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Perspectives on proximity tourism in Fryslân

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Jeuring, J. (2017). *Perspectives on proximity tourism in Fryslân*. University of Groningen.

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Summary

Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the ways how tourism's subjective boundaries between home and away shape and are shaped by people's socio-spatial identities. Specifically, the main objective of this thesis is to better understand how discursive, behavioral and experiential practices of socio-spatial identification depend on and augment/constrain touristic consumption/production of places near home. As such, this thesis explores the meanings, behaviors and experiences of '*proximity tourism*', which pertains to the consumption/production practices which blur and transcend the boundaries between home and away (Bourdeau, 2012) through the paradox of touristic otherness within places that feel familiar.

The theoretical observation of proximity tourism builds on a *relative perspective* in a physical spatial sense, as it positions touristic otherness as relatively nearby (even within) the usual environment. Similarly, touristic experiences are relatively unexpected and counterintuitive due to assumed associations of familiarity with the 'usual' geographical space, and because its ontology is relatively diverging from the societal norms for 'appropriate' touristic activities. Also, it builds on the notion that the practices through which proximity tourism are *consumed and produced* are contingent with each other in an ongoing circulation (Ateljevic, 2000). Proximity tourism can be seen as a cultural artifact of the global-local paradox, as a form of localization and a performance of territorial identification, simultaneously enabled by and motivated to counter the homogenizing processes of globalization (Govers et al., 2008).

The 'Circuit of Culture' (Du Gay, 1997; Hall & Evans, 2013) is used as a metaphorical framework to grapple with the ways shared meanings between members of a society are produced and circulated. Hereby, the interdependent relation between touristic consumption/production is not

studied in isolation, but as a process for which its meanings are contingent on the relations with practices of regulation, representation and identification.

The geographical focus of this thesis is principally concerned with Fryslân, a province in the North of The Netherlands. The context of Fryslân is a favorable 'living lab' for studying socio-spatial identification in and through tourism, in which various notions of 'home' and 'away' are produced and contested. The core of this thesis consists of five studies (Chapter 2-6). In these Chapters, three stakeholder perspectives are addressed (Policy and marketing, Chapter 2; Tourism entrepreneurs, Chapter 3; Residents, Chapter 4-6).

Chapter 2 studies the discursive positioning of Fryslân as tourism destination in regional tourism marketing strategies. The study reveals various contradictions in how aspects of place brands, identity claims, target groups, roles and collaborations were used to position Fryslân. The regulating processes of touristic positioning are imbued with 'politically charged' representations of social and spatial meanings. This is exemplified by the hegemony of a homogenizing and externally oriented discourse. This leads to the conclusion that Fryslân is primarily positioned as a place for touristic consumption for people from 'elsewhere', while the regional benefits are often reduced to incoming monetary revenue.

The strong reliance on holistic representations however is found to be at odds with the intraregional social and spatial differences existing within the province. This brings along a challenge for destination marketers and policy makers as to how externally oriented images will be perceived and acted upon by internal stakeholders such as residents. Therefore, it is argued that representations of difference and similarity employed in destination positioning should be balanced and support their socio-spatial narratives. This would furthermore account for and build upon the various

roles of residents as both producers and potential consumers, which in turn can be a basis for engaging residents in place branding.

The notion of role attributions is picked up further by Chapter 3. It is explored how tourism entrepreneurs in Fryslân make meaning of their relationships with residents of the province by the way they attribute touristic consumption/production roles to residents of Fryslân. It is concluded that relationships between entrepreneurs and residents are at risk of a behavioral lock-in: producers see residents as an unattractive target group because they perceive residents as being unaware of near home touristic attractions, while a lack of interest in residents as potential customers reinforces that many residents remain unfamiliar with local attractiveness. The concept of re-consumption provides a conceptual and practical way out and gives rise to opportunities for pluralized and interdependent resident roles and entrepreneur-resident relationships. It is further concluded that a role-switching dynamic, both within and between stakeholders, could facilitate inclusion of residents in near home touristic consumption/production: tourism SMEs may adopt touristic consumer roles themselves, and residents can become the producers, feeding them with local touristic knowledge and experiences.

Chapter 4 focuses on the ways subjectivities of distance and proximity among residents of Fryslân affect the appreciation of their region of residence as a tourism destination. The findings reflect the dominance of a belief that tourism and everyday life places are geographically separated: "home is here, my holiday is there." Interpretations of proximity and distance signify a hegemony of conventional touristic push, pull, keep and repel factors, such as weather conditions and cultural differences. Various nuances and non-linear ways of spatio-temporal positioning are found too. Also, the appreciation of familiarity of and with Fryslân counters the impression that tourism destinations should only be framed as places to escape from home. Therefore, it is concluded that there is a need to

acknowledge that Fryslân just as well is/can be a tourism destination for its residents. This also raises the question whether a (re)discovery of the familiar home environment through tourism is a matter of responsibility and citizenship.

