



## THE ROLE OF THE TOURIST MILIEU IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE TOURIST EXPERIENCE

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### ABSTRACT

*The tourist milieu is defined as the objective projection of the subjectively experienced tourist space. Consequently, the tourist milieu of a destination is based on an informative consensus that reflects the visitors' emotions and impressions. Due to its kaleidoscopic complexity and its dependence on human factors, the tourist milieu should be understood as a dynamic concept, thus, its assessment involves the simultaneous analysis of both subjective perceptions and objective facts.*

*The paper summarises the key factors contributing to the development of a destination's successfully marketable tourist milieu. The study analyses the objectification process of subjective visitor perceptions through which the perceived image becomes a component of social awareness. The hierarchical relationships of milieu, image, sense of place and local identity are also assessed, with particular emphasis on the role of the tourist milieu in the social construction of the tourist experience.*

**Key words:** *tourist milieu, destination, image, experience*

### Introduction

Although the atmosphere of a tourist destination as part of the travel experience strongly influences visitors' satisfaction with their trip, their behaviour during their stay and their willingness to return, it is a relatively under-researched topic in tourism studies, and the atmospheric characteristics of places rarely provide the basis for destination marketing (a notable exception is the "Australia - a different light" marketing campaign

which, however, has been subject of serious criticism on behalf of local tourism professionals).

The notion of the tourist milieu is defined as “the objective manifestation of the experience components of the tourism space, i.e. the result of the gradual process in which individual visitors’ psychological perceptions become part of collective knowledge” (Michalkó & Rátz 2006:95). Consequently, the tourist milieu is based on a consensus of perceptions, i.e. on an almost homogeneous factual reflection of visitors’ impressions and sentiments, and, in this respect, it shows significant similarities with stereotypes (Gronhaug and Heide 1992, Hunyadi 1998, Leerssen 2003).

### **The characteristics of the tourist milieu**

Although the tourist milieu is shaped by a specific interpretation of perceptions and, as such, its existence depends on tourist demand, the emergence of the milieu itself is based on the supply-side components of a destination. Within the system of tourism (Inskeep 1991), the tourist milieu comprises of elements of the place product (i.e. it belongs to the supply side of the system), but its evolution is also strongly influenced by certain tangible and intangible components of the tourism system’s wider environment.

While the tourist milieu may become an attraction by itself, generally only returning visitors and experienced travellers may be incited to choose a particular destination by the area’s milieu elements. On the one hand, the development of the subjective milieu requires direct personal experiences on behalf of the perceiver, and on the other hand, first-time visitors to a destination are usually attracted by the area’s landmark sights and major events (Lau and McKercher 2004). It must be noted however that it is not necessary for the traveller to return to the very same destination: it is one of the key assumptions of the milieu concept that various destinations may represent the same milieu due to shared characteristics, thus favourable experiences gained in one destination may lead to demand generation in other places characterized by the same tourist milieu.

Due to its complexity, the tourist milieu of a particular destination is hard to define and even harder to communicate; consequently, in most marketing messages it is only represented as the background to a few selected sites. However, the authors believe that an area’s milieu plays an equally - if not more - important role in affecting travellers’ satisfaction

and willingness to return as the major tourist sights; visiting key attractions only occupies a certain amount of time during a trip, while the destination's milieu surrounds the visitors throughout their whole stay.

While being a component of the tourism system's supply side, the tourist milieu also incorporates certain elements of the social, economic, political, technological and natural environments of the system. Although any of these environmental components may prove to be decisive in creating the tourist milieu, it is the social environment and its physical representation, the cultural landscape that have the most intensive role in shaping the milieu.

A further assumption of the milieu concept is that the milieu of the same area is perceived differently by tourists with different cultural background; i.e. different aspects are perceived and different details are noticed. The closer the tourist's socio-cultural background and the milieu of their place of origin to the destination's milieu, the more meticulous observations are made, while in the case of greater cultural distance, the visitor is more likely to discern the significantly different, thus more easily distinguishable components of the visited destination's milieu.

