



Identity and tourism. Between image and perception

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Just like the usefulness of our decisions depends among other factors on our identity, understood as the sense each individual has of himself, according to the claims of economy of identity,¹ there is a key premise in the operation of any tourist system by which it is its symbolic content what provides its identity, makes a difference and turns it visible.² In fact, as Tuan suggested,³ any territory is a vital space, an area of identity and attachment and a space where values are represented and communicated. Hence its tourist and recreational potential is based on the symbolic values of its identity and its ability to communicate, interpret and share them.



From the perspective of the role of identity in tourist destinations, Groves and Go⁴ distinguish between global, virtual and physical identities while claiming that there are built, imagined and experienced identities. To explain it they link the concept of identity of places with those of projected image, product, consumption experience and perceived image and relate it with everybody's own identity.

Based on their proposals, it can be stated that identity in tourism is product, construction and result at one time, but also identification, representation and belonging. It is also a domain for action, intervention and domination and an area of diagnosis, knowledge and analysis. So when Anholt⁵ raises an agenda to implement competitive identities, he claims that tourism is in most cases the most important and powerful tool.

The fact is that beyond characteristics, size, accessibility, popularity or reputation of each destination, the contents of tourist communication strategies of a territory is usually conceived as its legitimate representation.

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Although the role tourism has or may have as a tool to set an identity proposition for a specific territory must not be dismissed,⁶ what is to be raised is the actual or possible role of items making the identity of a territory and its local tourist systems in Catalonia from a perspective of creating business opportunities, that is, the perspective of the economy of identity.

The role of identity in the Catalan tourist system

The symbolic value of places (i.e. destinations) is the factor creating expectations with tourists and

making them territories appropriate for tourist attraction and use. This value usually includes three sorts of items:⁷

- ▶ **Nodes.** Attractions standing out in the cultural landscape of destinations according to socially constructed hierarchies.
- ▶ **Meanings.** From the colour of façades to gastronomic variety, allowing tourists to recognise the expected identity of the landscape they are located in.
- ▶ **Signs.** Fragments of reality relating territory with tourism, like postcards, travel guides or signposting in different languages, showing the tourist nature of the place.

They all are dynamic items according to the existing heritage of each place, but also to the existence of other components that may in their turn create new items of identity. Outside Catalonia, this is the case of **Toulouse**, where the aerospace industry has become an item of identity joining the traditional historical one. In Catalonia, this is in fact the main value of the debate recently raised in Barcelona within the five territorial commissions (Districts, Old Quarter, Icons, Metropolitan environment and Catalonia) organised by **the Office of the Strategic Tourism Plan of the City**.

At the same time, there is what Urry calls semiologic landscapes,⁸ realities representing a certain allegedly ideal or universal meaning at a specific place (e.g. a walled medieval city). They are spaces able to be identified at different territorial levels tending to become reproductions of what they pretend to represent as they become part of tourist circuits, trying to adapt permanently to the idealised picture tourists have. Being deeply marked by identity, semiologic landscapes (**Tuscany** at European regional level, wine **Burgundy** at subregional level or **Venice** at local level) are associated with McCannell's concept of theatrical authenticity.⁹ Beyond other meanings, the debate they create is fully valid in Catalonia today, when amidst the discussion for instance on landscape cards, they

raise the question about the limits – if there shall be any – between what is considered the ideal reference for a territory (traditional crops on slopes in the case of **Priorat DOQ**, to name a case) and the necessary evolution of lifestyles, production and consumption (leading in the above example to make terraces on the slopes by mechanical means) as well as to what extent each decision taken affects the very sense of the place and thus its meaning and lure.

The debate created by semiologic landscapes is fully valid in Catalonia today as the question is raised about the limits between what is considered the ideal reference for a territory and the necessary evolution of lifestyles, production and consumption.

In any case, if territorial identity originates in cultural identity and the latter is exposed by recreational and tourist commercialisation, territorial identity itself is challenged. Hence thoughts need to be raised on the extent to which territorial identity is under the influence of a deliberate strategy of semantic manipulation by means of interpretation of reality. In this respect, based on an ethic commitment, identity must not be the key item of attraction nor become just an attraction. According to what Pivin said in 1994,¹⁰ this involves:

- ▶ Bringing together vehicular identity (external communication) and real identity, which has to be reasserted to avoid image malfunction and loss.
- ▶ Respecting the landscape so it can be interpreted by tourists but also useful for its residents, preserving environmental, productive and social values.
- ▶ Fostering building, knowledge and experience of unique values of places.

- ▶ Refurbishment without musealisation but having heritage be functional again and providing it with a sense of continuity.
- ▶ Not restricting action to resources with the highest prestige.



