A visual analysis of a cultural tourism destination

Uma análise visual de um destino turístico cultural

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Abstract

This research investigates how a relatively unknown town that is elected as cultural capital of Europe can use visual materials to attract visitors from totally different areas in the world, particularly China. The study uses visual cues for two purposes: first, to evaluate the motivating factors that lead travellers with different cultural background to select their travel destination, and second, to explore the influence of visual communication in the promotion of cultural tourism. The research studied the impact of visual information during several stages in the visit: before the visit in the decision-making process; during the visit in the experience stage; and after the visit in the post-experience evaluation. It was found that visual material can help to frame the experience in all three stages. For that reason it is advisable for destinations to employ some kind of visual identity system management to package the city image into a clear brand.

Keywords: European Capital of Culture. Leeuwarden 2018. Chinese Visitors. Destination Branding. Flanking Research.

Resumo

Esta pesquisa dedica-se a compreender como uma cidade relativamente desconhecida, eleita como Capital Europeia da Cultura, pode fazer uso de material visual para atrair visitantes de áreas totalmente diferentes no mundo, em particular da China. O estudo usa sinais visuais com dois objetivos: primeiro, avaliar os fatores motivacionais que levaram viajantes com diferentes históricos culturais a escolher os seus destinos de viagem e, em segundo lugar, explorar a influência da comunicação visual na promoção do turismo cultural. A pesquisa estudou o impacto da informação visual durante vários momentos da visita: antes da visita, no processo de tomada de decisão; durante a visita, no estágio experiencial e depois da visita, na avaliação da pós-experiência. Descobriu-se que o material visual ajuda a moldar a experiência nos três momentos. Por esta razão, é

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aconselhável que os destinos adotem um sistema de gestão de identidade visual que os ajude a representar a imagem da cidade na forma de uma marca clara.

Palavras chave: Capital Europeia da Cultura. Leeuwarden 2018. Visitantes Chineses. Gestão e Marketing de Destinos. Pesquisa de Acompanhamento.

Resumen

Esta investigación está dedicada a la comprensión de cómo una ciudad relativamente desconocida, elegida como Capital Europea de la Cultura, puede hacer uso de material visual para atraer visitantes totalmente de diferentes zonas del mundo, especialmente de China. El estudio utiliza señales visuales con dos objetivos: en primer lugar, para evaluar los factores de motivación que llevan los viajeros con diferente histórico-cultural a elegir sus destinos de viaje y, en segundo lugar, para explorar la influencia de la comunicación visual en la promoción del turismo cultural. La investigación estudió el impacto de la información visual durante varios momentos de la visita: antes de la visita, durante el proceso de decisión; durante la visita, en la etapa experimental y después de la visita, en la evaluación de la post-experiencia. Resultó el entendimiento de que el material visual ayuda a dar forma a la experiencia en todas las tres etapas. Por esta razón, es recomendable que los destinos adopten un sistema de gestión de la identidad visual que les ayude a representar la imagen de la ciudad como una marca clara.

Palabras clave: Capital Europea de la Cultura. Leeuwarden 2018. Visitantes Chinos. Gestión y Marketing de Destinos. Investigación de Acompañamiento.

Introduction

The European Capital of Culture project (ECoC) started in 1985 on the initiative of Melina Mercouri and Jack Lang, ministers of culture of respectively Greece and France (European Commission 2013). Each year two European cities are awarded this coveted title and the past 30 years 60 well-known and less well-known cities have been granted this honour. As the title suggests, the ECoC is mainly directed at other European countries and its people. ECoC need to balance the interests of many stakeholders, both inside and outside the community (LÄHDESMÄKI, 2013; VATTER, 2014) in what Ooi et al. (2014, p. 420) call "the Poetics and Politics of the ECoC project".

This research investigates how Leeuwarden, a relatively unknown town in the northern part of the Netherlands that was elected as ECoC, can use visual materials to attract visitors from totally different areas in the world particularly China. The research is part of a longitudinal project that will monitor changes in expectations and perception of the destination from the time before the town becomes cultural capital until two years after that event. This is a first in a series of flanking research studies that monitor the occasion. The aim of this first study is primarily to investigate the attractiveness of Leeuwarden as a destination in general and specifically the quality of the visual material that is used as promotion.

Cultural visitors

Visitors of cultural sites frequently use visual information to make their choice for a destination. Besides the internet they use brochures, books, TV programs and on-line movies as visible mediators (OOI, 2002), and to minimize risk of the planned journey. Because of the lively quality, "visual material appears to be especially memorable and the salience that this confers may make it particularly forceful" (JOFFE, 2008, p. 85). This is especially relevant since "there is increasing competition for customers – who have only a limited amount of time – and growing competition for coverage by the media" (VAN AALST, BOOGAARTS, 2002, p. 208).