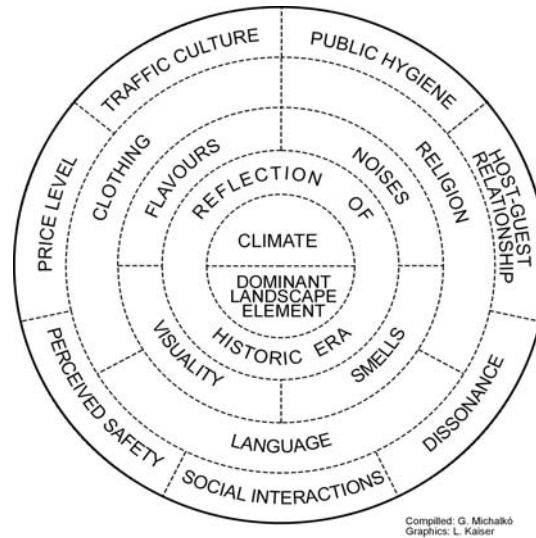
The de-differentiation of the tourist experience suggested by e.g. Lash and Urry (1994) and Uriely (2005) also highlights the importance of the tourist milieu. While the development of mass media as well as the potential development of virtual reality may replace travel as a means to 'see the world', and for many tourists, visiting the Louvre may soon be substituted by looking at the museum's collection on television or on the internet, the complex audiovisual and sensual stimuli of the milieu cannot be reproduced yet by artificial or virtual reality. Even the probably most publicised, most professional and - in commercial terms - most successful attempt to recreate a place's milieu, the construction of The Venetian in Las Vegas failed to replace the real Venice, and this failure can mainly be attributed to the artificial, sterile milieu of the casino and hotel complex. The details are carefully replicated, the scale and the exterior of the buildings are thoroughly designed and executed, but the sense of history, the smells and sounds of the real Venice are missing. (Which is not to say that The Venetian project fell completely short: it created a new place product that exists parallel to the real Venice and it does have a distinctive milieu - dissimilar to historic Italian cities, but sharing distinct characteristics with other new, artificial, purpose-built

attractions.) However, the question of the tourists' experiences arises again in this example: those who have first-hand experience of historic Italian cities may perceive The Venetian as a commercialised replica without the 'right' atmosphere. Those, on the other hand, who have only seen the real Venice on photos and films, may enjoy the combination of visual authenticity and shopping mall-cleanliness in the case of The Venetian, and a subsequent visit to the real Venice may even prove to be a disappointing experience, due to the difference between expectations and reality (Davis 2004).

The socio-cultural characteristics of the local community are embedded in a given destination's milieu; therefore, its typical features will be reflected in tourists' experiences (Fülemile 1998, Szarvas 1998). Obviously, the perception of the milieu also strongly depends on the guest's personality. Similarly to the individual nature of travel behaviour, spatial experiences are also influenced by the socio-economic and socio-cultural characteristics of the visitor (Pizam and Sussmann 1995). The extent to which tourists engage in communication with the local population, their familiarity with the place, the intensity of their participation in the activities offered by the destination, and their socio-cultural attitudes all influence their experience of the social components of the tourist milieu. The diverse milieu interpretations of tourists of different cultural backgrounds will in turn influence the milieu itself: consequently, highlighting target market-specific milieu elements in marketing communication may alter in the long term the actual tourist milieu of the destination (Butler 1998).

### **The structure and components of the tourist milieu**

The tourist milieu may be understood as a meta-level of the destination as a tourist product: "it contains the abstract components of tangible reality, and while each milieu element may be perceived individually during the routine consumption of the site, it is the elusive totality of all the elements that is able to create a feeling of attraction in visitors" (Michalkó and Rátz 2006:100). Figure 1 presents the kaleidoscopic structure of the tourist milieu - it comprises of the destination's physical environment and heritage values, the tangible and intangible elements of the tourism supply as well as the site's human characteristics such as behaviour of locals and fellow travellers, expressions of religion or the tourist-host relationship.



Source: Michalkó and Rátz 2006:100

**Figure 1** The kaleidoscopic structure of the tourist milieu

One of the main assumptions of this study is that the tourist milieu is generally not limited to a single destination: due to comparable geographic location or cultural background, larger regions frequently embody similar milieu elements. Consequently, while certain settlements may provide an absolutely unique milieu, resemblances are often experienced within regions including several countries. The findings of an empirical survey of the social construction of the Mediterranean tourist milieu in Hungary (discussed in more details by Michalkó and Rátz 2006) justified the existence of a shared tourist milieu in the study area, although visitors' associations with the region included both well-known tourist attractions and typical milieu elements such as colours, ambiance, landscape, and the visual and behavioural components of local life.

The analysis of the survey results also suggested that the personal construction of a destination's milieu does not depend on visitors' deeper cultural and historical awareness - as opposed to the sense of place of a destination which requires a certain level of familiarity with the history of the area. However, the perception of the tourist milieu necessitates the existence of certain physical components including both natural and man-made landscape elements, since it is based on actual observation and participation of the destination environment.

