

Questioning the Maturity of Tourism Research A Mexican Perspective

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Abstract

It has been commonly stated that tourism has reached a maturity stage as a field of academic enquiry. The existing evidence from the English-speaking countries may suggest that indeed tourism has matured. However, this does not seem to apply to the specific development of tourism research in certain countries or in non-English-speaking academic communities. The limited conditions in terms of tourism scholars, publication spaces and postgraduate courses in countries such as Mexico may actually suggest that tourism is not experiencing a maturity phase. Thus this paper aims to question whether tourism has indeed become a mature field of knowledge in the case of Mexico by briefly analysing relevant aspects in determining such a stage. It ends up suggesting that tourism research in Mexico is still in its embryonic stage and that the alleged maturity of tourism should not be generalised.

Key Words: Maturity, Tourism, Mexico, Academia.

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Introduction

Existing literature, particularly that belonging to the English tradition, suggests that tourism has started to establish its own conceptual and theoretical bases. In so doing, it is presumed that tourism has begun to move towards its legitimisation as a field of serious academic research enquiry. The alleged legitimisation of tourism is quite recent. According to Sharpley (2011), it was from the 1990s that tourism started to establish itself as a subject of legitimate academic endeavour. This has been reflected in the number of tourism programmes both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels around the world. This is also evidenced by the significant advancement in knowledge and understanding of tourism as an economic, social, cultural, environmental and political phenomenon. Furthermore, the well-established and growing international academic community has contributed to regard tourism as a valid research object and gain respect from other ‘social scientists’.

However, it should be acknowledged that most of the assertions about the advancement, recognition and maturity of tourism as a research area come frequently from the perspective of the so-called First-World tourism scholars. Tourism may have gained the recognition and become well-established as a serious field of knowledge but only in certain societies. The assertions of such scholars may thus reflect the particular conditions of their own contexts, that is, of their own academic traditions and development of their understanding of tourism. Yet, tourism as a research object may not yet be well-established in other parts of the world and in other academic communities, especially in the less developed countries where traditionally the advancement of science and technology in general has been slower and limited by the conditions inherent to each country.

Tourism as an International Mature Field of Research

When referring to the advancement and maturity of international tourism research as a field of knowledge, we commonly refer to the assertions made by the English-speaking research community. In this vein, it is common to read that tourism is a maturing field of study (Sheldon, 1991, p. 473) or that the development of research interest within the tourism academic community reflects the maturity of the field (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007, p. 476). When assessing the development, recognition and maturity of tourism, we may think of four indicators mainly: 1) the academic community; 2) publication spaces for disseminating research; 3) undergraduate and postgraduate university courses and; 4) specialised conferences. In an attempt to identify the current state of tourism research at a global level and within the English-speaking perspective, these four indicators will be briefly described in the following sections.

1. The international English-speaking tourism academic community

The interest in the systematic study of tourism has emerged from a wide number of researchers from various parts of the world and from different disciplinary perspectives, mainly from English-speaking countries. Particularly scholars from the United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia integrate the academic leadership in

tourism research (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007). The academic leadership in tourism research is also widely reflected on the most recognised academy of tourism researchers: *The International Academy for the Study of Tourism*. The Academy is composed of highly accomplished scholars in the field of tourism and aims to further the scholarly research and professional investigation of tourism, to encourage the application of research findings and to advance the international dissemination of tourism scientific knowledge (www.polyu.edu.hk/htm/iast/). As a leading research academy, it sets the standard for tourism as a complex and interdisciplinary field of knowledge worldwide.

A brief overview of the members directory of the Academy shows how the number of such members is relatively limited (55) and are from and/or work at institutions in developed countries where English is spoken, mainly the United States of America, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Researchers coming from or working at developing countries such as China, Turkey, and Korea are also members of the Academy. It is of interest, however, to notice that the number of members from such countries is significantly small and that only one member of the Academy is from a Latin American country (Argentina). Furthermore, it should be noticed that the fields of knowledge to which the members of the Academy belong to are relatively limited in amount; Economics, Geography, Sociology, Anthropology and Psychology are by far the most dominant disciplines in the study of tourism. This in part concurs with the dominant disciplinary focus of doctoral dissertations in the case of the United States of America, as reported by Meyer-Arendt and Justice (2002).

The list of members of the *International Academy for the Study of Tourism* contributing significantly to tourism studies is not exhaustive –for there exist researchers who have made relevant contribution but are not included in the members’ directory. Examples of these can be found within the fifty-seven leading scholars (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007) that have contributed significantly to the maturity of tourism, mainly from an English perspective. From this viewpoint, it is first observed that tourism has indeed gained recognition among the international scholarly community and, second, that this community is integrated mainly by English-speaking scholars and have made perhaps the most significant contributions to the development of tourism knowledge in the English world.

