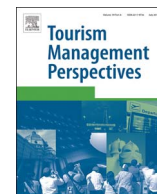


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## Making sense of heritage tourism: Research trends in a maturing field of study

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### A B S T R A C T

This essay examines several emerging research trends in the field of heritage tourism. These trends, including experiential connections with heritage, blurred boundaries between tourisms, more accurate portrayals of the commodified past and technological advancements, demonstrate a precipitous growth in heritage tourism scholarship that focuses more on experience, identity, stewardship, place and empowerment than the more descriptive supply v. demand work that preceded it. Changes in how researchers treat the cultural past indicate a maturing field of study that is increasing in popularity as a focus of academic research and also as a consumable tourist product.

### 1. Introduction

Heritage tourism, one of the oldest and most pervasive forms of tourism, has become a buzzword in the travel industry and within the research academy. Heritage involves an inheritance from the past that is valued and utilized today, and what we hope to pass on to future generations. This patrimony may be tangible or intangible, abstract or concrete, natural or cultural, very old or rather recent, and it may be quite ordinary, although the extraordinary tends to sell better. Heritage tourism is based upon the utilization of historic resources and forms the backbone of the tourism economies of many destinations. Some studies suggest that upwards of 80% of all trips taken involve some element of cultural heritage (Timothy, 2011), which is not surprising when heritage is understood holistically. This commentary examines heritage tourism as a subject of academic research that has undergone a significant evolution since the 1980s and today reflects a scholarly sub-field in the early stages of maturation.

### 2. A chronology of thinking

The earliest academic observers of tourism, leisure and culture between the 1930s and the 1970s acknowledged the importance of cultural resources as recreational and educational assets. Concepts related to visitor use, museum management, conservation, interpretation and authenticity—all of which are directly related to tourism—became increasingly a part of the academic lexicon in the 1960s and 1970s. During the same period, many non-academic reports and ‘how-to’ documents related to heritage conservation and visitor management

surfaced to satisfy the growing needs of heritage stewards as they managed patrimonial resources for tourism.

However, as an explicit type of tourism, heritage tourism was only acknowledged, defined and researched in the mainstream as recently as the 1980s, with a rapid rise in academic interest in the 1990s. In common with many areas of tourism studies, research into heritage tourism began as extremely descriptive accounts of supply and demand (Herbert, Prentice, & Thomas, 1989). This approach dominated the work of the 1980s and 1990s as scholars attempted to identify what heritage meant on the ground, how it was spatially distributed and delineated and who its consumers were. Since the late 1990s, however, the research has become more analytical and focused on theoretical and conceptual development. Increasing emphasis has been placed on understanding important concepts such as the cultural experience, people's relationships with the heritage they consume, identity reinforcement through heritage visits and intra-group solidarity.

Owing to a heightened interest in cultural heritage as a tourism product, and given its pervasiveness now as a salient concentration of academic studies, thousands of research articles, books, presentations and conferences have been produced to focus on this imperative theme of tourism studies. The bulk of research articles on this topic has appeared in more than 90 tourism, hospitality and leisure journals, with a secondary record having developed from journals in geography, sociology, political science, anthropology, archaeology, cultural studies, art, theater, history, economics and architecture.

An often cited sign of a maturing research field is the emergence of specialized journals. As the greater field of heritage studies universalized in the 1980s and 1990s, a few journals appeared to satisfy

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the early needs of heritage scholars, but few, if any, of the papers published dealt directly with tourism. *Historic Environment* (first published in 1980) and the *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (beginning in 1994) were two of the first journals to focus on cultural heritage resources and their uses. Several other generic heritage management journals appeared after the turn of the millennium with much of their content being devoted to the visitor industry and its impacts and management. These include, among others, the *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* (2006), *Heritage and Society* (2008), *Journal of Community Archaeology and Heritage* (2014) and the *Journal of Heritage Management* (2016). From a tourism-specific perspective, the *Journal of Heritage Tourism*, established in 2006 and initially published by Channel View Publications (now published by Routledge), has become the leading international journal devoted to this academic subject.

As noted above, most heritage tourism research from the 1980s until the 21st century was especially descriptive. From the supply perspective, researchers spent much effort defining heritage resources, their scales, locations and market reach, and identifying simplistic typologies. Research on the market and other elements of demand likewise lacked conceptual strength and theoretical potency, with most studies describing market characteristics, behaviors, satisfaction, expenditures and intent to return, resulting in an over-saturation of the field with repetitious and predictable case studies of visitor satisfaction, market segmentation and demographic profiles. For their time, and in the normal chronology of things, these studies were important in forging the foundations of this field. During the early 2000s, however, we saw a change from purely descriptive empirical case studies to efforts to understand cultural heritage tourism on a deeper level, such as the experiential dimensions between people and the resources they visit, as well as the broader societal implications of heritage-based tourism.