Recent years has seen a tremendous growth in the Chinese economy, an following that a corresponding increase in Chinese people that have both the desire and the means to visit foreign places, particularly in Europe (GUANCHA, 2014). The first years of this exodus saw Chinese tour groups who tried to cram as many European countries as possible into one trip. In later years, however, these Chinese travellers are becoming more discerning. Especially returning visitors tend to organise their tours around certain themes and spend more time in each country. Some of the themes are heritage and culture (DEDE, 2013). ECoC is a concept that fits very well in this trend.

Leeuwarden has a number of features that could make it an attractive place for Chinese to visit. It is the capital of Fryslân, a province of the Netherlands that is known for dairy farming, agriculture and water management, three topics of great concern In China that suffers from problems in these areas. In the ECoC tender Leeuwarden cleverly made use of this connection, both in the themes and content of the so-called Bid Book (2013) as in the visual imagery of the official logo (see Figures 1 and 2) and the adapted logo of Leeuwarden – Ljouwert 2018. The truth is that Leeuwarden has its own variant of the Frisian language and historically there has been tension between the capital and the surrounding country side. But for Leeuwarden with its central theme "open community" which connects Leeuwarden not only to Europe, but also to its immediate neighbours. Suddenly the town has become bilingual, adopting the official language of the surrounding province and even using the Frisian name *Ljouwert*. This is a nice example of what Aiello and Thurlow (2006, p. 158) call "the privileging of certain mythologies".


Figures 1 and 2: Official logos of Leeuwarden 2018

Leeuwarden was the birth place of Mata Hari, the notorious exotic dancer and spy during the First World War. A statue of Mata Hari is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Statue of Mata Hari

But also M.C. Escher, the world-famous graphic artist was born in Leeuwarden, incidentally in a house that forms part of the Princessehof Ceramics Museum today. Some examples of Escher's work are in Figures 4 and 5.
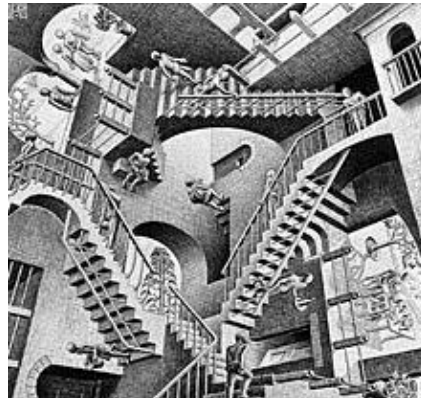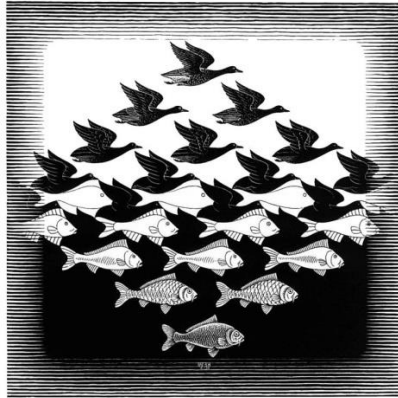
Figures 4 and 5: Esher – Sky & Water and Relativity

Escher is well known in China, and the ceramics collection of the Princessehof Museum is one of the finest outside China. Recently the museum has commissioned a series of ceramics that show the connection with Escher (see Figures 6 and 7). So with the fast growing number of Chinese visitors to the Netherlands (GOWLING, 2014) the question arose whether it would be feasible to attract Chinese visitors to this relatively unknown town.

Figures 6 and 7: Ceramics on table and Ceramics plate (inspired by Escher), at Princesshof Museum

China is slowly opening to the western world. On the one hand there has been an explosion of English language schools in many cities in China, on the other hand search

programs such as Google and social media such as Facebook are banned. Especially people who were born before 1990 often have limited command of English (WANG, LAM, 2009) and this creates a barrier for them to appreciate the cultures of Europe. Thus it seemed appropriate to focus the research on other ways of conveying information to visitors, both prior to and during their visit.

