

# Place image and urban regeneration in Liverpool

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## Abstract

It is recognized that to date there has been an overemphasis on received images and their impact on the selection and evaluation of tourist destinations; this paper will therefore focus on projected images. While the merit of both semiotic and discursive approaches to analysing place image are recognized, it is proposed that the discursive approach is more appropriate as it takes into account the advantage of deriving meaning from its broader context. Drawing on examples from Liverpool, UK, the discussion indicates firstly, how projected image is formed by a complex and dynamic network of agents and secondly the implications for urban regeneration. Particular reference is made to the influence of the media, the circle of growth and the promotion of culture. Importantly, it is argued that while projected images can influence perceptions, the consumer also plays a key role in this process. It is concluded that while image campaigns can play a role in the regeneration of the urban landscape, drawing on the cultural dynamics of the local population could enhance it further.

**Keywords** Culture, image, Liverpool, regeneration, socio-cultural implications.

## Introduction

The importance of place image is increasingly recognized, particularly in place marketing studies (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996; Selby and Morgan, 1996; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Pritchard and Morgan, 2001; Gallarza *et al.*, 2002; Pike, 2002; O'Leary and Deegan, 2005). One focus has been the use of image campaigns to gain competitive advantage. It has been demon-

strated how branding is often used to reinforce the uniqueness of places, which are otherwise more or less interchangeable in consumers' minds (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996; O'Leary and Deegan, 2005). It has also been argued that image forms the basis of the selection and evaluation process. As the tourism product is to a great extent intangible, image is the only means a potential consumer has of comparing and making choices about possible holiday destinations (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; O'Leary and Deegan, 2005). The projection of distinctive images can assist in attracting tourists, because it is suggested that choices are made largely on the basis of attributes that differentiate the visit from everyday experience (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996). However, if the selection process is largely based on image, then it can be argued that it is in the light of this first impression that the visitor will evaluate the actual experience of the destination. The more the pre-visit image is confirmed, the more visitors' expectations will be met. The implications for the destination then are that if the visitor is satisfied the more likely he or she is to repeat the visit or recommend it to others (O'Leary and Deegan, 2005).

From a sociological perspective, emphasis has been given to the symbolic consumption of place image. A connection is made between sociological theories, which suggest that individuals acquire social distinction through consumption practices (Bourdieu, 1984), and the ways in which people associate themselves with the symbolic significance of the image (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996). While such perspectives are clearly valuable, it can be argued that there is an over-concentration on received images (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996; Pike, 2002) and the role of destination image in influencing tourist decision making and satisfaction (Pike, 2002).

Reviews of destination image studies (Gallarza *et al.*, 2002; Pike, 2002) underline how the topic has been treated in conceptual and methodological terms, but fail to highlight the significance of less researched areas,

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specifically the lack of critical analysis of projected images. Few studies recognize the social, cultural and political implications underlying projected images (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996; Pritchard and Morgan, 2001), and how these may be exploited in line with the interests of place marketers and depending upon whether tourists, residents or investors are being targeted (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996). Considering the recognition of how influential projected images can be (Selby and Morgan, 1996; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; O'Leary and Deegan, 2005), this area appears to deserve further consideration. This paper therefore will contribute to this field of research by arguing the advantage of the discursive over the semiotic approach to analysing place image. Then, drawing on examples from Liverpool, UK, the discussion will focus firstly, on how projected image is formed by a complex and dynamic network of agents and secondly, the implications for urban regeneration.

## Analysing place image

### Place image formation

Gunn's (1972) influential work has provided a conceptual framework for the analysis of place image. Gunn's hierarchy of place images suggests that place images are dynamic and vary according to whether they are consumed before, during or after a visit. Projected images are those that originate from various sources associated with the place and can be categorized into organic and induced images. Organic images arise from supposedly unbiased sources such as literature, education, documentaries and word of mouth. Induced images, on the other hand, are a result of the destination's marketing activities. Received or modified images represent the image, as it is perceived by the consumer. An important point to note here, is that the received image is formed by 'stimulus factors', in other words the place itself and any external factors associated with it, but also by 'personal factors', which can be understood as the socio-cultural and psychological characteristics of the perceiver (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). This would suggest that place image is not static in nature, but varies according to the point in time when it is consumed and the profile of the consumer or potential consumer.

