



THERMAL TOURISTS' EXPERIENCES, DISCOURSES AND VALUES

Martín Gómez-Ullate García de León
Universidad de Extremadura, Spain

122

Gómez-Ullate García de León, M. (2017). Thermal tourists' experiences, discourses and values. *Tourism and Hospitality International Journal*, 9(2), 122-129.



Resumo

O impacto das novas tecnologias, principalmente a utilização da internet como forma de interação nas redes sociais nas actividades de marketing, permite delinear estratégias e formas de comunicação apelativas e originais no setor de turismo. Tornando-se crucial para que, o mesmo, sobreviva nesta era cada vez mais globalizada e diferencie os seus produtos e serviços, de forma a motivar os utilizadores da rede social e proporcionar aos mesmos, o desejo e a necessidade de interagir ou, ainda, a motivação para experienciar o que cada região de turismo pode lhe oferecer. Esta investigação tem como principais objetivos identificar e comparar as diferenças de interação entre as páginas das regiões de Turismo de Portugal Continental, com o intuito de perceber quais dessas regiões mais se beneficiam de sua presença nas redes sociais (no caso o Facebook), como ferramenta de marketing estratégica, na procura por obter maior notoriedade e estímulo ao envolvimento com os consumidores. Com esse intuito, desenvolveu-se uma análise bibliográfica sobre temas como Web 2.0, Marketing Turístico, redes sociais, envolvimento do consumidor. Posteriormente, uma análise de conteúdo e desempenho dessas páginas de regiões de Turismo de Portugal Continental no Facebook, utilizando-se de métricas digitais, entre março e maio de 2015, para comparação e apuramento de resultados. Verificou-se que, a quantidade de informação disponibilizada pela página não tem uma relação direta com o envolvimento com o consumidor e que existem muitas diferenças entre o envolvimento dos utilizadores com cada destino estudado.

123

Palavras-chave: Facebook; regiões de turismo de Portugal Continental; interação; marketing turístico; comunicação digital.



Abstract

From participant observation and in-depth interviews, this work deepens in the motivations, conducts, values, evaluations, etc. of thermal tourists in Spain and Portugal. In-depth interviews and anthropological approaches, not only gather useful information as questionnaires, like what thermal balnearies has the informant visited or how many times, but also subtle information about likes, dislikes, values, images; complex evaluations that go beyond the scope of a closed questionnaire and that are really useful prior to any sociological enquiry and marketing campaign.

Thermal resorts are very special places, where leisure and tourism, mix up, or at least, share space with disease and therapy. There are some baths and thermal towns, as Baños de Montemayor in Extremadura (Spain), still very conditioned by Senior Citizen programmes (centralized by the Institute of Elder and Social Services –IMSERSO– through a specific thermal programme. This programme prioritises by this order, income level, degree of need of a thermal treatment (respiratory and rheumatologic, first), age and other variables as pertaining to a large family.

Cultour+ Strategic Partnership funded by Erasmus programme, is a project focused in cultural tourism and European Cultural Routes, centring in particular in “Historical Thermal Towns and Sites”. Partners in the six countries composing Cultour+ (Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Poland and Bulgaria) are researching on thermal tourism, doing diagnosis of concrete case studies and coaching projects dealing with thermal towns. It is very important for any project devoted to thermal tourism, to understand the problematic of the places and the mentalities and values’ systems of users.

Social anthropology, with adaptive qualitative methodology, can significantly add value to thermal tourism research, analysing words, observing practices and thinking on values behind them.

Results will characterize the different typologies of users, discourses and values.

Keywords: Thermal tourists; Social anthropology; Cultour+ project; discourses; experiences; values..



Introduction

Innovation and Capacity Building in Higher Education for Cultural Management, Hospitality and Sustainable Tourism in European Cultural Routes (CULTOUR+) is a Strategic Partnership (SP) of universities, local governments, SMEs and NGOs funded by the programme Erasmus+.

Participating organizations share the concern, expertise and experience in proving that cultural management, sustainable tourism and European Cultural Routes and Heritage can be a source to promote creative, high-quality work for young graduate and postgraduate entrepreneurs. As well as SME generation, networking, co-working and clustering.

Cultour+ coordinates research in cultural routes, specially focusing in pilgrimage routes and in the European Route of Historic Thermal Towns to help improving tourism and cultural management of those routes. An important dimension of this research is to know about thermal tourists and their concerns. Some of the results toward this aim are presented in this article.

Literature review

Concepts and terms

There is no universal agreed definitions for thermal tourism and thermal tourists. In the fashion of strange labelling, thermal tourists are called curists by some authors. (Duman & Kozak, 2010).

For Taskov, Metodijeski, Boskov and Filiposki (2011), “thermal or spa tourism can be defined as visit and staying in specialized facilities that provide an opportunity for healing and relaxation with the use of the thermal water”.

In a different sense, Spanish Institute of Statistics (INE, 2015) defines

Spa and wellness tourism as the one including “trips made with the main purpose of enjoying stays in spas, thalassotherapy centers or other specialized centers to receive massages, beauty or health treatments (thinning, detoxification, etc.) when they are not by medical prescription”.

