



Research Paper

Online rural destination images: Tourism and rurality

Lingxu Zhou*

School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, TST East, Kowloon, Hong Kong



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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the online rural tourism destination image of Wuyuan, Jiangxi, a town said to have “the most beautiful countryside in China.” The study focuses on domestic rural tourism and identifies a set of themes found in the destination image of Wuyuan: *resources*, *rewards*, and *expectations*. Wuyuan’s rural destination image is connected to common representations of rurality in tourism and rural imaginaries. Several ideological influences are found in the construction of Chinese rural destination images and imaginaries. Although similar, the Chinese rural image displays slight differences from the global image of idyllic rural life. This study has practical implications for the online marketing of rural areas and microblog marketing.

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1. Introduction

Rural destinations throughout the world have a globalized and idyllic image, which, like the tourist gaze, is subject to mediatization (Bell, 2006; Urry, 2002). Rural tourism, as an important form of the consumption of rural space, allows us to explore the concept of the rural idyll in the context of touristic representations of rurality (Bell, 2006). Destination images can be used to practically link the representations of rurality with rural destination marketing. Online destination images have been intensively researched and are powerful tools for destination management and marketing (Choi et al., 2007; Dwivedi, 2009; Govers & Go, 2005; Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008); however, online images of rural destinations have been scarcely researched. Although rural tourism is largely domestic, and positioned as a small-scale activity and an alternative to mass tourism, rural destinations are becoming increasingly popular among urban dwellers, and the online marketing and promotion of rural destinations is in urgent need of development. This study examines the image of a specific rural destination in China using information on the Internet to understand rural representations in tourism discourse and the relationship between rural tourism and the rural idyll.

Previous studies have examined images of rural destinations from the destination identity perspective, which can be divided into two streams of research – social and cultural representations of the destination (Frost, 2006; Kastenholz, 2010) and rural destination branding (Cai, 2002; Greaves & Skinner, 2010; Lin, Pearson, & Cai, 2011; Wheeler, Frost, & Weiler, 2011) – and from the perspectives of tourist behavior and the market segmentation of rural tourism (Chen

& Kerstetter, 1999; Loureiro & González, 2008). The destination identity perspectives are the main foci of this research. A destination image has expressive and representative power that is more important than tourism aims or the destination itself, but this image has to be anchored in a true destination identity (Govers, Go, & Kumar, 2007). A transferrable feature of rural tourism is the idea of the rural idyll, which is more seductive than actual rurality; the particular identity of a destination is largely based on localized features of rurality (Boyne & Hall, 2004; Lin et al., 2011; Woods, 2011). Therefore, it is possible to organically combine the two streams of destination identity research in the examination of a rural destination’s image structure.

To construct a destination identity that represents localized features and lifestyles and elicits a holistic image suitable for tourism promotion, it is necessary to understand the role of rurality in rural tourism. Rural tourism and rurality are intertwined. The term “rurality” is used to capture generalized rural features; these features are then reproduced for tourist consumption (Lane, 1994). This study suggests that essential to this consumption is the “imagined rural idyll.” The concept of rurality indicates that the rural is an imaginative place with a significant range of cultural meanings (Cloke, 2006; Woods, 2011, p. 92). Furthermore, tourism has the capacity to revitalize the culture and heritage of rural communities, and represent local people, societies, and lifestyles (Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006). Therefore, the role of tourism in making, promoting, and representing rurality needs to be further understood (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001).

An online destination image can reflect the tourism-influenced representations of a destination (Choi et al., 2007). Royo-Vela (2009) recommends that the measurement of destination images be used as a management tool for rural-cultural tourism. Rural destinations should make proactive and collaborative marketing efforts and should seek intermediaries to promote their tourism

* Tel.: +852 3400 2326.

E-mail address: lingxu.zhou@connect.polyu.hk

product (Cai, 2002; Forstner, 2004). However, rural areas are often slower to adopt the Internet as a marketing and promoting channel (Beldona & Cai, 2006; Boyne & Hall, 2004). An online destination image is an important component of the reputation and success of a destination, due to the effect of digital (electronic) word-of-mouth; information displayed on the Internet can be generated from different sources, viewed by potential tourists, and can influence their intention to visit (Cai, Feng, & Breiter, 2004; Reza Jalilvand et al., 2012; Sigala, 2007, 2011). By developing their use of information technology, rural destinations have the potential to promote tourism through various online platforms.

