ABSTRACT

Tourists assemble versions of the social and personal meanings of places through stories. As tourists move from one to the next, they engage in a process of understanding, deriving, and making meanings of the places, and then creating and telling what might be best characterized as spatial narratives. This study identifies multiple interpretations of spatial experiences based on tourists’ narratives about places visited in the Center City district of Philadelphia. By conceptualizing tourists’ different “ways of seeing,” this study provides a better understanding of the tourist experiences and their role in the on-going collective construction of the multivalent characteristics of tourist destinations.

INTRODUCTION

Tourists have a “narrativistic” attitude (McCabe & Foster, 2006) and, as such, tourism is grounded in discourse (Dann, 1996). In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in the role of tourists’ narratives in the construction of sense of place and identity (Bird, 2002; McCabe & Stokoe, 2004; McCabe & Foster, 2006; Noy, 2004; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2007a). It is argued that tourists attach meanings to places and construct identity through discourse. Researchers in human geography and anthropology suggest the term “spatial language” whereby the content of stories ties meanings to the spatial features of places; “[t]he tale [about place] confirms that a piece of space actually means something” (Bird, 2002, p. 523). Thus, there is a symbolic as well as physical consumption of places through tourism activities (McCabe & Stokoe, 2004). Tourists define and describe the experiential and cultural significance of these places while simultaneously locating themselves in the narratives. Hence, tourists’ narratives are important in the dynamic and ongoing social construction of places as tourist destinations.

It is argued that people maintain stories in their mind and tell others about the experiences that are meaningful to them. In articulating their touristic activities, tourists assemble
versions of the social and personal meanings of places. Indeed, Bird (2002, p. 552) argued that “narratives depend on selective appropriation of facts, incidents, descriptions, and so on, to create particular kinds of cultural construction”. Hence, there is no one real meaning to a particular place as tourists narrate their own versions of discourse. Dixon and Durrheim (2000) assert that “places are dynamic arenas that are both socially constituted and constitutive of the social” (p. 28). Thus, destinations are defined by (and can be branded as) a collective memory of spatial stories where tourists can derive and construct new meanings and identities from the variety of different tales.

Previous studies on spatial stories have focused on tracking the tales to derive various meanings of specific places (Bird, 2002). Another stream of research has focused on interpretation of stories to plot tourists’ activities (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2007a). It is argued in these studies that the production of tourists’ stories, and the process of narrating them, is inseparable from the process of experiencing the places. That is, as tourists move from one place to another to “consume” the places, they engage in a process of understanding, deriving, and making meanings of the places, and then creating and telling what might be best characterized as the spatial narratives. Today, the emergence of new digital technologies allows researchers to examine how tourists construct narratives in a way that were not feasible, using new forms of location-based and social media technologies. It is posited in this research that the analysis of the collective and shared narratives of tourists constructed using digital media provides a powerful basis with which to draw a broader conclusion about the sense of place at the destinations. Therefore, the results of this study provide a framework for understanding the process of ongoing construction of the significance of tourists’ places within the context of quality tourism experiences. For this reason, this study conceptualizes the construction of identity based on tourists’ narratives of the places they visit.

**CONSTRUCTING MEANINGS OF TOURIST PLACES**

Places, identities, and tourists’ stories have been under much academic scrutiny in tourism and the social sciences for the past three decades. Particularly, recent development in the digital journaling (e.g., weblogs and image sharing) has generated another wave of development in the research of tourists’ stories and sense of place (see Pudliner 2007; Goodman, 2007; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2007b). Tourists’ stories are associated with spatial experiences; the act of telling and re-telling these stories is an active construction of identity of touristic places. In his work on cultural geography, Massey (2005) suggests three propositions on the construction of spatial identity: 1) space (and identity) is a product of interrelations; 2) place and space are born with multiple histories, stories, and trajectories; and, 3) space is continuous and always “in-production.” Furthermore, Massey points out that space can be merged with time in that space can be considered as “an event” that is open to multiple experiences and modalities and always in the process of “becoming” (Massey, 2005; Miller, 2006). Within the context of tourist destinations, multiple histories and stories based on the spatial experiences told by tourists and locals form the qualitative multiplicity of meanings. Touristic destinations, thus, have multivalent characteristics; they are what Miller (2006) refers to as spaces of multiple, coexistent, and even contested meanings (see also Hughes, 1992; Young, 1999).

