



Renewing a historical legacy: Tourism, leisure shopping and urban branding in Paris



Chiara Rabbiosi *

Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Department for Life Quality Studies, Center for Advanced Studies in Tourism, Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses a form of urban tourism branding based on the archetypal form of consumerism: leisure shopping. Commodity fetishism is instrumental not only to increasing mainstream fashion sales but also to rejuvenating and multiplying city images on the global competitive market. Drawing from fieldwork performed in Paris, the article analyses and discusses the strategies developed by key players to promote leisure shopping for urban tourists. It specifically focuses on the actions of public-led tourism marketing organisations. Paris is historically renowned as a capital of style and a commercial metropolis, which can easily be used as a basis to develop urban branding strategies for promoting tourism. However, urban branding based on leisure shopping *per se* was rarely fostered until recently. Previous theoretic reflections on urban development and consumption – leading to debates on the “fantasy city”, the “cultural-creative city” and “local shopping streets” – provide the analytical basis for understanding the promotion of leisure shopping as an urban tourism branding strategy in Paris and the changing relations between urban political economy and consumer capitalism.

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Introduction

By the end of the 20th century, most world cities had focused on tourism as a source of revenue (Hoffman, Fainstein, & Judd, 2003; Judd & Fainstein, 1999). The economic and cultural production of cities through tourism became important in late capitalism, while urban redevelopment scenarios were planned to accommodate additional retail spaces and welcome a variety of city users (Martinotti, 1996). Together, these two elements secured both increased individual consumption and international investment (Evans, 2003; Gotham, 2002; Judd & Fainstein, 1999; Tretter, 2011). This article connects the on-going promotion of commercial resources in tourism to a changing panorama in urban development by examining leisure shopping as a theme for urban tourism branding in Paris, France. The luxury fashion industry developed early in the 16th and 17th century in Paris, where it was also displayed by the Royal court (Williams, 1982: 8). Two centuries later, the city was the stage for the establishment of urban commercial culture, forged by the “aesthetics of the consumer metropolis” (Tiersten, 2001: 57). The history of the mid-nineteenth century commercial revolution and luxury fashion are embedded in the city’s physical forms as well as in its sense of place; these

two elements constitute strong premises for the branding of Paris for its leisure shopping. In the shift from commercial to neoliberal capitalism, luxury fashion became a more valuable source for the consumerist branding of the city, often driven by the investments of premium companies quoted on the stock market such as LVMH (Louis Vuitton and Moët Hennessy group) or PPR (Pinault-Printemps-Redoute group, today renamed Kering). Suburban retail real estate – such as shopping centres and retail parks located on the outskirts of Paris – and luxury fashion also took hold in the French capital and its region in the last decades of the 20th century, often intersecting with what Marc Berdet defines *fantasmagories du capital postmodernes* (“postmodern phantasmagorias of capital”) (Berdet, 2013: 155–262). This is the case for instance of the high-end factory outlet *La Vallée Village* on the eastern outskirts of the Paris metropolitan region. Parallel to luxury and fashion shopping, Paris is also connoted by more mundane commodity exchange in its neighbourhoods (Lallement, 2010, 2013). A more popular commercial image of the city, emphasising leisure shopping facilities, somehow received less attention in tourism promotion until recently. Today local policy makers seem keener to focus on urban leisure shopping and provide new readings of urban Paris as a shopping destination. This shift constitutes the object of this article.

This article integrates literature on urban tourism branding as a planning and marketing strategy (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990;

* Address: Corso d'Augusto 237, 47921 Rimini, Italy.

E-mail address: chiara.rabbiosi@unibo.it

Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005) with more critical accounts of the social construction of urban meaning and legitimacy through place marketing consistent with contemporary urban politics (Bradley, Hall, & Harrison, 2002; Colomb, 2012; Kim, 2010; Vanolo, 2008). In this article, the focus is not on urban commodification, the construction of premium consumerist spaces or tourism bubbles, in contrast to previous studies investigating consumption and the visitor economy (for overviews on these matters see Gottdiener, 1997; Judd & Fainstein, 1999; Ritzer & Liska, 1997). The article instead relies more on debates on the recognition of local retailing as sociability incubator (Oldenburg, 1989) and as intangible cultural heritage (Zukin, 2012). The article questions the trend of explicitly integrating leisure shopping into urban branding by asking: What is the nature of branding policies in Paris? Is it alternative to other typical understandings of urban branding? Is the acknowledgment and exploitation of shopping tourism a new feature of urban development strategies in Paris? What can this single case study add to contemporary debates on urban political economy and consumer capitalism?

