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Title	An insight into the product culture as a commodity for tourism, with the British National Tourist Organisation perspective
Authors	Maccarrone-Eaglen, A
Type	Conference or Workshop Item
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/44073/
Published Date	2005

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An insight into the product culture as a commodity for Tourism, with the British National Tourist Organisation perspective

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Abstract:

The complexity of the notion of culture has been the object of multidisciplinary studies attempting, with difficulties, to attribute definitions, boundaries and classifications to this polyhedric concept expressed in symbolic representations. Culture may signify unity whilst presenting a variety of components. The tourism industry treasures culture as a product to attract visitors through international promotions. This study is based on a case study strategy, adopting the British National Tourism Organisation, VisitBritain, as a unit of analysis. It was found that, as a product, culture maintains its ‘singularity and plurality’ making the identification of its structure equally complex. Moreover, in becoming a commodity, culture is partially traded as some of its components carry intrinsic values for the culture holders and as the manipulation of symbolic representations of culture might present the risk of misrepresentation of the product and its authenticity, therefore commodification of culture is fully unattainable.

Keywords:

Culture, product, tourism, commodification, symbolic representation.

Introduction

It is argued that tourism originated by the desire of people to experience ‘other cultures’ (Richards, 1996a), considering culture as the complexity of symbolic representations, external to the human essence, that are embraced by a population, in sharing their social life (Lloyd & Thomas, 1998). On the other hand it is claimed that culture has its roots in tourism because, when consisting of a flow of people searching for experiences possibly related to a different culture, it represents an exchange of meanings with an economical benefit (Robinson, 1999).

In part the relationship between culture and tourism concerns the extent to which the tourism industry commodifies culture as a product to be sold in the international market and, therefore, across cultures.

This paper aims to contextualise the multifaceted concept of culture and its relationship with the tourism industry focusing on the analysis of the versatility and intrinsic values attributed to culture when, in its function as a product, it is employed in the tourism trade. Therefore the paper provides background literature on the concept of culture considering different disciplinary perspectives and an overview of the tourism position. The empirical exploration focuses on a collection of qualitative data from a case study on VisitBritain, the National Tourism Authority in Britain to find out how culture is conceived and used to encourage inbound tourism. The paper finally reports a comparative qualitative analysis between the literature and the empirical data.

Culture

The concept of culture appears to be one of the most complex because of the variety of aspects included in its meaning. Lloyd and Thomas (1998:2) explain the original meaning of the word culture as derived from the cultivation of nature applied to cultivation of humankind. In this context it can be seen as “the ensemble of artifacts and aesthetic practices of a developed civilisation” and the process of different historical moments that shaped the cultivation of people (Jenks, 1995, Storey, 1996). Culture can be seen as the ensemble of aesthetic preferences accepted by a group (Lloyd and Thomas, 1998) communicated and recognised through symbolism (Jenks, 1995) and not genetically transmissible (Eagleton, 2000).

Wallerstein (1995) identifies two terms in the attempt to classify culture: high and low culture. High culture referring to a set of characteristics and productions that are different from others, it can be conceived as a means by which upper class people maintain superiority in relation to other social groups, therefore it is related to cerebral outcomes, such as production of philosophical or artistic work. Popular (or low) culture refers to specific characteristics that broadly differentiate a group from another, for example a religious group or an ethnic group. In this context popular culture might be subjected to influences and changes and, therefore the word culture entails a very superficial meaning.

Popular culture is a dynamic concept (Fiske, 1996) and represents everyday life as structured by the individuals belonging to a group. It also includes the influence and input that these people might have on the society itself, for example through dissemination of information, popular music or television, with programmes specifically encoded in popular activities or popular tabloids reporting facts and fictions for a popular audience (Storey, 1996).

The anthropological perspective asserts that culture is what differentiates humans from animals because it implies all the symbolic representation they apply out of the context of their nature to their social interaction. This phenomenon is conceived with the view of perpetuating their social characteristics in other individuals in order to enlarge their heritage (Jenks, 1995).

