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Published: 28/07/2021

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bhandari, K. (2021). *National symbols and the political agency of tourism*. Paper presented at The Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya 2021, Kathmandu, Nepal.
<https://annualconference.soscbaha.org/topic/national-symbols-and-the-political-agency-of-tourism/>

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National symbols and the political agency of tourism

Abstract

Scholars take the view that globalisation harbours a utilitarian conception of market rationality and competitive individualism and that globalisation makes the national and political boundaries messy by putting the market above all other forms of social and international engagement. Even amidst diverging viewpoints on the role of globalisation, there is an established line of inquiry that globalisation and assertive nationalism can go hand in hand and that they both reinforce and reconfigure national feelings and identity. For example, tourism scholars have associated the use of national symbols in tourism as an expression of nationalism which is grounded in the argument that tourism and nationalism are 'cultural' phenomena and complement each other. Informed by the above debate, this paper examines the deployment of the Nepali national flag in Nepali tourism promotion. The study applies a qualitative methodology and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 17 purposefully chosen tourism stakeholders who are instrumental in the design and selection of the Nepal's tourism promotion activity originally intended for Visit Nepal Year 2020. The study finds that the use of national symbols in tourism is an example of the political agency of tourism in which the 'nationalist' narrative is mobilised as a means to challenge the conditions of neoliberalism that undermine the perceived national autonomy and integrity of its national identity. The paper opens a new debate to study the engagement between tourism and nationalism through the lens of the political agency of tourism.

Keywords: nationalism, national identity, national symbols, political agency, Nepal

National symbols and the political agency of tourism

In the last two decades there has been increased interest in the study of the engagement between tourism and nationalism and national identity (Park, 2010; Palmer 1999; Pretes, 2003; Bhandari, 2014; 2018; Frew & White, 2011; White, 2016). A common theme in these studies has been that both tourism and nationalism are complementary to each other (Palmer 1999) and that tourism is an expression of national identity and nationalism (Bhandari, 2014; Frew & White, 2011). This view originates from the articulation that tourism and nationalism are both 'cultural' phenomena (Urry, 1994; Hutchinson, 1999; MacCannell, 1999; Rojek & Urry, 1997; Kosher, 1998) and there is a convergence between the two in producing a shared interest, motivated through a variety of inspirations which could include history, architecture, archaeology, and ethnography (Van den Berghe & Ochoa, 2000). However, such an explanation ignores the fact that unlike nationalism, that helps crystallize and articulate national identity (Cerulo, 1995; Eriksen & Jenkins, 2007; Smith, 1991), tourism is a platform for intercultural exchange and social interaction that contributes to cultural diversity, and fosters intercultural dialogue (UNESCO, 2009).

Additionally, there are also the forces of globalisation which are strongly contradictory to the idea of complementarity between the two. Scholars argue that the basic tenets of globalisation reside in the utilitarian conception of market rationality and competitive individualism (Spyridakis, 2018). This is informed by neoliberalism that has two important characters: first, it creates a mode of governmentality that prescribes a preferred form of social organisation (Harvey, 2005; McGuigan, 2016; Steger & Roy, 2010); and second, by putting the market above all other forms of social and international engagement, it makes national and political boundaries messy (Dunn, 2017; Springer, Birch, & MacLeavy, 2016). Thus, a homogeneous entity created by globalisation is a challenge to tourism, as the basic premise of international tourism is unique cultural authenticity and distinctive identity. This paper considers the above nuances in the interaction between tourism and nationalism and provides an alternative explanation to our understanding of the engagement between highly globalised tourism and nationalism.

