

# CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCE, ESSENTIAL FACTOR IN DESTINATION BRANDING: A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

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**Abstract:** *The theoretical framework of the article falls within the realm of consumer culture regarded as symbolic consumption, with focus on the experiential aspect of the consumer culture. The analytical framework of the article, on the other hand, falls within the realm of communication studies, i.e. semiotic perspective upon consumption, with focus on visual, symbolic consumption of objects. The research boundaries being delineated, the article presents the results of an in-depth analysis of signs of tourist experience as expressed in travel narratives. The aim is to suggest considering consumers' experience of a place when building a destination brand. Destination branding consists of several phases and what the article brings forward is intended to be an element of the first phase, that is analysis and strategic recommendations for developing a destination brand.*

**Key words:** *consumption experience, semiotics, destination branding.*

## 1. Introduction

“If people do not travel, they lose status: travel is the marker of status. It is a crucial element of modern life to feel that travel and holidays are necessary” says J. Urry (2002a) in his reference work on tourism, viewed from a social and cultural perspective, making appeal to Feifer (1985 apud J. Urry 2002: 4, 5). Following the same idea in order to ground their work on destination branding, N. Morgan, A. Pritchard and R. Pride state that “choice of holiday destination is a significant lifestyle indicator for today’s aspirational consumers and the places where they choose to spend their squeezed vacation time and hard-earned

income increasingly have to have emotional appeal, high conversational capital and even celebrity value” (N. Morgan, A. Pritchard and R. Pride, 2004: 4).

Given the increasing value of the visiting-and-seeing-a-place product, the place, like any other product to be consumed, is submitted to branding strategies developed to take something common and improve upon it in ways that make it more valuable and meaningful (the concept of branding analyzed by P. Kotler, 2006).

N. Morgan, A. Pritchard and R. Pride are right to say that “places currently offer the greatest untapped branding opportunities” and in this study, which is

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part of a tourist communication strategy framework, we advocate the idea that Romania offers a great branding opportunity; yet, a clear and sustained, long-term communication strategy must be envisaged.

One side of the strategy is, as S. Anholt reminds us, to understand consumers' mindspace "the way in which consumer logic works, or can be encouraged to work, in each target country and each target audience" S. Anholt (2006: 37).

It is true that an accurate branding strategy should also include locals' mindspace since "place brand management is a collective activity embraced by residents and smaller trade operators" (N. Morgan, A. Pritchard and R. Pride, 2004: 15). This is the other side of the strategy. Taking into account the cultural endowment of a particular place, its values, visions, emotions, not as destination marketers would want them to be, but as locals regard them, would give uniqueness to the place and all actors involved in a destination branding would meet and satisfy their interests. The question raised by the aforementioned authors "Why do destination marketers so often ignore a place's unique cultural attributes in the rush to promote sun, surf and sand, or lake, land and mountain?" (2004: 15) illustrates the disregard of local cultures when designing a brand.

This local culture-branding aspect, like in many researches, is beyond the scope of this article, where we focus particularly on consumers' profile. However, we find it important to mention that at the time we started the original research, we considered the destination marketers, i.e. individual local and private tour operators, and the consumers for a particular travelling segment as forming an epistemic community, sharing similar social and cultural knowledge and values,

in this case, respect and love for nature and natural things, in other words, nature, picturesque, authenticity and ecology-oriented gaze. This makes us advocate the approach to destination branding as a sub-branding process within the context of "increased market segmentation" directly linked to "multiplication of types of holiday and visitor attractions based on life-style research", as well as the context of "consumers increasingly dominant and producers much more consumer-oriented" directly linked to "rejection of certain forms of mass tourism and increased diversity of preferences", as J. Urry (2002b:151) mentions when describing the shift to post-Fordist consumption and the influence on tourism.

Therefore, out of this 'community' of actors involved in reshaping the image of Romania as a destination, we 'particularize' the consumers and the consumption experience, which is an essential facet of the strategic recommendations for developing a destination brand. We focus on a particular category of consumers, those oriented towards "non-mass forms of production/consumption", the "non-tourist" (J. Corrigan, 1997), the green tourist, the "moral tourist" (J. Butcher, 2005), representatives of the "new service class" (J. Urry, 2002a) and on the visual, symbolic manner they consume the destination.

## 2. Corpus and Methodology

### 2.1. Corpus

The corpus is made up of a significant number of travel narratives, i.e. 531, extracted from the guest books of 10 ecotourism-oriented tour operators, all of them involved in promoting a particular type of tourism, namely ecotourism.

