

COAL SEAM GAS AND ITS IMPACTS ON DESTINATION IMAGE ASSESSMENT: AN INVESTIGATION INTO WINE TOURISM IN THE HUNTER VALLEY, NSW

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ABSTRACT

This project investigates the impact that media coverage of Coal Seam Gas (CSG) exploration in the NSW Hunter Valley is having on tourist perception of the wine tourism industry. We argue that the inclusion of social values methodologies (specifically Personal Construct Theory based repertory grids) in destination image assessment may provide a structured approach for measuring tourist sense of place. In this paper we report on the rationales behind the study, as well as outlining the ways in which repertory grid methodologies are being used to measure the impact of coal seam gas on tourist's sense of place.

KEYWORDS: Community values, wine tourism, coal seam gas

COMMUNITY VALUES, WINE TOURISM AND COAL SEAM GAS

In 2009 3.2 million people visited Australian wineries, with 21% of all international wine tourists visiting the NSW Hunter Valley (Tourism Australia, 2009). Wine growing in the Hunter first began in the 1830s and today there are more than 120 vineyards located throughout the Hunter Valley. In the year to June 2012 domestic tourists spent \$850million in the NSW Hunter Valley (Destination NSW, 2012). Across the Hunter wineries are driven by a desire to create an image of 'rustic agricultural pursuit' (O'Neil, 2000, p. 161) in which the pioneering history of early wine growing families including Rosemount and Tyrell are held up as indicative of the struggles of early European settlers against a harsh natural landscape. Over recent years the number of vineyards opening their cellar doors to tourists has expanded with groups such as the Hunter Valley Wine Tourism Association being established to represent the interests of vineyards with State and Federal Governments.

The development of a destination image for wine tourism in a region like the Hunter will be influenced by a range of factors. While the quality of the wine product (Batra, 2008) is paramount; a visitor's experience will also be influenced by the broader characteristics of the rural region including tranquility (Sparks, 2007). Poitras and Getz (2006, p. 426) have defined wine tourism as a "combination of consumer behaviour, destination development and marketing opportunity" and because of this, commentators have come to realise that "changes to the winescape can have a significant impact on the wine tourism potential of a destination" (Piotras and Getz, 2006, p. 427). In 2011 the Western Australian Government rejected mining applications in the Margaret River wine regions in part "due to the perceived impact on the tourism destination image and operations of the region" (Carlsen, 2011). Carlsen (2011) notes that the implications of this decision are that rationales for development decisions must move beyond economic imperatives to encompass concern for the environmental and social fabric of a region.

The Hunter Valley region is home to a diverse range of primary and service industries including mining (open cut and CSG), thoroughbred breeding (McManus, 2008), power generation, viticulture and associated tourism sectors. Since their inception each of these industries has contributed in

various ways to the economic prosperity of the region (Allen Consulting Group, 2011). Regardless of their economic potential a number of commentators have noted the cumulative environmental and social impacts of mining operations on host communities (Franks, Brereton, & Moran, 2010). In recent years this querying has taken on a more popular/ activist tone with the development of groups such as the Hunter Valley Protection Alliance opposing AGL Energy through the “Lock the Gate” campaign. Media play a significant role in shaping the message that is read by tourists in the capital cities, with different publishers seen as being aligned with CSG stakeholders on the basis of the publisher’s own political ideological position. At this time, however, there are no academic studies that have formally considered the ways in which newspaper reporting on CSG may influence image formation of one of Australia’s premier tourism destination regions.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Carlsen and Boksberger (2011) established that the “creation of pleasurable, memorable, educational and sensorial experiences is the *raison d’être* for developing wine tourism”. If we are to understand the impact of CSG on the wine tourism experience it is vital that we comprehend the relationship between a socially organised and systematised tourist gaze and the professional “experts who help construct, develop and market the tourist’s experience of place” (Urry, 1990, p. 1). With this in mind the first part of this study has focussed on determining the key features of the Hunter Valley destination brand. While the tourism industry makes use of various media to communicate their marketing message; this study has focussed on the destination image, which is portrayed in 15 tourism association, vineyard and tourism operator websites. Palmer (2004) has identified that websites offer a useful delivery platform for marketers in that they allow suppliers to react quickly to volatile market conditions. A recent study of tourists in the area by the Hunter Valley Tourist Centre established that 63% of visitors would consider boycotting the Hunter in light of CSG development. Over the next few months tourism providers will have to respond to these messages if they wish to maintain the Hunter’s reputation as one of NSW’s premier regional tourism destinations. Websites will likely be at the forefront of this marketing push.

The authors have reviewed the destination image of the before mentioned websites according to post positivist principles, which Ellingson (2011) has identified as being particularly suited to the study of media sources. Under such a model the researchers have conducted an inductive appraisal of sources, which has allowed for the formation of a typology of destination image categories for the Hunter. The typology draws on the work of Williams (2001) who employed a modified version of Echtner and Ritchie’s destination image attributes, which they then adapted for the study of wine tourism. Williams (2001) proposed a model that contained eight core wine destination image attributes. Based on a review of the before mentioned tourism association, vineyard and tourism operator websites the research team has expanded these attributes to reflect the range of characteristics of wine tourism in the Hunter Valley. Appendix A shows the core attributes and the forty five Hunter Valley based sub components that were identified by the research team. Destination attributes have been ranked on the basis of the emphasis ascribed to them in each web site, and the top sub categories of the destination attributes have subsequently been chosen for use in repertory grid surveys. Sub categories chosen for inclusion in the repertory grid interviews included: farmers; wine makers; visitors (in and around production facilities); production activities; and [tourism] activities undertaken outside in bright sunshine.