This paper examines the use of national symbols in the tourism representation of Nepal and suggests its deployment as a nationalist resurgence and a resistance against externally defined impositions, namely the forces of globalisation. Before going into detail it would be useful to explain why the use of national symbols is chosen. National symbols and flags are a

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potent symbol of national identity and serve a special relationship with the nations they represent (Sasha, 1973; Cerulo, 1993). Billig (1995) describes the ubiquity of the use of the national flag in the United States as creeping 'banal' nationalism and argues that everyday practices such as flags on public buildings and the use of deictic words in the media such as 'ours' or 'us' reproduce the nation on a daily basis. Despite an increasing number of studies into the interaction between tourism and nationalism, the study of national symbols and flags in tourism has not emerged as a priority amongst tourism scholars. This is interesting, given that there are examples where countries have extensively deployed national symbols and icons in the promotion of tourism. A good example is Scotland, where tourism is permeated with the iconography of Scottish national identity, which scholars have interpreted as an expression of nationalism (Bhandari, 2014; Greiner, 2005, 2006; Butler, 1998; McCrone, Morris & Kiely, 1995). In the context of Nepal, there is an appreciation that the selection and making of a new national anthem has strengthened the process of political modernisation of the nation-state and its new national identity (Hutt, 2012), though no such study has been done into national flags.

This paper argues that the use of national signifiers such as national flags is an example of the political agency of tourism where the 'nationalist' narrative is used as a means to challenge the conditions that undermine the perceived national autonomy and subjectivity of the nation's identity. Given that tourism is an intercultural exchange, the application of political agency is relevant because politics is a 'a form of activity concerned with addressing problems of living together in a shared world of plurality and difference' (Arendt, 1958 cited in Häkli & Kallio, 2018, p.3). The problems of such coexistence and association are referred to as political and the space of such sharing is constituted of active agents (Barnett 2012: 679; Kallio & Häkli 2011a, 2013, 2017). According to this view, politics is a relational phenomenon and what makes any issue political is the context within which the exchange relationship takes place. Thus, the representation in tourism can be said to be political if such a statement is the outcome of or if it symbolises a problem or contestation in the nature of exchange that takes place in tourism. The premise of the argument is that the contradiction between the tenets of globalisation and identity-stimulating cultural icons instigates a social movement that challenges the homogenising tendencies of globalisation. In this context, tourism acts as an agent in the conflict between the political realms that lie outside the state structure and national society – which in essence is a strong application of the political agency of tourism (Maignashca & Marchetti, 2013; Flint, 2003).

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However, it would be useful to outline first why Nepal was chosen at the outset. Nepal is one example where its national flag has been conspicuously used in tourism because of its unique shape and as a representation of Nepal's distinctive identity. Most of Nepal's tourism promotional activities are accompanied by its national flag. Such initiatives are unusual because Nepali tourism is largely dominated by international visitors, and one third of its tourists originate from India and China. The use of highly nationalistic symbols like the national flag does not fit well with the above two markets, given that the two countries form 'the Other' in the narrative of Nepali nationalism (Bhandari, 2016; Gellner, 2018). Despite the prediction that the era of nationalism is coming to an end (Hobsbawm, 1990), scholars have noted a nationalist resurgence globally (Bieber, 2018). Given the above, the use of the national flag in tourism representations could provide a meaningful insight into why nationalism is permeating an area that is seen as a carrier of globalism and universality. However, the link between a nation's cultural representation and its location and response to the globalised world-system has been largely ignored (Cerulo, 1994). Thus, this study is driven by the following research question: what discourses inform the mobilisation of the national flag in the tourism representations of Nepal?

Literature review

Our understanding of the engagement between tourism and nationalism and national identity has been largely informed by the historical and political complementarity between the two (Lepp & Haris, 2008; Bhandari, 2018; Greiner, 2005). In terms of theoretical influence, the study of tourism and nationalism has been greatly influenced by Anderson's (1991) notion of 'imagined communities'. For example, Shaffer (2001) shows how the development of domestic tourism in late nineteenth century USA played an instrumental role in the formation of its national identity. The consumption of patriotic landmarks, grandiose landscapes and the experience of moving westward played a key part in the forging of American identity. Similarly, another notable study by Pretes (2003) provides a further insight into the contemporary imagination of American identity in the state of South Dakota. He uses the examples of Mount Rushmore, Wall Drug and Rapid City Dinosaur to show how each of these icons affirm the political, economic and natural ideals of the American nation. There are other studies that have applied Anderson's theory to show how domestic tourism promotes national identity (e.g Palmer, 1999; Light, 2001; Pritchard & Morgan, 2001; Henderson, 2002).