In a general way, Hall (1997:2) reports an anthropological definition of culture, which is “whatever is distinctive about the ‘way of life’ of people, community, nation or social group”. In addition Medina (2003) alleges that the term culture should consider something existing regardless of its definition instead of referring to old past practices of people.

Culture is not a static concept and it has a polyhedric aspect. With this background every culture can be seen as ‘non pure’ because of the assimilation process from other culture and, consequently, ‘stratification’ formed by layers of cultures or elements of them. The idea of stratification is linked to cultural conquests, where invaded populations had to accept their ‘cultural inferiority’ as the invaders imposed their own cultural practices. Languages are a reflection of the stratification phenomenon with structure, syntax and grammar that implies gender consideration, patriarchy and stereotyping (Jenks, 1995).

This process created the idea of ‘cultural inauthenticity’ (Jenks, 1995). However, since culture is a dynamic concept it is implicit that it might be subjected to changes. Culture is an assembling of artefacts with can be authentic or not, the concept of authenticity lies in the first symbolism that was adopted as an aesthetic formulation of behaviour and, therefore, authenticity is almost impossible to achieve (Shepherd, 2002).

One can argue that human beings are the fundamental focus of unification causing a tendency toward globalisation in different cultural aspects. More developed societies have created the so-called ‘cultural imperialism’ by pushing nations with less resources to absorb their lifestyle through the media (Featherstone, 1995), colonialism, political and economical attributes (Tomlison, 2001), though, on the contrary the advent of new technologies and communication has contributed to human awareness diversity (Featherstone, 1995).

Lloyd and Thomas (1998) provide another perspective of culture in its identification with the State, reinforced by Featherstone (1995), whose view implies the totality of ideas, interpretations and the integration of a nation. Jenks (1995), instead, contrasts this concept claiming that culture has more identification with the more static concept of ‘civilisation’. This word comes from the Latin word ‘civis’ which describes a sense of belonging giving culture a dynamic interpretation with attribution to socialisation, cultivation of a mind or a person, education, colonisation, native population and high culture.

Culture and tourism

The relationship between culture and tourism dates back to the Seventeenth Century when aristocrats were undertaking travels for cultural purposes giving birth to a phenomenon called ‘cultural tourism’ with travellers prevalently interested in ‘High culture’ (Richards, 1996a). Cultural tourism, in the form of interest for low culture later developed, traditional food consumption is an example that is considered as a cultural action in the same way as visitation of historical sites and monuments (Hjalager & Antonioli Corigliano, 2000).

Another aspect of the relationship between culture and tourism is found in language learning, also defined as a ‘serious’ form of leisure. Bilingual people are, to some extent, considered as bicultural, and studies

show that language learners are perseverant in understanding the acquired culture and undertake frequent visits shaped, in particular, by career and personal life (Kennett 2002).

Tourism originated by the desire of people to enrich their culture; therefore it was considered an instrument to enhance cultural exchanges and the economy (Robinson, 1999). Therefore, tourism presents benefits also for locals, not just economically, but also in learning from the interaction with tourists as it increases 'exchanges of lifestyle'. Tourism increases the level of understanding of differences and it is also a reason for maintaining pride of identity (Besculides, Lee & McCormic, 2002).

However, as a substantial amount of cultural products is managed by the tourism industry, a variety of implications for the social and economic environment may arise. The income generated by the selling of cultural products has a positive impact on the host economy; consequently organisations are stimulated to fuel the tourism market though this creates a problematic circle that may impact on the product itself, the audience, the host community and the environment (Richards, 1996b). Tourism has the potential to emphasise differences between groups of humans from different countries, which according to the type of interaction can create tension among the involved populations (Duggan, 1997).

Mass tourism is, in fact, related to the affluence of tourists in bulk in a destination, having little interaction with locals (Cooper et al., 1996) and developments of performances for tourism purposes for a re-creation of authenticity (Besculides, Lee & McCormic, 2002).