This study is situated in the rural tourism context and the online environment in China. Rural tourism in China has developed rapidly over the last two decades, and has faced many problems and challenges (Su, 2011). Tourism providers in China have adopted online marketing efficiently (Feng, Morrison, & Ismail, 2004); social media sites such as Youku and Sina Weibo have become popular for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and tourism businesses. The thriving online information channels ensure the dynamism of destination images constructed on Chinese websites. This study uses the so-called “most beautiful countryside in China,” Wuyuan, as a successful rural tourism case to explore representations of rurality in tourism and the use of rural destination images online. Two specific research questions are asked. First, how is Wuyuan represented and imagined in tourism related online discourse? Second, to what extent is rurality and rural ideology reflected in this image?

2. Literature review

2.1. Destination image formation and identity

Destination images have been researched for more than four decades. There has been tremendous conceptual development on the nature and formation of destination images, although the lack of a theoretical foundation for this concept has been criticized (Gartner, 1994; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Tasci, Gartner, & Cavusgil, 2007; Ryan & Cave, 2005; Martin del Bosque, 2008; del Bosque & Martin, 2008). In a holistic review of destination image research, Tasci et al. (2007) states, ‘destination image is an interactive system of thoughts, opinions, feelings, visualizations, and intentions toward a destination.’ (p. 200). The interactive system they developed to illustrate the components of a destination image is shown in Fig. 1. Their summary shows that a destination image is a complex entity with multiple attributes that can be viewed from the perspectives of destination organizations, local residents, anonymous agents, and tourists, and from its effect on consumer behavior before, during, and after their visits (Tasci & Gartner, 2007).

Regarding destination image formation, the intrinsic components of destination image and the extrinsic factors of information sources, tourist motivation, and demographic characteristics all play a role (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Travel constraints (Chen, Chen, & Okumus, 2012), political events and activities (Gartner & Shen, 1992), and festivals and mega events (Boo & Busser, 2006; Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2005) also influence destination image formation. Multiple information sources are needed to form positive cognitive and affective images (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Govers et al. (2007) find that tourism promotion does not play a key role in destination image formation; in fact, other sources such as mass media and books have more significant effects. Apparently, in the digital age, the use of the Internet and mobile phones by destination marketers attracts more visitors. By integrating destination branding and image, Qu, Kim, and Im (2011) identify the effect of different destination image components on destination image formation.



Fig. 1. Interactive system of image components (Tasci et al. (2007, p. 200).

They find that a unique image and the cognitive dimension make a significant contribution to overall destination image formation.

The cognitive-affective construct has been widely applied in destination image studies (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; del Bosque & Martin, 2008; Gartner, 1994; Kim & Yoon, 2003; Lin, Morais, Kerstetter & Hou, 2007; Pike & Ryan, 2004). According to Martin and del Bosque (2008), the cognitive dimension (beliefs) of a destination image is related to the destination's attributes, whereas the affective dimension (feelings) is related to the emotions the destination evokes in an individual. The conative dimension refers to the actions of a tourist that are based on the cognitive and affective images he or she has formed (Gartner, 1994). The cognitive-affective-conative model of destination image has been recently confirmed by a quantified empirical analysis (Agapito, Oom do Valle, & da Costa Mendes, 2013). That study suggests that both the affect and cognition of a destination can lead to a positive intention to visit, and therefore affective components should be developed in destination images, as a cognitive image will have a greater effect on the conative dimension if there is an affective mediator (Agapito et al., 2013).

The cognitive and affective dimensions of a destination image also coincide with the taxonomy proposed by Echtner and Ritchie (1993), which provides insights into measuring the attribute/holistic, psychological/functional, and unique/common aspects of destination images. Destination attributes, such as functional (tangible) attributes and psychological (abstract) attributes, have an effect on cognition (Martin & del Bosque, 2008). Another commonly used categorization of destination images is according to the aspects of the projected image and perceived image. The former is constructed by the destination and the latter is perceived by a tourist (Beerli & Martin, 2004). The projected image of a destination, along with its unique elements, contributes significantly to a destination's brand and brand identity from the supply side (Konecnik & Go, 2007; Qu et al., 2011). The trend to integrate destination image with destination identity or personality and destination branding grounds the concept in traditional brand personality theories, and expands the concept to the representation, generation, and (re)production of cultural identity (Govers & Go, 2004; Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006; Lin et al., 2011).

Destination image research is largely situated in the international context. In particular, similar cultural values have been identified as strongly influencing cognitive destination images (Martin & del Bosque, 2008). Presumably domestic tourists have better cognition of a domestic destination than an international destination, due to the effects of cultural distance (Kastenholz, 2010; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 2000). Despite its placement in a

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