Studies by anthropologists dealing with tourism and nationalism consider tourism as a form of ethnic relations (Wood, 1998; Hitchcock, 1999) and nationalism as a spontaneous construction of ethnic identities as a result of group interaction (Conversi 1995). Such

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arguments are drawn from Barth's (1981) view that ethnic distinctions are maintained and asserted through interaction and interdependence. Wood (1998) has tried to apply this in the case of tourism and argued that the tourism industry has become an important player in the process of ethnic boundary determination, maintenance, and change which has made people much more self-conscious and reflexive about the 'cultural stuff'.

More recent studies show that on many occasions national identity and tourism intersect, overlap, and traverse each other, providing an opportunity for authorities to capture the imagination of tourists by referring to various aspects of national identity (Frew & White, 2011; also see Pretes, 2003; Pitchford, 2006; Park, 2010). In the views of Frew and White (2011) the connection between tourism and national identity is apparent via the promotional activities of tourism authorities. White (2016) extends the above argument and suggests the use of national symbols in tourism as a form of commercial nationalism, that is, the promotion of national signifiers in commercial enterprises in creating a boundary. She argues that the design of tourism promotion and a logo by state agencies utilises the symbols of official nationalism such as national symbols, flags, images, and icons. However, as a concept commercial nationalism is still very similar to official nationalisms, barring the way they present their visual or textual representations (Ratz & Irimias, 2017). This does not answer why tourism fosters cultural identity against the very nature of globalisation that vouches for homogenisation.

These studies take the view that the nationalist overtones in tourism are not acts of deliberate strategy but a cultural trait that people may have been taking more or less for granted and which unknowingly foster nationalistic feeling through tourism representations. They do not take into account that the role of global forces in ascribing, shaping and expressing self-identity though the impacts of globalisation on other aspects of tourism economy is well established by scholars (Bhandari 2019; Wearing, McDonald, Taylor & Ronen, 2019). A critical examination of the neoliberal order shows that globalisation and the international community have become so powerful that they have almost displaced the traditional state-centred political system, to which various forms of resentments have been recorded. Bhandari (2019) has shown in the case of Nepal how international agencies have been playing a key role in the development of tourism policies, undermining the role of state actors in public policy making.

The response to the above has come in the form of a more assertive expression of nationalism. This is appreciated by Giddens (1994), who has taken note that national communities have responded to this pressure by adopting a stronger national sense (cf Sabanadze, 2010).

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Scholars have also shown that a large section of the Nepali political class has been critical of the economic neoliberalism and its capitalist institutions, often terming them an aggression against Nepali national identity and nationalism (Bhandari, 2018). The forces of globalisation advance a universal global identity which neglects the cultural differences of global societies, bringing about a challenge to the questions of national culture, authenticity and uniqueness. The remit of the above nature of globalisation has often fallen in the subject areas of political economy and more recently of geopolitics, which supposes tourism as a geopolitical act providing a platform for the intersection of the above: people articulate who they are in both historical and political senses.

However, there are limitations to these challenges. The political-economy approach is a much established field in the study of tourism and has examined tourism's engagement with the wider international community (Bramwell & Meyer, 2007; Bramwell & Lane, 2012; Chambers and Airey, 2001; Elliott, 1997; Krutwayshe & Bramwell, 2010; Sharpley & Knight, 2009; Wan and Bramwell, 2015). However, it is more concerned with the nature of state involvement in tourism (Sharpley & Knight, 2009; Elliot, 1997; Chambers & Airey, 2001; Bramwell & Meyer, 2007; Krutwayshe & Bramwell, 2010; Hazbun, 2004) and puts too much emphasis on the market and inequalities. However, in an interconnected world the forces that shape the interface between tourism and its relationship with international actors cannot be overlooked (Hall, 2017).