According to the survey results, the most distinctive components of the Mediterranean tourist milieu with the highest level of social consensus proved to be the weather conditions, the flows of tourists, the bustling crowds, the multitude of restaurants and cafés, the sight of historic buildings and that of people sitting on terraces. The results of a factor analysis indicated that the Mediterranean milieu was essentially organised along five dimensions which influenced respondents' perceptions to a different extent: visitors' experiences were most affected by everyday life in public areas, by the built historic heritage and by the natural features of the destinations, while the physical reflection of material welfare and the neglected environment proved to be less influential in shaping their milieu concept (Michalkó and Rátz 2006).

### **The role of the tourist milieu in the social construction of the tourist experience**

The tourist experience is a combination of perceptions, emotions, reactions, moods, level of satisfaction and memories created by visiting a certain destination. It is a complex phenomenon - various people embark on journeys for different reasons and return with different experiences. These dissimilarities are significantly influenced by the travellers' motivations to visit a certain place, their previous expectations, their socio-cultural background, their psychological needs, and by the destination's perceived characteristics.

It shall also be noted that the tourist experience is affected by a multitude of external and internal factors before, during and after the actual visit. Visitors' advance expectations of their travel experience are mainly influenced by their subjective image of the destination, non-commercial and objective information that they collect before the trip, and the promotional efforts of the tourism sector. The on-site visitor experience is mainly affected by the tangible elements and the service delivery elements of the tourist product (particularly visitor attractions, accommodation, F&B services and transportation) (Connell and Meyer 2004), the milieu of the destination, and the social interactions between the visitor and the representatives of the tourism industry, local inhabitants and fellow travellers. Experiences are situated in specific space and time that are socially and culturally interpreted (O'Dell 2005). Depending on the socio-cultural distance between the visitors' and the destination's culture, their previous travel experiences, motivations and interest, different people will pay

attention to different details of the tourist product and the destination milieu, even if they participate in the same activities and seem to have the same experience. Thus the basic characteristics of the human attention significantly influence the individual perceptions of the tourist milieu, and the attention structure framework of understanding tourist experiences suggested by Ooi (2005) may prove to be a useful theoretical approach for the further analysis of the milieu's social construction.

Following the trip, the actual experience will be gradually modified by the selective memory of the traveller, and it generally becomes an incomplete narrative based on and limited by photographs and memorable stories. The milieu of a destination plays an important role in the post-trip recollection process of the tourist experience. Although it is a relatively difficult concept to convey to those who have never visited the destination or at least a similar area, emotions are generally easier to remember than facts, and sharing the same milieu experience creates a sense of familiarity among travellers, so it contributes to the efficient communication of the travel experience.

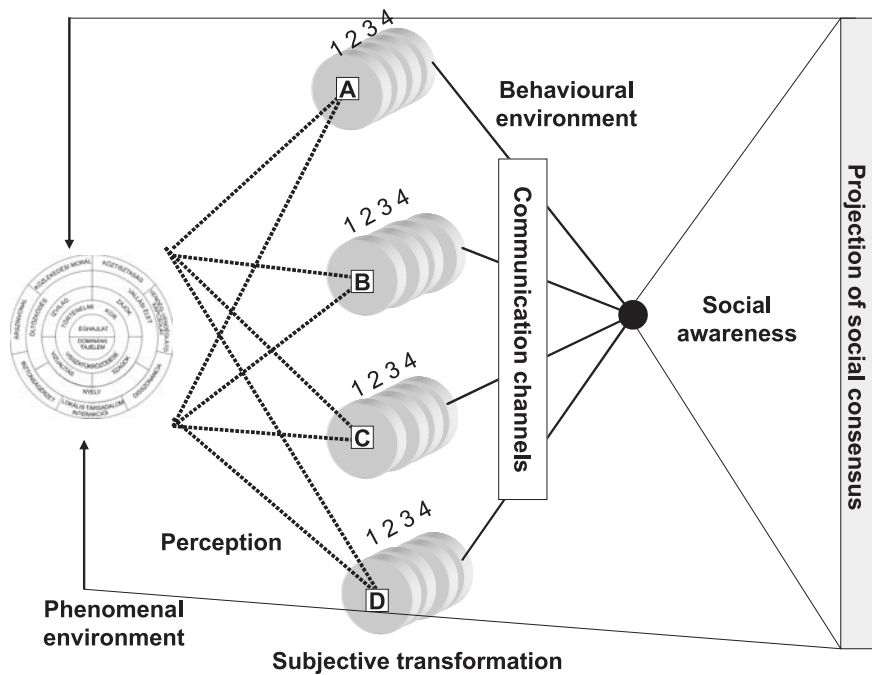
Due to the intangible nature of the tourist product, the image of a destination plays a particularly important role in influencing tourists' choices and their satisfaction, since they are motivated to act by perceptions rather than reality. The significance of the destination image - a relatively well-represented notion in tourism - in affecting the tourist experience, demands further analysis of the similarities and differences of the concepts of destination image and tourist milieu.