In this vein, Chapter 5 studies the engagement of residents in touristic promotion, to get further understanding of how touristic consumption/production can relate to notions of citizenship behavior. It is explored to what the extent residents of Fryslân feel responsible to engage in promoting the province as tourism destination. Residents of Fryslân perceive responsibility for promoting Fryslân as tourism destination to be shared between the government, entrepreneurs and themselves. As such, their attribution patterns are found to be partly predictive of intentions to engage in both positive and negative Word-of-Mouth. It is concluded that, in principle, residents are willing to contribute to regional tourism development by WOM behavior. However this implies that as a precondition there is a need to facilitate meaningful touristic experiences for residents within their home region.

Finally, Chapter 6 examines how the weather affects perceived attractiveness of domestic holidays in The Netherlands and which weather conditions form a basis for experienced differences between home and away. Hereby, this chapter explores more in-depth the finding in Chapter 4 that the weather plays an important role in shaping spatial imaginaries along which home and away are negotiated. Respondents display a generally high level of attentiveness to weather conditions, but how this relates to destination imaginaries and at-destination behavior, varies according to people's Weather Salience (perceived personal significance of the weather). Furthermore, weather induced differences between home and destination appear to vary on a small geographical level.

It is concluded that weather is a meaningful socio-spatial characteristic, with important consequences for the attractiveness of

domestic tourism in The Netherlands. The findings hereby point to the relevance of the weather for experiences of touristic otherness. It is suggested that weather deserves more attention in Dutch tourism management practices in terms of psychological coping, in addition to currently popular physical interventions to deal with inclement weather. Also, since weather shapes stereotyped ideas about the assumed familiar climate and weather of the home country and region, efforts to communicate more nuanced weather knowledge could positively contribute to perceived attractiveness of domestic tourism.

Reflections on proximity tourism

The prevalence of tourism meanings which benefit from the 'in-between-ness' (Bourdeau, 2012) that is enabled by overlapping dichotomies (i.e., home-away, tourist-resident), is still relatively limited and undervalued in the context of Fryslân. This way, limited opportunities exist for engaging with alternative, hybrid practices (i.e., proximity tourism) as basis for socio-spatial identification and as foundation for attributing touristic value. Both the tendency of a lock-in and the opportunities for proximity tourism are embedded in the meaning-making powers generated in processes of circulation (Ateljevic, 2000; Du Gay, 1997).

At worst, circulating forces result in the marginalization of meanings and interests of certain stakeholders at the expense of others. To that end, the apparent external orientation in destination marketing on incoming visitors (Chapter 2) from ever further away (e.g., attempting to attract visitors from Asian countries such as China and Japan) risks overlooking and misunderstanding local stakeholders (e.g., residents).

At best however, the dynamics of circulation further integrate tourism into everyday life, by bringing out a renewed interest for and valuation of what was deemed familiar and known. Creative and

innovative ways of constructing touristic value consciously negotiate and build on the paradox of physical proximity imbued with experiential novelty.

So, the paradox of destabilizing forces of touristic dualisms is not just an undesirable consequence of globalizing dynamics or an externality of profit-oriented approaches to tourism. From the optimistic perspective this thesis has aimed to embrace, a hybridization of everyday life and tourism is primarily creating a promising space for rediscovery of what is assumed familiar, an exoticization of the everyday (c.f., Larsen, 2008).

The findings also provide conceptual input for understanding the relation between spatial (un)familiarity and the construction of tourist experiences. For instance, residents as touristic consumers can contribute themselves to an integrated approach of touristic production and consumption, by adopting such a conscious interest in exploring ways to experience exoticness near home. This highlights the importance of the mental activity of 'distancing' (Diaz-Soria, 2017): instead of predefining what is usual and unusual, the boundary between home and away is shaped by the experiences itself and by the intentionality of the individual.

Furthermore, the social context affects what is seen as usual and unusual. For example, the hosting of family or friends provides for a context in which familiarity and attractiveness within a 'usual' environment are renegotiated and even inversed: finding novelty in familiar places becomes the touristic value itself. The physical environment itself is 'on the move' too and hereby can invoke experiences of difference: weather conditions in all their unpredictability and ephemerality can contribute to touristic experiences near home.

Politics of regional institutionalization

The increased interest of regions and cities to explore and develop their touristic potential has resulted in a growing concern with spatial identification as part of regional development policy. The practices studied

in this thesis however tend to limit proximity tourism to be part of this institutionalizing process. The importance attributed to competitive identities (Anholt, 2007) as basis for tourism development is problematic, as such an approach often does not align with the interests of internal stakeholders such as residents, let alone that it accounts for the multiplicity and interdependence of the roles they can take up. Being recognized as tourism destination seems to have become an indicator of prosperity for cities, municipalities, regions and countries. The way the touristic success is often measured and hereby strived for –in terms of (international) visitor numbers, overnight stays, et cetera– narrows the potential of tourism being a social force with benefits that reach beyond revenue.

To that end, Fryslân certainly is not unique. The tension between regional institutionalization for the purpose of tourism and the varieties of socio-spatial identification of residents is a problem inherent to the touristic commodification of socio-spatial identities more generally (Braun, Kavaratzis, & Zenker, 2013). In this vein, this thesis points to the need to rethink how 'successful' tourism development is to be defined.