This is slightly corrected by the application of geopolitics that analyses the touristic response to the stimuli of the global forces (Bhandari, 2019; Huang and Suliman, 2020; Hall, 2017; Hannam, 2013; Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2016; Mostafanezhad, 2018; Gillena, & Mostafanezhad, 2019). Scholars take the view that "tourism is part and parcel of state geopolitical programs" (Rowen 2016, p.392) and that there is a philosophical and epistemological link between them because both are considered an outcome of international exchange. Both concepts are premised on the proposition that the global landscape is structured into various nation states and is informed by various agendas and discourses that are represented in various forms (Dodds, 2005; Kraxberger & Paul, 2013; Toal, 2000). The link between the two is made clearer in the expression of West II (2006) who believes that the focus of contemporary geopolitics is on the dynamics of "power to" produce things, induce pleasure, form knowledge or produce discourse. This is similar to tourism that plays a role in the evolution of the viewing of a nation or producing a distinctive narrative of it (Hughes, 1992).

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Such a view can result from the reading of the cultural icons, images and symbols of the nation presented to visitors, which is why 'political geographers have long noted how both political and spatial realities are created vis-à-vis the social imagination of place' (Ashworth, 1994 cited by Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2017, p. 227). Huang and Suliman (2020) have illustrated the complex interplay between tourism and territorial nationalism which is mutually constituted and interdependent. They argue that through China's comprehensive territorialisation strategy in the South China Sea, Xisha tourism is politically oriented, highly regimented, and performatively constituted to achieve China's territorial goal. The above discussion suggests that the geopolitical angle provides a good perspective; however, it considers tourism merely a recipient of the consequence of international geopolitics and does not take into account the tensions and discourse that inform the representation of nation in touristic mediums (Mamadouch & Dijkink, 2006).

The above limitations of the political economy and geopolitics can be corrected to an extent by the concept of political agency that has not been given much attention in tourism until now. There is a wider recognition that tourism takes place within the larger political environment and has a deal agency: in such a way that the adopting of a concept of political agency can provide a fresh standpoint to the problem. According to Maignashca and Marchetti (2013), political agency is traditionally understood as a capacity to impact upon the state-centred political system to achieve a desired outcome. However, the present understanding of political agency is not restricted to participation in social movement but also includes a non-human way of acting that challenges the institutional political processes. The premise of political agency is that though not all actions or events are inherently political, they can gain political weight through politicisation, which can depend on the context and the sphere in which they take place. In a situation where matters that people or tourism stakeholders hold important are challenged or called into question, political agency is prompted.

Thus, political agency includes a non-human way of acting that challenges-institutional political processes, which has started to gain some appreciation in tourism scholarship (Keith Hollinshead, Irena Ateljevic & Nazia Ali, 2009; Hultman & Hall, 2012). For example, Lanfant (1995) contends that relationships between international tourism and culture are much more complex than that tourism impacts analysis, and that constellations of social relations, and structures and institutional constitutive rules shape the agency of tourism. Some recent studies have elaborated such an agency of tourism in negotiating the transaction between the exogenous forces of global markets and endogenous local aspirations (Chang, Milne and Fallon, 1996). One strain of analysis is that the agency of tourism is 'characterised by the

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power to change spaces and resist what they perceived to be threatening external processes' (Everett, 2012, p. 547). This observation is helpful to further our understanding of how tourism uses national symbols to respond to the homogenising tendency of international tourism. This paper contributes to pushing this boundary further.

Research context & methodology

In late 2017, Nepal's Minister of Tourism, Culture and Civil Aviation announced that Nepal would celebrate the year 2020 as Visit Nepal Year (VNY) with the main objective to bring two million international visitors to the country. An open competition for designing the campaign logo was announced in April 2018, with the requirement that the design should be unique and vibrant, successfully conveying the culture and ethos of Nepal, whilst highlighting the natural, cultural, and religious diversity of the country. A total of 145 entries were received altogether. A small selection team at the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) comprising members from the tourism industry and external experts forwarded the final 5 logos to the main logo selection committee led by the Minister of Tourism, Culture and Civil Aviation. This study articulates the discourse of nation and nationalism that inform the finalised logo and its interpretations by Nepali tourism stakeholders.

