

The role of political communication in
constructing tourist cyber places:
some insights from Lecce (Italy) and Galway (Ireland)
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Premises: studying virtual perception of tourist - Cyber place, like cyber space is 'defined by interaction; however, its interactions are explicitly embodied in space/time' (Meek 2012: 1430). A piece of research designed to investigate the virtual perception of two cyber places (Wellman 2001, Meek 2012, Devriendt et al 2008) in the tourist gaze (Urry 2011) was interrupted by unexpected findings. Contrary to expectations, the data revealed a huge disparity in the use of social media relating to tourism in Galway, Ireland and in Lecce, Italy. Accordingly, the enquiry has since focused on trying to answer what then became the key research question: what factors might account for the uneven construction of the cities' digital images?

The research - The research begins by presenting the findings of a sentiment analysis study undertaken over the period July 1st 2019 – December 1st 2019. This highlighted a very sizeable disparity in the level of engagement with social media by tourists in the two cities. The data suggest that while Lecce is

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very visible in the digital sphere, Galway, in contrast, has a very weak, almost invisible, presence. This is contrast to its actual performance as a leading tourism city, not only in Ireland but internationally. Earlier in the 2018, the city was described as being “Brilliantly bohemian”, and was named “one of the world’s top cities for travellers in 2020” by travel guide Lonely Planet.

The research then reports the findings of the second phase of the study investigating the digital promotion strategies adopted by the two cities. This involved in-depth interviews with key policy actors and in-depth analysis of policy and strategy documents. Armed with these findings, the researchers then returned to the literature to seek to identify and explain the reasons that might be at play.

Conclusion - Initial conclusions point to the key role played by institutions and policy actors in constructing communication policies and actively developing a culture of digital engagement among tourists (Marques and Borba 2017). Overall, in highlighting the unevenness of cyber space they support the views of Lepawsky (2014) and others who point to the uneven geographies of digital practices and presences. The politics of geographical knowledge production (Kitchin 2013) is shaped by the influence of hegemonic social relations and so particular knowledges come to be privileged over others. In this case, the differential emphases placed on tourism as a mode of production and the variable efforts of the communication strategies in the two cities have been shown to produce differential consequences for the construction of virtual tourism imaginaries.

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