

Cosmetic Tourism: Bodies and Identities Between New Opportunities and Unseen Risks

Turismo cosmético: cuerpos e identidades ante nuevas oportunidades y
riesgos inéditos

Fabio CORBISIERO & Salvatore MONACO

University of Naples Federico II - Department of Social Sciences

fabio.corbisiero@unina.it, salvatore.monaco2@unina.it

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Abstract: Unlike of what occurred in the industrial era, in the post-modern society the identity of the social actors is no longer linked only to the class, but it appears as the result of an individual choice. This process has been –and continues to be– favored by globalization, the growing free time, the spread and the multiplication of media and transportation tools, that offer possible new dimensions for the construction of self, that can be realized through the physical transformation too. This paper pretends to highlight how today even tourism can be an experience of identity construction. In particular, the contribution intends to describe a specific kind of tourism, the cosmetic one, whose aim is to combine the experience of traveling with the modification of the body which is a visible vehicle of identity. The purpose of the article is to show new opportunities –but also unseen risks– linked to this specific form of tourism.

Keywords: post-modernism, identity, body, tourism, cosmetic tourism, globalization.

Resumen: A diferencia de lo que ocurría en la era industrial, en la sociedad postmoderna la identidad de los actores sociales no está vinculada solo a la clase, sino que aparece más como el resultado de una elección individual. Este proceso ha sido –y sigue siendo– favorecido por la globalización, el creciente tiempo libre, la difusión y la multiplicación de los medios de comunicación y de transporte que ofrecen nuevas posibles dimensiones para la construcción del yo, que puede realizarse también a través de la transformación física. El artículo se propone mostrar que hoy también el turismo puede ser un momento de construcción de la identidad. En particular, este artículo describe un tipo específico de turismo, el cosmético, cuyo objetivo es combinar la experiencia de viajar con la modificación del cuerpo, que es un vehículo visible de nuestra identidad. El propósito de este trabajo es mostrar nuevas oportunidades –pero también riesgos inéditos– vinculados a esta forma específica de turismo.

Palabras claves: post-modernismo, identidad, cuerpo, turismo, turismo cosmético, globalización.

Introduction

On the post-modern society, globalization, the spread of communication tools and the increasing leisure time are some of the variables that offer new possible dimensions to the social actors for the construction of their identities.

In this scenario, the key element is the body, because it is conceived by people as a visible way to show their identity¹, as well as a malleable vehicle to demonstrate to themselves and to others who they are².

This article intends to highlight how even tourism can represent an important moment for the identity construction. In fact, as Bauman says³, today tourists are constantly moving and finding experiences that can contribute significantly to the self-determination.

After describing the dynamics that led tourism to get to the dimensions and characteristics that presents it as a rooted and widespread phenomenon in society⁴, a specific focus is made on cosmetic tourism as travelers move from their countries to places where, in addition to *making holiday*, they also have the possibility to change their bodies, through treatments, surgeries, therapies.

The objective of this work is, on one hand, to show characteristics, potential, but also possible risks associated with this form of tourism and, on the other hand, to identify potential strategies to control the possible harmful consequences.

¹ Giddens, A., *The consequences of modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990.

² Remotti, F., *Contro l'identità*, Rome, Laterza, 1996.

³ Bauman, Z., "From pilgrim to tourist - or a short history of identity", Hall, S., du Gay, P. (eds.), *Questions of cultural identity*, London, Sage Publications, 1996.

⁴ Gilli, M., *Autenticità e interpretazione nell'esperienza turistica*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2009.

Identity and Free Time in the Post-Modern Society

Echoing the words of Lyotard⁵, what distinguishes modernity from the post-modernity is the decline of the *metanarratives*, great tales have become less credible and have been replaced by ever-changing, more relative narratives. The theories on contemporary society describe the social system as segmented, liquid, in perpetual transformation⁶, in which some of the certainties that characterized the modern era go down. In the industrial society, in fact, the individual had in front of her/him nearly prescribed steps and rites of passage: from the inclusion into the peer group, from the school to the career, from the working world to the retirement. The construction of the social actor identities arose from the belonging class and became stronger through work. These two elements defined boundaries between individuals, outlining the similarities and the differences.

The latest innovations in technology and the proliferation of communication fields have favored a radical change in the paradigm that has transformed the way we think, to the point that it is not possible in our time to look at social, cultural or political phenomena, separate from the communicative sphere⁷. In the so-called information society –with the advent of the mass media first and new media later– social actors are able to interact with other people by placing symbolic resources that otherwise would be foreclosed. In this scenario, therefore, subjects experience their identity, unlike in the past, in a free and fluid⁸ way, beyond territorial boundaries⁹. The *cosmopolitanism*, that characterizes the globalized society, turns the lights on the fact that being citizens of the world means not to belong to any particular culture but to belong to all¹⁰.