Some anthropological studies have also focused on the understanding of the relationship between culture and tourism in the reasons for people to travel and the effects that this exchange has on cultures that are consumed by tourism (Shepherd 2002).

Bourdieu's opinion, mentioned in Richards (1996b), is that the consumers of culture should have the cultural capital in the field of the 'culture purchased' in order to appreciate the product and participate in the consumption. Research demonstrates that the level of education of the tourists is related to their choice of cultural experience, not only among mature consumers but also among younger people, whose relationship for the demand of cultural products is proportionate to their level of scholarship. Occupation is also an important factor as a substantial proportion of cultural consumers are involved in the field, therefore, culture appears to be arranged to appeal to the middle class and to educate the masses Richards (1996b).

However, on the other hand, cultural products are often promoted on a large scale in tourism, more for the economic benefit than for cultural purposes. In addition research identifies that there are about 6000 cultures in the world, only a minimal percentage of these groups is seeking to experience diversification (Robinson, 1999).

"The offering of cultural products and practices for money" (Medina, 2003:2), known as commodification (or commoditisation), opens a debate on the costs and benefits that culture could face or gain and on the extent to which it can have a detrimental effect on the meaning of culture itself.

Richards (1996a) asserts that cultural products have two aspects. One, the technical, is related to sites and monuments, the high culture approach, which however, has a limited scope of activities. These include:

1. "archaeological sites and museums
2. architecture (ruins, famous buildings, whole towns)
3. art, sculpture, crafts, galleries, festivals, events
4. music and dance (classical, folk, contemporary)
5. drama (theatre, films, dramatists)
6. language and literature study, tours, events
7. religious festivals, pilgrimages
8. complete (folk and primitive) cultures and sub-cultures" (Richards, 1996a:22).

The second aspect, defined as conceptual, is mainly related to low culture and is also considered as ethnic tourism, since it focuses on the experience of the interaction with other cultural identities (Richards, 1996a). As any exchange this implies intention and commodification implies manipulation of both high and low culture (Shepherd, 2002).

The commercialisation for economic purposes is believed to deprive culture of its original characteristics in terms of its societal role (Robinson, 1999).

However, a weak form of commodification is attributed to high culture, as historical features and arts will remain of the same value whether or not they are used to attract visitors who have to pay to have access to them. A strongest form of commodification is, instead, attributed to low culture as popular rituals, habits and ways of life are reconstructed for the benefit of tourism, even if they are no longer actual. This fact might have great potential for conflicts between population, public sectors and business organisers, when these do not agree to this form of commercialisation, as they may see it as not in harmony with their missions and beliefs. Commodified culture is also promoted by packaging it in brochures with images and word descriptions, which may reduce considerably the value of the particularity and unique characteristics of a culture (Robinson, 1999).

According to Halewood & Hannam (2001), the analysis of the process of commercialisation of culture can be seen under two different perspectives, the first identifies commodified culture into 'nostalgia', as it aids heritage tourism in keeping cultural values and maintaining diversity against globalisation. The second, instead, presents commodified culture for tourism purposes as 'staged authenticity' related to reproduced traditions, copies of the original presented as authentic experiences. These two concepts have been a reason for debate on commodification among researchers on this controversial matter.

The reproduction of culture for tourists, in items and signs that have a relative cultural value then sold as souvenirs, is believed to deprive culture from its original meaning, as those items are not designed for their original purpose. However, this form of commodified representation seems to be unavoidable because tourists want to itemise their experience in something to take with them (Richards, 1996a).

The concept of a souvenir is, in fact, a symbolic representation of a society and it may have significance for the tourists; the meaning might be private as when related to a personal interpretation. The symbolic item can also have a collective meaning, as it can be seen as an 'indication of nostalgia' of an experience that aims to produce feelings and remembrance of something that, probably and paradoxically, no longer exists (Kasfir, 1999).

