



Case Study

Visiting authenticity on Los Angeles Gang Tours: Tourists backstage



Konstantina Zerva*

Universitat de Girona, Campus de Montilivi, Girona 17071, Spain

HIGHLIGHTS

- Theoretical presentation of the concept of authenticity in tourism.
- Case study of a niche tourism market developed in L.A. Gang Tours.
- Content analysis of online texts which inform the market over L.A. Gang Tours.
- Focus on markers of objective authenticity from the organization and the press.
- Focus on markers of existential authenticity from tourists who took this tour.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 2 December 2013
Accepted 7 August 2014
Available online

Keywords:
Authenticity
Tourism
Crime
Reality
Gangs
Tours

ABSTRACT

Many studies have stated that tourists are searching for authenticity – or what they perceive as such – within foreign cultural contexts. Accepting forms of culture that reflect day-to-day life as tourist attractions, many tourists have developed an interest in the real life of their hosts. Yet, the definition of authenticity in tourism has become multifaceted. Divided between experiences and objects, authenticity has been perceived through either objective, constructive or postmodern approaches. This paper examines the various elements on which a new tourist attraction, namely Los Angeles Gang Tours, bases its commercialization upon authenticity as communicated through online communication channels. For this purpose, content analysis was applied to the textual and visual online data available. Finally, the discussion is developed as to what form of authenticity this tour represents, as well as the perception of authenticity that tourists share online after experiencing the tour.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

So far, investigations into tourism have provided various conceptual frameworks of what tourism represents for people, ranging from a way of viewing, creating and confirming realities, playing with variables such as body, space and time (Adler, 1989), or a deeper involvement with society and culture (MacCannell, 1976), to a private, self-perpetuating system of illusions (Cohen, 1988), or simply, a tension relief activity (Lau, 2010). The need to escape from day-to-day life and see something different, regardless of its degree of originality or novelty, is by far the basic motivation for practicing tourism. The intensity of observations and experiences during traveling is high, not only due to the change of context but also due to its short duration and infrequent repetition (Adler, 1989). Through traveling, people visit different contexts and situations, witnessing various ways of belonging to the world and seeing the

Self from other perspectives (Neumann, 1992). This is why most forms of tourism are culturally identified by escape codes (Edensor, 2001), practiced in host countries, which are marketed as devoid of problems so as to enhance an image of safety (Silver, 1993), regardless of whether that is entirely true or not.

Tourists look everywhere for authenticity, whether it's an actual experience or simply something different from their ordinary lives (Sharpley, 1999), in order to overcome the discontinuity of modernity (MacCannell, 1976). That is why tourism destination communication strategies focus widely on presenting their product as authentic. So naturally the question of what authenticity represents arises. Undeniably, this is one of the most overused words in tourism investigation (Dann, 1996), a polemical concept defined too many times (Peterson, 2005; Taylor, 2001) due to its continually evolving nature within the various changing social and cultural contexts.

The purpose of this investigation is not to offer one more definition of authenticity but rather – after gathering and structuring into a continuum the existing ones – to analyze which theoretical conceptualizations of it are being used through a) the online

* Tel.: +34 600558933.
E-mail address: konstantina.zerva@udg.edu.

communication messages of a particular tourist attraction – called Los Angeles (L.A.) Gang Tours – and b) the online messages tourists that have taken the tour share with their peers. This less conventional tourist attraction was founded in 2009 in the County of Los Angeles in the U.S. state of California – which welcomed a record 41.4 million visitors in 2012 (*Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board, 2013*). This attraction refers to a nonprofit organization created by Alfred Lomas, a former gang member of one of the most notorious gangs in Los Angeles, “Florence 13.” Being a veteran of an elite U.S. Marine Corps infantry unit, Alfred was a freelance hired bodyguard protecting criminal assets and some of L.A.’s top gang leaders. Currently, Alfred presents himself as a community interventionist and a gang abatement consultant with the intention of training and professionalizing former gang members. The mission of this organization according to the information available on their official web page is to reduce violence among the gang communities of South Central, to improve employment rates for ex-gang members and to create awareness for the wider social context that visits them of the existing situation that gang communities live in.

2. Literature review

2.1. Day-to-day life or “reality” tourism

Besides great cultural and historical monuments or animated forms of culture such as festivals and local celebrations, *Mathieson and Wall (1982: 159)* distinguish a third form of cultural attraction reflected in the day-to-day life of the visited society. For *MacCannell (1976)*, tourist attractions represent every visible public part of society, including public behaviors of any sort. Modern man feels the need to distance himself from his “real life” and learn as well as experience the “real” life of others (*MacCannell, 1976; Sharpley, 1999; Taylor, 2001*). Getting a small taste of the simplicity or complexity, poverty or wealth of the visited social context can be achieved through social interaction with locals, who form the “spirit” of public places (*Selwyn, 1996*). The quest is to become a traveler and not a tourist (*Frow, 1991*), that is, to become an active agent in search of adventure, people and experiences instead of a passive agent who expects everything to happen to him and for him (*Boorstin, 1992*). Putting aside counteractive systems of insiders versus outsiders and giving emphasis to the basis of the tourist experience, encounters between different stakeholders produce meaning-making procedures that allow a redefinition of truth and authenticity (*Dürr & Jaffe, 2012; MacCannell, 1976*).

