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Stories visitors tell about Italian cities as destination icons

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Abstract

Using brand netnography (analyzing first-person on-line stories consumers tell that include discussions of their product and brand use), this article probes how visitors report specific Italian cities as unique brand icons. Visitor stories interpreting Bologna and Florence support Robert McKee's wisdom that powerful storytelling moves people via unique "inciting incidents"—incidents serving to unfreeze or throw life out-of-balance. The visitors' city lived-dramas give credence to Tom Peter's advocacy of focusing strategically on brand experiences—"an experience–event–happening leaves an indelible memory" and Doug Holt's treatise on how brands become icons. The analysis includes applying Heider's balance theory in maps showing immediate and downstream positive and negative associations of concepts, events, and outcomes in visitors' stories [cf. Collins, J., & Loftus, E. F. (1975). A spreading activation theory of semantic processing. *Psychological Review*, *87*, 407–428; Epstein, S. (1994). Integration of the cognitive and the psychodynamic unconscious. *American Psychologist*, *49*(8), 709–724]. These maps include descriptions of how visitors live Bologna's and Florence's unique promises (i.e., cultural beauty/decadence and total Italian Renaissance emersion, respectively). The article provides a revisionist proposal to Holt's five-step strategy for building destinations as iconic brands and suggestions for tourism management.

Keywords: Netnography; Brand; Icon; Tourism; Destination

1. Introduction

The Big Apple! What does this metaphor imply about New York? Big, big, big a major transformation….Apple, apple, apple…Adam and Eve…forbidden knowledge… rebellion against parental authority, banishment, achieving adulthood. A TASTE OF DECADENCE! ON MY OWN AT LAST! YES, I'VE DONE (ACHIEVED) NEW YORK! The point here is that destination nicknames widely shared are kernel expressions of iconic myths rooted in medieval allegories (see Stern, 1988, 1995)—allegories permitting "the championing of the id over the ego" (Holt, 2003, p. 49) via a personal experience–event–happening that leaves an indelible memory (see Peters, 2003, p. 113). We often are unwilling to admit/know (to ourselves or to others) the need to enact the promise that the iconic brand offers (for a review, see Woodside, 2006)—thus, the possible scoffing at the Big Apple allegory. Part of the visitor's enacting a brand-destination experience occurs unconsciously and this part is often stored and retrieved unconsciously (see Bargh, 1989; Bargh, 1994; Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Woodside, 2005; Zaltman, 2003)—see Zaltman's (2003) literature review confirming that most thinking is done unconsciously.

The Fat One! What destination comes-to-mind? Okay, a hint: What European destination comes-to-mind? Please read further for the answer that most Europeans retrieve automatically. The point here is that certain cities are able to project unique place identities that transform visitors from their ordinary lives to extraordinary experiences (cf. Judd, 1995; Pagano & Bowman, 1996).

The objectives of this paper include analyzing naturally occurring communications by first-time visitors to cities in

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countries beyond their home nations. The article examines whether or not Heider's (1958) balance theory is useful for understanding the first-person (i.e., emic) reports visitors communicate. Heider's theory includes the proposition that individuals seek to maintain psychological balance and to overcome states of imbalance when psychological imbalance occurs in their lives. "A Jewish couple buys a German car" (for details see Woodside & Chebat, 2001) is an example of striving to overcome an imbalance state, i.e., automatic associating German and the Holocaust at first requires rejecting the idea of buying a German car for the Jewish couple to maintain psychological balance; Woodside and Chebat (2001) describe the story of how the couple reach a new state of balance that overcomes the imbalance caused by their desire to buy the car.

The work of several scholars in consumer research (e.g., Arnould & Price, 1993; Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Hirschman, 1986) and related fields of human inquiry (Bruner 1990; Mitroff & Kilmann, 1976; Orr, 1990; Zukier, 1986) support the proposition that

Proposition 1: People think narratively rather than argumentatively or paradigmatically (Weick, 1995, p. 127).

