Research Paper

Thirsting for vampire tourism: Developing pop culture destinations

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ABSTRACT

Destinations associated with pop culture phenomena, such as destinations depicted in books and films, often experience increased numbers of visitors as well as strengthened and changed destination images. The pop culture phenomenon the Twilight Saga (book and film series) is in this paper used as an example to explore how a pop culture phenomenon can affect destinations, and how destinations manage this type of tourism. Case studies in Forks, WA, in the USA, Volterra, Montepulciano in Italy and British Columbia in Canada illustrate different tourism destination strategies. Forks has, for example, developed experiences based on a fictionally constructed reality connected to *Twilight*, which has reimagined the destination, and, thus, *fabricated the authenticity* of the place. Volterra and Montepulciano, on the other hand, have experienced a Twilight Saga tourism development characterised by deliberations regarding the immersion of Twilight Saga elements into their cultural heritage which has resulted in a strategy best described as *guarding the authenticity* of their respective destinations. Finally, British Columbia has had no strategy and exhibits little interest in Twilight tourism. The priority of the destination has been to satisfy the needs of film producers. The study elaborates on different paths of pop culture tourism development, i.e. it is not always advisable to fully exploit the potential that a pop cultural phenomenon can bring to a destination. Which strategy should be used by a particular destination depends on the unique character of the place and its perceived need for tourism development.

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1. Introduction

Popular culture tourism, such as film and literature tourism, has received an increasing amount of attention in tourism research lately (Frost, 2010; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Lee, Scott, & Kim, 2008; Shandley, Jamal, & Tanase, 2006). This kind of tourism rests on the imaginary created in books and films and it consists of experiences of fun, fantasy and desire (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). The experiences are based on constructed realities, i.e. based on both authentic as well as purely fictitious foundations (Frost, 2010), which creates a strong emotional tie between a tourist and the destination (Kim & Richardson, 2003). This construction of reality is also referred to as commoditization or staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973), which does not necessarily result in a less genuine or authentic experience for the tourist. On the contrary, this staged authenticity may create a new and enhanced authentic experience (Cohen, 1988). The often extensive amount of interest in characters and places depicted in films and books is an opportunity for the destinations in question to develop film or literature tourism (Tanasescu, 2006).

Pop culture tourism is often characterised by a sudden appearance and is strongly demand-driven. Most often it emerges suddenly, and may surprise actors at the receiving destination. In addition to this, it is difficult to predict since films and books are not produced for the purpose of generating travel to certain locations/destinations (though there are exceptions). This type of tourism may have potential, but there is a risk that it may be relatively short term. If so, this makes investments and destination development difficult to motivate in a long-term perspective. Furthermore, films and books create constructed realities, not always connected to the places in which they are staged. Thus, film and literature induced tourism development suffers from problems of dealing with fiction and reality, i.e. to balance the authentic elements of the place and the elements constructed by the film and/or the book. Shandley et al. (2006) refer to this problem and state that it can be seen as a cultural post-colonialism facilitated by globalisation and the globalising reach of the culture industry.

The purpose of this paper is to develop exploratory themes on how destinations deal with pop culture tourism. Focus is on the perceptions and actions of the public organisations responsible for tourism development at the destination. What strategies do they adopt and how is place identity balanced with the destination image constructed by the films/books and in the development of pop culture tourism experiences? Firstly, we will describe the

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effects of the pop cultural phenomenon as perceived by the public organisation representatives. Different kinds of pop cultural destinations will be described; *settings*, where fictional stories take place, and *locations*, where movies are shot (Tooke & Baker, 1996). Secondly, we will describe how the public organisation representatives approach the phenomenon and how they use it in their destination marketing strategy. In particular we will discuss how the tension between the destination image induced by the pop cultural phenomenon and the place identity is managed.

The cases illustrated in the paper are destinations drawing on the highly successful vampire books and films the Twilight Saga. The Twilight Saga by Stephenie Meyer consists of four books. Already in 2010, 116 million copies of the books had been sold (www.publishersweekley.com). The first four films (out of five), released on the big screen and DVD/BlueRay before November 2012, have grossed over 3.1 billion US dollars worldwide (The-numbers.com, 2012). The story of a vampire falling in love with a teenage schoolgirl has attracted an enormous amount of attention, particularly in social media where fans meet and discuss. The story is primarily played out in four different settings – Forks, La Push and Port Angeles in Washington, USA, and Volterra, Italy. All of these destinations now have considerable tourist flows due to the phenomenon; this is despite the fact that none of the movies were filmed here. Primarily, the movies were filmed in Portland, Oregon, in the USA; British Columbia (e.g. Vancouver, Squamish, Tofino) in Canada; and Montepulciano in Italy; destinations that also attract Twilight induced tourism.

