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# Present-centered dialogue with heritage representations

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## A R T I C L E   I N F O

## A B S T R A C T

This study aims to examine heritage representations of a metropolitan city in the United States, using a dialogical present-centered approach. Heritage themes and icons contextualized by the local agencies are identified. Views of a purposeful stratified sample of local residents are sought. Statistically significant differences in perceptions and level of connectedness to heritage expressions and icons are determined between the Whites (the mainstream population), the Hispanics and the Asians. Information is also elicited on preferred themes and images that hold potential to showcase local heritage in an equitable manner to heritage tourists. Traces of heritage dissonance and societal exclusion are identified and proactive dialogical initiatives are suggested that portray meaningful present-centered public heritage representations to promote sustainable heritage tourism.

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## Introduction

It is a recognized fact that demand for heritage tourism has grown exponentially in the last several decades (Graham & McDowell, 2007; Henderson, 2001; Nyaupane, White, & Budruk, 2006; Poria & Ashworth, 2009). Parallel to this demand has emerged the need to engage with heritage resources in a responsible manner to promote equitable representations from different sects of host

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communities (Chhabra, 2010; Graham & McDowell, 2007). Extant literature argues that heritage tourism representations can no longer be separated from the heritage of local communities as they play a vital role in fostering a shared sense of identity. Therefore it is crucial to, "examine the present-centeredness of heritage or the nature of presentness of heritage" (Lowenthal, 2000, p. 3) so that it can relate to the contemporary era. Akin to this view, it is argued that it is a folly to conceptualize or promote a society's heritage without reference to the real sense of past as deciphered today (Chhabra, 2012; Cross, 2001) by the visited communities. It is necessary to move beyond "the universal assumptions so as to accept the contributions of local communities as valid players in a process that has profound effects" on how cultural heritage is viewed by tourists and practiced by locals on common meeting grounds (Waterton, 2005, p. 320).

According to Ashworth (1991), past can be purposely structured to build and manage associations with history and heritage and craft a sense of local identity. By this token, there is a need to adopt a multifold approach to tie heritage with diverse constituencies such as ethnic groups, the mainstream population, local businesses, governing agencies such as the local government and destination marketing organizations, and the tourists. More specifically, the views of a representative sect of local residents are paramount to build/manage healthy and harmonious local environments in order to market equitable slices of local heritage (Chhabra, 2012) so that sustainable heritage tourism is promoted. A key objective of sustainable heritage tourism is to engage with heritage in a way that it supports present-day environments in a meaningful manner that promotes intragenerational equity (Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011). It is being increasingly recognized that the "foundations of a healthy and harmonious society rests on the ability of the public institutions to reconcile dominant heritage perspectives with existing socio-cultural values of the local community" (Chhabra, 2012, p. 1701).

In view of the foregoing, several studies underline the need for social inclusion to build a shared sense of belonging and identity (Dark, 1995; Waterton, 2005). This calls for the inclusion of marginalized voices and broadening of the social agenda by extending "the parameters of heritage management both in theory and practice" (Waterton, 2005, p. 310). Contemporary investigations need to suggest ways in which local cultural heritage is appropriately rooted in equitable community perspectives and this requires a different kind of comprehension of and engagement with the past (Dark, 1995). At this point, it is plausible to acknowledge that the types of heritage relationships public institutions seek with the local communities are often subject to conflict (Chhabra, 2012; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). This calls for the need to address dissonant perspectives to seek a common meeting ground to support diversity. One approach is to critically examine dominant heritage images/representations portrayed by government agencies and heritage institutions (often categorized as induced image agents). For instance, it is important to determine how these are viewed by different community sects including the local minority groups and whether traces of dissonance exist.

As pointed out by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), dissonance management is crucial for the sustainable use of heritage in tourism. An identifiable set of criteria supported by sustainable heritage tourism include promotion of intergenerational and intragenerational equity and maintenance of diversity (Chhabra, 2010; Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011). According to Loulanski and Loulanski, "sustainable integration of cultural heritage and tourism includes local involvement, balance of authenticity and interpretation and shift towards sustainability-centered tourism management and practice" (2011, p. 845). Therefore, gathering insights into the mindset of the local communities and management of dissonance is important to effectively address issues associated with equity in order to strike a meaningful compromise between commodification and conservation of local heritage so that sustainable heritage tourism may be promoted. As reported by McGehee and Andereck (2004), local residents strongly feel that sustainable marketing of heritage tourism can help to build a sense of cultural identity and improve understanding/image of local culture both in the eyes of the host community and the tourists.

Limited number of studies has discussed the 'present-centered' nature of heritage from a sustainability perspective using a case study approach to examine how contemporary communities' relate to and engage with dominant heritage images and narratives. Chhabra (2012) proposes a dissonant heritage strategy paradigm which critically examines present-centeredness of heritage in marketed themes. The paradigm highlights "the need to identify cross-ethnic commonalities and unique characteristics of each ethnic group's heritage and gathering views on preferred ways in which public