



Blame it on Hollywood: The influence of films on Paris as product location



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the way location myths conveyed through Hollywood movies influence consumer expectations, by looking at how the city of Paris is represented in motion pictures. We develop measures of the location image of Paris in a sample of Hollywood movies released between 1985 and 2011. These are used to examine the images of Paris held by American consumers who have never directly experienced the location. Our results show that Hollywood movies project specific location images and myths of Paris. More specifically, we show that these images fall into two distinct stereotypic patterns and are widely shared by consumers. Individuals who seek information on location from popular culture are shown to embrace and reproduce Paris myths. The study concludes that the cultural industries influence the cognitive consumption of location through the production and dissemination of meaning, via stories and fueled by perpetual myth making.

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1. Introduction

“When good Americans die, they go to Paris.”— Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

For some filmmakers, cities are just convenient locations for staging crowd scenes or car chases. For others, like Woody Allen, cities, particularly European cities, have a personality that “can’t be left out of the equation” (Vulture, 2011). “You want to figure them in the story in some way”, says Allen, “otherwise it is just a film that it is there”. Woody Allen has made a series of films that feature cities, beginning with his beloved New York, then London, and subsequently Paris. Paris, he argues, has special resonance for Americans who are imbued with Hollywood myths of Paris as the romantic city. Though he knows the real Paris well enough, he is not immune to these myths, nor was he shy about employing them to good effect in his 2011 film *Midnight in Paris*.

For Woody Allen and many other filmmakers, location stereotypes and location myths have been the staple of motion pictures since the industry first emerged at the end of the 19th century. By incorporating prevailing location stereotypes and myths into their plots, filmmakers have indirectly influenced consumer perceptions of these locations. Stories built around location myths shape consumer expectations that

are central to the formation of locations as cultural product categories. This paper aims to examine the way myths, projected by the cultural industries, influence consumer expectations of product markets, such as the location market.

The present study highlights the importance of the cultural industries as a reservoir of stories that influence and drive consumption. Stories are considered as the main sensemaking market tool in product markets (Porac, Rosa, Spanjol, & Saxon, 2001; Rosa & Spanjol, 2005; Rosa, Porac, Spanjol, & Saxon, 1999; Weick, 1979; White, 1981), as well as an important factor in the markets’ evolution. The cultural industries, which deal with the production and reproduction of symbolic materials and meanings (Lampel, Shamsie, & Lant, 2006), disseminate a multitude of stories. These stories often feature technologies and products in a variety of contexts, influencing the consumer cognitions and market perceptions towards consumption. Inescapably, through their storytelling the cultural industries are producers and conduits of stories that convey powerful product messages, meanings and myths in various markets, influencing the consumption expectations of consumers.

The present paper focuses on Paris as a case study. Paris is arguably the most filmed city in the world (according to the Paris Tourist Office), appearing not only in many French films, but also in more than 800 Hollywood movies ranging from early masterpieces like *Casablanca* (1942) and *Breathless* (1960), to recent blockbusters like *Taken* (2008) and Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris* (2011). By examining the influence of Hollywood on expectations that consumers hold of Paris, this study focuses on the way Hollywood produces meanings about Paris, as well as how the market reproduces those meanings in order to make sense of the cognitive consumption of location.

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For purposes of this paper, we define consumption of location as the, direct or indirect, experience of a territory that possesses distinct and widely recognised geographic identity. Consumption of location therefore refers not only to the consumer interaction with the built form of a natural location, but also to the individual attribution of meaning to this location (Adler, 1989; Giddens, 1984; Gieryn, 2001; Stedman, 2003; Tuan, 1977). Individuals attach meaning to the location either by directly experiencing it, that is living in it or visiting it in person, or by indirectly experiencing it through various mediums, such as stories told by other individuals or culture. Therefore, since location consumption is cognitive (Wohl & Strauss, 1958), it needs to be measured at the level of individual perceptions, meanings and values, rather than only in terms of visitor numbers and actual consumption habits.

Location image is the distillation of ideas, perceptions, feelings and general information that individuals hold regarding cognitive and affective components of specific places (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Dann, 1996; Gartner, 1993; Kotler, Hauder, & Rein, 1993). Location stereotypes are simplified images that focus attention on a few select features that are culturally shared (Forgas, 1981). Their relationship to the complex and varied landscape of the real location is similar to the relationship between caricatures and full portraits. A caricature selects and amplifies certain features at the expense of detail in order to express strong views about what is essential about the subject. However, unlike caricatures, which are often the work of individual artists, location stereotypes are shared mental representations that emerge through cultural processes.