Even though the tourists writing in the

guest books did not write down their occupation so that we might label them as belonging to the “service class” (J. Urry, 2002a) oriented towards nature and wildlife appreciation, we can assume they are intellectual, considering the hobbies they have, such as horse riding, discovering new species of plants, learning about rural cultural life, which are basically specific to intellectuals, and their travel writings, which focus particularly on nature and landscape-related impressions, the latter one falling within the attributes of the higher class who, as Bourdieu (1984: 120), quoted by J. Urry (2002a: 81), reiterates, “favour bare wood interiors, and activities like mountaineering, hiking and walking, which represent the intellectual’s taste for ‘natural, wild nature’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 220). In addition, taking into account J. Urry’s statement that says that “It is the intellectuals who best exemplify the ‘romantic gaze’”, (2002a: 81), J. Butcher’s (2005) reference to the “New Moral Tourist” who “really wants to experience the country and its people” and for whom “a rough-and-ready experience is a virtue” (2005:78), Corrigan’s (1997) inclination to the untourist who “*is out to track down authenticity*”, “*cares for people, maintains unspoiled environments, authenticity and value-for-money*” (1997:145) or Poon’s (1993) definition of the new type of tourist looking for authenticity, novelty, spontaneity and adventure, keen to learn about the natural environment and new cultures (Poon, 1993, apud G. Hughes, 2004: 499), and having in view the main references tourists make to natural environment and landscape, we may definitely maintain that the profile of the tourists writing in the guest books submitted to analysis matches the profile outlined by the above mentioned researchers.

## 2.2. Hypothesis and Methodology

The hypothesis on which we ground the research is that the consumption experience provides a sound basis for developing the destination brand. In order to test the hypothesis we considered the corpus presented above, which was submitted to an in-depth semiotic research regarding the construction of the tourist space. In this article we present solely the results of the semiotic approach for the purpose of this article, an attempt to convince that brand building is essentially a communication-oriented process.

Consumption is approached semiotically in the light of the new and emerging theories that consider consumption from a semiotic perspective, focusing on the significances of what we consume more than on what we consume, as we are going to illustrate in the following chapter.

The semiotic scholars that made our research possible are, on the one hand, C. S. Peirce, who framed a semiotic scheme, sign-object-interpretant, explaining the sign that refers to something other than itself – the object and that is understood by somebody: that is, it has an effect in the mind of the user—the interpretant (J. Fiske, 1990), and, on the other hand, R. Barthes (1997), who proposed a semiotic scheme on two levels of significance, denotative and connotative, describing the interaction occurring when the sign intersect with the feelings and emotions of its users and with the values of their culture (J. Fiske, 1990).

Therefore, the signification scheme built by R. Barthes positions us at the level of connotation and the semiotic model built by C.S. Peirce positions us in the core of the relation within the sign, at the second level of signification by means of the interpretant, “the mental concept produced both by the sign and by the user’s experience of the object” (J. Fiske, 1990: 42).

### 3. Symbolic consumption of objects

One of the assumptions founding the research is that we live in a consumption society, where it is not the object that you consume but the meanings attached to the object that is important. This hypothesis is based on the definition that J. Baudrillard 1996 [1968] gives to consumption:

“Consumption is neither a material practice, nor a phenomenology of “abundance”; it is not defined by the food we digest, by the car that we drive or by the oral or visual substance of images and messages, but by turning all of them into signifying substance: consumption is virtual totality of objects and messages already transposed into a more or less coherent discourse. Consumption, in order to make sense, is a systematic manipulation of signs”. (J. Baudrillard, 1996: 130 [1968])

Consumption came into the preoccupations of researchers in communication sciences, especially from a semiotic perspective on consumption. C. Campbell (2005) supports this idea, following those launched by J. Baudrillard, Barthes R. and P. Bourdieu, emphasizing that “It has become almost routine for theorists to employ a communicative act or expressive paradigm when focusing on consumption; with the consequence that consumer actions are not viewed as real events involving the allocation or use of material resources (or even as transactions in which money is exchanged for goods and services) so much as symbolic acts or signs: acts which do not so much ‘do something’ as ‘say something’, or more properly, perhaps, ‘do something through saying something’”(C. Campbell, 2005: 112).

