages of the tourism experience: corporation, emancipation, animation, repatriation and incorporation. Tourist created content can be developed, uploaded and shared during the entire tourism experience and its mediation will vary depending of the type of tourist (e.g. lifestyle, age), their eLiteracy, their level of connectivity to the destination and their technological resources.

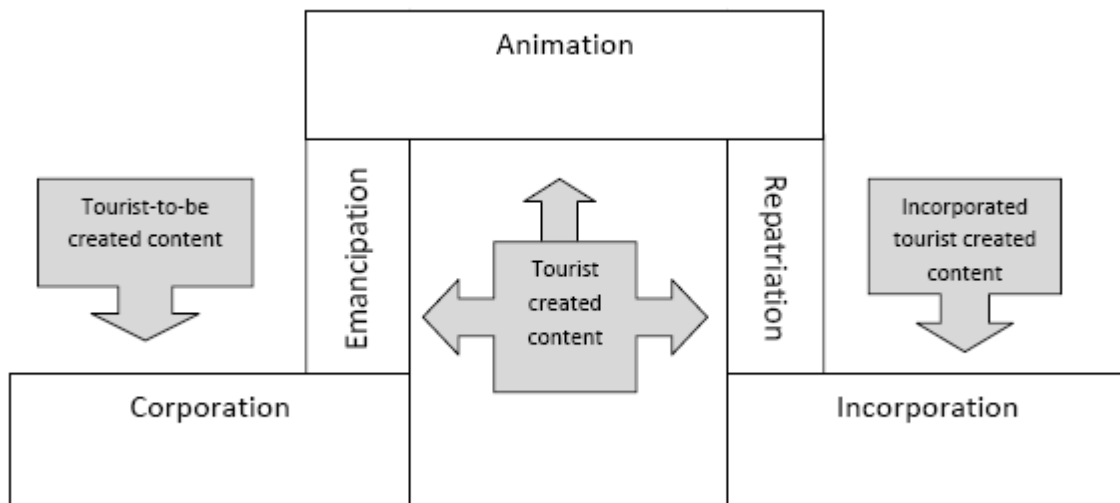


Figure 1. Tourist Created Content and the Tourism Model

Throughout the tourism experience UGC reviews contribute actively to the shaping of other tourists' preconceptions of heritage sites. Touristic culture is not only about the physical act of travelling, but it is also about preparing people to experience tourism (Franklin & Crang 2001). Tourists' heritage reviews emphasize the role of fantasy and imagination as part of a tourism experience that begins with a virtual, emotional and imaginative mode of travel before the actual journey. Making heritage reviews helps travelers build new, expanded images of cultural tourism experiences while they participate in an interactive exercise of joint-affirmation.

Studies by Prentice (McIntosh & Prentice 1999; Prentice 2004; Prentice & Andersen 2007) have shown that tourists want to reaffirm their preconceptions of their travel destinations. UGC reviews contribute to the shaping of these tourists' preconceptions. Furthermore, review making helps to ritualize the tourism experience, so that tourists can show their collection of places as a ritual of travel expertise:

Forbidden City, Dkissel - "Historically, this is a must place to go to";

Acropolis, vernicos - "The acropolis, the ancient market, the museum all places to visit. [...] This is a place to visit before you die";

Acropolis, unevic - "a visit here certainly makes you feel like you can check a box in your "Things to See Before You Die" list." Interaction 2: Socialization and meritocracy

Tripadvisor provides several applications and feedback mechanisms between contributors and readers. The applications aim to encourage social interaction and extend the social tourism experience (Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2007). Tourists do not keep their knowledge and experience as secrets or trade them as valuable assets in commercial terms. The more accessible, usable and reusable the content is, the more valuable it becomes. By sharing their knowledge, tourists appear as free revealing innovators expressing some of the values of virtual community cultures (Von Hippel, 2005). The evolution of the Internet provides many examples of virtual communities based on the establishment of collaborative on-line systems that reward expertise and merit (Castells 2001). Tripadvisor helps to make tourists' socialization culture visible and rewarding. The site has developed a tool so that users are able to give a supporting vote to each review (see figure 2). Tourists can see updated voting results alongside the titles of the reviews. The application operates as a community-building marker and as a reward system for contributors. In this sense, Tripadvisor shares many similarities with the Internet's techno-meritocratic culture and the open source movement.

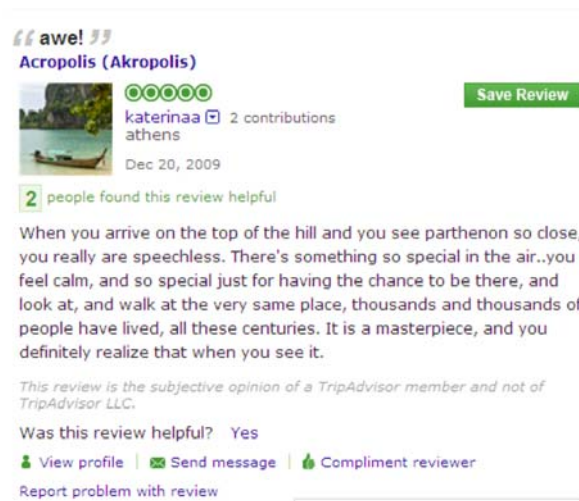


Figure 2: Tripadvisor review.