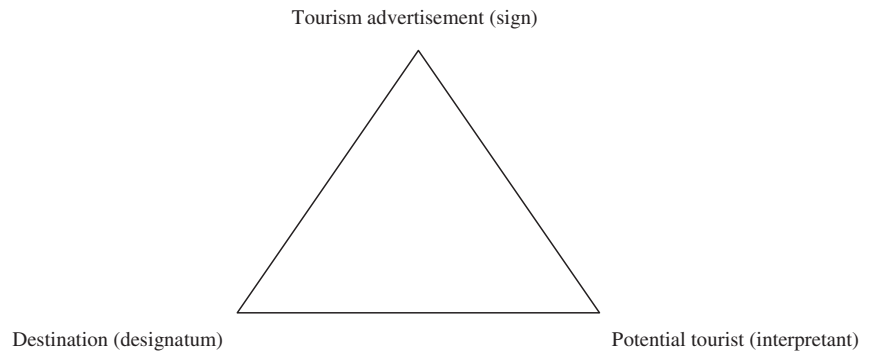
More recently, however, Gunn's theory has been challenged in terms of the terminology used to refer to these categories, and importantly it has been recognized that the distinction between induced and organic images is not as clearly defined as proposed by Gunn (Selby and Morgan, 1996; Morgan and Pritchard, 1998). Gartner (1993) identified eight 'image agents', which function as a continuum in the image formation process and which act independently but also in conjunction with each other. The implications of this development are that the impact of individual factors on the received image cannot be easily determined (Morgan and Pritchard, 1998; Hughes and Allen, 2005). For example, the impact of tourism agencies' public relations activities on the news media, or the collaboration of tourist agencies and film makers and travel programmes result in a blurring of the distinction between the individual image agents. This then emphasizes the fact that place image is a complex entity and that its analysis is not a simple process.

### Tourism representations and the circuit of culture

The above discussion indicates that image represents a dynamic process, consisting of layers of meaning. Even in the absence of visitation, its structure and formation is influenced by various factors (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Therefore, analysis of projected images in themselves can reveal a lot about the socio-cultural and political background of the place being promoted. If we accept that language, in its broadest sense, is a key form of representation, a medium for the production of meaning and that culture relates to the exchange of meaning, then it is clear to see how the language of tourism is rooted in culture, and should therefore be considered in this context (Hall, 1997).

Further to this argument, it has been noted that tourism representations comprise a three-way relationship, and therefore for them to be fully understood, each of these relationships should be explored (Morgan and Pritchard, 1998; Echtner, 1999) (see Fig. 1). The first relationship (destination/tourism advertisement) represents how the place is represented by the advertiser; the second (tourism advertisement/potential tourist) indicates how the potential tourist perceives this representation; and finally, the third (potential tourist/

**Figure 1** The tourism semiotic triangle  
– a tourism marketing rendition  
(Echtner, 1999).



destination) corresponds to the symbolic consumption of the destination. This framework echoes Hall's (1997) argument that tourism images are embedded in a circuit of culture, which reflects and creates identities, resulting in a constant interchange of production and consumption of images. What we can draw from this is that a holistic approach to image analysis, which considers the relationship between the place, the producer and the consumer, is more valuable than a simple consideration of the explicit content of the image.

#### The semiotic vs. the discursive approach

Theories of representation and language can be useful in providing a further understanding of the production and consumption of place image. Hall (1997, p. 24) identifies the reflective, intentional and constructionist approaches to exploring the representation of meaning through language.

The reflective approach supposes that meaning can be found in the object, and that language directly reflects that meaning. Applied to the concept of place image, we can see how this theory is lacking because it is clear that there is no objective image of a place, given that the meaning of a place is subject to the interpretation imposed by the various agents responsible for projecting its image.

The intentional approach, which argues that the 'true' meaning is the intended meaning which the speaker or author imposes again, is flawed, because 'our private intended meanings, however, personal to us, have to *enter into the rules, codes and conventions of language* to be shared and understood.' (Hall, 1997, p. 25). In

other words, our intended messages need to take into account the language of the receiver. In the place promotion process, ideally, messages are modified according to the profile, tastes and demands of the potential consumer. Furthermore, the intentional approach dismisses the fact that the receiver interprets messages through his/her own world view.