The effects of this process can be seen positively in the light of 'sustainability' as it helps to preserve traditions (Richards, 1996b). This is the case, for example, of the Native American Cherokee, who have organised themselves in a co-operative to produce handicrafts for tourists. This activity helps to maintain ethnicity and inform tourists about their culture, creating a stimulus for pride on their identity (Duggan, 1997). Therefore, tourism's commodification of culture can be seen as a help to preserve traditions and, moreover, it adds new performances and icons to a culture (Medina, 2003).

However, as commodification is the transformation of processes into a product, for the benefits of tourism, one argument is whether culture has to be maintained in a static position to be considered valuable or whether there are positive aspects in the 'evolution' approach. However, to measure the negative impact of tourism on culture it is necessary to have knowledge of a pre-tourism situation. However, the identification of an original moment (almost the search for a static reality), which represents authenticity, is difficult to achieve (Shepherd, 2002).

This contrasts with the motionless view of culture from Zukin, cited by Richards, Goedhart & Herrijgers (2001), who defines 'real culture' as the built capital of a population, the factor that shapes the inhabitants lifestyle; therefore, under this perspective, it is almost impossible to refer to 'new' fields and 'new' products.

Commodification of culture into products for the benefit of tourists, can offer only the illusion of the past but may no longer reflect the reality (Shepherd, 2002). This process is believed to spoil the meaning of authenticity of culture and, in the long term, it may reduce or destroy cultural meanings or transform it into a different culture no longer appealing to tourists motivated by authenticity (Medina, 2003).

Authenticity and anything related to strong symbolic value has a powerful appeal to tourists wanting to experience culture. In particular recent research showed that one reason of interest in general was atmosphere, created by liveliness, language and food (Richards, Goedhart & Herrijgers, 2001). However, the concept of authenticity is also related to the view of the tourist who is interested in culture, for example international visitors to the Great Wall in China did not appreciate the fact that the wall was a copy. Chinese tourists, instead, are not concerned about the reproduction but about what the wall represents (Shepherd, 2002). In addition, research undertaken shows that tourists bring their knowledge, perceptions, imagination and emotions towards their experiencing another culture's authenticity and these elements influence their assimilation and their engagement with the past. Therefore, to a certain extent, authenticity may become a personal concept in which the tourists encode meanings (McIntosh & Prentice, 1999).

Nevertheless commodification and reproduction may weaken the value of authenticity, though this has increased the demand of commodified culture and in some cases, as previously examined, made the non authentic desirable (Shepherd, 2002).

McIntosh & Prentice (1999), to a certain extent, use 'inauthenticity' interchangeably with commodification, in fact they speak about non-authentic culture as a replication of the past becoming commodified for mass consumption. Therefore at a superficial level this process is like a tension between past and present, while at a deeper level it can be seen as an emphasis on the identity of a culture whilst providing an interesting 'product' for the tourist.

The dynamics of this context is ideal in conditions where the local people are involved and able to commodify only part of their cultural patrimonies and forbid access to tourists to aspects that are important for them to remain local, (rituals, objects and traditions). Conversely, in becoming subjected to an economic price, those, again, might lose their original meaning (Shepherd, 2002).

The Mestizos, descendent of the Maya, in Mesoamerica, for example, welcome tourists to visit the ruins and the 'old culture'. Research shows that Mayan rituals were still carried out by the Mestizos; these practices later disappeared. However some of the Mestizos do identify themselves as partially Maya because they are still able to speak Mayan, in particular some tourist guides who show tourists part of the 'original' culture related to their language. Moreover they perpetuate this culture by producing handicrafts, with the help of archaeologists' actions and the tourism industry; in this interaction it is also possible to see a compromised view of the relationship between culture and authenticity, created and maintained, and used to understand more recent studies (Medina, 2003).