M. Featherstone (2007) also originated part of his research on the consumer culture in writings of French theorists, especially J. Baudrillard and P. Bourdieu,

his aim being to explain postmodernism not only as cultural movement produced by artists and intellectuals but as everyday experiences and practices which can be deemed postmodern. M. Featherstone's approach to consumer culture and lifestyles of contemporary consumers, consumption of dreams, images and pleasures, partly outlines the consumer profile in this research article. One of the perspectives on consumer culture that Featherstone identifies is that of “emotional pleasures of consumption, the dreams and desires which become celebrated in consumer cultural imagery and particular sites of consumption which variously generate direct bodily excitement and aesthetic pleasures” (M. Featherstone, 2007: 13). Emotions may be lived, perhaps even more intensely, due to imagination and dreams, and when a good is consumed symbolically (gazed at, dreamt about, talked about, photographed and handled), it produces a great deal of satisfaction, adds the author (M. Featherstone, 2007: 16).

Therefore, since we talk about pleasure and emotions generated by the symbolic consumption of objects, we talk about the cultural economy where, as J. Fiske (2009) says, “it is the pleasure and significances” that are the most important; thus, objects are important economically not culturally. Continuing the idea of J. Fiske, in cultural economy objects become “a text, a discursive structure of potential significances and pleasures” (J. Fiske, 2009: 27). Therefore, the consumption acquires a new cultural dimension, in the light of the fact that “commodities move beyond their utility functions and assume certain cultural and symbolic meanings, production and consumption are seen as complements, feeding off each other in an endless cycle “C. Lury, 1996 apud I. Ateljevic, S. Doorne, 2005: 291). In other words, “consumption as cultural form has

emerged to acknowledge the importance of culture in ensuring consumption, through which leisure and tourism have become significant elements in contemporary capitalist societies” (I. Ateljevic, S. Doorne, 2004: 292).

### **3.1. Tourism, visual and symbolic consumption**

As is well known, place branding is marked by several elements, i.e. tourism, exports, governance, investment and immigration, cultural heritage and people, “tourism promotion as well as people’s first-hand experience of visiting the country as tourists or business travellers” ranking first in creating the reputation of a nation, as S. Anholt (2007) emphasizes. S. Anholt (2007: 25) underscores that tourism “is often the loudest voice in “branding” the nation, as the tourist board usually has the biggest budgets and the most competent marketers”. This is the reason why tourism identifies with the concept of destination branding and is the object of our analysis in terms of visual, symbolic consumption.

The tourist culture, essentially visual culture, offers the largest space for the consumption of images and construction of significances through the ‘tourist gaze’ (concept introduced by J. Urry in 2002). It is the tourist gaze that justifies the approach to tourism as a complex form of consumption that involves a particular way of seeing. The tourist gaze is, on the one hand, “directed to features of landscapes and townscapes which separate them off from everyday experience” (J. Urry, 2002a: 3). This gaze is anticipated both through images and through texts whose narrative structure is intended to follow the signs that tourists seek for. On the other hand, the tourist gaze is “constructed through signs, and tourism involves the collection of signs” (J. Urry, 2002a: 3).

Tourism is, therefore, “consumption of images, representations, especially visual experiences” (M. Paterson, 2006: 118). These observations may be related to those of C. Jenks (2003) who, even if he does not introduce the term of tourism in his perspective on visual culture, agrees that the term of visual culture, conventionally used to signify painting, sculpture and architecture, could be taken to refer to all those items of culture whose visual appearance is an important feature of their being or their purpose (C. Jenks, 2003: 16). Therefore, we may consider that tourism is part of this visual culture, particularly because we believe that tourism is at the heart of what the author calls ‘ocularcentrism’ of Western culture (C. Jenks, 2003: 16).

The tourist gaze is implicitly linked to consumer and visual culture, moreover, to the experience-centred consumer culture” (N. Wang, 2000) because, as the author mentions, the experience-centred consumer culture “is characterized by a cultural orientation towards the consumption of experiences as a meaningful activity, together with the associated images and feelings attached to such consumption (N. Wang, 2000: 193). Tourist experiences, from those anticipated, imagined, to the real ones, are an example of turning the consumption of goods into consumption of significances attached to goods through experiments, this transformation finding its origin in what Lee calls “dematerialization of commodity forms or consumer goods (W. Lee, 1993: 135 apud N. Wang, 2000: 194). Viewed in this context, “the consumption of experiences (or experiential commodities) is in fact the consumption of a certain period of time itself, namely the consumption of ‘a good time’, time being “what the experience-centred consumer culture is based on” (N. Wang, 2000: 194). As far as this paper is concerned, one of the assumptions is that

present time is consumed to recreate the past time and the tourist experience is constructed through appeal to signs and significances belonging to the romantic period. Therefore, we underscore the symbolic consumption of tourist objects analyzed within the framework of a semiotic paradigm, i.e. semiotic scheme outlined by C.S. Peirce.