In the National Tourism Survey (Encuesta de Turismo de Residentes (ETR)) the Secretary of Tourism uses a restrictive definition that would exclude the majority of thermal facilities users in those countries where thermal treatments are funded by national governments (as the INSERSO programme in Spain). However, why these patients should not be included?, Don't they have an impact in the supply and local development as other users do? Don't they make a choice of the balneary where they will do their treatments?

Research on thermal tourists

Although thermal tourism is a growing sector, especially interesting by its potential for enlarging tourists' stay and for breaking seasonality (Garín-Muñoz, 2009) attracting more and more attention from businessmen and researchers, the academic literature about thermal tourism and thermal tourists is scarce. “Thermal tourists” perception are not considered, for example, in monographs as Erfurt-Cooper's Health and wellness tourism: Spas and hot springs (2009). We can find, at the present, 893 results in Scholar Google with the search “Thermal tourism” and only 12 with “thermal tourists” (29 with



“thermal tourist”). This means, it has been done little effort still to reflect on thermal tourists and to know about their values, motivation and practices.

It is, thus, very important we progress in contributing to this scarce literature with studies like ours adding interdisciplinary value to the state-of-art with the special contributions from anthropological approaches that transcends and questions simple findings based in questionnaires and scales.

Studies done in thermal tourists use normally quantitative approaches, like Structural Equation Models used by Emir & Saraçlı (2011) who conclude that while “Cleanliness of Private Units’ has the greatest influence on ‘Private Thermal Unit’ features, the perception of ‘Additional Services’ has it on ‘General Physical Features’ on tourists’ level of satisfaction with thermal tourism”.

Kaşlı, & Öztürk (2014) do field research in the TR41 region in Turkey, implementing a survey to 384 thermal tourists (or as they name them, “thermal tourism visitors”). The conclusions from this survey that the authors offer in an article that refer to thermal tourists are the following:

Many of the customers belong to the young and medium aged generation. This group goes for holiday with their children. They complain about the absence of the children activities sites regarding sports and fun in case that think to the region again (sic.). The insufficient activity sites for the children shorten the duration of stay at the centre. (...) It is a great indicator for a thermal centre if the customers are happy with the services and with the centres and if the customer revisits or recommends their friend or relatives (83 %) to showed us that the customers are mainly coming from the surrounding areas.

For the case of Macedonia, Taskov, Metodijeski, Boskov and Filiposki (2011) summarize the “Survey on foreign tourists in accommodation facilities, 2009” published by the State statistical office of Republic of Macedonia, providing some demographic traits. Foreign thermal tourists in Macedonia are:

- “craftsman by profession and other related workers”,
- “most of the tourists are above 50 years old”
- “prevailing visitors are with secondary education”

As in all standard surveys about tourists we will find some information about motivations (“the visit is usually because of health reasons”), loyalty (“tourists” previously stayed in the spa center (and) would like to stay again”), satisfaction (“Nature, personal safety, service by the personnel and diet are rated as very good, and the possibility of excursions, congresses and road infrastructure as good. (...) Tourists are satisfied with housing, nutrition and hygiene in the spa. The only negatively rated are the opportunities for sports and cultural events”), average length of stay (9 days).

This information is completed with other that should be nuanced to know more about the profile, motivations and habits of thermal tourists, since we do not know if they are the result of an election among alternatives or they are forced by the conditions of the place as “Vehicles which they use is a car” (is there other means to get to the thermal resort?), “(tourists) pay in cash” (is there any other way of paying?), “most (tourists) are fed in a room or outdoor spas”.

In the conclusions, Taskov, Metodijeski, Boskov and Filiposki (2011) do some remarks, based on observation, interviewing or other sources not specified, that give more a complex picture of real problems of balneary: “Tourists may feel bored and isolated, sharing the space with “sick” people”.



Methodology

Anthropology situates discourses in life stories and contrast discourses and practices to deepen in further meanings. For it matters about literality and meaning of words but also about values and emotions, its methods and results are highly valuable for marketing, branding, building upon image and identity.

A highly valuable result of an anthropological research is a good questionnaire, adequate to key research questions but also to the public to which it is directed. This will allow survey's results to be useful to its purposes.

We are doing in depth interviews to thermal tourists taking in account different ages, nationalities, incomes, professional and educative backgrounds to register and analyse discourses and practices and build on the oral history of thermal tourism.

In this sense, as happens in anthropology, the significance and relevance of research results are given by the complexity and diversity of discourses found.

Results and discussion

In-depth interviews and focused life stories bring to the research a myriad of topics left uncovered by standard questionnaires. They show the affective value and the height of tradition and family emotional links, as well as the nuances of classism and different cultures and life styles that share the same space but with very different views.