The concept of authenticity is also used in marketing to attract tourists. However, this process may provoke debates among cultural stakeholders. The Viking heritage in Europe, for example, has opened an argument between archaeologists and marketing traders, the first wanting to present a crude and accurate exhibition of authentic pieces, the second promoting 'authentic replicas' without too much concern, leaving tourists doubting about the real value and originality of what they see. However the degree of authenticity of exhibited items might vary according to the importance of the museum (Halewood & Hannam, 2001). Nevertheless, one can also argue that marketers and operators may be able to reproduce a culture such that, paradoxically, the interest of tourists could shift towards the imitation rather than the authentic experience (Salomon, 2001).

Method

In order to explore further the employment of the product culture for tourism purposes, a case study approach has been taken. The case study is considered a strategy that presents the advantage of embracing any type of research method suitable for data collection, including quantitative data, and provides a structure within which data are assembled and analysed (Yin, 1994; Stake, 2000).

This study is characterised by a single case study, as it is directed to investigate VisitBritain's practices in their employment of culture as a product. The rationale for this choice is that VisitBritain is the National Tourist Authority (NTA) in Britain and it is the agency in charge of marketing culture abroad. Therefore it offers the possibility of collecting information from one source that acts as a representative for the whole promotions of British national cultural tourism operations. The collection of data from private and public organisations around the British territory would be difficult in terms of time, diversity and analysis of qualitative information from a significant sample. Moreover different needs and aims in organisations would dilute the centre of attention on culture.

VisitBritain's marketing of culture is centralised with application of geographical and demographic segmentations of the consumers and embraces culture and arts from the past and present. Marketing focuses on the need for learning (Richard, 1996b).

The unit of study was therefore VisitBritain. Data collection was of qualitative nature, the method used was in depth semi-structured interviews carried out by the author to those considered key actors in marketing culture internationally at VisitBritain Marketing department in London. Data were tape recorded and fully transcribed for a detailed qualitative analysis, which implies a complexity of procedures that cannot always be predicted in advance and which aim to clarify subjects of study (Miles & Huberman, 2002). The analytical process was the result of a series of inductive and deductive steps. Analytical induction can be seen as a way to direct research to confirm or challenge evidences and concepts through attention to details and contradictions (Punch, 2000).

To corroborate that information, an examination of some of VisitBritain literature on culture (brochures, Internet webpage, posters and paper advertisements) was undertaken using a semiotic technique. Semiotics is “the study of signs and the way they work” (Fiske, 2001:40). It studies the relationship between signs adopted in a specific social interactions as constituents of meanings and the way in which they relate to each other in codes (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993), therefore connotations were extracted from the semiotic examination of imagery, descriptions and captions used to promote characteristics of ‘British culture’.

Outcomes

The findings’ definition of culture is in a broad sense ‘lifestyle’. It appears to be relatively unsophisticated and general compared to the philosophical and multifaceted approach considered in the literature, where the attribution of meanings to the notion of culture is very complex and definitions are not always able to capture the entire significance of the term. Culture, as a result of human performance, appears to be considered in high regard by the theorists trying to explain its meanings and its importance for humankind. The wide-ranging term lifestyle, however, seems to be similar to the concept of ‘social’ culture (Jenks, 1995), as the way of living of a group. This might be comparable to the idea of popular culture, to which Wellerstain (1995) attributes the external and consequently superficial (though essential) meaning of symbolic representations that allow interaction in the group. However, the inclusion of the perspective of emerging process and evolution of a society (Jenks, 1995) in addition to the concept of State and ‘national culture’ by Featherstone (1995) and Thomlison (2001), might be implicitly seen in the definition.

However, this idea of ‘lifestyle’ seems to be a partial contradiction the other information given. First of all, culture was addressed more as a sector than a product, since the marketing emphasis was on the elements identified as cultural products. Secondly, these elements, specified later, are more related to the concept of high culture (Wellerstain. 1995) that find ground in the production of knowledge and intellectual heritage; however, on the other hand, one can argue that development of knowledge is part of the way of living of a group. VisitBritain’s distinctive cultural products were very similar to the definitions that Richards (1996a: 22) refers to as a technical dimension of commodified culture, as it is possible to see from the following comparative table 1.