In this study, we measure the location image of Paris projected through 24 major Hollywood movies, released from 1985 to 2011, in order to identify the stereotypes that storytellers hold on the location. We then identify the location stereotypes that prevail in the market towards the Paris location experience, by using data obtained from a survey of American consumers who have never directly experienced Paris themselves. The two parts of the study are linked by two Paris movie posters created for the purposes of this study. The posters' development is based on the movie location image analysis. They are used as stimuli in a survey that tests the prevalence of dominant Paris location stereotypes and myths.

We define location myths as stories that involve location stereotypes that are widely shared in society. We argue that location myths strongly influence location consumption, involving social cognitions on location and considered as the vessel of individual participation in societal culture (Holt, 2004). The social cognitions that form location myths come from an imagined world rather than the real market environment. Hollywood uses these location elements in conjunction with location for its own purposes, and in the process reinforces wide acceptance of unified location myths. In this way, movies can influence the evolution of locations as product categories by amplifying certain elements of the product reality.

Overall, this study provides one explanation of the way cultural industries affect consumption. Specifically, the objective of the paper is to throw light on the way Hollywood stories (re-) create and spread location myths that influence the locations' cognitive consumption. The paper provides an explanation of how the cultural industries directly, and often unintentionally, impact various markets through their storytelling power (Kennedy, 2005, 2008; Porac et al., 2001; Rosa & Spanjol, 2005; Rosa et al., 1999).

2. Storytelling, mythmaking and the cultural industries

The socio-cognitive view of markets argues that product markets are created when market actors connect specific products to their conceptual systems, by abstracting them in a number of attributes through narratives and conversations (Porac et al., 2001). Product conceptual systems are the cognitive structures created around products' attributes and uses, and include market actors' perceptions, knowledge, beliefs, expectations and consumption patterns of the product; they emerge

through the interaction between producers and consumers, being, partially or fully, shared by them (Porac et al., 2001).

Shared conceptual systems are considered the glue of product markets (Porac et al., 2001), in the same way as shared beliefs are considered to define reality (Kennedy, 2008). When market actors experience new attributes of existing products, such as new attributes of locations, new conceptual systems emerge and producers and consumers adjust their behaviour and activities to create new product representations (Rosa et al., 1999). In order to make sense of existing and emerging product attributes and make comparative judgements, market actors use product market stories (Lounsbury & Rao, 2004; Porac et al., 2001). Market stories are an important sensemaking tool among the members of a market, creating bonds among market actors at the social level, and cognitive links between consumers, products, consumption patterns, and the uses and value of products (Rosa & Porac, 2002; Rosa et al., 1999). In the location market, market stories connect locations with their perceived cognitive and affective attributes, as well as with the cognitive consumption of location.

Stories are essential to how individuals make sense of the world, and how they adopt new behaviour and consumption patterns (Rosa & Spanjol, 2005). Within product markets, stories are also vital because they enhance market actors' understanding of new products, which – in combination with existing ones – shape or even guide their lives. By allowing market actors to share experiences when they first encounter new products, market stories influence and shape consumption. The sociocognitive theory of markets points to market stories as a key tool for the generation of new knowledge on the product, its values and its multiple ways of consumption. According to Rosa and Spanjol, product market stories form the knowledge structures that make individuals within the product market “reconcile current experiences and behaviours with pre-existing beliefs, and by doing so, stories shape future behaviours” (Rosa & Spanjol, 2005: p. 199).

Individuals involved in the generation and dissemination of market stories are not only consumers who exercise considerable influence over market stories via word of mouth. Storytellers also include producers, retailers, government and non-government organizations, as well as various intermediaries, such as advertisers (Rosa & Spanjol, 2005). The cultural industries are often involved in the wide storyteller network that exists around product markets. Media and news stories are also considered as a major source of sensemaking input for market actors, having the power to shape new and emerging product categories (Kennedy, 2005, 2008). Culture, in this sense, is able to shape new and existing markets, by embedding new product representations in the existing shared conceptual systems, which in turn influence beliefs and perceptions that shape consumption habits of market actors.

Cultural products such as books, films, and videogames create product myths in general, and location myths in particular. As a major cultural hub, Hollywood has long created films that capture and express location myths through scripts, location filming, cinematography and editing. Location myths triggered by Hollywood films can be highly influential because they often link the exceptional with the mundane, by representing everyday lives in stereotyped but exciting locations, or by portraying the lives of exceptional individuals in such locations.

Myths have been defined as tales “commonly told within a social group” (Levy, 1981: p. 51); stories that are able to explain the nature of living in a given society. In general, myths are popular beliefs or stories that illustrate a cultural ideal that people have about a place, a person, or an event. The cumulative impact of myths formed by and within societies gives rise to mythology, a collection of stories which begins from the primary universal narratives regarding birth and death (Slotkin, 1973; Stern, 1995; Thompson, 2004). These narratives usually include consumption stories that play a central role in forming the marketplace mythologies of the modern economies. Such mythologies are not only expressed in consumers' conversations, but also in culture and cultural industries.

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