Three phases can be distinguished in the Visitor Decision-making and Evaluation of a Journey and these are normally divided into six stages (see Figure 8, based on WILSON et al 2012). In each of these phases visual material can play a part to help the visitor. At the same time it creates opportunities for the destinations to frame these three stages (RICHARDS, MUNSTERS, 2010). Before the visit visual information acts as the visible mediators that helps to translate and interpret local cultural attractions to tourists and offer advice to help them decide where they go and what they do (OOI, 2002). As a result, 'new' tourism destinations strive to offer an image that is unique and clearly recognizable, in order to increase their attractiveness for tourists (RICHARDS, MUNSTERS, 2010).
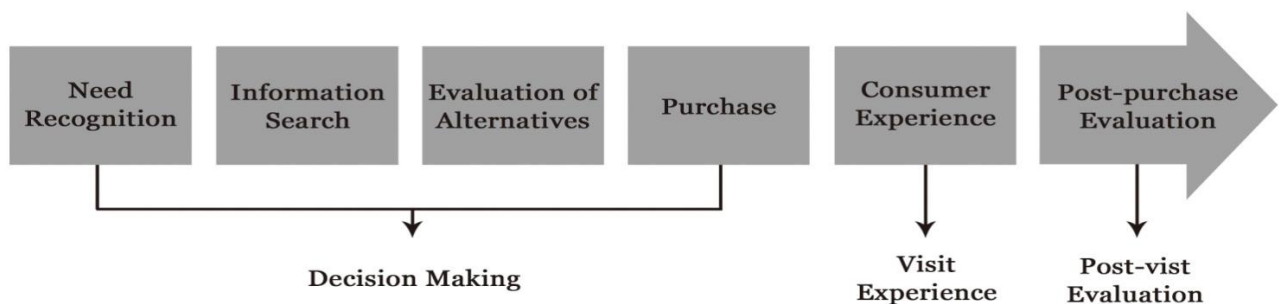

Figure 8: Six Stages in consumer decision making (Based on WILSON et al., 2012, p. 30)

During the visiting progress, visual information is more helpful than other kinds of introduction because of images has a more direct impact on visitors and can be understood more directly by visitors from various origins. After the visit visual materials can help travellers to keep memorable experiences when they finished their journey. Because of the lively quality of visual material, "visual material appears to be

especially memorable and the salience that this confers may make it particularly forceful" (JOFFE, 2008, p. 85).

Research approach

The method of the research combines a qualitative phase with a quantitative one. In the first phase half-structured interviews with open questions were used to collect primary expectations and perceptions of Chinese visitors to Leeuwarden. In the second phase, an online survey was used to test whether the opinions from first study correspond with a wider range of people in China.

First phase of the study

In the first phase Chinese tourists to Leeuwarden were interviewed about their expectations regarding their visit and their experiences. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and then transcribed and translated into English. In the interviews the researcher made use of two different sets of visual information. Visual methods used in tourism research can be:

a) collected from secondary sources and later studied by relying on analyses such as content or semiotic analysis;

b) created for the purpose of a research project by either the researchers or their research participants; or

c) used to create data by using techniques of elicitation (RAKIC, CHAMBERS, 2012, p. 5).

In this study we used the second and third. Firstly, photographs of attractions in Leeuwarden which tourists can receive during their visiting were collected (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Photo of Leeuwarden, Netherlands

For some of these photographs matching pictures from China were selected with similar composition, light and objects (see Figure 10). Questions were asked such as: "which picture is more attractive to you?" During the interviews photographs were shown to interviewees first and questions were asked that served as a 'lead-in' to a more focused inquiry into the influence of destination's view in shaping of the city image. At other times, when the question were about expectation, the interviewee would first describe their imagination of the destination and after that the interviewer would present a matching photograph with the question if that photo was a good illustration of the interviewee's description.

Figure 10: Photo of Guilim, China

As a second visual cue the researcher designed a Chinese version of a tourist brochure for Leeuwarden. The brochure highlights some of the main tourist attractions of Leeuwarden (see Figure 11). In parts of the interviews, the brochure was shown and related questions like "how would information in Chinese help you during your journey" were asked.

Figure 11: Tourism Brochure of Leeuwarden in Chinese, created by Shenghan Zhou

Findings and analysis of the first phase of the study

The interviewer used the three phases of customer decision making model as a basic framework for the interview questions. Ten interviews were held with a total of fifteen people. Examples of questions and answers from the interviews are:

Examples of questions and answers that resulted from the interviews are:

First phase:

Q: How will visual information impact your imagination of a destination?

A: *It made very intuitive feeling of local conditions, there forms a strong attraction for me. Pictures can always catch my attention. When I feel attractive, I will begin to plan my journey.*

Q: When you consulting the travel agency, will the printed visual information impact your decision making?

A: *Yes, even if the pictures have the possibility to be beautified before, I still want to experience the places of interest personally, even if it is a little bit out of the fact, I think it is also acceptable.*

Q: Do you think the brochures placed at airport or hotel will be helpful?