Young (1999) argues that ordinary places become touristic places when they are attributed particular meanings and values which appeal to and attract tourists. Building a concept she termed “seductions of place,” Cartier (2005) states that interest in experiencing touristic
places reflects “aspects of desire as well as multiple positions of sensory engagement, attraction, and legibility – ways in which landscape can be read, imagined, and experienced, from different point of view and positions of orientation” (p.4). According to Crouch (2005), people practice and perform places in a chaotic relation to themselves and diverse cultural contexts. Therefore, spatial experiences are bound by subjective interpretations, which then generate the qualitative multiplicity of meanings. Tourists’ stories, in texts or pictures, are more than sums of words or imagery; they carry messages of “ways of seeing” (Hughes, 1992). As touristic destinations are lived, played, given anxiety, encountered (Crouch, 1999), they are places where tourists (and locals) negotiate identity. Thus, in his conceptual model of place construction, Young (1999) suggests the term “zone of consensus” where meanings are negotiated in the process of place production and consumption.

Previous research on tourist-destination relations has focused on images of particular places and how these images are communicated, particularly in destination marketing context (e.g., Moeran 1983; Gartner 1989; Echtner & Ritchie 1993; Cohen 1995). These studies typically use tangible components (i.e., evaluation of attractions and facilities) to analyze the construction of image. Young (1999), however, suggests psychological components of place perception (i.e., affective features) as important factors in the social construction of tourist places. Based upon this literature, it is posited in this study that the meanings of places can be better understood through recognizing tourists’ subjective psychological expression of places described within narratives. That is, as tourist-place attachment is created through the process of place consumption, understanding meanings of tourist destinations depends on the encounters, the activities (i.e., movement or stillness) from one moment and place to the next, and how tourists interpret these experiences.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

This study was conducted in a historic urban setting (i.e., the City of Philadelphia) with the goal of understanding the process of collective construction of place identity. This study particularly focuses on understanding how tourists interpret their experiences as they move through space and time. For that reason, two types of data were collected: tracks of tourists’ spatial movement (i.e., to identify tourist places) and tourists’ descriptions of their experiences (i.e., to identify meanings of tourist places).

This study utilized a multi-method approach of data collection including interview, observation, time-interval survey, and questionnaires. Mobile devices with GPS applications were used to track tourists’ spatiotemporal movement in the city and simultaneously collect the tourists’ narratives through photographs and voice recordings. The subjects were tourists visiting Philadelphia who were 16-39 years of age. It was required that all subjects are familiar with the basic features of a mobile phone and a digital camera. The participants were solicited through direct recruitment at the Independence Visitor Center, as well as indirect recruitment through announcements posted on blogs and eNewsletter sent out by the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation (GPTMC) to potential travelers. The subjects were asked to use Nokia’s N95 multimedia phone while they were touring downtown Philadelphia for several hours. The N95 device was used because it offers a variety of data services useful for tourist on-the-move including navigation services, internet browsing, high quality digital camera, 3G and Wi-Fi radios, and GPS, in addition to other typical mobile services. The subjects were encouraged to explore different features of the phone while touring and were required to do two
general tasks. First, the subjects were asked to report their experiences every hour using the voice recorder feature on the phone. They were given a set of cards containing a list of questions as guidelines for them to describe their experiences; the guidelines start with describing the place where the subjects were doing the recording. Second, they were asked to capture images that they perceive as representations of their experiences. SportsTracker™ service was added onto the phones to enable the GPS tracking of the tourists’ movement. For ethnographic studies, in addition to the tasks performed by the participants, observers were asked to prepare field notes based on their examination. To date, a total of 49 subjects have completed the tour; 41 participated in the time-interval survey, and eight tourists participated in the ethnographic study.

The survey resulted in 188 rich descriptions about tourists’ activities related to time and space and their perceptions toward their own experiences. The descriptions from the sound files of tourists’ reports were transcribed into textual documents. The survey also resulted in tracks (i.e., movement based on latitude and longitude data) recorded by the SportsTracker™ application on the phone which were then exported to the Google Earth™ application to be visually available for the analysis process. The process used to analyze the data is illustrated in Figure 1. The textual documents were carefully read to identify words related to spatial references (e.g., attractions, street names, buildings, etc.), and keywords describing the tourism experiences, which were categorized into evaluation (i.e., positive and negative evaluation and general comments about the experiences), identity (i.e., words that tourists use to describe a particular place), and activities. The identified spatiotemporal references from the textual data were then matched with the tracks recorded by GPS. Then, through geo-visualization, the spatiotemporal data were corresponded with the keywords identified from the textual documents to identify the construction of identities of places.

