



The tourist on the farm: A ‘muddled’ image

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The image of agritourism is recognized as being a product of various influences.
- Agritourism images differ between groups of tourists, following experience.
- The organic image of agritourism does not fit with the farm experience provided.
- The farming sector benefits from a romantic image removed from contemporary agriculture.
- Agritourism promotion should target diverse niche markets in areas with access to large populations.

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ABSTRACT

Agritourism is promoted as a method of offsetting decline in farm incomes, and is defined in different ways which creates difficulties in attracting tourists. The present research contributes to a better understanding of agritourism, based on evidence in Wallonia (Belgium) and Luxembourg. It does so by studying the image held by four groups of actors: (i) farmers who provide ‘agritourist’ experiences; (ii) promotional organisations; and tourists who both (iii) have and (iv) have not engaged in agritourism. A mixed method study is based on data collected through 1148 tourist questionnaires and 65 interviews with farmers and representatives of tourism promotional organisations. The results illustrate that there is a lack of congruence between sectoral images with respect to the concept of agritourism and its development. Agritourism is a muddled concept between realities and stakeholder expectations but opportunities exist for targeting particular niche interests.

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1. Introduction

Agritourism is a complex subject of study, merging agriculture and tourism, being at the same time a marginal practice and one supplying a diverse range of services (Beteille, 1996; Disez, 1999; Sznajder, Przeborska, & Scrimgeour, 2009). As a marginal practice within the wider field of rural tourism, it is promoted by development agencies as a method of supplementing farm incomes by valorising underused on-farm resources in innovative ways (OECD, 2014; Tew & Barbieri, 2012). Different terms, with sometimes different meanings, are used to describe agritourism – ‘on-farm tourism’, ‘agritourism’, ‘agrotourism’ – and these terms are

also often associated or confused with rural tourism more broadly defined (Phillip, Hunter, & Blackstock, 2010). Phillip et al. (2010) sought to provide clarification by developing a model of agritourism, based on the relationship with a working farm, the type of direct or indirect contact with agriculture provided for the tourist and the authenticity of the experience in terms of whether there is engagement with actual farm tasks. Further empirical research by these authors (Flanigan, Blackstock, & Hunter, 2014, 2015) and others (e.g., Gil Arroyo, Barbieri, & Rich, 2013) show that the model possesses considerable validity. Investigation in other contexts is recommended.

This paper seeks to add to the literature relating to agritourism by analysing the associated imagery and the relationships with what is provided, expected and experienced by tourists on working farms in Wallonia, the southern French speaking part of Belgium, and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg (GDL). ‘Image’ relates here to the mental representation of an object which is not physically in

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front of the observer (tourist in this instance) (Fridgen, 1987; Piaget & Inhelder, 1948), the representation constructed by the organisations which manage tourism promotion, at the regional or local levels, and by the farmers who provide the experiences. Principles advocated by Gunn (1972, 1988) relating to the imagery of a tourism destination, which have been applied in several studies, are used (O'Leary & Deegan, 2005; Rodríguez-Santos, Gonzalez-Fernandez & Cervantes-Blanco 2013; Sanchez-Rivero & Pulido-Fernández, 2012).

Gunn (1972) distinguishes between: (i) the induced image arising from deliberate communication and promotion, on the part of public or private tourism entities, with the purpose of developing the attraction of a destination and (ii) the organic image, held by the would-be tourist, which comes from sources of information (such as word-of-mouth information, advice and recommendations, the media and the influence of education) not arising directly from the promotion of the destination or from experience. A third image of the destination, the one modified by personal experience as a tourist, was recognised by Gunn (1988) and developed by others (for example, explained in Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Chi & Qu, 2008; O'Leary & Deegan, 2005; Sánchez-Rivero et al., 2012; Sussmann & Unel, 1999). Selby and Morgan (1996) suggest that, whilst the induced image is separate from the organic image as created, the influence of the former on the tourist cannot always be distinguished from that of the latter, because of the increased penetration of media imagery. This issue is recognised in the present study.