A1: Of course it will be, first of all, the title is more attractive, but I will then consider other issues. This city is very strange to me, like what aspect, transportation and so on. Because I will normally search the internet to develop a good trip and check in online. If the brochure is at the airport, I will not make temporary change.

A2: *Yes, if time is more comfortable and the destination is very interesting, I will make temporarily travel arrangements. If there is really no chance for this time, I can still arrange it into my next journey, or recommend it to other friends who plan to travel.*

Second phase:

Well as the living condition of local people are very attractive.

Surprisingly for the Dutch researcher, many Chinese tourist found the photograph of Leeuwarden in figure 8 more appealing then the picture of Guilin in China (Figure 10). The reason that interviewees give are that it is a picture of a European town that shows a beautiful blue sky and that is green, even when there are no leaves on the trees. This appeals to many Chinese travellers who come from heavily polluted cities.

Third phase:

Q: Generally, will you keep visual information materials during your journey?

A1: *Yes, it is also a memorial form of travel experience.*

A2: *I keep it as souvenir for my journey, because it is well-designed and, the most important thing is, it is exclusive and unique.*

After conducting the interviews the interviewer performed a first content analysis on the Chinese version of the interviews. Subsequently both the interviews and the codes were translated into English and discussed with the Dutch researcher.

The analysis generated the following categories:

- Personal status
- Travel preferences
- Information collection method
- City imagination
- Attention to visual information
- Significance of visual information
- Authenticity of information in tourist guides

An example of the coding is:

Finding of interview:

Q: When you travel, will you pay particular attention to visual information? What information will help you?

A: *Yes, because this is my occupational habit, particularly more outstanding visual design always caught my attention. Graphical guidance is also very important for communication, especially in other countries with different languages*.

Codes: attention to visual information, significance of visual information

Detailed method of the second phase of the study

Following the coding of first study, an online survey was designed as a quantitative study to test whether the opinions from first study also make sense for a wider range of people. The categories from the content analysis served as a basis for the items in the questionnaire. The Chinese brochure was also presented in the online survey. The survey consisted of five demographic questions, followed by eleven multiple choice questions about general travel behaviour. The main part of the survey consisted of 17 binary questions, 25 5-point Likert scale questions, and 8 multiple choice questions. Several of the questions allowed respondents to add extra comments. These 50 questions targeted specifically the use of visual information and Leeuwarden as a potential destination.

Example item in questionnaire:

Q: During your journey planning, does visual information have great significance for you? (5-point Scale Question: 1 = not agree at all; 5 = totally agree):

1 I am particularly sensitive to visual information, publicity pictures of destination are more appealing to me

2 The information communication through visual materials is more real, it helps to build the image of the destination

3 I rely on visual information, the information only in text will make me feel dull

4 Visual information plays a good supporting role, but a more detailed explanation of the text is also essential

5 I do not trust visual information, because the pictures possibly do not represent the real world.

The sample of the second study may be called a mix of purposeful sampling and convenience sampling. It consists of a group of 204 young professionals in China who work in the media and design industry and who are familiar with, or at least interested in the cultural features of the destination. Most of them attended the same design program at Fuzhou University, in Fujian, China, as the Chinese author of this article. That made it convenient to reach them and to obtain a good response. At the same time their interest in culture would align with the target group of a ECoC.

Findings of the second phase of the study

The sample consists of 57% females and 43% males. The median age (66%) is between 26 and 35. 62% hold a Bachelor Degree and 11% have a Master Degree is between. Their main occupation is designer/illustrator/copywriter (32%) and half of them graduated between two and five years ago. They like to travel. Half of them travel up to two times per year, and the other half travels three times or more. The main occasions are leisure or special events and exhibitions. They travel preferences are shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Travel preferences of travellers (more than one answer possible; N = 204)

Natural Landscape	156	76,5%
Wild Adventure	30	14,7%
Cultural heritage sites	142	69,6%
Rustic Exploration	33	16,2%
Small Town Roaming	75	36,8%
Leisure Experience	81	39,7%
Other	4	2,0%

Natural landscape and cultural heritage sites are their main preferences. Table 2 shows that they spend a substantial portion of their disposable income on travel:

Table 2: Proportion of dispensable income spent on travelling (N = 204)

10% spent on travel	55	27,0%
20%	107	52,5%
50%	41	20,1%
75%	1	0,5%

When asked about their travel destinations 37% state that they have never been abroad and 16% has only been to a nearby foreign country (see Table 3).