The constructionist approach, on the other hand, recognizes that 'neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language . . . It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others.' (Hall, 1997, p. 25). In relation to the production and consumption of place image, then, this implies that images projected by place marketing agencies draw on selected physical and conceptual elements associated with the place which will hopefully appeal to the potential consumer. The perceiver makes sense of the image according to his/her previous knowledge of the place and own personal and social characteristics, and thus does not necessarily accept the message intended by the place marketing organization. Therefore, place image represents a social construction; an amalgam of physical representations, situated in a framework of themes and socio-cultural values; a convergence of the conceptual and representational systems and values of the producer and consumer of the image.

Both the semiotic and discursive approaches to image analysis are largely based on the constructionist theory discussed above. Semiotics considers meaning and rep-

resentation through the understanding of language as a system of signs, whereas the discursive approach is concerned with the production of knowledge through language in its particular cultural or historical context (Hall, 1997). The constructionist approach was adopted by semioticians, such as Saussure and Pierce, who recognized that signs are composed of the interrelated elements of the signifier and the signified, and therefore that representations are constructed of layers of meaning. While the useful application of semiotics in destination image analysis has been recognized (Echtner, 1999), it is suggested that it is limited in that it fails to take into account the politics or impact of representations. In contrast, the discursive approach recognizes how a particular discourse can control knowledge and its impact (Foucault, 1980). Discourse can be both enabling and restrictive, in the sense that by defining a topic in a certain manner, it excludes other views, other relationships between the reader, the writer and the object. However, it is important to note that the 'power' of discourse is not governed by one element, but that it 'is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation', 'individuals . . . are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation.' (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). Regarding the texts of place image, then, we can apply Hall's (1997, p. 33) assertion that the 'reader' and the 'writer' play equal roles in the production of meaning. Furthermore, we can conclude that a discursive approach to analysing representations of place allows us to consider the socio-cultural and political relationships that lie beneath their surface and in particular the interplay of the voices of various image agents that impact on the overall image.

### Methodology

As proposed by Aitchison (1999, p. 29, in Pritchard and Morgan, 2001) 'space, place and landscape . . . are not fixed but are in a constant state of transition as a result of continuous, dialectical struggles of power and resistance among and between the diversity of landscape providers, users and mediators.' The following discussion therefore intends to argue the advantages of the discursive over the semiotic approach to analysis discussed above, in particular the benefit of deriving meaning from its broader context. Using the image of

Liverpool as an example, it will demonstrate, first, how projected image is formed by a complex and dynamic network of agents, and second, the implications for urban regeneration. Based on the premise that 'Meaning and representation seem to belong irrevocably to the interpretative side of the human and cultural sciences, whose subject matter – society, culture, the human subject – is not amenable to a positivistic approach . . .' (Hall, 1997, p. 42), the study used qualitative methods.

The data were drawn from a selection of promotional material, strategies and interviews with key informants from The Mersey Partnership, which acts as the tourist board for the region of Merseyside in general. Examples of promotional material were chosen to reflect the different markets targeted and the content of the images was analysed. The content of the tourism and marketing strategies was also analysed. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with key informants and were recorded for subsequent analysis. This provided a context for comparing references from the promotional material and the strategies. This triangulation of methods generated a number of common themes but also provided an insight into the image formation process, which would not have been possible had the images been analysed in isolation. The findings are discussed below.

### Place image and urban regeneration

After a period of industrial decline, Liverpool, like other cities (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996) is investing in tourism and its cultural heritage in order to bring about the economic, social and environmental regeneration of the city. The Mersey Partnership, and The Liverpool Culture Company, responsible for Liverpool's Capital of Culture 2008 campaign, along with other organizations, are striving to reconstruct the image of Liverpool. With the rising profile of Liverpool, this time as a place of consumption rather than of production, expectations of those consuming the city's urban landscape are potentially going to be higher than ever before. Consequently, it can be suggested that Liverpool's promotional bodies cannot afford to create expectations that they cannot meet, especially in light of the city's designation as Capital of Culture 2008 and its World Heritage Site status.