The central objectives of the research were to identify the elements included in: (i) the imagery promoted by tourism agencies; (ii) the imagery held and promoted by farmers involved in agritourism, their perceptions of the tourist expectations and the activities provided on the farm; and (iii) the imagery held and the experiences expected by tourists who had and had not visited a farm. Based on this evidence the extent to which the activities promoted, provided, perceived and experienced could be considered to be a specific farm experience was assessed. This tripartite approach is innovative in analysing the whole spectrum of image formation and fills a missing dimension in studies of imagery in agritourism. A destination is a complex assemblage of institutions and actors located in a physical or a virtual space involved in marketing-related transactions (Saraniemi & Kylanen, 2011, p.: 133). Agritourism is one of a variety of marketing-related experiences that take place in rural areas and Clarke (1999) has pointed to the need to differentiate it from other experiences. In this context, it is argued that it is appropriate to apply Gunn's (1972, 1988) principles relating to destination imagery, in order to better understand agritourism imagery and its implications for this form of tourism in the study areas. Based on the findings, recommendations are made relating to the development and promotion of an agritourism that meets the needs of promoters, providers and tourists more effectively, as advocated by Gil Arroyo et al. (2013) and Flanigan et al. (2014).

1.1. Agritourism as a form of farm diversification

The adoption of tourism as a supplement to farm incomes has been pursued by farm families and advocated and supported by policy at national and international levels for several decades (Che, Veeck, & Veeck, 2005; Phelan & Sharpley, 2012). It is one of a number of responses to downward pressure on incomes, arising from the liberalisation of agricultural markets (Che et al., 2005; Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1998; McGehee & Kim, 2004; Ollenburger & Buckley, 2007; Sharpley & Vass, 2006). The objectives include adapting underused land, labour and capital resources (notably farm buildings) as an income compensatory strategy (Fleischer &

Tchetchik, 2005; Lane, 2009). The financial contributions are often limited in absolute terms, except in scenic areas (Sharpley & Vass, 2006), but can be important supplements to falling agricultural incomes and deliver material and non-material benefits for the farm family (OECD, 2014; Tew & Barbieri, 2012). During the last two decades demand has grown for outdoor recreation and contact with more traditional ways of life among health conscious recreationists and tourists, who seek alternatives to sun destinations and mass tourism (Cánoves, Villarino, Priestley, & Blanco, 2004; Flanigan, Blackstock, & Hunter, 2015; Lane, 2009). Agritourism can help to meet this demand in both remoter areas of the countryside and in proximity to larger urban centres (Che et al., 2005; Cánoves et al., 2004; Evans & Ilbery, 1992; Gartner, 2004).

The adoption of agritourism is sometimes problematic because of a perceived threat to the farmer's identity as a food producer (Di Domenico & Miller, 2012). In this context, a capacity for a female partner to become involved in the tourism enterprise facilitates the process (Brandth & Haugen, 2011). There are often economic motivations for the adoption of agritourism, but it is sometimes explained by providers as a lifestyle choice in which welcoming visitors and educating them about agriculture and rural life may be prioritised over the financial benefits that arise (Cederholm & Hultman, 2010; Getz & Carlsen, 2005; Ollenburger & Buckley, 2007). McGehee (2007) describes this prioritisation of the social over the economic as a dominance of substantive rationality over economic rationality. In studying agritourism, it is important to recognise gender issues and the explanatory frameworks forwarded to explain the motivations for its adoption.

The study areas of Wallonia and the GDL are located less than one hour from a city. Most of their inhabitants frequently commute to cities such as Brussels, Luxembourg, Liège and Charleroi. Areas within easy reach of cities are known to attract agritourists and their study is recommended as part of the recognition of agritourism as a differentiated product (e.g., Vandermeulen et al., 2006; Zasada, 2011; Zhang, Inbakaram, & Jackson, 2006). The theoretical context for the research is now discussed in greater detail, followed by the methodology and the findings. Conclusions are then drawn.

2. Theoretical background

In providing a theoretical background for the research, attention is given to: (i) the imagery of agritourism promoted by organisations and farmers and held by tourists and would-be tourists, as reported in published research; (ii) typologies of agritourism that have been developed; (iii) applications of Gunn's (1972, 1988) model.

2.1. Agritourism imagery and contested features

A growing literature illustrates that the image of a destination and the products that it provides are increasingly influential in attracting tourists (Bonn, Joseph, & Dai, 2005; O'Leary & Deegan, 2005; Pike & Page, 2014; Sánchez-Rivero et al., 2012). Imagery has been described by Pike and Page (2014, p. 215) as "the most popular topic in the destination marketing literature". Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2002) illustrate that two elements go to form an overall image, a physical (cognitive) dimension which relates to what is known about a destination such as location and activities and an emotional (affective) dimension which includes feelings towards the location. An idyllic tranquil scenic countryside with friendly people is a dominant image in rural tourism, which combines cognitive and affective dimensions, and is sometimes contrasted by tourists with negative images of urban environments as noisy, polluted and unfriendly (Frisvoll, 2013). Whilst the imagery associated with rural tourism more generally is well

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