Social interaction with the “spirit” of these public places basically means discovering and making contact with the “Other.” This term has been widely used to express the materially oppressed, primitive and exotic, located in particular nonmodern geographic spaces unpolluted by Western civilization, and visited by the materially privileged, who wish to experience the life of a distant past in its original state (*Bruner, 1991; Frow, 1991; Galani-Moutafi, 2000; Silver, 1993*). Spivak’s term “othering” (1985) – meaning distancing from Others – was first used in slum tourism by *Steinbrink and Pott (2010)*, and later by *Frisch (2012)* in favela tourism. These niche markets are looking for new forms of the Self, more authentic ones (*Dyson, 2012; MacCannell, 1976*), through an interplay of geography, time and the image of the Other (*Galani-Moutafi, 2000*).

Access to these particular public spaces is the actual challenge for the tourist who is confronting the destination tourism industry, with its established recommendations and semantic interpretations. This quest, for *MacCannell (1976)*, is doomed to failure since tourists do not see everything they ought to see. Yet, one way of confronting this “touristic shame,” as he names it, is

through guided tours that provide easy access to “ordinary” areas closed to outsiders, in order to reveal the inner reality of these spaces. Sometimes, these areas represent disadvantaged zones of the tourist destination, usually referred to as “slums,” “favelas” or townships (*Butler, 2010; Dyson, 2012; Frisch, 2012; Meschkank, 2011; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006a, 2006b; Rofles, 2010*), where social problems, such as poverty, violence or even crime, are displayed. Yet, today authenticity is also looked for where risk and danger hide (*Frow, 1991; Harper, 2006*), for the very reason that the tourism industry has not shown much interest in those areas. As could be expected, new forms of tourism specialisms have been created representing niche markets, starting from alternative tourism (*Douglas, Douglas, & Derrett, 2001*), and specializing in “dark” tourism (*Lennon & Foley, 2002*), “slum” tourism (*Rofles, 2010*), “poverty” tourism (*Rofles, 2010*), “pro-poor” tourism, volunteer tourism (*Dürr & Jaffe, 2012*) or “favela” tourism (*Frisch, 2012*).

Thus, the transformation of spatially disadvantaged communities, and the insecurity they are known for, into adventure and pleasure appears to be a new tourism product for tours. Many investigations have called these tours “social” or “reality” tours, based on the authentic day-to-day life of the visited community, with its positive and negative side, as shown by their operators (*Dyson, 2012; Frisch, 2012; Rofles, 2010*). Here, tourists are asked to visit in person, imagine and share later on what life means in these contexts (*Isaac, 2009; Meschkank, 2011*), while contributing to the impulse of positive socioeconomic development. Examples of such tours that promote this negative sightseeing go way back to the end of nineteenth-century Victorian London, when upper-middle-class people toured the dangerous and morally dubious East End (*Koven, 2006*), or later to 1967, when *The New York Times* reported the Penny Sightseeing Company, which inaugurated extensive guided tours of Harlem (*MacCannell, 1976: 40*). More contemporary tour examples are the Katrina Tours in New Orleans (*Pezzullo, 2009*), the Slum Tours in Dharani, Mumbai (*Dyson, 2012*), the pro-Palestinian tours through Bethlehem neighborhoods (*Isaac, 2009*), and the township tours in Cape Town and Johannesburg (*Butler, 2010*).

According to *Greenwood (1989)*, anything sold can be transformed into a commodity, and although areas of urban deprivation, concentration camps, slums and battlefields – to name but a few – have shown some resistance to the forces of commercialization (*Adler, 1989*), today we can say that that battle is lost because they mark tourism experiences as “real” (*Dürr & Jaffe, 2012*). The providers of reality tours have created a niche market, defining its demand by using real-not real and authentic-not-authentic distinctions (*Meschkank, 2011*). Images of the day-to-day life of the Other were first created by “orientalism,” which for Edward Said (in *Silver, 1993*) refers to the first contacts between Europeans and the Arab people and the various distinctions between “West” and “Other.” Later on, the tourism industry marketed these images, usually based on what Westerners thought the Other would be like, using exaggerations and an inaccurate representation of their lives and cultures in the name of profit (*Silver, 1993*).

The role of the mass media in this image formation for tourists, presenting what the Other looks like, has been undeniably fundamental. Previous investigations have shown the need for tourists to draw their conclusions directed by other sources (*Adler, 1989; Bhattacharyya, 1997; Edensor, 2001*). Ranging from print materials, such as literary texts and traveler accounts, which are based on the word-of-mouth effect (*Galani-Moutafi, 2000*), journals like *National Geographic*, or brochures that portray static and uninfluenced by Western colonialism traditions (*Silver, 1993*), to popular motion pictures with international distribution and success, like *Slumdog Millionaire* and *City of God* (*Frisch, 2012*), the “poor” are aestheticized, either glamorized or demonized to their respective

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7422316>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7422316>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)