The article is based on a case study emphasising the process of branding Paris through leisure shopping fostered by tourism marketing policies. Special attention is paid to the engagement of public-led tourism institutions beyond this process. The research was conducted in 2012. A preliminary analysis of a variety of freely available secondary sources (public documents, websites, magazines, press releases) was performed, along with the direct observation of the shopping and tourism landscape of Paris. These sources were used to identify major strategies of connecting leisure shopping to urban tourism branding in the city. Following this first phase, a group of public and private actors was identified as key stakeholders in the observed process. They were interviewed qualitatively in order to investigate their policies, aims and visions more closely.¹ The data analysis was inspired by discourse analysis and its uses in urban research (Jacobs, 2006).²

After introducing and presenting the theoretical framework of this article in the next section, the historical link between Paris, commercial culture and tourism is described in the third section. Tourism and urban branding in Paris is discussed in detail in the fourth section, leading to an account of how local actors have recently turned to leisure shopping as a theme for contemporary urban tourism promotion in the city. In the discussion, the article considers the ambiguous world outlined by the branding of urban retail and tourism. This process concerns the renewal of the historical legacy between Paris and luxury design and the differentiation and multiplication of images of leisure shopping in Paris. In the conclusions, the outlined set of material and discursive practices for economic and geographical competitiveness contributes to answering the main questions of the article.

Urban branding, tourism and leisure shopping

Literature in the field of urban studies has widely debated the way cities become commodities as a consequence of their repositioning towards tourism. Urban environments have become consumption spaces in their entirety, often turning into “malls

with no walls” (Featherstone, 1991; Gold & Ward, 1994; Gotham, 2002; Gottdiener, 1997; Hannigan, 1998; Kearns & Philo, 1993). However the archetypical forms of elusive consumption – leisure shopping – have rarely been discussed *per se* (an exception are the forerunner articles of Jansen-Verbeke (1990, 1991)). On the other hand, leisure shopping is increasingly informing the choice of destination among visitors (Merenne-Schoumaker, 2001; Moscardo, 2004), making it a feature of the competition between cities and a target for city branding (Anttiroiko, 2014). Recently a Globe Shopper City Index was published by the custom research division of the Economist Intelligence Unit,³ and Global Blue, a leading tourism corporation best known for providing VAT refunds to international tourists (EIU, 2011). The European report states that the Index “seeks to find out which of 33 European cities are best placed to take advantage of the continent’s reputation among international consumers” (EIU, 2011: 3), stressing that certain shopping facilities might stand alone as a motivation or reason of interest in a city.

Leisure shopping draws on specific aesthetic and experiential activities involving the pleasure of window shopping and browsing through commodities (Rabbiosi, 2014); an activity devoted principally to shopping for clothes and accessories, which elsewhere is referred to as “fun shopping” (Gravari-Barbas, 2013: 81). A number of destinations in Asia, Europe and the U.S. have already distinguished themselves as shopping destinations. They range from the so-called capitals of fashion (Paris, London, New York; see Anttiroiko (2014)) to cities and neighbourhoods characterised by a high density of traditional shops and markets with an ethnic and/or “authentic” character (e.g. night markets in South-East Asian cities; see Hsieh and Chang (2006)), cities and neighbourhoods characterised by a high density of hypermodern shops (e.g. Dubai; see Henderson (2006)) or fake villages completely devoted to mass consumption and retail (lifestyle centres, retail parks, themed-based outlet centres; see Rabbiosi (2011)). These destinations may base their branding on either historical legacies or completely newly developed retail real estate projects. In keeping with the increased value of city image in late capitalism (Gold & Ward, 1994; Harvey, 1989; Lash & Urry, 1994; Short, 1999), the urban branding of leisure shopping and tourism relies on a less homogeneous set of images than generally discussed, including: luxury design and fashion; niche products addressed to subcultures; enclosed corporate shopping centres; or vernacular shopping streets. The nexus between urban governance and the role of signs, visual images and information in fostering global economies has already been analysed with reference to specific representations such as those related with postmodern spectacle, mega-events, culture and heritage cities, the green economy, Information and Communication Technologies and – more recently – “smart” development (Hoffman et al., 2003; Rossi & Vanolo, 2012: 30–48). These sets of images have been used to sell cities worldwide and attract consumers of services, experiences and commodities through the establishment of urban branding as a marketing strategy in most capital cities across the continents (Dinnie, 2011).

Urban studies literature analysing the link between commercial activities, tourism and urban branding can be summarised as:

1. *Urban branding based on postmodern spectacle.* As Kevin Fox Gotham explained, since the rise of what Guy Debord (Debord, 1973) called “the society of the spectacle” in the early ‘70s, “the need to present the tourist with ever more spectacular, exotic and titillating attractions” has increased (Gotham, 2002: 1737). This gave rise to the “fantasy city” (Hannigan, 1998), a city where room is made for show business brands by selling licensed

¹ Twenty-two semi-structured interviews with key players were conducted in Paris between March and September 2012. Their length varied from 30 to 90 minutes. Interviewees ranged from the City councillors in charge of retail or tourism to representatives of retail or tourism organisations. They also included private actors such as the representatives of the retailers’ lobby or the marketing managers of department stores and shopping centres. They were asked about their understanding of the relationship between Paris and shopping/tourism and their strategies to promote leisure shopping among tourism audiences.

² This research particularly acknowledges the post-structuralist approaches that consider narratives as a strategy linked to politics of representation (Rossi & Vanolo, 2012: 13).

³ The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) is the consultancy unit of the Economist group, a multinational media company specialised in international business based in London.

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