TOURISM as Location's Image-Maker

Inga Külmoja
Kerttu-Kaisa Kiviselg-Lindeberg

Introduction

In the spirit of constructivism dominating contemporary social science, reality is largely defined as a social construct (Berger, Luckmann 1972; Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 1998). So is place:[1] it was realised that 'location or position is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of place, even if it is a very common condition' (Relph 1976: 29). Place is an interrelationship of the physical setting, the occurring activities and emerging meanings (Relph 1976: 45) – the latter becoming increasingly important in the context of the worldwide tourism industry.

Physical space is a precondition and the basis of tourism, being 'constructed from a diversity of trip purposes that take people 'away from home" (Hughes 1995: 784). Obviously, space may also have social characteristics, as far as it is occupied or dominated by rich or poor, men or women, locals or tourists, natives or immigrants. Social characteristics of space are dual by nature: they are both physical in the sense that space is occupied by a certain category or class of people, and mental, in the sense of the meaning attached to these categories and classes. Less evidently, present day tourism is increasingly about the meaning and image various places or locations possess, or rather the meaning constructed by place marketers or attributed by mass media and the public.

In fact, tourism is an important sector of the world economy, in the context of which place images get defined. Tourism's impact on place can be very tangible and observable via hotels, airports, public information available in foreign languages, and finally tourists visiting a location. This kind of direct impact, firstly, transforms the physical component of place. On the other hand, the impact of tourism may also be indirect and subtle. In cities and countries where the huge

[1] Throughout this article, *place* and *location* are used as interchangeable notions referring to any geographical position that residents or tourists may occupy, whereas destination has a narrower meaning with reference to a potential place to visit only by tourists.

economic importance of tourism has been realised, the entire life and development of the city starts taking into account 'the Other', the tourist, as the addressee of the city communication and development process. This orientation to the Other need not always be explicated or advertised. It may be revealed in the ways the infrastructure, accommodation, catering services, entertainment and transportation are organised. Moreover, tourism may affect local residents' employment and well-being, their perception and tolerance of the Other.

Destination as product

In the tourism industry, places gain more exchange value and lose the importance of use value as such. Various places, as well as cities, compete with each other in a manner similar to products, having their own trademarks, market value and customers. When we look more closely to see who the actual competitors are, it is not so much the real places as their images and representations. Through the continuous process of globalisation, places have become quite interchangeable: multinational chain hotels, standardised service and familiar trademarks have contributed to this development. The mechanism is quite similar to the one prevalent in the current product market: the same type of products, e.g. cars, can barely be differentiated on the basis of their technical characteristics, because these characteristics are too similar. The differentiating function has been taken over by the product image, created and advocated using different marketing tools. That is why place images are constructed to highlight some (!) individual and particularistic characteristics, although without treating the consumer with too much 'otherness'. Research has shown that an optimal level of predictability is required: the more familiar a destination is, the more attractive it is; however, after a certain point, familiarity becomes less attractive (MacKay, Fesenmaier 1997).

> Locations have become symbols of themselves to be sold to tourists. The commodified features being sold are not just direct practical use or utility, but also the psychological utility or symbolic significance of place. The choice of destination has become a significant lifestyle and status indicator (see e.g. Morgan *et al.* 2002), since people are trying to buy not only into an image, but also into an emotional relationship.

Places differ from products in the sense of being inaccessible before the actual consumption can take place. One cannot see, touch or smell a place in the way one can with normal products in a store. When you do this, you are already 'con-

suming' the place. (There are exceptions to the rule: for example, free excursions for travel agents or other key persons.) In this sense places as products have more similarity to catalogue or internet shop products than to in-shop commodities. Prior to destination 'consumption', the customer is faced with all kinds of representations of the place: photos, brochures, maps, stories, personal knowledge, values and beliefs, as well as possible place experience in the past. Representations of place and its image are especially crucial for those with no relevant personal experience and little prior knowledge of the place.

Another particularity of place products, pointed out by multiple tourism management textbooks, lies in their 'perishability': a museum, theatre or hotel bedroom which is not sold represents lost profit to the operator. While the product can continue to be sold at other times, the potential sale on that particular day cannot be recovered.