Figure 1. The Analysis Procedure

FINDINGS

Due to the variety of track formats and some technical failures of the GPS applications to communicate with the satellites (i.e., due to the bad weather or because participants were moving indoor), 35 full tracks were recorded and 29 tracks, which were imported as kml files suitable for Google Earth application, are illustrated in Figure 2. The tracks show the spatial patterns of visitation and movement throughout the central part of Philadelphia. Several nodes and paths are identifiable from the collective traces of tourist’ movements; they form a network which can be described as a tourist-generated spatial network. Specifically, tourists’ movements are clustered around: (1) the Old City area, (2) City Hall/Center City area, (3) Walnut/Chestnut and Rittenhouse Square area, (4) South Street area, and (5) Art Museum area. Several important paths are Benjamin Franklin Parkway (i.e., connecting Art Museum and City Hall), Market Street (i.e., connecting City Hall and Old City area), Walnut Street connecting City Hall and
Walnut/Chestnut/Rittenhouse Square area, and South Street; most tourists access South Street from Walnut/Chestnut street area.

Figure 2. Tourists’ Movement Patterns: Identified Nodes and Routes

Another important dimension that characterizes tourists’ movement is temporal sequence. Temporal and spatial sequences of tourists’ movements constitute the spatiotemporal networks in a destination. For this study, temporal data were gathered from the recorded GPS tracks as well as the time stamps of sound files. The pattern of tourists’ visitations concerning time of visit is illustrated in Figure 3. As can be seen, most tourists visited all major nodes in the afternoon (between 12:00 – 16:00).

Figure 3. Tourists’ Visitations to Five Major Nodes in Philadelphia by Time
The majority of tourists started and ended their tour in Center City area because the survey briefing, pre- and post-trip interviews took place at Love Park. This place was chosen for convenience, particularly because it is located near Suburban Station as an entrance to and exit from the city. It is assumed that tourists who came to the city with regional train will also start and end their tour in the area. The temporal sequences of tourists’ movements show that when tourists include Old City or Art Museum area in their itinerary, they visit these places first before the other areas. If both places are in the itinerary, most tourists start with Old City and then move to Art Museum; hence, they pass by Center City area. Another popular pattern is the movement from Center City to Art Museum (through Ben Franklin Parkway) and then to Rittenhouse Square, more often including Walnut/Chestnut Streets area.

Tourists’ descriptions of their experience were analyzed to understand the perceived meanings of these places. This analysis identified keywords for five main places as summarized in Table 1; they are categorized into keywords related with the perceived quality or the characters of the places, concepts or things that tourists associate with the places, and activities they do/see at the places.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Association</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old City</td>
<td>wonderful, calm, delightful</td>
<td>liberty, bell, history, constitution, independence, horse, carriage, colonial, tour, student, group, scenery, building, exhibit, people, traffic, park ranger, old, freedom, line (queue), speech, equality, woman, African American, excavation, president's house, brick, tourist, foreign</td>
<td>taking picture, touring, sightseeing, walking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Hall</td>
<td>beautiful, interesting, amazing, good, fun, dirty, crowded, public</td>
<td>statue, building, architecture, exterior, plaza, sculpture, people, subway</td>
<td>walking, sightseeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Museum</td>
<td>good, magnificent, impressive, fun, interesting</td>
<td>sculpture, fountain, painting, statue, armor, weapon, exhibit, European, Renaissance, art, column, artist, stone, earth, rocky, stair, step</td>
<td>walking, sightseeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Street</td>
<td>good, nice, fun, interesting</td>
<td>recycling garden, store, shop, clothes, shoes, hats, skate, water ice, people, traffic, restaurant, pizza, lunch, coffee shop, antique, presents, subway, food, flower, carnival, farmer's market</td>
<td>walking, shopping, eating, sightseeing, browsing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rittenhouse Square</td>
<td>pleasant, great, lovely, nice, wonderful, exciting, funny, positive, green, relaxing, fun, crowded</td>
<td>garden, bar, restaurant, café, snack, beverage, store, shop, park, tree, flower, grass, green, art festival, artist, people, paint, picture, bird, farmer's market, vendor</td>
<td>walking, shopping, eating, sitting, watching, relaxing, painting, drawing, reading, touring, hanging out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The extent to which tourists consider the place as context influence their positive and negative feelings toward the places and the things they associate with the places were identified from tourists’ narratives and their keywords. The results of this analysis indicate that when tourists identified places as context (e.g., South Street serves as context in “South Street...
shopping”), tourists’ movements and emotions, rests and excitements, arose from their activities are factors that shape the sense of places. On the other hand, when a place is considered a subject of exploration, the characteristics of the places appear to have much more impact of the meanings of places. This is akin to the concept of landscape perspective by Motloch (1991): places can be perceived as “habitat” or “system” (i.e., places as contexts) as well as “artifact” or “aesthetic” (i.e., places as objects). South Street and Rittenhouse Square areas are highly regarded as context; Old City and Art Museum are highly regarded as artifacts or objects of exploration. The stories about the Art Museum, for example, depict its functional meaning as a place that exhibits a collection of arts as well as its symbolic meaning as a magnificent urban architectural artifact and a place carrying the spirit of a fictional hero from the movie “Rocky” that is so attached to the place. Extracts 1–3 illustrate stories describing what Art Museum means to tourists. Extract 1 is from Matt, a tourist visiting the museum and spending more than an hour seeing the exhibit, while Extract 2 and 3 are from Will and Josh who visited the museum to enjoy the exterior of the building but not the exhibits. For Will and Josh, the symbolic meaning of the place is the main aspect that frames the quality of their tourism experiences. It can be concluded that the difference in meanings of places is inseparable with the activities tourists perform in the places.