Two additional propositions complement this first one.

Proposition 2: A substantial amount of information stored and retrieved from memory is episodic—stories that include inciting incidents, experiences, outcomes/evaluations, and summaries/nuances of person-to-person and person-and-brand relationships (see Fournier, 1998; Schank, 1990).

Proposition 3: Stories expressing how and why life changes are highly persuasive (see McKee, 1997, 2003).

Research on storytelling (e.g., see Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Fournier, 1998; Schank, 1990) is useful because examining stories helps clarify and deepen knowledge of how people resolve paradoxes triggered in their minds by unbalanced states. Learning stories enables the researcher to perceive the complexity often associating when initial balanced states become unbalanced and the steps taken to achieve old or new balanced states (Heider, 1958; Woodside and Chebat, 2001). Storytelling research enables holistic views on how initial balanced states become unbalanced and the steps taken to achieve the old or a new balanced state.

First-person stories (i.e., a story that the protagonist in the story reports to herself and possibly to others, i.e., an emic interpretation of how, why, who, when, and where events unfold with what immediate and long-term consequences) are what people bring back from travels and destination visits. Ethnographic research (i.e., etic) reports of city visitors' behaviors and meanings visitors have of their experiences often fail to include emic interpretations (e.g., Moore, 1985); the reader of such reports might well ask, do the visitors observed by the ethnographer and who answer the observers questions actually report to themselves similar interpretations as the ethnographer reports?

Visitors own storytelling about their own experiences often describe myth enactments/climaxes uniquely relevant to specific destinations. Such storytelling closes with advocating future visitors by oneself and others, or the avoidance of such visits—the present article examines this fundamental proposition.

Holt (2003) claims that people have always needed myths—simple stories with compelling characters and resonant plots, myths help us make sense of the world.

> Icons are encapsulated myths. They are powerful because they deliver myths to us in a tangible form, thereby making them more accessible. Icons are not just brands, of course. More often, they are people [Ronald Regan, Marylyn Monroe, and Martin Luther King]… When a brand creates a myth, most often through advertisements, consumers come to perceive the myth as embodied in the product. So they buy the product to consume the myth and to forge a relationship with the author: the brand. Anthropologists call this 'ritual action.' When Nike's core customers laced up their Air Jordan's in the early 1990s, they tapped into Nike's myth of individual achievement through perseverance…iconic brands embody not just any myth but myths that attempt to resolve acute tension people feel between their own lives and society's prevailing ideology. (Holt, 2003, p. 44)

Holt (2003) urges marketers to consider moving away from conventional marketing of attempting to position a brand as offering unique attributes and benefits; he outlines a brand strategy for competing to provide the most compelling myth. Brand winners in myth markets become icons; they are the greatest performers of the greatest myths, and they bask in glory and cultural leadership. More often than not, in America at least, those who win in myth markets are performing a myth of rebelling; the most successful icons rely on an intimate and credible relationship with a rebel world: Nike with the African–American ghetto, Harley with outlaw bikers, Volkswagen with bohemian artists, Apple with cyberpunks, Mountain Dew with slackers—protagonists who would rather pursue quixotic activities than "grow up" and get serious about careers (see Holt, 2003).

While Holt approaches iconic brand analysis from the perspective of marketers, the need exists to learn how consumers implicitly and explicitly enact brand myths. For example, from one marketer's perspective at Harley: "What we sell is the ability for a 43-year-old accountant to dress in black leather, ride through small towns, and have people be afraid of him" (Peters, 2003, p. 116). Does the 43-year-old accountant's lived-myth plot match with the marketer's plot? Responding to this issue, a substantial number of studies focus on how consumers enact myths via experiences with iconic brands (e.g., see Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; Stern, 1988).

Relating to the primary focus on destinations providing visitors the opportunity to enact iconic myths, Borgerson and Schroder (2003) detail such a myth for the holiday vacation destination frequently found to rank first among