### Place image and the media

The power of the media in influencing place image is undisputed. Ashworth and Voogd (1990, p. 80) comment how cities attempting to market themselves are at a disadvantage, because they suffer from an 'antiurban bias' that is emphasized by the media. For those who are not particularly familiar with a certain place, media images often represent the 'objective' 'reality' (Avraham, 2000). Therefore, while promotional campaigns and events may be used to reposition a city, these may only serve to change certain aspects of the city's image, which is 'compartmentalized' in the mind of the individual (Paddison, 1993). The overall image, especially if that is negative, is difficult to change (Paddison, 1993; Selby, 2004, p. 25).

Liverpool, in particular, has suffered from negative representations in the press (Interview 1,<sup>1</sup> The Mersey Partnership, 2005). Promotional campaigns have been used to try and change this negative image. Figure 2 provides an example of how promotion is being used to subvert visitors' preconceptions of Merseyside as an area with a high crime rate. The image shows a padlock that is not locked and people sat outside at some kind of drinking or eating establishment. The implications are that there is no danger and that people are actually outside enjoying city life. The words 'Merseyside is one of the safest city regions' reinforce this message. On a deeper level however, the image is indicative of the interplay of discourses of different image agents. It is an attempt by Liverpool's place marketing organizations to subvert perceptions of the city as a dangerous place, held by the general public, fuelled by the media and originally instigated by not the whole, but a section of the city's population. As such the image is representative of the shifting power relations between the place, and the various producers and consumers of its image.

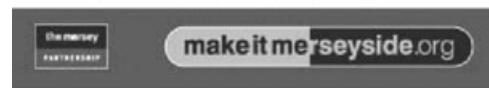
However, it is not just the pictorial representations of promotional material, but a range of promotional activities that are implemented to reconstruct the image of the city. Recent events such as the city's designation as European Capital of Culture 2008 and the awarding of World Heritage Site status have given rise

<sup>1</sup>Interview 1: Head of Tourism Sector Development, The Mersey Partnership (2005).



**Merseyside** is one  
of the **safest** city  
regions in the **UK**.

Source: Mersey Office Statistics Bureau, January 2007 (compiled from England & Wales, 12 months to September 2006)



**Figure 2** National advertising campaign (The Mersey Partnership).

to more positive media coverage. The city has 'gone from getting very very negative press to getting a much more neutral press' (Interview 1,<sup>2</sup> The Mersey Partnership, 2005). While Liverpool's image alone is not monitored, it is reported that Merseyside's image score in general increased by 11% in 2004 (The Mersey Partnership, 2005) and there were 121 positive mentions in the media (The Mersey Partnership, 2004a). Attempts to influence the image portrayed by the media include public relations initiatives such as familiarization visits, where the media experience selective features of the city. Thus, again, we see the shifting nature of the distribution of power between various image agents – the media on the one hand, and the place marketing organization on the other. The above example however, demonstrates how the impact of individual image agents becomes increasingly difficult to ascertain, given that they are working together in favour of the city. So,

<sup>2</sup>Interview 1: Head of Tourism Sector Development, The Mersey Partnership (2005).

while Liverpool's image has not been totally transformed, marketing activities have assisted in improving its image. However, the ultimate aim is to achieve even more positive press coverage (Interview 1,<sup>3</sup>The Mersey Partnership, 2005).

### Image and the circle of growth

The influence of image has also been linked to the concept of the 'circle of growth' (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996). The promotion of tourism theoretically attracts visitors, which in turn encourages investment and economic development, which reinforces a positive image and so the circle continues. Thus, image campaigns can be considered a crucial component of the circuit of culture, which reflect and reinforce power. Traditional industrial cities draw on their cultural heritage to position themselves as tourist destinations. However, this process seems to be extended even further. Suggestions that tourism destination brands are being positioned as place brands appear to be justified (Morgan *et al.*, 2002, p. 4), as image campaigns are now directed not only at potential visitors, but at potential investors and residents. Theoretically, the more attractive a place is seen to be, the more people will invest in it and the more the place will flourish.

