

SPORT ATTRACTIONS: ADDRESSING ISSUES OF COMMODIFICATION AND AUTHENTICITY IN TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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Introduction

The thesis of this theoretical discussion paper is that sport has unique advantages over other types of cultural tourist attractions when considered in the context of commodification and authenticity. Leiper's (1990) tourist attraction system is used to position sport as an attraction and to argue that sport reflects local culture. These sport attractions are then considered in the context of commodification and Wang's (1999) framework of authenticity. It is concluded that characteristics of sport attractions such as the uncertainty of outcomes, the role of athletic display, the kinaesthetic nature of sport activities and the tendency for strong engagements in sport all combine to make sport a sustainable cultural tourism attraction.

Context

One of the fundamental criticisms of tourism is that it leads to pseudo-events that fail to reflect the true culture of a place (Boorstin, 1964). This criticism suggests that in the very process of catering to visitors' needs and wants, tourism operators create packages and foster experiences that corrupt the cultural essence of the destination. In effect, the destination becomes a stage, featuring performances by hosts that are removed from their real lives, their real homes, and their real culture. During the development stage of a destination lifecycle, hosts try to balance their performances with their private lives by spatially and temporally structuring their communities into a series of front stages where they perform and back stages where they escape from the visitors. As the destination progresses through its lifecycle, this balancing act becomes increasingly difficult. In effect, a destination can be destroyed by its own success as more and more tourists come, resulting in a community dominated by a front stage with the cultural uniqueness of the destination lost to visitors and hosts. At this point, Plog's (1972: 4) warning that "[d]estination areas carry with them the potential seeds of their own destruction" comes to fruition.

This line of argument suggests that the commodification process destroys, or at least significantly alters, the culture of a destination community. In doing so, the authenticity of culturally based tourism products and attractions at the destination is compromised or lost. As tourists sense this loss, they will substitute other products or destinations in their search for authenticity. From the perspective of the hosts, the loss of cultural authenticity is likely to be even more destructive, as it is tied closely to their collective identity. Under these conditions, tourism activity in the destination is unsustainable.

Clearly, if destinations want to avoid this course of development they need to adopt strategies that protect their cultural integrity. This is particularly challenging for destinations that see place-based cultural attractions as one of their competitive advantages. Previous work by the authors suggests that sport attractions may be more robust than other types of cultural attractions in the face of this challenge (Hinch & Higham, 2004). More specifically, the thesis of this paper is that positioning sport as a commercial tourist attraction has unique advantages over other types of cultural attractions when considered in the context of commodification and authenticity.

Discussion

The starting point for this paper is that sport represents a unique type of cultural tourist attraction. The authors have expanded on this argument elsewhere (Hinch & Higham, 2004; Higham & Hinch, 2003) where Leiper's (1990) widely cited paper on tourist attraction systems is used as the basis for considering sport as an attraction. The authors then critically consider the status of sport as a tourist attraction in terms of the commodification of sport and tourism, and in terms of authenticity. In terms of the former, it is the authors contend that in a sport tourism context the process of commodification itself is not automatically destructive. Notwithstanding the globalization of many sports, attractions based on local sporting events, activities and nostalgia tend to reflect local culture however manifested in unique playing styles, emotions or fundamental values. In contrast to other types of cultural

attractions, those based on sport have the potential to be more robust and resilient. For instance, one of the characteristics of sport is that the display of physical prowess is an integral part of many sporting activities (Loy, McPherson & Kenyon, 1978). Spectatorship, therefore, is a natural part of sport. Furthermore, the suggestion that the locals tend to view tourist-oriented products as diacritical marks of their cultural identity (Cohen, 1987) fits very well with the view that sport is a major determinant of collective and place identity (Nauright, 1996; Bale, 1989). In hosting visiting spectators and sports enthusiasts, the locals are aligning collective identity with destination image. Finally, despite the challenges of commodification in terms of the changes that it inevitably brings to the meaning of these tourism products, it is unlikely to destroy the authenticity of sport, given its characteristic of uncertain outcomes. Sport attractions therefore offer the promise of authenticity not available through other types of attractions.

Conclusion

Positioning sport as a tourist attraction is a form of commodification but the natural role of display in sport and the ability of sport attractions to align collective identity and destination image appeared to protect sport's cultural "soul." Similarly, an assessment of sport in terms of Wang's (1999) three types of authenticity suggests that sport attractions have distinct advantages in terms of constructive or symbolic authenticity as well as existential or experience-based authenticity. Uncertainty of outcomes, the role of athletic display, the kinaesthetic nature of sport activities and the tendency for strong engagements in sport represent some of the key characteristics of sport that protect cultural authenticity. To the extent that sport attractions can facilitate authentic cultural experiences, the likelihood that tourism and more importantly, local culture can be sustained in a destination is greatly enhanced. From an applied perspective, the argument presented in this paper suggests that sport attractions offer a useful tool for the strategic development of a destination. They offer visitors authentic cultural experiences in destination spaces that seem to function simultaneously as front and back stages. While destination managers have long capitalized on sports as tourist attractions, they can be more strategic in the pursuit of a sustainable culture and sustainable tourism.

Selected references

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