The study applies interpretive philosophy and the data were collected using qualitative interviews. The sample came from two categories: i) who belonged to the policy community and contributed to the VNY logo selection committee, and ii) influential tourism industry stakeholders who engage with the government and tourists and inform the tourism policy process. The sample included officials managing the VNY campaign; former administrative heads at the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation and the Nepal Tourism Board; the artist whose logo design was selected; staff contributing to the selection of the logo and private sector stakeholders in tourism. The chosen samples were similar in response to the main issue, for example, all belonging to the tourism policy community. This was done in accordance with 'issue homogeneity' (Corfman, 1995) which suggests that participants are similar in response to the focal issues, for example, attitude, opinions and values. However, they were diverse in terms of age, gender, education, and the organisation they work for. This was intended to achieve triangulation via data sources. According to Guba (1981), triangulation in such a way can increase trustworthiness. Additionally, according to Shenton (2004), applying diversity in data sources through the inclusion of informants within several organisations or a wider spectrum of professional fields helps in minimising bias that might arise through local factors peculiar to one institution or subject areas.

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Before conducting actual interviews, a set of cognitive interviews were also carried out. Cognitive interviews are helpful in testing the reliability and validity of survey instruments used in research. They are normally used in quantitative studies to determine whether or not items and response options are understood and consistently interpreted by potential respondents as intended by the investigator (Sudman, Schwiz, & Bradburn, 1995). This was done using the 'think aloud' approach (Sofaer, 2002) where a set of interviews are done with persons similar to the potential respondents. In this study, five cognitive interviews were carried out on Skype with the researcher's former colleagues who had previously worked in Nepal's national tourism organisation. The respondents were first asked to verbalise the questions asked. Thereafter, each of their answers were probed with a follow up question to make sure they understood the questions. The interview questions were finalised and interviews with actual participants were then carried out.

Final interviews were done with 17 individuals using face to face and online platforms. Eleven interviews were conducted in Nepal in April-May 2018 at the following venues: five in local restaurants and six in respondents' offices. The rest of the six interviews were done at various periods between then and May 2020 over Skype. Questions discussed in the interview consisted of their opinion of the campaign, primarily to solicit their views on the appropriateness of existing representations of Nepal in tourism, the designing of the logo and on the use of the national flag in the tourism campaign. The interviews lasted 20-50 minutes. All interviews were written in hand notes which were later expanded on the same day. Synopses of the main points from the interviews were communicated to the five interviewees to verify they represented their main points. As all of them agreed with the researcher's notes, other interviewees were not asked to verify because of the difficulty in getting a timely response from them. The study complied with the ethical principles of carrying out research and the participants were provided with a participant information sheet and all face-to-face interviewees were asked to sign a consent form before the interview.

Data analysis involved the transcription of the interview data. Since the number of interviews was relatively manageable, all interviews were transcribed. There are debates over the usefulness of transcribing data, as some researchers tend to advocate analysing data without transcribing, arguing that this gives researchers time to focus on the bigger picture and not get bogged down in the details of what people have said (Gibbs, 2007). This option was overlooked so that every small detail can be considered in the analysis that applied inductive thematic analysis. In this analysis, interview transcripts are thematically analysed. In order to achieve this, interview data were coded selectively. This process comprised reading the

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interview transcripts multiple times to identify a distinctive pattern and emerging themes thereof (HesseBiber & Leavy (2006). This was helpful in extracting meaning from the data (Flick, 2014). Data are presented with minimum interpretation by the researcher to allow readers to find their own meaning. Each emergent theme was organized into and presented under sub-sections in the findings below.

Findings

Creating a nationalist narrative in the tourism logo

Participants who played a pivotal role in the selection of the VNY logo were able to provide insights into the selection process and the reason for constructing a nationalist narrative in the logo. It was interesting to note that the original submission did not have the national flag and Mt Everest. The two mountains used in the background were Mt. Ama Dablam and Mt. Machhapuchre. According to the artist whose design was selected,

As an artist I see aesthetics side of mountains and the Mt Everest does not stimulate me. You don't judge the taste of a whiskey by the alcohol percentage in its content, so the beauty of a mountain cannot be judged by its height. Both Mt. Ama Dablam and Mt. Machhapuchre are beautiful mountains and perhaps for that reason they are the most photographed Nepali mountains as well.