2. International English-speaking publications

Undoubtedly, the number of publications looking at tourism from academic perspectives is a key indicator of how tourism has developed as a research topic. Particularly, we may think of two products; books and journals. With regard to the former, the majority of text books that have encouraged the recognition and advancement of tourism studies is a product of the 1980s and 1990s, and, as Page and Connell (2006) have acknowledged, have been written from North American, European, Australian and New Zealand perspectives. This is not surprising bearing in mind that, as stated above, most researchers belong to English-speaking countries. The publications generated in English have covered conceptual, theoretical and methodological aspects of tourism and has thus permitted to regard tourism as a legitimate field of enquiry.

In addition to the wide number of books written within the English tradition, the number of academic journals on tourism has for over four decades (starting with *Journal of Travel Research*) recognised the scientific value of tourism. Academic journals are important in the creation and dissemination of knowledge, and the existence of several journals, each with varying specialty areas, is an indicator of the maturity of the field of tourism (Sheldon, 1990). Furthermore, academic journals are essential communication channel for researchers and serve as a lens to which the evolution of tourism as a research field can be identified (Xiao & Smith, 2006). Tourism journals have shown a static growth during the last decade and it is estimated that the amount of such journals are currently over 70 (Hall, Williams, & Lew, 2004). The relevance of these publications lies not only on the concentration and dissemination of theoretical and conceptual knowledge but also on the acknowledgement and promotion of the academic value of tourism at least within the English-speaking community.

The development of tourism knowledge is not only evident in the quantity of academic journals but also on the level of specialisation of these. Certainly, journals such as *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Tourism Management* and *Journal of Travel Research* -the highest-quality and most referenced tourism journals (Pechlaner, Zehrer, Matzler, & Abfalder, 2004; Sheldon, 1991)- concentrate research on tourism in general, but there are now a growing number of journals publishing on very specific aspects of tourism. In this vein, journals looking at the relationships between tourism and sustainability, history, marketing, economy, to name but a few, have supported the scientific value of analysing the several dimensions of tourism (see Table 1). The specialisation of such publications may reflect the maturity of the development of tourism knowledge and also the need to analyse the specificities of tourism as a complex phenomenon. As with books, the highest producers on tourism research in journals in English are authors from the United States of America, United Kingdom and Canada. These are shaping the development of tourism knowledge more than authors from other regions of the world (Sheldon, 1991).

Table 1 | Academic journals publishing in English on specific aspects of tourism

(selected list)

Journal	Specific aspects of tourism on which the journal focuses
International Journal of Tourism Anthropology	• Focuses on original, high-quality and cutting-edge research on all aspects of tourism anthropology and aims offer a new, integrated perspective of the field.
Journal of Convention & Event Tourism	• Provides multidisciplinary perspectives on conventions, exhibitions, and events.
Journal of Ecotourism	• Focuses on the social, economic, and ecological aspects of planning, development, management and good practice of ecotourism.
Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Education	• Facilitates scholarly interchange among hospitality and tourism educators, industry practitioners and educators from related disciplines.

Journal of Tourism History	• Publishes overviews and comparative as well as contextualised case-studies, covering all areas of the world and all approaches to historical study.
Journal of Vacation Marketing	• Publishes on topics relating to the marketing of destinations and businesses/organizations involved in the wider tourism, hospitality and events industries.
Tourism Economics	• Addresses the components of the tourism product and the economic organization of tourism at micro and macro levels.
Tourism Geographies	• Explores tourism and tourism-related areas of recreation and leisure studies from a geographic perspective.

3. University courses

Unquestionably, the number of educational programmes on tourism is another key indicator of how tourism has become recognized as a study area. According to Sharpely (2011), over the last three decades tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing subject of study within higher education around the globe. While it is true that some students doubt that tourism in reality deserve individual attention as academic subject (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert, & Wanhill, 2005) and that many students have started tourism studies without being totally convinced of developing in the area (Ritchie & Goeldner, 1994, p. xiii), the growing number of candidates to tourism degrees suggests that the academic interest in the field is increasing. So significant has been the number of students in tourism courses that there may now exist an ‘overproduction’ of tourism graduates in some developed countries (Ryan, 1995).

The acknowledgement of tourism as an academic subject is not linked only to the number of bachelor degree students. The existence of tourism Masters and PHD courses in countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada and Australia reflects the latent need for the systematic study of tourism and its components and the growing recognition of tourism as a scientific field. In the case of the United Kingdom, for example, tourism has become a legitimate area of knowledge that merits scientific research since the 1970s. By 2003, around half the higher education institutions in the same country offered around 100 undergraduate and 50 postgraduate tourism programmes (Sharpely, 2011). As for 2011, a search through the Education UK website (www.educationuk.org) yields 107 courses for the subject area of travel, tourism and leisure as a first degree. In terms of PhD and MPhil research programmes in the same subject area, the search yields 40 different programmes.