▲ Venice and its canals are a clear example of what Urry calls semiologic landscapes.

- Creating systems of cooperation between stakeholders so it is possible to define joint production and communication strategies.

Moreover, in the process of tourist valuation of identity, not only the wish of stakeholders managing resources but also the interpreting ability of tourists need to be taken into account. Or can it somehow be denied that the tourist intensity of sun and beach – now complex regarding modes as motivations – on the Catalan coast is not part of Catalonia's identity as a destination? Another thing to be seen is whether tourists are able to make a difference between sun and beach on the Catalan coast and elsewhere, and more importantly from the perspective of economy of identity, if there is or can be a Catalan way of producing sun and beach tourism. In fact, the very identity of a destination evolves in objective and perceived terms, as

shows the open debate in Ibiza – also identity-based though recent – related to the role of certain creative industries like architectural design, music production or Adlib fashion.

In this respect, the conclusions Mariné draws from the analysis of how the image of Catalonia and its main seaside destinations developed based on twenty French and German travel guides published between 1912 and 2007 are interesting from an empirical point of view.¹¹ During the pre-Civil War period, Catalan identity appears as clearly distinctive in the travel guides.

However, Spanish stereotypes become frequent in describing Catalonia from 1940 and almost into the 1980s. After 1990, a significant change is observed with the reintroduction of values and items specifically related with Catalan identity.



- ▲ Since the 1990s, folk culture celebrations started being considered an item able to make a contribution to Catalan identity.

Those singled out are art and monuments, intangible culture – especially folk celebrations – and more especially typical items of Catalan cuisine and wine culture. Also, analysed travel guides in this last period come back to a somehow romantic view of certain less developed coastal stretches and, beyond pointing out the scenic value of inland Catalonia, they also introduce cultural aspects into the classical sun and beach offer.

These meanings can also be related with the emergence of new recreational and tourist propositions completing overall identification of Catalonia as a leading holiday destination in Europe. They are propositions developed within local and regional tourist systems and are mainly based on:

- ▶ Items of cultural and natural heritage like art and culture (the Dalí triangle in Girona or the landscape of the Picasso, Gaudí, Miró and Casals genius in Tarragona), singular events and folk traditions (e.g. the creation of interpretation areas like the one devoted to *tremantinaires* in Tuixén), history (by means of the offer in explaining the territory from recovering Civil War sites to *industrial colònies*, including routes like *Catalonia's royal monasteries* or Roman Tarraco) and biodiversity (especially certain national and natural parks, from *Aigüestortes* to the *Ebro Delta*).
- ▶ The rise of new identity items, like those associated with sports (e.g. in *Alt Pirineu* and *Val d'Aran* or, in a very different sense, the *Circuit de Catalunya* racetrack), health (Barcelona), entertainment (*PortAventura*), shopping (from new shopping centres outside cities to the recovery of traditional and luxury retail in the centre of Catalan towns, inherent to their condition as county seats), agrofood production including wine (with differentiated business models and recreational offer, like in the *Penedès DO* and *Priorat DOQ*) and high-level cuisine located all over Catalonia.

The emergence of new recreational and tourist propositions completes overall identification of Catalonia as a leading holiday destination in Europe.

Going for identity in a global world

The *Handbook on Tourism Destinations Branding* published by the World Tourism Organisation in 2009 starts with the following statement: «The term *destination brand* is used in this text to refer to a destination's *competitive identity*. This is what makes it different and memorable. It distinguishes a destination from all the rest. It is the foundation of the destination's international competitiveness.» In fact, despite globalisation of information and convergence of consumption habits, the identity of places remains. For instance, parallel to deterritorialisation processes, intensive reterritorialisation trends are observed that individualise consumption, generate differences and originate feelings related to belonging and/or attaching to specific places. This has two relevant effects from a tourism perspective:

- ▶ Permanent redefinition of the sense of identity of places.
- ▶ Reinvention of marketable or at least communicable local cultural products.

It is for this reason that in the current context of dematerialisation of the economy, items of identity, including its intangibles, become a key in fostering local and regional development through tourism, leisure and culture.

However, to formulate specific strategies, a fundamental issue needs to be taken into consideration as is the existence of hierarchies in

the penetration capacity of the meanings of the different items related to the identity of a destination – either nodes or semiologic landscapes – and the limitations in the ability to embrace their sense among the different potential segments of demand. Put in other words, hierarchically prime nodes like the Sagrada Família or Montserrat Abbey have different opportunities (not only based on location and/or better access) from other items that despite containing universal values (e.g. Romanesque art in Vall de Boí, declared World Heritage as a potential Catalan semiologic landscape) require appropriate presentation to become part of visitor imagery and hence attract tourism.