The destination image is a mental construct of ideas and conceptions held individually or collectively (Embacher and Buttle 1989); it is comprised of cognitive, affective and conative components (Gartner 1993). Although both the image and the milieu of a destination are dependent on visitors' subjective perceptions, image formation is possible on the basis of preconceptions, while the milieu corresponds to the interiorization of personal impressions and first-hand experiences (Michalkó and Rátz 2006). Potential tourists frequently create mental images of destinations in spite of their limited pre-visit knowledge (Laws et al 2002). In contrast, the tourist milieu develops as a result of the visitor's sensual experiences of the destination's attributes, so it is predominantly based on actual observation and participation rather than on advance expectations produced by marketing communication and the general media. (It should be noted that although certain forms of

communication, particularly films and novels, may also contribute to the prospective tourist's milieu perception, personal involvement and experiences are essential for the development of the milieu concept.)

Obviously, the perceived milieu of an area does not always conform to its image; travellers' images are generally modified after visiting a particular destination (Baloglu and McCleary 1999), and significant differences exist between first time and repeat visitors' image perceptions (Fakeye and Crompton 1991, Awaritefe 2004, Beerli and Martín 2004). It is the assumption of this study that the perceptible milieu elements - particularly those that are difficult or impossible to communicate by traditional promotional methods such as temperature, smells, sounds, general ambiance - play a significant role in the transformation of the visitors' preliminary images.

As we could see earlier in this paper, the tourist milieu is defined as the objective projection of the subjectively experienced tourist space. Consequently, the tourist milieu of a destination is based on an informative consensus that reflects the visitors' emotions and impressions. Figure 2 presents the process of the social construction of the tourist milieu.



*Figure 2 The social construction of the tourist milieu*

The tourist milieu - represented in the kaleidoscopic model - is a complex sphere where the tourist experience takes place and which, at the same time, has an influence on the traveller's personality (Michalkó and Rátz 2006). This sphere - the phenomenal environment - includes both tangible and intangible components: objects and persons on the one hand, and socio-cultural phenomena on the other. The phenomenal environment filtered through the socio-cultural set of values of the individuals (marked by A, B, C and D in Figure 2) becomes the behavioural environment which forms the basis of the milieu. Individual values and factors (marked by 1, 2, 3 and 4) include the visitor's personality, education, previous knowledge of the destination, destination image, and the traveller's attitudes and stereotypes, among others. Obviously, this is not a one-way process: while experiencing the behaviour environment as a network of interrelations, humans react individually or behave in a controlled way, which again influences the phenomenal environment (Clark 1985). Sharing individual perceptions and attitudes through various commercial and non-commercial communication channels, e.g. personal discussions, photographs, films, literature or other mass media forms, contributes to the development of a certain level of social consensus concerning the tourist milieu of a destination. The projection of the generally accepted milieu concept affects, in turn, the expectations of future travellers, and, due to the fact that visitors tend to reaffirm their perceptions and stereotypes when consuming a place product (Waller and Lea 1999, McIntosh and Prentice 1999, Ooi 2005), it has a major impact on their satisfaction and experiences.

### **Conclusions and implications**

In the travel decision-making process, the image of an area primarily influences the destination choice, while the milieu mostly affects tourists' behaviour and activities. In addition, image is a key factor in attracting first time visitors, whereas the milieu of a destination plays a critical role in generating repeat visitation. While prospective tourists often base their decisions on the range of attractions in an area, travellers' willingness to return is more strongly affected by their experiences and the particular destination's specific ambiance (Michalkó and Rátz 2006). The objectivity of the destination image is strongly influenced by the media (Hughes and Allen 2005), while tourists' milieu perceptions are also subject to the individual's personal expectations, state of mind, and emotions. Repeat visitors are often considered a more attractive market segment than first

timers, due to the lower costs and more limited marketing efforts required to reach them. Consequently, in addition to the theoretical contribution of introducing the milieu to the existing tourism literature, the practical implementation of the research is to highlight the decisive components of the destination's milieu for marketing organisations, in order to increase the competitiveness of tourism destination marketing.

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