The image a tourist has of the Hunter Valley will develop organically on the basis of information a tourist draws from a range of information sources. As such the authors have also undertaken a content analysis of the destination image of the Hunter from two contrasting sources. The first is the reporting on CSG exploration in the regional newspaper the Sydney Morning Herald. Because of their high perceived credibility and market penetration the mass media plays an important role in shaping the individual and shared consciousness of a community (Khodadadi, 2012). For each of the destination

attributes in William's (2001) typology the researchers have searched for evidence of reporting in the Herald of associated CSG impacts. The top five impacts identified have been used as elements in repertory grid surveys (see Table 1) and will themselves be contrasted in the final repertory grid survey tool with five images/ elements representing the current contemporary landuse mix in the Hunter Valley.

Table 1: Coal Seam Gas Impacts Reported in the Sydney Morning Herald

Issue	Number of Times Appears
1. Contamination of groundwater	24
2. Contamination of Agricultural Lands	16
3. Land Access and landowners rights	13
4. Visual Amenity Impacts	8
5. Depletion of Water Resources	4

With the elements in place the researchers are moving on to the process of conducting Personal Construct Theory based repertory grid interviews with Sydney based wine tourists over the last few months of 2012. Personal Construct Theory (PCT) is a form of psychology which centres on an individual's interpretation and assessment of the environment around them (Coshall, 2000). Originally developed by George Kelly (1955) in the context of clinical psychology, PCT and the associated repertory grid method have provided tourism researchers with a means of formalising and quantifying the perceptual mapping process in destination image studies (Hankinson, 2004; Pike, 2002). Drawing from the information sources above, repertory grid respondents will be presented with triad combinations of images for analysis. For each set of images, respondents will be asked the following question; As a wine tourist who has visited the Hunter; if you were considering your idealised destination image for the region, in what way are two of these images alike but yet different to the third. The constructs, which are developed from such a study, are an 'individual interpretation of the way in which elements relate' (Schweinsberg, Wearing, & Darcy, 2012, p. 204). They allow tourists to construe the impact of CSG not only on the tourism image of the Hunter region, but also on the broader character of an area to which many wine tourists are repeat visitors to (see Tourism Australia, 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

Over the last ten years a substantial body of literature has developed on the marketing of wine tourism industries in many rural localities throughout the globe (see J. Carlsen & Charters, 2007; Jack Carlsen, Dowling, & Cowan, 1998; Marzo-Navarro & Pedraja-Iglesias, 2010; Pikkemaat, Peters, Boksberger, & Secco, 2009). While some publications (e.g., Carmichael, 2005) tacitly acknowledge the historical role of mining industries in shaping the current character of the wine tourism destination region; no studies have been identified that specifically canvas tourist perceptions on the likely impact of future mining operations on a region's destination brand. This study is exploring the possibility of using Personal Construct theory based repertory grids to measure the impact that CSG has on the destination brand of the wine tourism industry in the NSW Hunter Valley. By establishing the usability of the technique in the Hunter Valley; the next stage will be to work with operators to establish user friendly repertory grid toolkits, which can be used to measure visitor sentiment on the likely impacts of mining operations on wine tourism in other areas of Australia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is funded through a UTS Business School Research Grant. The authors would like to acknowledge the work of Barbara Almond who has served as research assistant on this project.

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APPENDIX A: ATTRIBUTES OF THE HUNTER VALLEY WINE TOURISM DESTINATION IMAGE²³

Attribute (from Williams, 2001)	Hunter Valley Sub Components	Association	Vineyard	Operators	Average
Biophysical	Vegetation - natural	2	1	1	1.3
	Wildlife - Fauna	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.3
	Water/ water quality	0.6	0	0	0.2
	Climate - either hot, moderate or cool	2	2	1	1.7
	Air - Air quality	2	1	1	1.3
Production Facilities	Heritage - architecture	2	1	0.5	1.2
	Modern - architecture	0.2	0.4	0	0.2
	Wine making facilities - equipment used in the process	2.6	0.6	0.5	1.2
	Wine Storage Facilities	3	1.4	1	1.8
	Wine Tasting Facilities - cellar doors	2.8	1.2	1.5	1.8
	Accommodation	2.6	0.8	0.5	1.3
	Food production and Service Facilities - restaurants, cafés, pubs	2.6	0.6	0.5	1.2
Wine Production Processes	Production activities	3	1	1.8	1.9
	Farmers	3	2.6	1.3	2.3
	Wine makers	3	2.6	0.6	2.1
	Visitors - in and around production facilities	3	1.6	1.1	1.9
Food Production Processes	Local produce and cuisine	2.2	0.6	0.5	1.1
	Food production facilities - harvesting produce and cooking	2	0.5	0.5	1.0
	Simple Cuisine - often presented with wine	2	0.5	0.6	1.0
	Upscale cuisine - often presented with wine	2	0.6	0.5	1.0

²³ Bold items represent destination image sub components chosen for repertory grid interviews