It follows that in the post-modern society multiple membership systems exist that are not anymore mediated by the concept of class¹¹. These factors caused a change that has intervened in the form of a social distinction that is no longer linked to *social hierarchies*, but rather it developed starting from the people's preferences and expectations. What is at stake is the "appropriation capability"¹² of a social object to stand out from the massifying homologation. Going beyond traditional stratifications, social actors are all working to make themselves a collage of elements: the identity is set up as the result of an individual choice aiming to accumulate symbolic capital¹³. The post-modernity individual is

⁵ Lyotard, J.F., *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, Paris, éditions de Minuit, 1979.

⁶ Beck, U., *World Risk Society*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998; Beck, U., *What Is Globalization?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999; Bauman, Z., *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000; Bauman, Z., *The Individualized Society*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001; Giddens, A., *Europe In The Global Age*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007.

⁷ Abat Ninet, A., J. Monserrat Molas, "Razones de fundamentación de la participación democrática and the Internet", *BAJO PALABRA. Revista de Filosofía*. Época II, 10, 2015, pp. 85-94.

⁸ Berman, J., Bruckman, A., "The Turing Game: Exploring Identity in an Online Environment", *Convergence*, 7(3), pp. 83-102, 2001; Castells, M., Himanen, P., *Reconceptualizing Development in the Global Information Age*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014; Turkle, S., *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York, Penguin Press, 1995; Turkle, S., *Reclaiming Conversation. The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, New York, Penguin Press, 2015

⁹ Meyrowitz, J., *No sense of place: The impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985.

¹⁰ Appiah, A., *Cosmopolitanismo. La ética en un mundo de extraños*, Madrid, Katz, 2007.

¹¹ Canestrari, P., *Consumi e identità: Dal consumo di immagini al consumo di valori*, Rome, Edizioni Nuova cultura, 2013.

¹² Bourdieu, P., *La distinction. Critique sociale du Jugement*, Paris, éditions de Minuit, 1979.

¹³ Crespi, F., *Identità e riconoscimento nella sociologia contemporanea*, Rome, Laterza, 2004.

increasingly determined to live new experiences, aimed –to quote Fabris¹⁴ – *to stabilize his or her own self*.

To determine the quality of (aesthetics) appropriation an increasingly central role is played by the free time, source of “individualization and autonomy”¹⁵. According to Robert Park and Ernest Burgess¹⁶, theorists of the Chicago School, free time can be described as an element capable of allowing a rebalancing of the human personality, away from the working time. Rojek¹⁷ defines leisure time as a value that characterizes the different eras. About the post-modern society, the sociologist argues that it is a factor that pushes to self-affirmation.

The variables that have meant that leisure time assumes an important role in people’s lives are a few. Among them, those which certainly had the greatest influence are the rise in unemployment, which has created a surplus of time not devoted to work activities, and the flexibility introduced in the production process¹⁸, led to new times and social rhythms.

Bodies and Identities Tourism

In the words of Foglio, “in their free time people want to escape from the everyday life, then they search relax, humanly and spiritually grow through traveling, meeting new destinations, new people, and having fun: they search in tourism, generally speaking, entertainment, but also culture, education, experience, provided the tourist offer is able to offer it”¹⁹.

The central interest for the tourism sector is also attested by the recent World Tourism Organization statistics²⁰. This sector represents, in fact, 9% of world GDP. It is a major economic sector for the most industrialized countries, and for those with slower growth. The latest data produced by the Eurobarometer²¹ of the European Commission reveals that 73% of European citizens has made on average at least one trip in 2015²².

Feifer²³ defines the post-modern tourism as an activity that can arise from many different reasons, depending on the significance that the social actors attribute to the trip they intend to make. According to Urry,²⁴ trips are tools because the tourists need to live meaningful experiences for the construction of their identities.

In fact, in today’s society the conception of tourism as a moment of rest and escapism was gradually flanked by new models, which favor more reflective and individual dimensions. The last quarter century was marked by a specific form of tourism, the cosmetic one, aimed at combining the experience of traveling to that of aesthetic

¹⁴ Fabris, G., *Il nuovo consumatore: verso il postmoderno*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2003.

¹⁵ Riesman, D., *The lonely crowd. A study of the changing American character*, Connecticut, New Haven, 1950, p. 69.

¹⁶ Park, R., E., Burgess, E. W., *Introduction to the science of sociology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1921.

¹⁷ Rojek, C., *Decentering leisure. Rethinking leisure theory*, London, Sage Publications, 1995.

¹⁸ Échange et projets, *La révolution du temps choisi*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1980.

¹⁹ Foglio, A., *Il marketing del turismo. Politiche e strategie di marketing per località e prodotti/servizi turistici*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2015, p. 26.