Interaction 2: Paradox

There is a paradox between the effort of joint-affirmation and sociability in that social media review making represents and an evident anti-tourist awareness. The documentary analysis shows that tourists want to help other tourists but, at the same time, they want other tourists to disappear. Tourist reviewers' create a frontier between 'themselves' and 'the others tourists' who are considered, in most of the cases, to be a disturbing crowd that needs to be avoided as much as possible. The tourists

creating this frontier do not realize that they are part of the crowd that other tourists find annoying. This feature of the review genre is linked to the stream of heritage literature that focuses on preserving the integrity of heritage sites and avoiding commercialization and ‘touristification’ (Cohen 1988; Moscardo 1996; Watson & Kopachevsky 1994). Reviewers are often guided by the contradiction that heritage sites must be preserved from touristic crowds so that they, as tourists, can have a more memorable heritage experience:

Acropolis, HattieCostaRica- “I am now reading that there are plans to ‘improve’ Dionysus theater. I hope this will be strictly supervised and controlled and not made to be a tourist haven but a reminder of the past”;

Forbidden City, elizalily- “This is a big area to view and there are many big groups of tourists, often wearing matching baseball caps and moving as one, like ants on the march!”

Many of Tripadvisor’s reviews highlight the romance of travel and encourage people to travel. But there is a twofold dilemma for reviewers in that they want their reviews to be helpful to other tourists, but they also want to avoid encountering crowds of other tourists when they visit these heritage sites themselves. Crowds of people are seen to disturb the tourist’s romantic gaze of the touristic space. Heritage tourists want to have an individual encounter with the historical/cultural icon and experience it in reflection and solitude. Some imagine that they will be part of an idyllic postcard when they visit the site. In this sense, tourists’ imaginings of historical sites can displace these sites from their spatial surroundings. Therefore, when reflecting on their actual visits to these sites, the reviewers express both enthusiasm about the historical site and exasperation with a noisy or chaotic public space. These reviews are a reminder of the importance of the perceptual carrying capacity in the management of touristic sites:

Forbidden City, ChrisMcMillan - “When one is queuing up for tickets one is in the midst of a “huge” crowd. I can’t imagine what this would be like later in the year or even later in the day. We were there around 10am.”

Other tourists are not the only ones who are not always welcome as part of the heritage experience. The host is also missing. Reviewers generally do not reach out to the host community and do not reflect on the residents of the place. In heritage research, the local population has been seen as an authenticity marker. In the sample studied here, people who reviewed the Acropolis and the Forbidden City did not acknowledge the Greek or Chinese people or current socio-cultural state of affairs. This

finding points to the need for a critical analysis of the host-guest relationship. The literature notes that in many cases tourists do not want the host to be there (Aramberri 2001), and the reviews of the heritage sites studied tend to support this claim.

Discussion

The Acropolis and the Forbidden City are two similar and yet very different heritage attractions. Both are ancient and famous. They are must-see sights in Athens and Beijing respectively. Nonetheless, they reflect two different civilizations with contrasting stories. Despite these cultural and historical differences, the types of reviews posted on Tripadvisor treat both places similarly. These similarities point towards an emerging virtual tourism culture and also to generic tourist interests.

Tourism cultures are constantly evolving. The tourism experience, through Web 2.0, allows a virtual community of strangers to share their experiences. What brings them together is that many of them have visited the same tourist attractions or are interested in visiting the same sites. Besides searching for information, tourists are jointly affirming their experiences by sharing them online. Tripadvisor and other similar sites benefit from these emerging communities by exploiting the user-generated contributions. As mentioned by Ooi and Ek (2010, pp. 306-307):

The encouragement of emotive expression in social media like Facebook and Tripadvisor has a commercial motive. While people can keep in touch with their friends on Facebook and others tell their travel stories on Tripadvisor, these expressions are the commercial content of the websites. The public is doing the work for these Internet firms.

Quality of UGC remains an issue. Reviewers' contributions do not represent historical expertise. The reviews are also anonymous and although they are rated, these ratings mean different things to different people. Tourists are wary of commercial reviews of heritage sites and readers are also cognizant that some online reviewers may not be fair in their comments (e.g. because they focus on a single nasty incident that spoiled their experience). The community will only work if there are many participants, thus reducing the impact of 'outlying' voices. TripAdvisor's control over tourists' personal data aims to provide a 'free of commercial interests' image and to avoid misuse of the system by firms that are eager to get positive reviews. But control systems create a tension between the need to generate as much user traffic as possible, so that the value of accessing to the information will increase, and the need to provide reliable information from the end-users without bias from the industry.

Web 2.0, as a new technology, offers many emerging possibilities for the tourism industry. Nevertheless, traditional mediating agents in the tourism industry, such as tour guides, travel writers and visitors' centres remain important in providing cultural and heritage stories. Visitors' centres are still needed to help tourists when they arrive at their destinations and provide historical expertise which cannot be found in online reviews. But Tripadvisor's reviewers have also added new value to the information marketplace, even though the information they provide is heavily influenced by their general impressions, emotions and experiences.

While heritage sites tend to promote their uniqueness and the cultural value of their products, the types of reviews posted on websites like Tripadvisor indicate that tourists are just as concerned about practical issues and personal comfort as they are about historical and cultural details. The Internet enables them to share their feelings of uncertainty about being in a foreign environment and lacking local knowledge. The tips they learn from their experiences are considered useful by other users. By concentrating on the uniqueness of the heritage, promoters are ignoring tourists' concerns, which are an important part of the heritage experience. Therefore, the search for information to help tourists get a better sense of certainty and reduce their anxieties has been extended onto the Internet.

Finally, the study shows how Web 2.0 is not creating a group of post-tourists, nor is it making traditional tourism mediators redundant. Instead, social media have introduced new and significant players to the industry. They have opened up spaces for communication among tourists and have provided a novel tourism agenda. This chapter shows that other tourism stakeholders now have different lessons to learn from tourists' digital contributions.

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