Viewing our approach to the first phase of destination branding, that is analysis and strategic recommendation that take into account the consumers' 'mindspace', the ideas outlined by C.M. Echtner (1999) when citing Brown (1992) are very important for our semiotic approach to tourist consumption "Tourism is presented as a form of symbolic consumption whereby tourists display their identity and social roles through the destinations they choose. Thus, it is argued that tourism destinations represent specific symbolic experiences. The goal of tourism promotion becomes the portrayal of these symbolic experiences using the appropriate sign systems (CM Echtner, 1999: 52).

In other words, when building a destination brand it is essential to consider tourists' knowledge, attitudes and ideologies because tourists choose selectively not arbitrarily and they select in accordance with the significances they attach to what they want to see.

Therefore, we have to know what tourists want to see, what they want to visually consume. As we mentioned above, due to significant market segmentation we advocate the idea that the process of branding cannot be universal anymore but divided. The Golden Stag festival is not successful anymore because the universal taste has disappeared, but ARTmania or Fusion festivals are flourishing because the tastes are now diversifying. By making this comparison, our intention is to maintain that mass-tourism is not 'best-selling' anymore and it is replaced by growing

niche tourism such as ecotourism, adventure tourism, volunteer tourism, tribal tourism, gastronomic tourism, etc (examples given by M. Novelli, 2005), which calls for the development of sub-brands.

In this paper we present part of the results of an in-depth research where we considered the niche market of ecotourists and the related niche tourism, that is ecotourism, results that might work as instruments to produce more efficient discourses when promoting an ecological-oriented tourism strategy that implies the moral, picturesque, adventurous and authentic relation to the natural and cultural environment. The study into the signs of tourist consumption experience of ecotourists travelling in Romania may represent a starting point for building an eco-oriented sub-brand of Romania as tourist destination

#### 4. Results and discussions

In the light of an ecotourism-oriented research, the signs analyzed are the signs that make up the cultural and natural landscape. At the first level of signification, as defined by R. Barthes, these signs are named as landscape categories as follows:

Natural Landscape:

- Physical features (mountains, and other physical features)
- Flora and Vegetation (forests, flowers, meadows and other types of vegetation)
- Fauna (wildlife - animals and birds)

Cultural Landscape

- Human Settlements (villages, houses, churches, castles, human beings)
- Landscape use (pastures and hey meadows, orchards, land work and others)
- Landscape interactions (clothes, crafts and other jobs specific to the countryside, animal breeding, functional elements of landscape such as carts, materials used in

different activities or at home, culinary products)

Yet, what interests us is, in terms of research into the first phase of destination brand building strategy taking into account the current consumption paradigms, the significances tourists attach to the signs they visually consume.

Starting from the motivations of the new tourists that researchers M. Hall and S. Page (2006: 347) identified in a study conducted in New Zealand by J. Higham in 1997, i.e.

- to experience natural beauty and outstanding scenery.
- to experience remote and relatively untouched nature.
- to experience distinctive flora, fauna and natural systems.
- to escape civilization and engage in something completely new and different.
- to engage in the physical challenge that natural areas present.

and corroborating these motivations with the semiotic model, more precisely with the C.S. Peirce's interpretant seen as tourist experience, we transferred the signs that make up the landscape at the first level of significance, that of denotation, to the second level of significance, by means of the interpretant that we divided into four types of experiences that the ecotourist has in Romania:

- experience of protected natural and cultural landscapes;
- experience of a different, authentic lifestyle;
- experience of natural beauties and picturesque landscape;
- engagement in physical challenges of natural and cultural landscapes.

The analysis at the second level of significance shows us how the landscape elements are connoted in the light of the

tourist consumption experience, leading, in the light of the concepts added to the signs at first level of significance, to four signs we identified as:

- *Ecology and Environmental protection* – concept 'Romanian protected species, habitats, protected human settlements';
- *Tradition and Authenticity* – concept 'specific Romanian way of life';
- *Picturesque* – concept 'typical Romanian landscape';
- *Adventure, Discovery and Learning* – concept 'wilderness, adventure, learning'.

The tour operators endow the signifier with the value of the concepts 'typical Romanian landscape' and 'Romanian protected species, habitats, protected human settlements', noticing that all the tour agents form an epistemic community and share the values of the ecotourism-related ideologies.

However, the travel impressions are the results of the visual consumption of signs making up the landscape and of the experience related to these signs.