²⁰ UNWTO, *Compendium of Tourism Statistics 2016 Edition*, UNWTO, Madrid, 2016.

²¹ Eurobarometer is a series of public opinion surveys conducted regularly on behalf of the European Commission since 1973.

²² Eurobarometer, *Preferences of Europeans towards Tourism*, Luxemburg, European Commission, 2015.

²³ Feifer, M., *Going Places*, London, MacMillan, 1985.

²⁴ Urry, J., *The Tourist Gaze, Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*, London, Sage Publications, 2002.

modification. There is, in fact, a part of travelers who move to undergo plastic surgeries or cosmetic treatments, as the construction of identity in contemporary world is based on the idea that the body is a mediator between us and the world. Traveling as *cosmetic* experience represents a new way to conquer *distinction* and it finds its representatives in the new bourgeoisie of sellers and clients of symbolic goods and services that are linked to the new representation of the body.

First in America, then gradually in the rest of the world, the number of agencies and tour operators that combine travel, accommodation, treatment and convalescence, in a sort of *all-inclusive* package, has exponentially grown²⁵.

In fact, facilities that pack aesthetic tourism experiences are more and more, with interpreters, medical records in the patient/tourist's language, linked with shuttle services to and from the location, agreements with major hotels, in-room satellite TV, pre and post intervention tours. The recent data produced by the international consulting company Deloitte²⁶ for FNCP (Federación Nacional de Clínicas Privadas) shows the massive numbers of the cosmetic tourism: there are about 7 million people that every year move from their country to take care of themselves and their bodies, producing a turnover of about 100 billion dollars. The company estimates that the trend is on the rise and that the amount could grow by 50% over the next three years.

In this context, there are different factors having a big impact on the choice of destinations in which to practice cosmetic tourism. First, there is an economic evaluation. People search a convenience in terms of price, considering simultaneously the expense required for the operation and for the trip. The accessibility of the place, waiting times and accessory tourist quality offer (artistic and cultural heritage, possibility to make visits, excursions, local geography, etc.) are the other equally important factors.

Another important factor that feeds the cosmetic as a form of post-modern tourism is the proliferation of low cost airlines²⁷.

The types of requested operations are the most diverse, ranging from tattoos and piercing to plastic surgeries, from beauty treatments to body contouring.

What is happening globally is the setting up of a kind of *aesthetic geography* so some areas more than others are beginning to establish as preferred destinations for specific treatments. This is the case, for example, of the Eastern European countries (Romania, Poland, Hungary) where dental tourism is particularly present and vivid²⁸. Belgrade, has become a new mecca for those who want to undergo gender reassignment surgery²⁹. Every year, in fact, more than one hundred transgender people from all over the world (Austria, Greece, Romania, Hungary, France, Iran, Singapore, but also the United States) are turning to specialists of the Serbian capital for this surgical procedure³⁰.

²⁵ Connell, J., "Medical tourism: sea, sun, sand and... surgery", *Tourism Management*, 27(6), pp. 1093-1110, 2006.

²⁶ Deloitte, *2015 Travel, Hospitality, and Leisure Outlook*, New York, Deloitte US, 2015.

²⁷ www.whatclinic.com

²⁸ Marra, E., Ruspini, E., *Altri turismi. Viaggi, esperienze, emozioni*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2010.

²⁹ Corbisiero, F., *Sociologia del turismo LGBT*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2016.

³⁰ Walt, H., *Paper genders. Pulling the Mask Off the Transgender Phenomenon*, London, Make Waves Publishing, 2011.

Cosmetic Tourism... Which Risks?

The desire to travel to shape or change one's own body is part of the paradigm of individualization, in which the central element is the differentiation of social narratives. The concept of *aesthetic body* is a product of the late modernity, where fashion, medicine, sport and diet are linked to produce a desired, refined and calculated beauty³¹ reached through an investment in terms of money and energy³².

If it's true that the new opportunities of the post-industrial society have multiplied the possibilities for self-definition and self-realization, at the same time the cosmetic tourism exposes people to new risks. Indeed, even if treatments are combined with a vacation, this should not be a reason to underestimate their importance. These are, anyhow, interventions on the body that require the right belief. Many interventions provide day-care formulas, with discharge the same day of the operation, in order to allow patients to live the tourist experience. Times of rest and convalescence, however, are different and depend on the type of treatment which people are submitted to (it is quite different to change one's own body through a piercing or a tattoo, from undergoing rhinoplasty or breast augmentation) and the physical reaction is not always predictable. Even if the all-inclusive package scans in detail residence, operation, convalescence and post-intervention activities times, it should not bind the tourist, who must always feel free to change her or his mind or to take a few more days of rest. In addition, the body is not always ready to react immediately after the post-intervention: there are very few beauty treatments that have such a short convalescence time.