Table 1 – Culture’s elements comparison

Richards (1996a:22)	VisitBritain
Archaeological sites and museums	Museums and Galleries
architecture (ruins, famous buildings, whole towns)	Style and Design (including crafts, fashion and architecture)” History, heritage, archaeology, legends, coastline, countryside
Art, sculpture, crafts, galleries, festivals, events	Cultural events and Festivals
Music and dance (classical, folk, contemporary)	Performing Arts and Entertainment
Drama (theatre, films, dramatists)	Film and Television
Language and literature study, tours, events	Literature
Religious festivals, pilgrimages	
Complete (folk and primitive) cultures and sub-cultures	Sport

As a 'technical' dimension of culture, these elements have a limited scope (Richards, 1996a) and, in addition, they seem to emphasise that culture, as a commodity, concerns more tangible and visible aspects of the concept. Moreover the identification of culture as a product needs to be seen through the various attributions, their usage as commodities in tourism and the extent to which these attributions are a reflection of culture itself when considered as products for sale.

Symbolic representations

Culture as the artefacts and aesthetic practices of a civilisation (Lloyd and Thomas, 1998) and culture as values, customs and belief of a population (Eagleton, 2000) are reflected in the idea of symbolic representations identified by Jenks (1995). Therefore the elements identified by VisitBritain might be seen as symbolic representation of the 'British culture', commodified for tourism purposes, and, as previously considered generally related to high culture, the weakest form of commodification identified by Robinsons (1999).

The inclusion of expressions of popular culture are limited in VisitBritain's list of elements. This, presumably, since commodification of popular habits, in the sense of everyday peoples's life implies a more complex process, as the symbolic representations in which they are shown constitute part of each individual life and may not be 'seen' without 'reproduction' of practices. However in part 'British popular culture' was represented in the literature with images and words designed to 'produce a feeling' of some aspects of British life, for example the 'football culture' in the promotion of Liverpool as city of culture and the 'pub culture and eccentricity'. In addition the experience of engaging with locals and involvement in popular culture may be seen as a subjective choice during the visitors' experience. The involvement between host and guest, as a personal experience, is, to a certain extent, not commodifiable. In addition, as Shepherd (2002) considers, local practices, objects and traditions can be devalued if subjected to economic price. Moreover, a further consideration might be the fact that, in this context, every day traditions and practices would exist for a different purpose than their original one.

VisitBritain claims that only traditions and authentic products are promoted, in fact, considering that popular culture finds limited space in the variety of products offered, which are an extensive range, the need to commodify popular practices is relatively limited for the organisation. In this context and considering that culture, even if it is external and social, belongs to the people who live it, becoming part of their being, one can argue that part of low culture, the most intrinsically related to the humans who live and believe it, is uncommodifiable. Hence the commodity culture might be identified with what culture mirrors, such as its symbolic representations.

VisitBritain's concept of symbolisation of culture is referred to the images and wording put in the texts of their promotional material, to convey messages and meanings to the tourists. In this context, as symbolism is considered the external manifestation of a culture, what in reality is communicated is the symbolic representation of symbolic representations. This second layer of symbolic representations, adopted for promotional purposes, should be reflexive of the first layer of meanings to avoid the creation of a 'new culture' that does not represent the original and whose 'symbolised authenticity' might be compromised by the process of communication.

On the other hand the promotional process can affect this possibility of distortion, in particular if the objectives of promotions are directed to attract consumers through manipulation of the 'product' to make it appealing. In consequence this might create the mentioned second layer of meanings that, in reality, mirror a different entity than its original.