Table 3: Experience of travelling abroad (N = 204)

Never been abroad	75	36,8%
Only have been to the nearby foreign country	33	16,2%
Have been to Europe	40	19,6%
Have been to the Netherlands	49	24,0%
Have been to the city Leeuwarden	7	3,4%

However, 47% has been to Europe and half of those has been to the Netherlands. A few have even been to Leeuwarden, likely to visit their friend.

When asked where they find the information for their journey 91% say that they use the internet, and only 1% of these travellers consults a travel agency.

Use of visual information

The main section of the survey asked the respondents about their use of visual information. Questions were asked about visual information in the planning stage of a journey, but also during and after a trip. When asked how significant visual information is during the planning of a journey, the majority of the respondents answered that it is quite important (see Table 4):

Table 4: Significance of visual Information in Journey Planning on 5-point Scale (1 = not agree at all; 5 = totally agree; N = 204)

Item	M	SD
I am particularly sensitive to visual information, pictures of a destination are more appealing to me.	4,03	0,92
The information communication through visual materials is more real, it helps to build the image of the destination.	4,36	0,81
I rely on visual information, the information only in text will make me feel dull.	3,52	1,12
Visual information plays a good supporting role, but a more detailed explanation of the text is also essential.	3,91	0,95
I do not trust visual information, because the pictures possibly do not represent the real world.	2,93	1,14

The respondents find it easy to understand visual information, it helps to create their expectations and they rely of it. This reliance on visual information becomes even stronger during a visit when they do not have the leisure to study information in a Foreign language (see Table 5):

Table 5: Significance of visual Information in while travelling on 5-point Scale (1 = not agree at all; 5 = totally agree; N = 204)

Item	M	SD
I am particularly sensitive to visual information, visual communication is more intuitive for me	4,18	0,81
Information communicated by images is more understandable, especially in other country	4,55	0,72
I'm good at using graphics (logo) to identify the location or the usage of facility	4,04	0,81
Compared to remember road names, I prefer to use purposefully image (graphic) map	4,48	0,78

Visual information is significant for the respondents, and they are particularly attentive to it.

The section about the attractiveness of Leeuwarden after reading Chinese brochure yielded a very positive response. Based on the information provided the respondents deem Leeuwarden an attractive city. They see it as a typical European town

worth a visit, especially if it can be included in a travel itinerary. Especially the local museums create interest (see Table 6):

Table 6: Intention to visit local museum (N = 204)

Yes, I usually choose some representative cultural destination into my plan	87	42,6%
If the local museums are special, I would choose to visit	91	44,6%
If I have sufficient time and no other destination attracts me, I would choose to visit museum temporarily	16	7,8%
No, I'm not interested in the museum, I feel it wastes my time	10	4,9%

All in all the museums in Leeuwarden creates a favourable impression; 71% of respondents answer in a different question that they would take time to visit the museums to see the collections.

The final question was about saving visual information, such as brochures, maps, tickets etc. 55% of respondents answer that they always keep these as a souvenir, while another 40% state that they do so when the material has been well designed.

Discussion

The demographics show that the group of respondents to this research is rather special. They are young professionals who work in creative professions. That makes them particularly susceptible to visual information. On the other hand they are not so different from the returning visitors that Dede (2013) talks about. They are well educated, mobile, willing to spend a substantial part on their income on travel, and they are interested in culture and heritage. They may well be the avant-garde of the large number of Chinese that are expected to visit Europe (GOWLING, 2014; GUANCHA 2014).

At the same time these young and well-educated travellers still prefer information about the destination in Chinese. This reliance on visual information is partly created by incomplete foreign language competency. These your well-educated professionals still find it very convenient to have a travel brochure in their own

language (M = 3.98; SD = 0,87). It gives hem confidence, and they attach more value to it.

Leeuwarden will be European Capital of Culture in 2018. There will be a large number of visitors, and visitors from outside of Europe might be a substantial part of these, particularly people from China and other Asian countries. Visual information can play an important role in attracting these people by framing their expectations, but also their experiences and even their memories (AIELLO, THURLOW, 2006). For the city of Leeuwarden it would be wise to invest in corporate visual identity management (BOSCH, 2005). Also the role of the museums is not to be underestimated (VAN AALST, BOOGAARTS, 2002). It would also be wise to invest in flanking research that monitors the progression of the ECoC project (OOI et al., 2014), and the role visual information plays in the expectations and perceptions of the visitors. Leeuwarden could borrow ideas from the notion of Experiencescape (JENSEN, 2005) or as Aiello and Thurow (2006, p. 152) call it, "cityscape".

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