While places as a rule do have a self-image or identity in the form of self-descriptive verbal and non-verbal texts produced by local people, organisational and authority products don't seem to possess this quality. We can speak of products mainly in terms of their image, because from the product's point of view no self-conceptualisation or self-reflection takes place.

A crucial difference between a place and a normal product lies in the fact that, while the sale of usual commodities has no limits other than what the customer wants to buy, the number of 'consumers of places', or tourists, in a given destination at a given time may have a very real impact on the quality of the place experience and thus, on the actual number of visitors in the future (Howie 2003). Moreover, the number of visits exceeding the environmental or social carrying capacity of a place has brought up the issue of 'demarketing' the peak season and encouraging a 'second peak' (or more) at the 'low shoulder' seasons (Howie 2003). To go even further, destinations should determine not only the number of tourists they want but also the 'kinds' of tourists they prefer.

Image and identity

Both image and identity have been much discussed within many disciplines and given a lot of different interpretations. For tourism, two approaches to identity, originating from humanistic geography and environmental psychology, seem to be relevant. The distinguished geographer Edward Relph considers identity of place as the basic feature of the human experience of places. He stresses that 'it

is not just identity *of* place that is important, but also the identity that a person or group has *with* that place' (Relph 1976: 45). In environmental psychology, place identity is conceived of as 'a substructure of the person's self-identity that is comprised of cognitions about the physical environment that also serve to define who the person is' (Proshansky, Fabian 1987: 22).

The geographical and psychological approaches to place identity differ in two important aspects: for geographers, the physical place is the basis of its identity, while psychologists give more concern to the person experiencing the physical environment, so that place identity is more an attribute of person than of place. Secondly, geographers focus primarily on positive connections to place, whereas for environmental psychologists negative cognitions of the physical world are also an important part of place identity.

Both discussed approaches compliment and support each other: the identity of place arises from the interrelationship of a place and the person experiencing it, whereas both positive and negative experience are equally important.

Two definitions of destination image that are frequently referred to come from Fred Lawson and Manuel Baud-Bovy (1977), who define destination image as 'the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imagination, and emotional thoughts an individual or a group might have of a particular place' (quoted in Jenkins 1999: 1; also in Baloglu, McCleary 1999; Bramwell, Rawding 1996), and a shorter definition is given by John L. Crompton (1979), who understands destination image as 'the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person has of a destination' (quoted in Jenkins 1999: 2; also in Baloglu, McCleary 1999; Bramwell, Rawding 1996). Both place image definitions quoted are identity inclusive.

We suggest making an operational distinction between place identity and its image, to help us distinguish between local and tourist perceptions of place. Place image and identity can be viewed as two complementary notions. Whereas place identity is like an insider or local perspective on location, place image is possessed by Others coming from outside of the place. So Crompton's image definition might be rephrased as 'a set of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people not deeply rooted or connected to the place have of a particular place'.

Image and identity provide the basis for other possible perceptual combinations. For instance, 'what I think others think of me' may be called a reflected image. Usually when investigating images and identities, we are dealing with

reflected images – from opinion polls and interview results we derive what might be called 'how I think others identify themselves or what kind of images they possess'.

Resident and tourist

From the location's point of view, the Other is a potential or an actual tourist. Quite obviously, good and well-known images or brands attract tourists, businessmen and investors, and this means an important source of finances for place development. But it is not only economic reasons that matter. Location needs the Other as a communication partner because location is an open system and lacks self-sufficiency (see Lotman 1992). Image has to compliment identity. It should also help residents to position themselves.

The key point is how image and identity are related to each other, whether the former expresses the latter and whether it does so sufficiently. Because of the huge number of different messages and the limited capacity for their processing, the resulting image is often schematic and simplified. A one-sided image can harm identity. If the image is very widespread, residents start to adapt to the image and perceive themselves in the way image describes them.

The same holds true for rich and many-faceted images. If the image celebrates the locality of place, the inhabitants will enjoy their position:

> Emphasizing local inhabitants can enhance people's sense of pride in the distinctiveness and achievements of their locality, promote commitment to local volunteer activity, encourage loyalty to local buyers and sellers, boost indigenous traditional culture and economic activity, and add vigour to the efforts of local government to invest in local economic development, landscape protection, and historic conservation. (Bramwell, Rawding 1996: 202.)