However, the selection committee wanted to make two important amendments to it. It wanted to add an image of a Nepali national flag and replace Mt. Ama Dablam with Mt Everest. According to another member (R1), some members of the selection committee wanted to include a map of Nepal in it, which was not agreed upon, including the artist and the coordinator of the committee. However, they then came up with another suggestion to include the Nepali national flag in the logo. This time they had strong political backing from the Ministry of Tourism. Their contention was that the Nepali national flag is very distinctive, it represents Nepal's uniqueness and can complement Nepal's tourism destination image. According to respondent (R2),

Since our national flag is very unique and distinctive, we felt it would be good if we could create a sub-brand that can help identify Nepal. It is also an international campaign; the existence of the flag is an opportunity to promote our nationalism.

A more nationalist narrative arose around the issue of the replacement of Mt. Ama Dablam with that of Mt Everest. According to respondent (R19),

Mt Everest and Nepal are synonymous. Mt. Everest is the biggest symbol of Nepali national identity. In this age of globally interlinked world where most countries are

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competing on somewhat similar products, Mt Everest helps Nepal stand out from the rest of the world.

According to respondent (R3), when the revised logo was unveiled, a flood of comments started to pour in on all social media platforms and through emails. One main item of feedback was that the flag was given a 'low profile'. Bhandari (2018) cites a comment that stated,

We have a unique flag, and this should be more prominently placed in the logo. Nepal is the only country in the world that does not have a rectangular national flag. It is crimson with blue borders and incorporates stylized symbols of the sun and moon. The flag also symbolizes the victory in war by the great warriors of Nepal... (Bhandari, 2018, p. 48).

Given the enormous number of comments, the logo was revised one more time after its media release and the final logo with a more distinct Nepali national flag, and the re-arrangement of the placing of the two mountains, ie Mt. Everest brought to the right to make it more distinct, was finalised. According to the above participant, the changes were so unconvincing to the designer he had to reluctantly comply with these amendments, and was threatened that failure to do so would replace him by another artist.

Our 'nation' your destination

The creative changes in the logo were so significant that the 'destination' element of the logo was completely replaced by the 'nation'. According to a respondent (R10),

We have become a very touristified country. People in the western countries see us through the pages of travel websites and tourist brochures. The false association with Shangrila has so much stereotyped us as an authentic destination, our real (i.e. national) identity has completely become invisible. Mt Everest and our unique flag in the logo is a reclaim to that.

According to some respondents, the over-emphasis on a nationalistic element such as the national flag can also be equated with the influence of the leftist political ideology in the government. According to this participant (R9), Nepal's communist parties are overtly known for being 'nationalist', vehemently opposing the institutional international engagement with the country in its development efforts. For example, the current ruling party has in the past stopped large hydropower development projects with international companies; opposed the IMP and World Bank's driven institutional reforms programme including the Structural Adjustment Programmes that spearheaded the neoliberalism of the 1980s and 1990s in the country; and

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at the time of writing this paper, the ruling party members were at loggerheads with their own government over the ratification of the Millennium Challenge Corporation agreement with the US Government.

The party's success in the last election is largely attributed to its 'nationalist' stand against India when the latter imposed an economic blockade over Nepal in 2015. According to a respondent (R7),

The degree of their nationalist emphasis is such that soon after the new government was formed in 2018 they wanted the NTB to display the picture of the President of the Republic of Nepal in the Nepal Stand at all international travel trade shows where Nepal participates. This was reminiscent of the time of absolute monarchy when the picture of the King and Queen were displayed. I had to remind the political leadership at the ministry that no other democratic country displays such pictures.

The political leadership at the ministry has since then instructed the NTB to display the Nepali national flag in the international travel trade shows. Since August 2019, the government has made the national anthem mandatory at all temples and cinema hall: the latter was practised during the time of absolute monarchy. Like other communists in South Asia, Nepali communists vehemently oppose any globalisation, as they see it as an extension of western capitalism. The current government comprises former communist rebels that led the civil war for 10 years during the 90s and early 2000s, who then had the US as their main enemy and targeted US trekkers during the war. They believed that the latter represented imperialist power. The latest election manifesto of the party that now heads the government states that, 'neoliberal capitalist democracy does not resolve the problems facing the working class' (CPNUML, 2020).

