

## THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE - A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of our research is to propose a semiotic view about how tourists develop their experiences in the destinations. The encompassing view of the tourist's experiences as processes of representation allows the understanding that every cue or touchpoint between the place and the tourists is a semiotic sign that carries meaning. These cues or signs can be used by tourists when they construct their representations of the destinations and well before they travel to these places. Our research is exploratory and we propose envisaging the tourist's experiences as a holistic apprehension of signs about the destinations. With a Peircean semiotic view one can draw implications for the tourism management theory and practice and suggest avenues of research that can be empirically developed in future research. Our semiotic approach unveils that the tourist experience results mostly of unconscious processes that are conditioned by all the previous knowledge and the idiosyncrasies of the self of each tourist.

### KEYWORDS

Experience, Destination, Representation, Signs, Semiotics, Tourism.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Culler (1991) considers that exploring the semiotic mechanisms is fundamental, as they have proved to be ubiquitous and central to any culture or social order and that in that sense the tourism researchers should not disregard their use. Semioticians study the processes of signification, how meanings are created and how reality is represented (Chandler, 2007). One can use this theoretical frame to envisage the destinations as representations and analyze how the knowledge about them is created.

The three semiotic elements of Peirce's General Theory of Signs are: the sign in the strict sense; the object represented by the sign; and the interpretant, which is the effect that the sign creates in the mind of who processes it (Peirce, 1931-1958). Peirce argued that human beings have no direct experience, but merely an indirect knowledge of reality that is accomplished through signs (Silverman, 1983). One can consider that the interpretant translates the manifestation of some aspect of the object by and through the sign (Santaella, 2000) and can be regarded essentially as knowledge about the object (Mick, 1986).

We propose envisaging the tourist experiences as a holistic apprehension of signs about the destinations. Thus, using the theory of representation one can regard the tourist experience as the end of a part of a semiotic process, being the destination the object.

## **2. PURPOSE**

The purpose of this research is to explore a semiotic view about how tourists develop their experiences in the destinations. We believe that this approach is valuable because it allows a theoretically sustained study about the processes of representation and signification in the tourism research.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

We consider this article as a first theoretical step upon which we will develop empirical research. Within the semiotic frame we are using the General Theory of Signs of Charles Peirce (1931-1958) to deduct perspectives that can advance the understanding about how tourists construct their experiences.

## **4. RESULTS**

With a deductive approach it's possible to establish perspectives that we will further develop empirically. The semiotic theory allows proposing the following view:~

### **Broad concept of signs of the destination**

A semiotic sign can be defined as anything that represents a reality (the *object*) and carries a potential meaning about it. This broad conception of sign allows an understanding that the tourist experience can be envisaged as composed by a myriad of effects of signs.

### **Representation as an unconscious process**

Zaltman (2003) considers that human beings process unknowingly most of the influences they encounter in their world and within the semiotic theory Chandler (2007) argues that human beings interpret things as signs most of the times in an unconscious way. In this sense, we believe that the apprehension of signs that composes the experience of being in a destination is made most of all unconsciously by tourists.

### **The previous knowledge influences the tourist experience**

Peirce's theory allows the understanding that when the potential knowledge that signs carry is integrated in the perceptual spaces of the person who assimilates it, this process, besides being mostly unconscious, happens accordingly to the previous expectations, values, beliefs, social and cultural conditionings, lifestyle, tastes, life projects and all idiosyncrasies that make up each person sense of self (Mollerup, 1997; Fournier and Mick, 1999; Thellefsen, Bent, Danesi and Andersen, 2007). Thus, the

semiotic theory of the processes of representation explains how experience is indissociable of all the elements that compose the tourists' self, namely the personal expectations and the knowledge already gathered before arriving at the destination.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The encompassing view of the tourist experience as processes of representation allows the understanding that every cue or touch point between the place and the tourists is a semiotic sign that carries meaning. So, the experience can be regarded as the holistic result of the apprehension of signs. A semiotic approach unveils that the tourist experience results mostly of unconscious processes that are conditioned by all the previous knowledge and the idiosyncrasies of each tourist.

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