A significant case is the all-inclusive offer proposal by some agencies that includes safaris, facelifts and liposuction in Africa: strong heat, sand and dust are the first elements to be avoided if you have bandages or fresh sutures.

Moreover, very often the intervention costs are lower than those that would be paid in one's own country because of the lower quality of the products used.

Some Concluding Remarks

Data on cosmetic tourism and future forecasts, which leave us well understood that this is a growing phenomenon, bring out clearly the need for the social actors of anthropopoietic constructions³³.

Indeed, there seems to be today an even stronger link between the desire of the subjects to define their identities in order to distinguish themselves from others and their commitment to shape, adapt and transform their own body as a strategy of *self-completion*.

From an economic point of view, various services that enable people to modify their own look, acting on one or more parts of their bodies, have created a real *cosmetic industry*.

Furthermore, combining the possibility to change one's own body through surgery or cosmetic treatments and to travel has positive repercussions for the actors who are part of the tourism industry. In fact, the cosmetic tourism can represent, if supported by good local

³¹ Hughes, B., "Medicalized bodies," in Hancock, P., et. al (eds.) *The Body, Culture and Society*, Philadelphia, Open University Press, 2010.

³² Featherstone, M., *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London, Sage Publications, 1991.

³³ For further information on the subject, see Remotti, F. (ed.), *Forme di umanità*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2002; Affergan, F. et al., *Figure dell'umano. Le rappresentazioni dell'antropologia*, Rome, Meltemi, 2005; Angioni, G., *Fare, dire, sentire: l'identico e il diverso nelle culture*, Nuoro, Il Maestrale, 2011.

marketing strategies, an effective tool to attract consumers with good buying potential as well as an opportunity for private facilities to grow.

On one hand, this form of tourism can increase the value of the places in which the facilities for the patient-tourist exist and, on the other hand, it can overcome one of the problems that historically is gripping the tourism sector, the seasonality of flows, a phenomenon primarily linked to natural factors (climate in the first place), and timing dictated by work and leisure.

In fact, cosmetic tourism, unlike holidays that traditionally are made for rest and escape from the daily routine, must be practiced in non-holiday periods, where centers and clinics are active. It follows a revival in economic terms, especially for those areas that are traditionally frequented only when the weather is favorable or during holiday periods. These places have had a growing visibility thanks to the role played by the web and new technologies, which fulfil the central function in assisting those who decide to combine the choice to travel with the change of their bodies. It just takes a quick research on any search engine to find hundreds of offers in real time with all the information and explanations necessary to plan this type of holiday.

From this critical angle, it is therefore possible to assert that the web has promoted a real *geographic democratization*, that can be defined as a global tourist race that has opened to before unknown or little known destinations the possibility of being able to enter in global competition between local areas³⁴.

At the same time, however, the new sociology of the body has raised a number of questions about the possible contradictions between health and healthism, since a huge attention and care for one's own body, indicative of an excessive hedonism, may represent itself a risk for ourselves and our own well-being³⁵.

It would be appropriate, therefore, that people who decide to combine tourism with an aesthetic experience do it in a conscious and responsible way. Some precautions may be, to verify first the quality of the structure and inquire about the expert who will take care of the body (either a tattoo artist or a surgeon), on the studies she or he has done and on the experience gained. It is also important to check the laws in force in the country where one intends to go in terms of patient protection in case of plastic and cosmetic surgery. It would be appropriate, finally, to take out a specific insurance, which protects tourists from unexpected events.

In this sense, the various non-profit organizations and service companies that are springing up around the world to welcome and accompany tourists in choosing the most suitable facilities to meet their needs may represent valid points of reference.

In America, for several years to now have been active the Health Flight Solution³⁶, a company that supports tourists who decide to move to any part of the world to take care of themselves, of their health and their bodies. In Spain, on the other hand, in 2013 the most important tourist and health entities of the country³⁷ formed Spaincares, a Spanish health tourism cluster. And finally, in Italy, in 2014 the Minister of Health has promoted Italiastarbene, an initiative aimed at promoting the best Italian hospitals that offer services

³⁴ Nocifora, E., *La società turistica*, Naples, Scriptaweb, 2008.

³⁵ Cipolla, C. (ed.), *Manuale di sociologia della salute*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2004.

³⁶ www.healthflightssolutions.com

³⁷ Federación Nacional de Clínicas Privadas (FNCP), Asociación Nacional de Balnearios (ANBAL), Federación Empresarial de la Dependencia (FED), Confederación Española de Hoteles y Alojamientos Turísticos (CEHAT), Confederación Española de Agencias de Viajes (CEAV).

in the health, care and well-being field, providing also all the necessary information relating to possible tourist services that patients can benefit of

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