2. Managing and marketing pop culture tourism

Based on the explorative case studies at the selected Twilight destinations, themes evolved that described their characteristics, challenges perceived by the public organisation representatives and strategies adopted. These themes connect to theories, concepts and discussions in a variety of social science literature, in particular within tourism, film tourism and literary tourism that are presented below.

2.1. Consumer induced demand and lack of strategic planning

Pop culture tourism destinations emerge from the demand of pop culture consumers who experience a need to connect to the fictional stories of their interest. The tourism growth is often sudden and explosive. The Dracula tourism in Romania, for instance, started in the 1970s (Reijnders, 2011a, 2011b) and grew despite Romania's lack of interest in encouraging it (Light, 2007). Connecting to Butler's (1980) model of a tourism area cycle, the exploration phase is short, i.e. when there are few tourists and the tourist facilities are very limited. Challenges might include capacity problems in accommodation and other services, uncovering a lacking supply of tourism experiences and attractions associated to or necessary for this form of tourism (Connell, 2012; Müller, 2006). Thus, these kinds of destinations often experience a strong marketing push to cultivate niche products and experiences (Connell, 2012), i.e. to enter the involvement and the development phase of the tourism area cycle (Butler, 1980). Many times it is, however, not only a short-term demand induced by the pop culture phenomenon. Riley, Baker and Van Doren's (1998) study of twelve film sites showed that the span of movie inducement lasted for at least four years and tourist flows increased between 40 and 50%. Still, demand from this particular niche tourist segment will in many cases fade relatively quickly and the pop culture tourism destination enter a phase of stagnation and decline (Butler, 1980).

Despite many destinations being aware of the potential of pop culture tourism, Hudson and Ritchie's (2006) study of destination marketing organisations showed that nearly all could be more proactive with film tourism. The main constraint was a lack of resources. Connell (2012) argues that film tourism typifies a traditional boom-bust approach to tourism destination development that sometimes encompasses a lack of planning. This boom-bust approach can be related to a tourism planning approach identified by Getz, 'boosterism', which assumes that tourism is inherently good and should be developed. Another approach Getz identify is the 'community-oriented' approach, which assumes that there is a need for local control and that development should be balanced and defined in socio-cultural terms. (Getz, 1987 cited in Hall & Page, 2006) As Connell (2012) states, there is a need for a strategic supply-side response in film induced tourism development. Müller (2006) confirms this in his study on literary tourism. Thusly, pop culture tourism destinations need to have a more strategic planning approach to the tourism development, i.e. to "be proactive, responsive to community needs, to incorporate implementation within a single planning process, and to be ongoing" (Hall & Page 2006, p. 410).

2.2. Branding and image formation at pop culture destinations

There are unique destination marketing opportunities following pop culture tourism involving the shaping of destination images and brands (Connell, 2005, 2012). In tourism marketing literature a destination brand is defined as a "name, sign or symbol representing the core values of a place offered for tourism consumption" (Gnoth, 2007). Thus, destination brands represent the benefits of various services that are promised to tourists (Gnoth, 2007). They include functional, experiential and symbolic brand dimensions. The power of a brand lies in the customer's ability to differentiate one brand from another (Gartner, 2009). Keller (2008) identifies four stages of building a brand: (1) establishing brand identity which involves creating customer top-of-mind awareness about the brand, which is closely related to tourists' use of information sources and familiarity (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Baloglu, 2001); (2) establishing brand meaning by supporting customers' brand associations and ability to identify and evaluate brand attributes and benefits; (3) evaluating customer response and establishing positive brand attitudes; and (4) establishing customer relationships aimed at creating brand attachment and brand activity for loyalty.

Destination image is an important factor in brand building and widely acknowledged as an important source of brand equity (Boo, Busser, & Baloglu, 2009; Lassar, Mittal, & Sharma, 1995). Bigne Alcaniz, Garcia, and Blas (2009, p. 716) defined destination image as "the overall perception of a destination, the representation in the tourist's mind of what he/she knows and feels about it. In sum, it consists of all that the destination evokes in the individual; any idea, belief, feeling or attitude that tourists associate with the place." Destination image has been conceptualised as a continuum between "common" functional and psychological characteristics versus "unique" characteristics like sights, local events, special feelings and aura that form a very specific holistic destination impression (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). Several studies have identified significant relationships between destination image and satisfaction as well as tourists' loyalty behaviour (Bigne Alcaniz et al., 2009; Faullant, Matzler, & Füller, 2008; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). However, as Konecnik and Gartner (2007) argue, image should not be viewed as a single explanatory factor in determining tourism decision-making processes.

Image studies are an important part in understanding film tourism (Connell 2005, 2012). There are not many studies on the effects of pop culture tourism on image formation, something that