Highly nationalistic language is noticeable in the comments of some of the tourism entrepreneurs this researcher interviewed. They felt that the campaign was an opportunity to foster affinity and social cohesion amongst Nepalis in general, and the flag was obviously contributing to this. A respondent (R5) stated,

Our flag is not only our official representation, but it is also a part of our lifestyle. We have cultural and religious significance with the flag, for example, we keep them in temples or religious ceremonies. You will see them during festivals. Our flag has been one important thing that keeps all Nepalis united and distinguishes us from the rest of the world. So, if we want this (VNY) to be a national campaign, every nationalist Nepali should be proud to have our national flag in the logo.

A majority of other participants took the campaign as an opportunity to assert our uniqueness in the international forum. A participant who runs a star-rated hotel took a different approach to the use of the flag. According to him (R10),

Until the late 1990s Nepal was promoted with a tagline 'A world of its own'. It was a good way to assert our cultural uniqueness. The forces of globalisation (read neoliberalism) have attacked our authenticity and distinctiveness. We should use every opportunity to reiterate our uniqueness and, in my opinion, the (VNY) logo has just done that very effectively.

The above comments and the articulation of Mt. Everest and the national flag in the logo in the selection committee and on social media suggested that these discussions were not informed by professional judgement or artistic values but was driven by their emotional power and the 'nationalist' feelings of the committee members. The Nepali national flag is not an uncontested symbol, in a proposal to change the national flag was made in Nepal's Constitutional Assembly arguing that the flag is based on the principles of monarchy should not be continued in the new republican system. They believed that a new flag should be created symbolising the number of federal units and should depict inclusiveness and proportional representation arguing that the flag embodies one-caste and one-culture system which is against the spirit of new constitution endorsed the multi-nation concept. There was a demand for a new flag with symbols representing the federal structure or inclusiveness, not monarchy.

Conclusion

This study has suggested that the use of the Nepali national flag was intended to assert Nepali's uniqueness to counter the forces of globalisation invading Nepali identity. According to the participants, the flag fits in the logo because it provides a good ingredient for tourists looking for a different or an authentic experience (see Urry, 2002; MacCannell, 1992, 1999), that they come for, though existing literature does not indicate that national flags have the power to attract a holiday or a visit. On the contrary, the comments from the participants indicated that the assertion of the nationalistic narrative in the logo was serving two interests: first it was expressing their emotion associated with the nation; and second, and most importantly was their denial of the forces of globalisation which they believe are undermining Nepal's 'real' identity. Interestingly, there is a very little difference between what the participants think as 'real' identity and what constitutes national identity.

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This study contributes by illustrating the political potency of tourism as an agency. The idea of political agency is about being able to be conscious of self when reflecting about one's existence within the wider world (Häkli, & Kallio, 2013). The source of political agency in this case is the realisation that a nation has no social existence unless it is distinctive within the international community. Thus, the study showed that at the national level the tourism logo was an assertion of Nepali cultural identity and distinctiveness, but from an international perspective it is also an appreciation of global cultural diversity. On the one hand the study suggested the use of national symbols can be a useful instrument to gauge the expression of belongingness and collective identity. On the other hand, the expressions of participants referring to globalisation while explaining the national flag in the logo, suggested resentment of the forces of globalisation and the wish that the distinctive place of the nation can be still ensured.

According to scholarship that states identities are constructed within a discourse and must be read within specific historical and institutional contexts (Hall, 1992), the representation of who you are in the logo is also an assertion of who you are not. By challenging the forces that are threatening state representation, the logo makes a statement against the normalising shifts of globalised international tourism – which is an exercise of the political agency of tourism. However, the success of the logo in establishing Nepal's distinctive identity in the minds of the visitors and other consumers of Nepali tourism is important to fully comprehend the agency potential of tourism. This study was limited to provide insights on the deployment agency of the national symbol in tourism but did not examine how the subjectivity of Nepal's identity was interpreted by international visitors to Nepal. This is an area future research can look into.

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