While tourism courses in developed countries have experienced continuous growth, it should be acknowledged that this is not by any means the same case in other parts of the world. While the reasons why the number of tourism courses is significantly smaller in other countries escape to the scope of this paper, it is true that the growth, recognition, advancement and therefore maturity of tourism as a field of study are not always applicable to all international contexts.

4. International tourism conferences

Finally, tourism conferences around the world are also an indicator of the academic establishment of tourism as an object of scientific enquiry. Each year there are dozens of conferences organised by research institutes, faculties, universities and tourism organisations. Although such academic events may take place in different parts of the globe and may be held in different languages, there is a significant number of tourism conferences in English. Such conferences, which commonly attract a large number of tourism scholars from all the continents, usually invite well-known researchers belonging to the English-speaking world as keynote speakers. Although 'far too many tourism conferences seem to be little more than mega-events given over to hundreds of papers that are merely recitals of official statistics or survey data' (Dann, 1996, p. 1, cited in Riley & Love, 2000), tourism conferences are also a representation of current research interests and an indicator of the wide variety and trends of tourism research around the world.

Questioning the Maturity of Tourism Research

The preceding discussion suggests that in the eye of some English-speaking scholars, tourism has established as a legitimate academic area and has become a mature academic subject. This is widely evidenced in the number of international scholars –mostly coming from English-speaking countries, in the quantity of journals and the quality of their contents, and in the number of tourism courses and conferences around the world. Whether tourism has indeed reached a maturity stage as a field of knowledge is still debatable. First, there are not universally defined parameters in order to define when exactly an academic subject has reached a maturity stage. It is arguable what should be meant by maturity and therefore what are the indicators for such a stage. Such indicators are not only the ones cited above, namely academic community, publications, courses and conferences, but also other relevant aspects in the academic world such as international academic networking, agreement in the usage of common concepts and theories and the development of tourism's own methodologies, to mention some, may reflect the advancement of tourism as a field of knowledge.

However, determining the actual maturity of tourism as a field of knowledge goes beyond the scope of this paper. What it is actually pursued in this article is questioning whether the assertion that tourism has matured as a field of research, either at an international (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007, p. 476) or regional (Schlüter & Bertonecello, 2010, p. 10) level, applies to the particular development of tourism knowledge in different countries. Specifically, the case of tourism research development in Mexico is presented to challenge or support such assertion.

Development of Tourism Research in Mexico

In Mexico, in November 2006 a group of researchers interested in the study of tourism aspects from various disciplinary approaches such as Geography, Sociology, Economics, Anthropology, Psychology, Administration, to name but a few, were gathered to found the *Academia Mexicana de Investigación Turística, A.C.* (Mexican Academy of Tourism

Research, hereafter AMIT). The aim of the AMIT was to encourage the scientific study of tourism in Mexico and to contribute to the creation and dissemination of tourism knowledge nationally and internationally. Currently, the AMIT is made up of 104 members –out of which 53 hold a doctoral degree- representing 36 institutions from all over the country where tourism research is undertaken (www.amiturismo.org).

Undeniably, the foundation of the AMIT became a cutting-edge initiative in the recognition of tourism as a field of serious academic endeavour. It has become the most important academic association for the study of tourism in Mexico and is becoming widely recognised in other parts of the region, particularly in other Latin American countries. As the maximum representation of tourism research in the country, it has enhanced the recognition of tourism as a research subject by government bodies, particularly by the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (National Council for Science and Technology, CONACyT) and the Secretaría de Turismo (Ministry of Tourism). Currently, public funds are assigned to tourism research projects and, although such funds are directed towards specific demands of the tourism sector such as education, competitiveness, marketing, promotion and climate change, most of these projects are administered by tourism scholars in the country.

As in other tourism academies around the world, the AMIT does not gather all researchers undertaking research in tourism in Mexico. However, the AMIT has certainly become the major tourism research association helping to enhance the scientific and public acknowledgment of tourism. The scientific work of its members –and other scholars who are not part of the association- is becoming well known in the whole country and also gradually in other parts of Latin America. While the existence of the AMIT may be for some a clear indicator of the legitimisation of tourism research, the current conditions of other factors may not fully support the assertion that the development of tourism research in Mexico has reached its maturity stage.