So the formation of image should treat residents' identity very delicately. Still, image has to be understandable to the Others, and should make the place and its identity comprehensible for them. Image formation is a translation process – one's own culture is translated into a foreign one.

In a successful brand, the inner and outer perspective should be close to each other. If residents think of their location as stagnant and dull, it is unlikely that outsiders will consider it to be developing and improving. So the place brand should, first of all, be 'sold' to local people to strengthen and possibly modify their identity. The insider who knows the place thoroughly may be a tougher target

group to handle than the outsider whose relevant knowledge is limited. In any case, the physical characteristics of a place should support the image or brand developed. However, the more usual case is strong insider identity and high self-esteem, but poor knowledge by outsiders.

Acknowledging the importance of the issue, destination management is increasingly focused on bringing tourists' and residents' perspectives closer together through the design of a shared environment and by fostering increasing awareness of mutual interests (Howie 2003).

Image as an orientation mark

We can also think of images as orientation marks for Others. The existential space is difficult to understand for outsiders, as it is culturally determined. Image tells Others how to relate to the place (image is usually axiological), what the norms and taboos are, whether the place has some value or is threatening etc. Orientation marks may be intentional or non-intentional. For instance, the slogan developed during the Brand Estonia project to summarise the image of the country is, 'Positively transforming' which is certainly an intentional orientation mark. It also takes into account the target group's awareness of Estonia's historical background and its relatively poor or negative image in the past. Or in other words – it wants to erase the compromised past, to eliminate memory. It deliberately makes Estonia coherent with Europe, emphasising synchronic coherence while eliminating diachronic coherence.

An example of a non-intentional orientation mark might be the image of Narva as a city of AIDS, which is a widespread image in Estonia. Apparently it was not created consciously, but it gives a potential Estonian tourist a negative impression of the city. Remarkably, this image is not as widespread in Russia: the population of St. Petersburg positions Narva as a preferred Estonian tourism destination, in second place with Tartu after Tallinn (Eesti Turismiagentuur 2001).

Intentional and non-intentional orientation marks spread through different information sources. 'Official tourist organizations are responsible for the projected [i.e. intentional orientation mark – *I. K., K.-K. K.*] image while the organic [i.e. non-intentional orientation mark – *I. K., K.-K. K.*] image may be said to derive from non-tourist sources. Thus projected images include commercial sources such as guidebooks and advertisements, while organic sources include popular culture, the media, literature and education.' (Selby, Morgan 1996: 288.)

Because non-intentional images can seriously harm the tourism potential of places, developing image in a favourable direction is no less important than developing its physical space. In the context of a highly developed tourism sector, place image depends, to a large extent, on how intensively and in what manner location is exposed to the Other. Moreover, place image and its physical characteristics enter a dialogical relationship: the image affects the way we perceive space and surroundings, and creates a disposition to perceive place in a certain way. On the other hand, physical space influences our image: we adjust our image of place on the basis of what we see, hear, and smell in it.

Image formation as a translation process may affect the physical reality of place to a considerable extent. For instance, Disneyland in Paris is not an element of French culture, but it is a common and understandable object for people all over the world, as for example is the McDonald's restaurant in Tallinn's Old Town. What happens here is not so much a translation act, as a situation where an element of one culture is taken over into another. Besides being a fast-food restaurant, McDonald's functions as a sign standing for Tallinn as an understandable and usual place for tourists from many different cultures. For locals, the restaurant might as well be perceived as the positive sign of the 'advanced West' and global culture, or alternatively, as a serious threat to the local identity.

Each person perceives a place a bit differently from anyone else. Each person has his/her own place or location – mentally, socially and also physically. Different people use different parts of the place – one person knows every corner of the city centre, but has never seen a concrete suburb, while another person living and working there knows only a few significant points in the city centre. Different people also have different social relations within a location – one person only works, another has family and friends living there. And of course mental images that people have of a place differ. Still, there is considerable overlap – otherwise no communication would be possible, and while discussing Tokyo with someone else we might come to think that we must be talking about different locations. Sometimes it happens, but luckily not too often.

Place brand

In his recent article, Graham Hankinson (2004: 109–121) classifies all brand conceptualisations into four major types. Firstly, brand is understood as communicator and represents a mark of ownership and a means of product differ-

entiation. Secondly, brand is seen as perceptual entity or image, characterised by a set of associations or attributes. The third approach views brand as value enhancer and as corporate asset to be invested in, whereas the last conceptualisation views brand as a personality which enables it to form a relationship with the consumer.