Importantly, the double process of identification is imbued with (dis)empowering forces that establish boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, between what is meaningful and what is redundant. While this boundary making pertains to many aspects of tourism (and to cultural dynamics in general), the ways Fryslân is positioned as tourism destination makes it familiar for its residents and unfamiliar for visitors from elsewhere. Yet, the acknowledgement that internal stakeholders such as residents can contribute to tourism development in *multiple and mobile ways* (as opposed to being passive, immobile hosts of visitors from elsewhere, or merely being 'attractions' to be gazed at) can form an alternative way for integrating 'local' interests into tourism policies. Thus, when regions have the intention to incorporate tourism as a tool for socio-spatial transformation,

the foundation for this might have to be built around the ways residents engage with their near home environment through tourism.

Citizen engagement and place attachment

In the light of increasingly decentralized governance processes for socio-spatial transformation, this thesis points to the importance to account for the multiple roles of local tourism stakeholders (particularly residents), as both consumers and producers. The notion of proximity tourism gives residents both new rights and responsibilities in how they shape their socio-spatial identities through tourism and how they contribute to tourism as tool for socio-spatial transformation.

Rights are relevant when, for example, residents are increasingly acknowledged as producing forces in tourism, because this automatically means (for example based on the notion of re-consumption) that their consuming activities need to be facilitated as well. An important question to ask then is for who tourism –as socio-spatial practice near home– is available and accessible and in which ways? Exclusively relying on ‘international’ and ‘physical distance’ narratives could result in an marginalization of certain activities and places from the touristic realm that form essential ways for people to value themselves and the places they inhabit.

Simultaneously, residents may have a certain obligation to acknowledge their multiple roles in tourism development within their region of residence. Citizenship and citizen participation depends on a felt responsibility to take care of both the physical places and activities near home *and* a sensibility toward their societal symbolic meanings. However, as long as there is a disconnect between meanings of tourism and people’s attachment to places where they live, the integration of touristic consumption/production that seems so promising in theory will remain underdeveloped in practice.

The broader context in which these issues are embedded pertains to the ways people develop attachment to places, feel that they belong somewhere and employ spatial identities. To this end, the relevance of proximity tourism lies in its potential to build on and develop social capital within small spatial units that are meaningful for such spatial identities. Indeed, successful intraregional tourism destinations, as stated by Canavan, are 'accessible to locals, providing social interest and leisure opportunities, supporting community infrastructure and industry, and ultimately [are] contributing to social cohesion and civic pride' (Canavan, 2013, p. 349). A major opportunity lies in the capacity of tourism itself to be an educational tool, a learning practice through which knowledge and awareness is generated. Therefore, it is suggested to stimulate proximity tourism as an opportunity for playful learning (Bos, McCabe, & Johnson, 2013).

An increased emphasis on learning about a region's history, present and future, can provide destination branding with new routes for communication, entrepreneurs with new business models and clientele, can advance local awareness and facilitate social, cultural and practical skills. Tourism as learning practice is not just another mode of consumption, it is also a key precondition of any production practice. Therefore, engaging with learning through tourism is as important for tourism entrepreneurs as it is for residents.

Proximity tourism in the context of sustainable travel

People's 'need for distance' (Larsen & Guiver, 2013) is inherently related to how home and away are negotiated. However, since the era of fossil fuel will inevitably come to an end, a momentum is emerging to replace unsustainable modes of transport on which tourism is currently depending so strongly. The symbolic importance attributed to physical travel forms a point of concern that deserves much attention. To counter such

imaginaries, developing proximity tourism could indeed be a promising but challenging avenue (Dubois, Peeters, Ceron, & Gössling, 2011).

Tourism industries need to find ways to make the near home environment touristically valuable. The province of Fryslân could become a frontrunner in shifting the paradigm, for example based on its geographical layout: the Wadden Islands are arguably places perfectly fitting imaginaries of near-home otherness. E-bikes, sailing boats and electric boats, made in Fryslân and used to explore the province, could serve as a symbol for sustainable approaches to tourism by linking with current developments around the transition to renewable energy sources.

However, as long as tourism industries are built on business models which favor and reconfirm imaginaries in which touristic otherness is coupled with travel to places that necessitate unsustainable modes of transport, tourism is undermining its status as symbol for modern cultures and limits its enormous potential to contribute to societal progress on both global and local levels.

In sum, this thesis points to the potential significance of proximity tourism as underpinning for socio-spatial identification. The notion of proximity tourism can inform an augmented understanding of tourism, in which everyday life and touristic otherness are rather mutually inclusive instead of opposing. This way, proximity is embraced as potential commodity for tourism development. However, there seems to be plenty of room for tourism stakeholders in Fryslân to increase their awareness about its potential and be attentive to the opportunities that are embedded 'in-between' the production and consumption of here and elsewhere. In turn, this approach provides a perspective on tourism that is based on multiplicity and circulation and in which the societal opportunities of proximity tourism can become more strongly embedded in regional development.