It is quite different to click a box on the scale of importance of cleanliness for private units than to register in an audio recorder the following:

“The spas are anathema (for me). To the hammam I rarely go now-a-days. It was a fashion and I liked it, but now I have the impression that is a place a bit dirty, I think popular culture go there, people go there to paw each other. A bit porn, a bit dirty. I don't like it. I go to the balneary where the water is thermal.” (MGL, Woman, 68)

Original: . Los spas anatema. Al hammam ahora voy poco, porque hammam fue una moda y me gustaba pero ahora tengo la sensación de que es un sitio un poco guarro, creo que la cultura de masas, va la gente ahí a sobarse, un poco porno, un poco guarro, no me gusta, ya no me gusta ir al Hammam, porque pienso que van así, yo que sé, las parejitas. No, yo voy a un balneario donde el agua sea termal, que sé que es un lujo imposible porque las grandes piscinas, termal pero tratada.

This woman appreciates some factors that are not measured by standard questionnaires as the possibility to have access to free thermal water for bathing in a common space besides the balneary as it happens in Alhama de Granada (Spain).

A poet herself, is a special customer, that highlights very particular aspects of the thermal sites,

Lobios (in Galicia) inspired me. In Lobios I caught my great poem Aqua Originis, because there, the romas, the gold, the silver, the thermae. Thus, they are places... (MGL, Woman, 68)

Original: Lobios me inspiró... en Lobios cacé mi gran poema Aqua originis, porque allí los romanos, el oro, la plata, la terma. Entonces son



sitios... Aqua Originis, uno de los poemas más bonitos que he escrito hasta el momento.

In depth interviews are good also to question questionnaires and surveys. We saw that in Macedonia that has an extension as a country of about 25.513 km², thermal tourists, though using cars, found low opportunities for sports and cultural events. All the contrary happens in this interview, in which cultural events and interesting places are considered in Galicia that has a total extension of 29,574.4 km².

And I am also in a very privileged situation. I have a car and I am normally in environments where you can visit many things. And they know it, for example, in Lobios they put a lot of impressive things that you could go in Galicia. (MGL, Woman, 68)

Original: Y luego yo también voy en una situación muy privilegiada. Luego también llevo coche y normal. Y entonces, normalmente estoy en entornos donde puedes visitar muchas cosas.y ellos lo saben, por ejemplo, en Lobios ponían una cantidad de cosas que podías ir impresionante de Galicia.

Anthropological methodologies as participant observation, mysterious shopper, in depth interviews to significant agents and actors should always be a first step in the process of a survey. One of the most valuable outputs of an anthropological research is to build a good set of questions for a survey.

They are also very convenient to approach to broader publics, combined for example with museology (Gómez-Ullate, 2008), going beyond the academic and professional circles where the cultural universe of thermalism is framed.

Conclusions

As we have stated, there is very little literature about “thermal tourists” and the existent works are based in little detailed profiles. Designed surveys in the sector do not go much deeper than annual national surveys.

There is also a lack of consensus about the concept of thermal tourists, including or not those thermalists that go by medical prescription. We have defended in this article and stated some reasons for broad definitions including all thermalists (but local residents) in the concept and accounting of thermal tourists.

The processes of standardization of surveys and the limitation of space for presenting scientific research result in a very simple and succinct characterization of the thermal tourist profile, preferences, values, emotions and experiences.

Anthropology can add a very important keystone in the research of thermal tourists experiences, motivations, values, at least in three different ways: first, opening the available information in thermal tourism to new discourses and indicators; second, helping reformulate questionnaires to register more complex and relevant information; third, broadening the audience targets of scientific literature in thermalism

References

Erfurt-Cooper, P., & Cooper, M. (2009). Health and wellness tourism: Spas and hot springs. Channel View Publications.



- Emir, O., & Saraçlı, S. (2011). Determinants of customer satisfaction with thermal hotels. *Anatolia–An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 22(01), 56-68.
- Duman, T., & KOZAK, M. (2010). The Turkish tourism product: Differentiation and competitiveness. *Anatolia–An International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 21(1), 89-106.
- Garín-Muñoz, T. (2009). Tourism in Galicia: domestic and foreign demand. *Tourism Economics*, 15(4), 753-769.
- Gómez-Ullate, M. (2008) Un proyecto museológico de las relaciones entre portugueses y españoles In: Pereiro, X., Risco, L., & Llano, C. (Eds.) *As fronteiras e as identidades raianas entre Portugal e España*. Vila Real: UTAD.
- INE (Instituto Nacional de Estadística) (2015) Encuesta de Turismo de Residentes (ETR) Proyecto. http://www.ine.es/proyectos/turismo/proyecto_ETR.pdf
- Kaşlı, M. & Öztürk, D. An investigation on thermal tourism in Bursa, Eskişehir and Bilecik, *Global Journal on Advances in Pure & Applied Sciences [Online]*. 2014, 04, pp 13-20. <http://www.worldeducation-center.org/index.php/paas>
- Taskov, N., Metodijeski, D., Boskov, T. and Filiposki, O. (2011) Thermal-spa tourism in Republic of Macedonia. In: *Challenges and performance of post socialist tourism in Central Eastern European Countries, 2011*, Bucharest, Romania