Drawing upon the relational exchange paradigm and the marketing networks approach, Hankinson proposes the place brand model, consisting of a core brand and four types of brand relationships with stakeholders in the fields of infrastructure, primary service, media and consumer management. Thus place brand is defined within its dynamic context, entering into relationships with various stakeholders. A parallel with Yuri Lotman's concept of intellectual objects (1992) can be drawn: Lotman distinguishes between three types of objects capable of generating new meaning – individual, text, and culture as collective intellect. Place brand with highlighted personality features can be seen as an intellectual entity generating new meanings through different types of relationships.

Indeed, place branding, image-making and marketing are very much about skilful meaning management. The place marketer should take into account and handle an extremely large number of variables: the physical characteristics of a place; personal and social characteristics of local residents and target groups; the inner and outer perspective regarding place; the ways both perspectives interrelate and influence each other; the socio-economic situation of destination place and that of the target groups; and many others.

The key to success for different subjects and places seems to lie in winning the overwhelming meaning management competition, in which everyone and everything is, willingly or not, involved. This in turn presupposes understanding the logic of today's culture and society, of their functioning and development, as well as finding reliable ways to foresee the major trends in the society of tomorrow, with its own needs, fears and desires, obsessions and dreams.

References

B a l o g l u, Seyhmus; M c C l e a r y, Ken W. 1999. A model of destination image formation. – *Annals of Tourism Reasearch*, Vol. 26 (4), pp. 868–897

B e r g e r, Peter L.; L u c k m a n n, Thomas (1966) 1972. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books

B r a m w e l l, Bill; R a w d i n g, Liz 1996. Tourism marketing images of industrial cities. – *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 23 (1), pp. 201–221

C r o m p t o n, John L. 1979. An assessment of the image of Mexico as a vacation destination and the influence of geographical location upon that image. – *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 17 (4), pp. 18–23

E e s t i T u r i s m i a g e n t u u r 2001. Messikülastajate küsitlus St.Peterburgi turismimessil 3.–6. oktoobril 2001. – *http://public.visitestonia.com/uuringud/peterburimessikysitlus2001.pdf*, May 2004

F a i r c l o u g h, Norman 1995. *Media Discourse*. London: Arnold

H a n k i n s o n, Graham 2004. Relational network brands: Towards a conceptual model of place brands. – *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 10 (2), pp. 109–121

H o w i e, Frank 2003. *Managing the Tourist Destination*. London: Continuum

H u g h e s, George 1995. Authenticity in tourism. – *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 22 (4), pp. 781–803

J e n k i n s, Olivia H. 1999. Understanding and measuring tourist destination images. – *International Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 1 (1), pp. 1–15

L a w s o n, Fred; B a u d - B o v y, Manuel 1977. *Tourism and Recreational Development.* London: Architectural Press

L o t m a n 1992 = Юрий М. Лотман. Мозг – текст – культура – искусственный интеллект. [Brain – text – culture – artificial intelligence.] – Ю. М. Лотман. *Избранные статьи в трех томах*. Том I. Статьи по семиотике и типологии культуры. Таллинн: Александра, pp. 25–33

M a c K a y, Kelly J.; F e s e n m a i e r, Daniel R. 1997. Pictorial element of destination in image formation. – *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 24 (3), pp. 537–565

M o r g a n, Nigel; P r i t c h a r d, Annette; P r i d e, Roger (Eds.) 2002. Introduction. – *Destination Branding*: *Creating the Unique Destination Proposition*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann

P r o s h a n s k y, Harold M.; F a b i a n, Abbe K. 1987. The development of place identity in the child. – *Spaces for Children: The Built Environment and Child Development*. Eds. Carol Simon Weinstein, Thomas G. David. New York, London: Plenum Press, pp. 21–41

R e l p h, Edward 1976. *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion

S e l b y, Martin; M o r g a n, Nigel J. 1996. Reconstructing place image. A case study of its role in destination market research. – *Tourism Management*, Vol. 17 (4), pp. 287–294

v a n D i j k, Teun A. 1998. *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. London: Sage