

Rapid Changes in Approaching First-Time Destination Historical Cities

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet is rapidly changing the way first-time visitors approach a new urban destination. On the one hand, new media influence public spaces and infrastructures (Puel & Fernandez, 2012) but they also play a crucial role in how a person perceives a city prior to the direct experience.

European Capitals are well-established destinations among visitors from different countries who arrive with some preconceived ideas and various expectations that affect their behaviour during the visit.

According to Kalandides (2011, in Castillo-Villar, 2018:33): “The city’s image blends and simplifies all the tangible and intangibles elements that relate to the city. The image is formed from the encounters that we have with the messages communicates the city. These messages can be taken from the media, the culture or the direct experience”.

Moreover, for Castillo-Villar (2018:33): “Each individual forms his or her own particular city’s image, but also shares collective images due to a common physical and cultural environment. Therefore, city branding should focus on these public images to project an image true to the values, beliefs and ideas shared by locals and visitors.”

In order to understand the images of urban social space, the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1961/1976; 1984) has over the years offered an efficient framework. How is it changing in the era of readily accessible Internet-based sources? This chapter attempts to answer this question by taking into account the diversity of Internet-based sources of information about three European Capitals: London, Madrid and Warsaw, including the voice of those who visit a city for a limited period of time. Based on feedback from the field studies conducted in European Capitals, a special consideration is given to specific ways of exploring the destinations prior to the visit, such as turning to Institutional websites, social networks and Google Earth. While some of these tools have been examined in the context of urban studies (Diekmann & Cloquet, 2012; Porta et Al., 2014; Zhou & Wang, 2014; Fierro et Al., 2015), an integrative framework to consider Internet-based resources that shape social representations of cities has not been proposed yet. The aim of this contribution is the development of a new classification of sources of information, reflecting the complexity of tools available to city users today.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Within the theoretical framework of social representations (Moscovici, 1961/1976; Farr & Moscovici, 1984; Moscovici & Duveen, 2000; de Rosa, 2011; 2013a; Sammut et Al., 2015; Lo Monaco et Al., 2016), this chapter features the web-based multi-faced sources of information about three European Capitals: London, Madrid and Warsaw.

The social psychological construct of social representations introduced by Moscovici (1961/1976) has been successfully applied to urban studies since decades. Milgram (1984) conceptualised cities as social representations, attributing as much importance to the characteristics of neighbourhoods' residents as to physical features of places. Subsequently, the construct of social representations has been used to explain how urban entrepreneurs influence perception of the city to their convenience (Hubbard, 1996). In urban context, the theory of social representations provided a more complex manner of considering residents' attitudes towards tourism (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003). However, in the contemporary hustle of European Capitals it becomes increasingly common to find more tourists or commuters than actual residents, at least in some areas. In fact, for years the theory has also been applied to study how tourists represent cities as a whole as well as specific places or urban areas before and after the visit (de Rosa et Al., 1995; de Rosa, 1997, 2013b; de Rosa & D'Ambrosio, 2011).

First-time visitors form an especially interesting population, particularly useful when studying the city's image (Richards & Wilson, 2004), due to the fact that their knowledge about a destination stems from multiple sources of information, excluding direct physical experience. Quite often interpersonal communication plays a crucial role in enticing potential visitors to see a new city with their own eyes, as they seek referral from repeat visitors (Chi, 2012). While exploration tends to be the dominating tendency of first-time visitors, as opposed to acquisition preferred by repeat visitors (Lau & McKercher, 2004), such exploration begins prior to the trip and occurs through numerous channels. From conversations with family and friends, through consultation of newspaper articles, books and other printed and audio-visual materials such as movies, a potential visitor seeks information in an active way.

Today, the Internet offers numerous sources of information about cities. Concerning modern technologies and differentiation between specific forms of Internet-mediated communication in urban context, there have been some studies related to exploration of cities with Google Earth (Porta et Al., 2014), including the presence of places of interest in the satellite imagery (Zegras et Al., 2012); however, the relevance of this particular tool for social representations has not been discussed. In the era of Internet -where an integrative framework to consider Internet-based resources that shape social representations of cities has not been proposed yet- the paper furnishes an overview of the online city brand identity (Aaker, 1996) and image (Pike, 2009) of the European Capitals online. Overcoming the weaknesses regarding the literature focused solely on cognitive and evaluative factors in perception (processes of categorization, encoding, storage and retrieval of information in memory) the added value of this study is to re-read these constructs through the comprehensive multi-dimensionality of social representations (Vanolo, 2010). Moreover, in valorising the identity-related dimension of the cities, it refers to Proshansky's (1978) definition of place-identity as a sub-structure of self-identity characterized by clusters of cognitions, memories and affections concerning experienced places. The importance of the intersection between the constructs of the place-identity and the social representation of the European Capitals has been discussed by de Rosa (1997, 2013b).

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