«The competitive identity of a destination is what makes it different and memorable. It distinguishes a destination from all the rest. It is the foundation of the destination's international competitiveness.» (WTO)

Of course, there are technical procedures allowing their valorisation and market positioning. From a territorial planning perspective, the European Territorial Planning Strategy (1999) already showed the possibility of doing creative management of natural landscapes and cultural heritage to cater for their tourist value. In any case, this means to create narratives allowing to articulate the sense of resources and suggest alternatives and ways of usage, guide the contents according to demand characteristics and seduce with playful and educational contents.

However, one must consider that wrongly focused strategies cause dissatisfaction of tourist expectations and most importantly problems among social and economic stakeholders and the population, who are in charge of resource valorisation.

This is why policies need to consider from the onset all factors having an effect on visitor reception and animation, the use of new technologies, conservation, communication and

animation of resources and planning of other additional facilities. This is the only way to comply with the proposals of the *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism* (1999), which in its fourth article states that tourism is a user of world cultural heritage and contributor of its enhancement.

Another thing to be seen is whether tourists are able to make a difference between sun and beach on the Catalan coast and elsewhere and if there is a Catalan way of producing sun and beach tourism.

Regarding Catalonia, there may be the concern of creating symbolic landmarks leading to its overall identification as a semiologic landscape like Scotland, Bavaria or Flanders, the latter being in an advanced definition process. This is an opportunity that, despite depending necessarily on the perception of demand, needs inevitably to associate tourism with a differentiation strategy providing the country brand with contents.

This opportunity needs to include in an intelligent and practical manner the rest of semiologic landscapes otherwise related with Catalonia as a destination, especially with Barcelona and the coastal tourist brands that reached big notoriety and penetration capacity in the most consolidated issuing markets, mainly Costa Brava and Costa Daurada.

In any case, beyond the ability of becoming a semiologic landscape if applicable, Catalonia as a landscape is the result of the projection by the society that shaped it in all its aspects: material, spiritual, ideological and symbolic. In fact, the challenge should be tackled that Catalan society and visiting tourists also understand imaginatively tourist and recreational consumption as a process with cognitive value, which is useful to act and helps renovate social and productive life and hence identity itself.

After all – and this is known – talking of tourism and identity involves admitting a big paradox.

Thanks to globalisation, territories are easy to seize and visit. However, their discovery is often only possible with a short visit that does not create any sentimental bonds. From an operational point of view, the necessary response to this contradiction is to prepare the places to cater for visitor expectations and creating precise interpretations of their identity. This is reinforced by the fact that, as Nogué points out, «tourists are fully aware of the unreal component of the tourist experience». ¹² As he further notes, it will become necessary to seriously raise the issue of «what sort of territorial identities we will be able to create in this new scenario and what symbol landscapes will act as a tie between past, present and future».

Creating symbolic landmarks leading to Catalonia's overall identification as a semiologic landscape is an opportunity that needs inevitably to associate tourism with a differentiation strategy providing the country brand with contents.

In this respect, a possibly significant answer lies in the contribution made by Russo and Segre ¹³ based on the concept of collective intellectual property rights. Understood as acknowledged items of identity – e.g. areas with geographical

denominations like the Denominations of Origin or with agent networks gathered in collective trademarks as are, in a diffuse sense, Catalan tourist brands or tourist denominations associated with specific products with a territorial basis (e.g. Ripollès as the *Land of Counts and Abbots*) – these collective intellectual property rights can play two very important roles. First, they allow to avoid imitation, banality or oversimplification; and secondly, they may have an organisational role establishing rules, standards, control systems and development mechanisms for their productive systems allowing to socialise the benefit drawn from tourist valorisation of tangible and intangible public assets and facilitate efficient articulation of economic processes related with identity.

Catalan tourist brands associated with specific products with a territorial basis may have an organisational role establishing rules, standards, control systems and development mechanisms for their productive systems allowing to socialise the benefit drawn from tourist valorisation of tangible and intangible public assets and facilitate efficient articulation of economic processes related with identity.

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Notes

1. AKERLOF & KRANTON, 2010.
2. EQUIPE MIT, 2005.
3. TUAN, 1990.
4. GROVERS & GO, 2009.
5. ANHOLT, 2006.
6. In this respect, it is interesting to observe for instance the role of tourism in building the Spanish identity image as described by Fernández Cifuentes (2007).
7. DONAIRE, 2008.
8. FURRY, 2002.
9. MCCANNELL, 1989.
10. PIVIN, 1994.
11. MARINÉ, 2009.
12. NOGUÉ, 2000.
13. RUSSO & SEGRE, 2009.

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