



3rd GLOBAL CONFERENCE on BUSINESS, ECONOMICS, MANAGEMENT and TOURISM,
26-28 November 2015, Rome, Italy

Cultural Thematic Tourism Itineraries: Mediators of Success

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Abstract

This article argues for the need of studying to which extent certain psycho-social features characterizing the cultural profile of the communities involved in tourism activities on cultural routes (like the community culture of openness, social distance, community traditionalism and institutional traditionalism, the ability to take risks, ethnic (in)tolerance, the level of intergroup trust or intergroup prejudice etc.) act as mediators or moderators of the impact of traditional cultural heritage on the successful implementation of tourism activities within the communities, the development and tourism performance output indicators and the willingness to collaborate with other traditional communities along the cultural itinerary axis.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of BEMTUR- 2015

Keywords: cultural thematic route; mediation analysis; traditional-type culture; tourism conflicts; cultural tourism; community culture; cultural itinerary

1. Introduction

The objective of this paper argues for the need of studying to which extent certain psycho-social features characterizing the cultural profile of the communities involved in tourism activities along cultural routes (or in tourism projects in general), act as mediators or moderators of the impact of traditional cultural heritage on the implementation of tourism activities within the community and success outputs. In order to construct our central argument, in the first section the paper describes the practical context and research background from which stemmed the respective hypothesis, followed in the second one, by the discussion, based on the existing support in the literature, of the pertinence of the partial moderation or mediation effect proposed for the most relevant variables underlying the issues presented under section one. The paper also highlights the necessity of elaborating

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quantitative, structured and transparent assessment instruments for the cultural heritage (cultural representativeness, authenticity, etc.) of the thematic route candidate localities in order to transparently and unequivocally support the decisions of inclusion/non-inclusion of certain localities on these routes and, by doing so, to eliminate later resentfulness and sabotage during the integration and the process of providing the tourism services. The conclusions deliver a round-up of the arguments supporting the necessity of studying the implications of the communities' psycho-social variables in the efficiency of implementing tourism activities as they resulted from this research endeavor.

The inclusion, since 1987, of numerous routes in the Cultural Routes Programme of the Council of Europe has determined an increasing homologation process for cultural tourism routes in general, not only in Europe but on other continents as well. The main motivation for these initiatives varies greatly, from considering the cultural routes as the lever for the intensification of integrated tourism activities at an inter-regional and trans-national level (Berti, 2013), or as an opportunity for the development (sometimes by contamination) of the areas less mature from a tourism point of view (Mayer, 2004) or as another subsistence activity for the profound rural areas with an aged population (Yang et al., 2013; Klimaszewski, 2007), to deeper cultural or psycho-social motivations. In this latter case, cultural tourism routes are considered the (only) way of keeping alive the local ancestral culture and of appropriately preserving the endangered cultural elements of universal interest (UNESCO, 2005), as routes of memory that imply turning the immaterial culture into heritage, giving a collective connotation to memory (DiMeo, 2008), with the main function of the hosts being the remembering of the forgotten places and times and the opportunity to perpetuate, by conveying to tourists, their ancestral culture, the reappropriation of a common past or the rediscovery of their collective memory (Geronimi, 2003). The cultural routes are even contemplated sometimes as a support for an identity approach (Alais, 2013) that lays emphasis not only on identity factors but also on elements that are capable of developing a collective feeling of regional pride (Bourgeois, 2013). However, resurrecting the regional pride in several cultural regions along the route and creating a shared spirit (Aquilina and Mateo, 2013) have not been the easiest social objectives to attain simultaneously in a cultural route project. Developing tourism activities in a region, in general, was found to generate in certain conditions, social tensions and conflicts between stakeholders upon resources or tourists (March & Wilkinson, 2009; Ryan Yang et al., 2013; Robinson, 1999; Oberg, 1960; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Doxey, 1976), between host communities and tourists (Reisinger, 2009; Robinson, 1999; Triandis, 1994; Jafari, 1987; Butler, 1980) etc., up to the point of considering conflict as inherent (Yang et al., 2013). The outcome of conflict was identified without any preexistent social prejudices between the social or ethnic groups involved in tourism activities in the respective region or towards other groups from the neighboring regions along a thematic trail. Among the determinants of conflict established by Robinson (1999) in the conflict between the host community and tourism industry, the nature and the extent of the commodification of the host culture and the utilization of its natural and cultural resources are the most relevant.

1.1. The social premises for cultural and social objectives of cultural thematic routes initiatives

The performance of a tourist destination and “the quality offered by a tourist destination is more than the sum of its parts; [is dependant] in important ways on how the organizational parts are interconnected, the way they act and interact and the relations between the actors involved; (...) value is created and delivered to tourists by a complex network of interacting and interdependent actors” (March & Wilkinson, 2009, p.455). Considering the issues of (cultural) identity and regional pride that cultural heritage tourism development can bring to surface, in order to estimate the potential success of implementing tourism activities within a cultural thematic route frame, preexistent social premises like inter-group prejudice, social distance or the community's cultural openness towards alterity (e.g. especially towards international tourists) should be assessed as crucial variables for prospective chances of creating the shared spirit or reaching the level of cooperation those projects entail as well as the expected value of the tourist experience.

For example, the initial function in the case of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, was represented by the development of a framework to reflect on “an identity based on common citizenship as a tool of revealing a common European heritage and of restoring the collective memory of the communities” (Berti, 2013:150). Most of the times, this desideratum can be achieved without effort. In certain cases however, the restoration of the collective

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