This approach can be seen reflected in the promotional campaigns for Liverpool, which is marketed as 'A great place to invest, live, work and visit' (The Mersey Partnership, 2004b). The promotional message is exploited according to the market targeted. For example, on the one hand Liverpool is presented as a cultural centre to visitors (see Fig. 3), but on the other hand it is depicted as a thriving location in which to invest (see Fig. 2). It is implied that potential investors need not be deceived by preconceptions of Merseyside as an unsafe area, but should consider its cultural life and the opportunities this presents. If we analyse these images separately then they exist to convey the meanings described above. However, if we consider them in the wider context of promoting the city as 'A great place to invest, live, work and visit' then we can see how they are both

<sup>3</sup>Interview 1: Head of Tourism Sector Development, The Mersey Partnership (2005).



**Figure 3** National advertising campaign (The Mersey Partnership).

related to the discourse of power relations within the 'circle of growth'. Image is used to entice investors and visitors into the city region with the hope that more will follow. Based on the 'circle of growth' (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996) theory, the more investors and visitors invest in the city, the more it will be perceived as an attractive location to visit and invest in.

However, the challenge for place marketers is to be able to promote an image distinctive enough to achieve a competitive advantage. The key to this is not just producing clever slogans, but actually selling an 'experience' (Morgan *et al.*, 2002, p. 5). Nevertheless, image projection alone does not equate with successful marketing; place marketers must also ensure that the place product meets expectations. Here, word-of-mouth plays a crucial role in the formation of place image (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999). Numerous examples can be drawn from the case of Liverpool to indicate how the place product is being developed to ensure that a quality experience is provided. While the typical physical features of Liverpool's place product are being enhanced, considerable effort is currently being spent on improving customer service and co-ordinating the industry at all levels. An initiative known as 'The Liverpool Welcome' has been put in place to encourage all service providers to work together in providing quality customer service, by rewarding those who meet the mark, but penalizing those who don't. Furthermore, the product is being developed at a deeper level through collaboration with the education and training sector, who are

encouraged to promote tourism as a lucrative career and provide recruits with quality skills (Interviews 1 and 2,<sup>4</sup> The Mersey Partnership, 2005). The desired result is to enhance the image of the city by raising the standard of the tourism product and thus increase the chances of a satisfactory experience and recommendation. There are also stated social benefits such as the creation of employment opportunities. In practice, however, it appears that it is not so easy to convince local organizations of the benefits of training their employees, or to change perceptions that some local jobseekers have of the tourism and leisure industry,

‘A lot of the local people who are unemployed don’t want to work in the jobs... people’s perception of the industry is that it’s long hours, it’s unsociable hours and it’s poor pay.’ (Interview 2,<sup>5</sup> The Mersey Partnership, 2005)

Here, we see how the ‘circle of growth’ does not merely depend on the efforts of the tourism industry but also on the wider community’s co-operation. Therefore, going beyond mere pictorial representations aids our understanding of the underlying dynamics of place image formation.

### Image and the promotion of culture

It has been noted that many cities’ marketing strategies focus to a great extent on their cultural and heritage attractions (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996; Hughes and Allen, 2005). While an emphasis on culture can be beneficial in perpetuating the heritage of a place, it has been suggested that this is a strategy designed to attract the more affluent short break market (Bramwell and Rawding, 1996). This also appears to be the case with the promotion of Liverpool (Interview 1,<sup>6</sup> The Mersey Partnership, 2005) (see Fig. 3). In this sense, the marketing

organization has control over the image of the city in choosing who they wish to attract. Higher-income groups are likely to spend more and thus boost the city’s economy further and in turn the city’s overall image. However, while an emphasis on culture may be of advantage in enhancing the image of a city, it can also be problematic for a number of reasons.

Foucault’s (1980) arguments on the power of discourse are instructive here, for in choosing to represent certain features of a place’s cultural heritage, others are immediately excluded. By highlighting distinctive attributes, images are taken out of context and thus become very standardized, and promoters risk projecting an image very similar to other cities (Hughes and Allen, 2005). Furthermore, images tend to be tailored to the expectations of tourists (Hughes and Allen, 2005), which also presents difficulties because residents and tourists tend to have different perceptions of the same place, but also different expectations and usage of its cultural facilities (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990, p. 80). The ‘lived culture’, which is likely to embody the images most residents hold, is unlikely to be represented in promotional campaigns, such as in the example used here (see Fig. 3). Therefore, it has to be asked, whose representation of the city is being portrayed? Finally, and possibly most importantly, it is argued that the images projected rarely bear any relevance to the lived reality of many residents, or take any account of the reality of social problems experienced by many city dwellers (Paddison, 1993; Bramwell and Rawding, 1996). The consumption of ‘culture’ is considered by many to be beyond their means or simply of no interest.