One of these factors, as compared with the English-speaking world, is the limited spaces where researchers publish their work. A quick glance at the scientific production of tourism researchers in Mexico reveals that most of the research papers are published in Hispanic and regional journals (see Table 2) mostly in Spanish, Portuguese and very few in English. Although some researchers have realised the need for their work to be published in internationally recognised journals, authors in Latin America –and also in Mexico- have frequently faced the difficulty of writing their work in English (Schlüter & Bertonecello, 2010). They have also faced the difficulty of adjusting their works to the structure, styles and traditions already set for publication in the English world. This is not always the case, though, as there are few researchers in Mexico who have published their work –either alone or with other authors- in journals such as *International Journal of Tourism Research*, *Tourism Geographies*; these are, nonetheless, very few cases. Notwithstanding these few contributions, since the 1990s it was noted that Mexico did not appear at all within the geographic regions that have made research contribution to tourism in international journals (Sheldon, 1991), nor has any researcher in Mexico been listed within the fifty-seven leading scholars in tourism research at an international level (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007).

Table 2 | Academic journals in which a large proportion of tourism research of Mexico is published

Journal	Country	Focus of the journal
Cuadernos de Turismo	Spain	• Several aspects of tourism.
El Periplo Sustentable	Mexico	• Tourism and sustainability but also looks at sociocultural, economic and administrative, educational and food aspects of tourism.
Estudios y Perspectivas en Turismo	Argentina	• Tourism from a Social Science perspective.
Gestión Turística	Chile	• Scientific and technical development of tourism.
Investigaciones Turísticas	Spain	• Understanding of tourism activity through a multidisciplinary and Ibero-American perspective.
PASOS. Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural	Spain	• The tourism system from the cultural, natural, territorial and social perspectives.
RESTMA. Revista de Economía, Sociedad, Turismo y Medio Ambiente	Spain	• Scientific research in economics, sociology, tourism and environment.
Teoría y Praxis	Mexico	• Tourism, education, administration and business, languages, information technologies and natural resources.
TURyDES. Revista de Turismo y Desarrollo Local	Spain	• Tourism in Ibero-America and its effects on local development and environment.

In addition to the tourism research community and their somehow limited spaces for publications in Mexico, the number of tourism courses, particularly at a postgraduate level are considerably scarce. Although tourism became the subject of university degrees almost sixty years ago in Mexico, its legitimisation as an area of higher education was quite slow. Many Master’s programmes were only tourism-related; in other words, many of these programmes focused mainly on other areas of knowledge such as environment, development, management, but very few were indeed exclusively dedicated to tourism. This condition was more severe in the case of PhD courses. Until recently, candidates could do research on tourism but under non-tourism programmes such as Geography, Sociology, Education, and so forth. Tourism was then justified as a research object if being studied from the perspective of a ‘major discipline’. It was not until four years ago (2009) that the first PhD programme in tourism studies was offered for the very first time in Mexico and in Latin America. While the existence of tourism courses at a postgraduate level are an indicator of the legitimisation as a serious academic area, this does not seem enough to state that –at least within the type, quantity and quality of higher education tourism programmes- tourism research has matured in Mexico.

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Conclusion

This paper aimed to question the alleged maturity of tourism as a research subject, as frequently cited in the English-speaking literature. The existence of a well-known international tourism research academy, the large amount of tourism academic journals and the growing number of tourism courses are a clear indicator that tourism is not anymore in its early stages; however, this seems to be applicable only to the English-speaking world. In such a context, tourism has become legitimate in countries such as the United States of America, United Kingdom and Canada, and perhaps reached a maturity stage, but again the difficulty in defining what should be meant by maturity of an academic area makes this assertion questionable.

Notwithstanding this, it is true that tourism research in the English-speaking literature has certainly developed considerably as compared with that of other parts of the world, in particular of Mexico. Tourism in Mexico has started to gain academic attention and government, political and public recognition. Such interest and recognition have resulted in the recent foundation of an academic association interested in the tourism phenomenon, in the increasing number of publications and in the number of first degree courses in tourism. However, from the perspective of the author, this is still limited evidence to argue that in the case of Mexico tourism has reached its maturity stage as an academic field. In fact, it could be argued, tourism is actually in its embryonic stages since there is a need for a larger number of scholars studying exclusively the various aspects of the tourism phenomenon, for the creation of publication spaces that can reflect how tourism knowledge is constructed and developing, and for higher education in tourism.

Of course, the possibility that tourism is still in its infancy stages in Mexico should not be problematic. Tourism in Mexico offers a wide range of research opportunities and its theoretical, conceptual and methodological issues have no rush in being developed. Actually, most tourism research in Mexico is of an exploratory and descriptive nature and cannot (yet) easily jump into the propositions of theoretical explanations, a condition that may be necessary to reach a maturity status. In this vein, there is a lot to be learnt from those who have already turned their tourism as a matured field of knowledge, but assertions about the generalized maturity of this new but exciting academic subject should be avoided.

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