Finally, according to VisitBritain, consumers of cultural products belong to all demographic segments; however a prevalent interest for culture is shown by mature people, this is also supported by Richards (1996b). VisitBritain does not refer to the influence of education, occupation and social class in the type of consumer research that they undertake and the extent to which this sort of information would affect the organisation marketing. Therefore it appears, as Robinsons (1999) alleges, that their promotions of culture are addressed to a wide apparently undifferentiated audience. On the other hand additional geographical segmentation is undertaken, which shows the importance of the knowledge of general cultural issues, related to the population of a nation, which can influence consumer's attitude in the choice of a product. For example, according to VisitBritain research, Italians are interested in arts and fashion, therefore they are attracted by cities where museums, galleries and shops might be found. The Dutch, instead are

interested in outdoor activities, therefore they are attracted by a natural landscape different from the one in their own country.

Conclusion

The attempt to encapsulate the meaning of culture into a single, universally acceptable definition has not been achieved. The polyhedric 'feature' of culture has been the subject of studies within several disciplines, from anthropology to politics, creating different lines of thought, each of which have emphasised one or some characteristics of culture more than others. Theories acknowledge the complexity of the idea of culture and its influence on human behaviour, its identification with something abstract, for example values, practices and taste, and, at the same time with visible artefacts, for example art production and architecture. However, culture is also considered as a unified entity that gives a group of people a sense of belonging through the sharing of values and meanings encoded in symbolic representations.

In spite of the various levels of depth given to the meaning of culture, it appears that even if it is loosely considered as a 'lifestyle of a population', according to the British perspective, this meaning still implies the concept of identity and belongings. This, therefore, 'authorise' the owners to commodify their possession for common benefits and 'establish' the extent to which they are prepared to sell across the boundaries of their culture.

The study of the marketing practices of VisitBritain reinforce this concept as research of other 'lifestyles' attempt to identify characteristics of the buyers that could be attracted by some characteristics of the cultural attributes of a country by commodifying some of the elements that represent these attributes. The variety of ways of encoding process and meanings given to symbolic representations of cultural values, across populations in the world, has, in fact, fuelled the human desire of learning about other human beings. In consequence this has led to the movement of people to and from places to experience different cultures. In a contemporary setting, tourism has played one of the key roles in the development of these exchanges invigorating a desire for knowledge and experiences by creating the structures and infrastructures that have facilitated travelling and communication and promoting culture across the national borders.

Although culture is believed to appeal to mature and educated tourists, possibly with a high economic financial position, it appears that in some ways culture or, more precisely, some aspects of it, are of interest to a wider international audience. Therefore commodification and promotion of the product culture appears, to a certain extent, to be based on 'self stereotyping' in order to give the commodified element a circumscribed connotation identifiable within another stereotyped context. In this function culture acquires the role of a product, traded for commercial purposes and has been subjected to controversial forms of commodification. These are a 'weak' commodification, by trading and promoting high culture, and a 'strong' form in the attempt of marketing popular culture, which, to some extent appears not commodifiable as it belongs to its members.

Because of its nature, the product culture cannot be identified in one concept and it is rather conceived mainly with some of the visible and tangible elements, predominantly related to high culture. VisitBritain's perspective seems to substantiate this issue, linked also to the concept of authenticity, with the identification of an explicit portfolio of elements of high culture. Popular traditions, beliefs and the encoded meanings, belong in fact, to the members of the cultural group, therefore, to be transmitted and traded, they have often to be 'replicated' for the benefit of tourists and therefore cannot be authentic. It is difficult to judge to which extent the concept of cultural authenticity is applicable to culture as a product for tourism, since events and practices, in which tourism is involved, can be recreated.

In addition the scale of commodification of the culture of a group appears to remain controlled by the members, who promote what they believe to be acceptable without ruining the values of their culture or emphasising particular characteristics that reinforce the sense of belonging and identity, i.e. British eccentricity.

As culture is substantially constituted of and manifested through symbolic representations, regardless of any type of classification, what is identified as a product or products are themed representations of symbolic representations, with different levels of significance. This could embrace a universal meaning, in the elements of high culture, or a subjective and unique feature in the personal experience of the tourist through the consumption of popular culture.

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