Nevertheless, in Liverpool, an initiative known as ‘Creative Communities’, part of the Capital of Culture campaign, aims at engaging the local community in the cultural life of the city through various projects (Interviews 1 and 2,<sup>7</sup> The Mersey Partnership, 2005). These projects aim to reverse the perceptions of some who see the Capital of Culture as only relevant to visitors or to those who are likely to reap the economic benefits. This is achieved in part by encouraging disadvantaged or under-represented groups of the community to par-

<sup>4</sup>Interview 1: Head of Tourism Sector Development, The Mersey Partnership (2005). Interview 2: Tourism Skills Development Manager, The Mersey Partnership (2005).

<sup>5</sup>Interview 2: Tourism Skills Development Manager, The Mersey Partnership (2005).

<sup>6</sup>Interview 1: Head of Tourism Sector Development, The Mersey Partnership (2005).

<sup>7</sup>Interview 1: Head of Tourism Sector Development, The Mersey Partnership (2005). Interview 2: Tourism Skills Development Manager, The Mersey Partnership (2005).

ticipate in projects that allow them to represent the city in a way meaningful to them and thus they become active agents in the production as well as the consumption of the city's image. However, while this initiative may be improving the city's image locally, it could be developed by drawing further on the diverse cultural dynamics of the city's population to promote the city externally. It appears that an emphasis on culture is contributing to the improved image projected outside the city, nonetheless, the approach appears to use isolated images of mainstream culture, which seem to dilute the unique character of the city. Were promotional activities to draw more on residents' experiences this could have the joint effect of encouraging the local population to co-operate in the promotion of the city and also of increasing the congruence between images projected to visitors and their actual experience of the city.

Finally, the above analysis of Liverpool's image and the dynamic context within which it is produced and consumed demonstrate the overall advantage of the discursive approach to image analysis. As meanings are cultural, images are better understood when placed in the socio-cultural context from which they derive.

### Conclusions and limitations

The above discussion intends to indicate how the discursive approach provides a more holistic framework for the analysis of place image, by acknowledging that representations are bound in a circuit of culture involving the object, author(s) and reader(s). It follows that the meaning of representations of place is not dictated by official image agents such as marketing organizations but is caught up in shifting power relations between various image agents including diverse groups of place consumers such as visitors or residents, who often represent conflicting discourses. While marketing organizations are able to influence place image by targeting certain groups and by choosing which elements of the city to promote, their impact is difficult to ascertain when they work in conjunction with other agents or when other agents are working against them. Furthermore, as public perceptions and values often inform the overall image, the consumer of the image also becomes involved in the image formation process.

Drawing on examples from the case of Liverpool highlights these points further. Promotional images but also a range of other marketing activities are being implemented in an attempt to subvert negative perceptions. Public relations activities in particular appear to be getting the media on side. Furthermore, a connection can be drawn between the city's tourism marketing activities and the 'circle of growth' concept. Various initiatives are in place to ensure that the product is not only promoted but developed at every level in order to ensure visitors' satisfaction and thus the potential of attracting further visitors and investors. Moreover, Liverpool appears to be using its cultural assets to promote tourism. However, the images used are not particularly resonant of the unique character of the city. It is suggested that using the diverse cultural dynamics of the city's population to promote the city could reduce the risk of consumers' pre-visit image not matching the reality of their experience and could also encourage the participation of the local community in the city's cultural life, which could in turn address some of the negative issues affecting the image of the city. So, while there is some indication of the changing identity of the city, to what extent this can be sustained and to whom this applies remains to be seen.

Since so far only one element of the tourism relationship has been officially examined, that is the relationship between the destination and how it is represented by the various image agents, the conclusions that can be drawn are limited. On the surface it seems that the city is changing, however, it remains to actually engage with residents and visitors to the city in order to determine what image they hold of the city.

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