Extract 1. Philadelphia Art Museum as a place displaying collections of arts
“Checking out the exhibit throughout the Art Museum, I'm pretty impressed… I visited the Art Museum and all the exhibits within the museum, the armory, European art, Renaissance art… it’s been a good experience, seeing a lot of things I've never seen before…” (Matt, May 10, 2007)

Extract 2. Philadelphia Art Museum as an architectural artifact
“Magnificent… I say Art Museum is magnificent… and very impressive architecture… the weather and the sky and everything, [it] is just really beautiful…” (Will, May 15, 2007)

Extract 3. Philadelphia Art Museum as a spiritual place of a (fictional) hero
“I saw a huge fountain and the big steps of the Art Museum from the movie Rocky and [I have] never been to the Art Museum before but I live really outside the city so I enjoyed it, I saw a woman shooting an arrow when she walk in to the Art Museum, pretty cool…” (Josh, July 22, 2007)

Different interpretations (and meanings) of other places were emerged from the tourists’ stories. Old City is interpreted as a place rich in history, a place with a “colonial” style, and a place where people can find foreign and school tourist groups. City Hall/Center City is regarded as public and is seen as crowded (i.e., often associated with subway and crowd of people). Another stream of meaning is related with the architecture of its buildings. Rittenhouse Square is interpreted as a green, relaxing place, a place where people create and appreciate artworks, and a context for activities of shopping and dining. South Street is highly regarded as context; the place is associated with events (i.e., festivals) and activities (i.e., shopping and dining). Figure 4 illustrates the emerging meanings from multiple spatial narratives of tourists plotted into the places. The arrows represent the popular routes (i.e., paths) taken by tourists to move between places (i.e., nodes), making it the tourists’ activated network of places, and, thus, of meanings.
APPLICATIONS OF RESULTS

The results of this study indicate that: (1) multiple spatial narratives of tourists can be used to represent the emergent collective meanings of places; (2) tourists’ movements, and thus, experiences, are formed by their perceived and constructed meanings of the networked places; and (3) as these stories are created and shared among friends and relatives, the spatial stories will survive or change along the continuous construction of social identity of tourists’ places.

Figure 4. Emerging Collective Meanings of Places

The results of this study also demonstrate that the use of digital media can offer new ways to enhance tourists’ experiences through the combinations of tourists’ narratives produced in a rich digital media format. For example, the collective narratives of places created by tourists can transform an urban destination into “a museum without walls” where tourists can consume the places while simultaneously drawing multiple interpretations from the digital narratives left by others. Subsequently, tourists will also be able to leave their own digital traces along their spatiotemporal routes, allowing others to comprehend, re-tell, or re-make the tales that construct the identity of the destination. Thus, for destination managers, tracking tourists’ spatiotemporal movements and narratives is vital for understanding the aspects that support the delivery of quality tourism experiences at a destination.
REFERENCES


