

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

TOURISM PROMOTION AND PROFESIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY: DEFINING OFICIAL IMAGES IN SALTA (ARGENTINA)

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The study of images involved in tourism (at least from the social sciences) has been defined by the emphasis on representation (of places, attractions, cultures, tourists, tourist modalities, etc.). This is an established idea in tourism studies that has given rise to important academic contributions (Albers and James, 1988; Markwell, 1997; Wyckoff and Dilsaver, 1997; Morgan and Pritchard, 1998; among others).

Recently, interest has arisen in addressing tourism images more broadly. So, researchers have sought to understand how images are part of extensive networks of actors, ideas, objects, etc. (Crouch and Lübbren, 2003) and at the same time how they are generated from specific practices carried out by different actors, included the tourists themselves (Crang, 1997). These approaches seek to account for the process of image creation by recognizing other dimensions beyond those related to representation. In relation to this, the article is interested in recovering some contributions that have addressed images in tourism by focusing on the practices by which these images are created (Crang, 1997; Crouch and Lübbren, 2003; Scarles, 2004; Larsen, 2006).

In this case, the analysis is focused on how official touristic images are created both by state agencies and professional photographers hired specifically to produce this kind of photographs. Ultimately, the aim is to inquire who (and how) participates in the creation and dissemination of images that put forward a tourist destination. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the photographic images generated by tourism state agencies are a key element of the processes by which certain places are created as destinations. Also, this type of images may respond to certain narratives that governmental agencies seek to install with respect to tourism (Feighery, 2009). But it is needed to add that, beyond the institutional intentions that guide image creation processes, these processes can be considered as instances in which a vast array of actors (with their respective expertise, knowledge and possibilities of action) converge, complement each other or disagree on the course of action (Scarles, 2004).

Among these actors are professional photographers who interact with those responsible for public policy to shape the tourist images that become the “official” ones. In this sense, delving into the processes of image creation (considering their actors, ideas, actions

and decisions) allows us to recognize the complexity of a process usually assumed to be problem-free (Scarles, 2004).

In order to investigate these issues, we analyze the tourism promotion carried out by the government of Salta (Argentina), a district that has stood out in terms of tourism promotion in the last two decades. In fact, since the beginning of the 2000s, tourism in Salta has experienced a growth that was accompanied by a set of public policy actions aimed at transforming tourism in a key economic activity. This initiative is complemented by an intense promotion that includes the renovation and expansion of the official photographic image bank.

As part of this policy, in the mid-2000s,” por “Since the mid-2000s photographers were hired to create the image bank that is still in use today. From that moment on, photographic images gained an important role in Salta’s promotional devices. As part of this process we can observe the progressive preeminence of images over verbal information in the design of brochures and booklets (and even in audiovisual pieces).

The research seeks to know the processes by which the images referring to tourism in Salta are being defined since the mid-2000s, inquiring: a) what touristic images are generated about Salta by local government (and what idea of a tourist place it constructs); b) how officials and professional photographers participate in the elaboration of these images (how they have worked together and how institutional needs and artistic proposals are negotiated to promote these destination). In brief, we seek to analyze the processes and practices involved in the creation of the official image bank and the role of the actors engaged in this process.

This work is based on a qualitative approach focused on the collection, systematization and analysis of the promotional materials produced by Salta’s government from the mid-2000s to the end of the 2010s, including the photographic images that make up the official image bank. The period begins in the mid-2000s because at that time Salta’s tourism marketing actions took on an unprecedented impetus with the creation of a renewed image bank aimed at generating new photographic materials for promotional purposes. From this bank we analyzed the set of photos that were officially disseminated in brochures and via social networks.

This, in turn, was complemented with personal interviews. Interviews were conducted between 2010 and 2022 with those in charge of tourism promotion within Salta Tourism Department. These interviews were organized around the following axes of inquiry: the direction that the local tourism policy sought to follow; the role of promotion in it; the role of images in promotional actions; the ideas sought in relation to the content of the photographic images produced; the places and themes chosen for the photographs; the relationship established between officials and photographers at creating the images; the use of the photographs that make up the official image bank.

Interviews were also conducted with the professional photographers hired for the creation of the image bank from the mid-2000s onwards. These interviews focused on: the requirements regarding the photographic images to be produced; the decisions involved in the elaboration of the scenes or motifs to be portrayed; the relationship established with the officials at the moment of elaborating the photos; the possibility of taking photographs that did not respond to what was foreseen (not stipulated by the Tourism Department).

The analysis conducted shows how tourism places in Salta are presented (both in relation to traditional and emerging destinations) and what have been the criteria in the creation, selection and dissemination of these place images. This is complemented by providing an account of the ways in which the local population is presented as an attraction. In a complementary manner, we also recover the strategies to represent the tourists in the photos (in relation to the places and activities officially proposed).

The article also describes the processes by which the photographs are taken and selected, and the role of officials and professional photographers in this. This is completed with an analysis of the negotiations that take place between these actors at the moment of creating the images.

The results of the analysis reveal, the central role played by photographic images in the promotion of tourism in Salta in recent decades. In this regard, we recognize the deliberate creation of certain images to introduce new tourist destinations. It is also evident how, taking into account the new trends in consumption, Salta is shown as a place to live new and unusual tourist experiences.

The article also accounts for tourist images as a result of processes by which these images are created and negotiated between those responsible for tourism marketing and professional photographers. Thus, the presentation of Salta is the result (and the convergence) of political-institutional decisions and artistic-creative choices linked to new trends in products/experiences design, in tourist consumption and in the promotion of tourism.

This case study aims to contribute to the discussions related to the elaboration and dissemination of tourist images in order to understand them as a process of negotiation (related to place interpretation) that involves multiple actors. This approach to image generation practices allows us to complement those analyses focused on representational aspects of images creation. And it enables to recover the whole network these images are part of (involving practices, experiences, expectations, objects, ideologies, etc.; Crouch and Lübbren, 2003).

Ultimately, this type of approach also offers some clues to understand the ways in which we related to the world. If images are a way of grasping, of capturing the world (Crang, 1997) then knowing how these images are created (and, of course, also disseminated and shared) is a way of trying to understand how society transforms and gives meaning to different places.