### 3. A maturing field

There are several signs that the field of heritage tourism is reaching a certain level of maturity. Underscoring most of these new directions is the notion that the supply of cultural resources and the demand for them are not mutually exclusive, as the previous paragraph denotes. The sections that follow highlight four indicators of maturity, namely growing research on tourists' experiential engagement with heritage, the crossover between heritage and other types of tourism, tourism stimulating more accurate portrayals of the past, and technological innovations in heritage tourism. These four prospects represent an increasingly holistic view of heritage tourism and the development of the field, although I recognize that these are in no way exhaustive. Instead, they serve as representative examples of broader trends in the tourism academy.

#### 3.1. Experiential engagement with heritage

The first sign of maturation expressed here is the move beyond pure description of visitor experiences and heritage places towards efforts to understand more deeply how engaging with heritage can bring about change within individual visitors and more broadly within society. One example is some observers no longer being satisfied with the overly generalized and supply-oriented definition that heritage tourism entails common visits to historic sites and locales (Timothy, 2011). Poria, Butler, and Airey (2003), for instance, refuse to take for granted this generally recognized definition. Instead, they argue, from a demand perspective, that the heritage tourism experience is determined by people's personal connections to the place they visit rather than the innate historical attributes of the site or object itself. This unconventional view of heritage tourism is unique but illustrates emerging new ways of thinking about supply, demand and the visitor experience.

Relatedly, increasing numbers of studies hone in on personal and national identity formation through heritage experiences (e.g. Butler, Khoo-Lattimore, & Mura, 2014). Visiting cultural sites helps bolster

many consumers' own distinctive identities and self-actualization. Research also shows that social solidarity can be encouraged through cultural tourism experiences, as well as through the manipulation of heritage tourism by authorities in power. The notion of individual experiences helping to define what is or is not heritage tourism, or how people's own connectedness to the past determines their experiential outcomes, has provoked a healthy and robust academic debate around the concepts of heritage contestation, authenticity and nostalgia (Timothy, 2011).

#### 3.2. Heritage and other tourisms

Given the generally accepted definition of heritage—that which we inherit from the past, use today and pass on to future generations, potential heritage resources are vast and widespread, and they include many objects, places, events, persons and phenomena not heretofore considered to be traditional heritage tourism products. By the same token, people are becoming more sophisticated in their travel tastes and desires; many are showing more interest in the deeper meanings of places, local identities and their own connections to the places they visit. These changes indicate a growing recognition that other types of tourism fall within the purview of heritage tourism and cannot be separated from it (Timothy & Boyd, 2006). For example, pilgrimage or religious tourism, is an important form of heritage tourism wherein people travel to gain access to divine blessings, draw closer to deity, satisfy religious requirements, seek forgiveness for sins or simply to improve their spiritual selves. Beliefs, rituals, rites, celebrations, foods, sacred sites and buildings are important elements of the patrimony of places and the heritage of specific faiths. For non-pilgrim tourists, visiting the same sites can be an important part of a cultural experience that helps them appreciate better the heritage of the destination. Regardless of why one visits sacred locales, pilgrimage is a salient form of heritage tourism that draws millions of travelers to many faith-oriented destinations each year.

Likewise, dark tourism is based upon the notion of people consuming dark heritage places, events and artifacts (Stone, Hartmann, Seaton, Sharpley, & White, 2018). For some people, visiting sites of human suffering, death and disaster satisfies a morbid curiosity about a specific event or person. For others, visits to battlefields, cemeteries, war zones, places of incarceration or sites of natural disasters are more educational in nature and may fulfill their desire to understand history better. Growing interest in visiting sites of human suffering and death has spurred much research recently on the unique challenges of managing 'difficult' heritage.

A third example is sport tourism. People traveling for sport purposes may simultaneously be involved, wittingly or not, in heritage tourism (Ramshaw, 2014). The famous sporting venues they visit may be significant heritage attractions in their own right and feature prominently in a destination's recommended itineraries. As well, the events and athletic activities observed and undertaken, as well as the sites and happenings associated with sport celebrities, are by definition a part of the intangible and tangible heritage of regions and countries. Sport and its associated patrimony are known to help reinforce national identities and build solidarity among fan groups and communities. Pilgrimage, dark and sport tourism are not the only forms of tourism that depend on heritage resources or which intersect with heritage experiences, but they are illustrative of the point. Volunteer tourism, food tourism, shopping tourism and agritourism, for example, all embrace components of the cultural past and its consumption that place them squarely within the broader constructs of heritage tourism.

#### 3.3. More accurate portrayals of the past

Another indication of maturation is that tourism appears to be reflecting more accurate and balanced portrayals of the past. While staged, whitewashed and stereotyped heritage has been the norm for many

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