Our study shows that most of the tourists that wrote in guest books attached significances endowed with the concepts 'wilderness, adventure, learning', followed by 'specific Romanian way of life', 'typical Romanian landscape', 'Romanian protected species, habitats, protected human settlements'. Therefore, the tourists build their own experience in the light of the significances they add to the signs they consume. The dominant signs in the tourists' travel narratives are Adventure, Discovery and Learning, followed by Tradition and Authenticity, Picturesque and Ecology and Environmental protection.

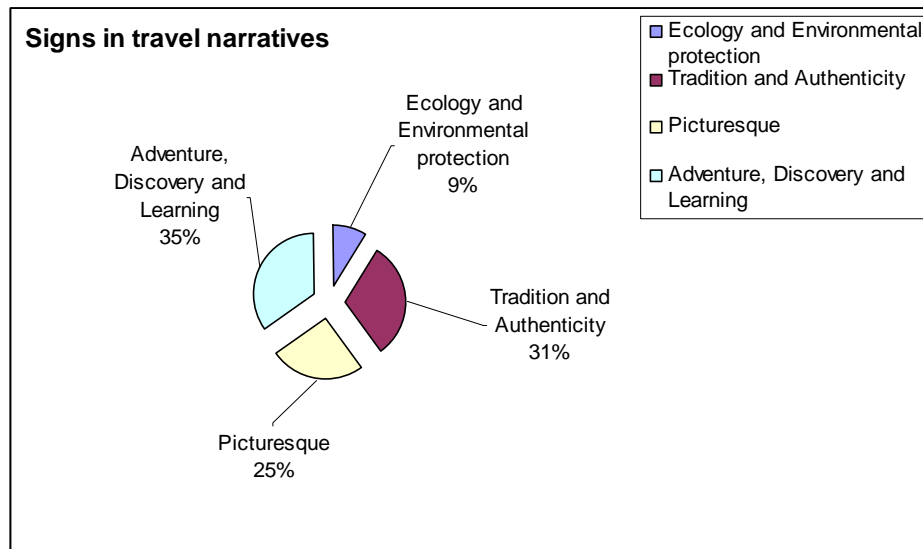


Fig. 1. *Classification of signs in travel narratives*

The research shows that it is the adventure, discovery and learning that stir up the new tourist and, therefore, the destination brand should evoke, as S. Anholt says, “certain values, qualifications and emotional triggers in the consumer’s mind about the likely values of any product that comes from that place” (S. Anholt, 2006: 26).

Moreover, going at a deeper level of the research, we notice that it is the human settlements (villages, houses, churches, castles, human beings) that rank first within all the four signs, which emphasizes that it is the cultural landscape that has the strongest impact upon the tourists. The new tourists gaze upon and symbolically consume the human settlements from the morality perspective – of protecting the landscape, from the authenticity perspective – of landscape regarded as authentic, from the romanticism perspective – of integrating the human being into nature and from the adventure perspective– of engaging in the world and life of the locals.

These are essential factors when formulating strategic recommendations in destination brand building. Theoretical backgrounds, supported by a strong analytical research, are the main ingredients to successfully create a destination brand.

## 5. Conclusions

The consumption experience viewed both theoretically and analytically as a practice of meaning, is essential in elaborating communication and public relations strategies and models in the field of tourism.

Given the worldwide development of both economic and cultural dimension of tourism, it is important to place ourselves within the framework of various research paradigms in order to reach our goal. The positivist paradigm is generally aimed for marketing research and the interpretative paradigm for communication research. We agree with C. Daymon and I Holloway in that “The aim of quantitative research



grounded in positivism is to explain phenomena based on what is already known about public relations and marketing communications. While this is relevant if you want to examine questions about cause and effect, or to measure and evaluate something, the linear focus and assumptions of stability associated with positivist research make it less suited to investigating the complexity and transformability of contemporary communication relationships” (2010: 5).

The article is integrated within the interpretative paradigm and unlike many studies on consumption experience, this one views the consumption from an interpretative, semiotic perspective, which gets us closer to consumer’s feelings and emotions. By doing this, we may identify distinct segments of consumers with distinct values, knowledge, ideologies for whom we may finally create distinct, individual-oriented destination sub-brands.

The research revealed in this article is intended to be an example in an endeavour to provide the basis for a strong communication strategy in destination brand building, with the consumer as main element in the equation. We should not forget that a branding programme “takes creativity, objectivity, branding sense and a deep understanding of the way in which consumer logic works, or can be encouraged to work, in each target country and each target audience” (S. Anholt, 2006: 37).

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