

# Cultural Diplomacy: A Tool for Promoting Mexico's Creative Industries

*Diplomacia cultural: una herramienta para promover las industrias creativas de México*

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## **Abstract:**

The creative industries have the potential to project a positive image of Mexico, attract new flows of tourists and promote sustainable development. How can cultural diplomacy draw on them to showcase Mexico's cultural diversity and improve the country's image, while promoting economic development and tourism? This article analyzes success stories related to the creative industries of other countries and makes some proposals as to how Mexico can better integrate its international promotional activities in the areas of culture, tourism and trade.



## **Resumen:**

Las industrias creativas tienen la capacidad de promover la imagen positiva de México, atraer nuevos flujos turísticos y promover el desarrollo sostenible. ¿Cómo puede nuestra diplomacia cultural difundir la riqueza cultural, elevar la imagen del país e impulsar el desarrollo económico y turístico a través de las industrias creativas? Este artículo analiza algunos casos de éxito de las industrias creativas en otros países para presentar propuestas a favor de una mayor integración de las labores de promoción cultural, turística y económica de México en el exterior.



## **Key Words:**

Cultural diplomacy, creative industries, tourism promotion, economic development, soft power, Mexico.



## **Palabras clave:**

Diplomacia cultural, industrias creativas, promoción turística, desarrollo económico, poder suave, México.

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*Tania Lara Ortiz*

Neither the British Museum nor Buckingham Palace ranked among London's most-visited sights in 2016, according to Mastercard's Global Destination Cities Index for the same year.<sup>1</sup> What featured on the itineraries of a majority of the 20 million visitors of the British capital—the world's second-most-visited city—was the Harry Potter Studio Tour.<sup>2</sup>

What began as a literary saga has become a US\$25 billion industry following the sale of 500 million books worldwide translated into 68 languages, ten films that have been box-office hits and juicy royalties from the sale of everything from toys, costumes and video games to memorabilia. There are even international *quidditch* tournaments (a new sport where teams play with broomsticks).<sup>3</sup>

But more than anything, Harry Potter is a prime example of what the cultural and creative industries can do for a country's image, with their atten-

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<sup>1</sup> Mastercard, "Bangkok Claims Title as World's most Visited City: 2016 Mastercard Global Destination Cities Index," press release, September 22, 2016, at <https://newsroom.mastercard.com/asia-pacific/press-releases/bangkok-claims-title-as-worlds-most-visited-city-2016-mastercard-global-destination-cities-index/> (consulted on: October 11, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Helen Coffey, "Revealed: The UK's most Popular Tourist Attraction, and it might Surprise You," in *Express*, December 22, 2016, at <https://www.express.co.uk/travel/articles/746516/harry-potter-london-uk-tourist-attraction> (consulted on: August 8, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew McCreary, "The Billion-Dollar Business behind the 'Harry Potter' Franchise (Infographic)," in *Entrepreneur*, November 18, 2018, at <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/323363> (consulted on: August 8, 2019).

dant impact on the economy and tourism. “Culture is integral to perceptions of countries”, writes British Council analyst Alistair MacDonald in his article on the soft power of the United Kingdom, adding that “as the over £200 million that has been brought to Northern Ireland by *Game of Thrones* demonstrates, it has a substantial real world impact too”.<sup>4</sup>

If the United Kingdom suffered from being perceived as a traditionalist country represented by British royalty, according to MacDonald, Harry Potter and *Game of Thrones* are revamping that image and replacing it with one of a world of fantasy where the distinctly British sense of humor predominates.

The impact of the big (and small) screen on a country’s image and tourism industry has been well documented and Mexico can lay claim to one of the first and most successful examples of “film tourism” with *The Night of the Iguana*, a film starring Liz Taylor and Richard Burton that was shot in Puerto Vallarta in the Sixties.

Likewise, the French agency for tourism promotion, Atout France, states that “the main purpose of film is not to attract tourists, yet we have seen that films, television series, documentaries and other audiovisual materials become excellent promoters of a region’s image”,<sup>5</sup> therefore, the agency supports the shooting of foreign films in France in coordination with Film France, to promote the country’s hotel industry, the restoration of historic sites and the development of film tourism.

In one study, the United Kingdom estimated that more than 28 million tourists arrived every year to the country to visit some location they had seen previously on TV or cinema.<sup>6</sup> Given the enormous economic impact that film has on locations, many tourism promotion agencies actively seek to collaborate with film producers and persuade them to shoot in their countries.

<sup>4</sup> Alistair MacDonald, “The Soft Power of Westeros and Middle Earth?”, in British Council, April 2019, at <https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/soft-power-westeros> (consulted on: August 17, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> “Tourism et Cinéma”, in Atout France, December 5, 2014, at <http://www.atout-france.fr/publications/tourisme-et-cinema> (consulted on: August 12, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Walaiporn Rewtrakunphaiboon, “Film-induced Tourism: Inventing a Vacation to a Location”, *Bangkok University Academic Review*, vol. 8, no. 1, January-June 2009, [6], at [https://www.bu.ac.th/knowledgecenter/epaper/jan\\_june2009/pdf/Walaiporn.pdf](https://www.bu.ac.th/knowledgecenter/epaper/jan_june2009/pdf/Walaiporn.pdf) (consulted on: August 12, 2019).

An emblematic example of this trend is the Chinese comedy *Lost in Thailand*, which sparked 93% growth in the number of Chinese tourists visiting the city of Chiang Mai just three months after its release. Prior to 2010, very few Chinese tourists visited Thailand, but since 2013, this number has increased substantially, standing at more than 10 million in 2018. China is now Thailand's main tourism market, accounting for a third of all foreign visitors to the country.<sup>7</sup> There are plenty of similar examples worldwide, including the impact *The Lord of the Rings* has had on New Zealand's tourism industry or the *Game of Thrones* series in Croatia.

That said, films and television series can also have a negative effect on perceptions. While recent American productions like *Spectre* in 2015 and *Coco* in 2017 have contributed to the international popularity of Day of the Dead traditions, others like *Man on Fire* and *Sicario*, and the Netflix series *Narcos México*, *El Señor de los Cielos*, *El Chapo* and *La Reina del Sur* show an image of a violent, unsafe country ruled by the leaders of organized crime.

Does this mean Mexico should embark on an intensive campaign to advocate the shooting of films that depict only its cultural wealth and diversity, so as to offset the negative image portrayed by drug series and films? Not necessarily.

Actually, film and television productions about organized crime in Mexico and their negative impact illustrate the difference between the creative and cultural industries and cultural diplomacy: the former are focused on money-making products and services, while cultural diplomacy seeks to show a country's best image, and to further its national interests.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, no country can allow its cultural diplomacy to depend exclusively on the projects and initiatives of the private entertainment sector. But by the same token, no country can promote its culture and its image abroad without the collaboration of international and commercial platforms from the cultural and creative industries.

<sup>7</sup> "Tourism Statistics Thailand. 2000-2019", in Thai Websites, May 2019, at <http://www.thaiwebsites.com/tourism.asp> (consulted on: August 10, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr, *Bound to Lead. The Changing Nature of American Power*, New York, Basic Books, 1990, 196.

The success of the animated film *Coco*, reflected in an international box-office ticket sales of over US\$800 million, demonstrates that an ancestral Mexican tradition, declared Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO, can be as popular—if not more—among international audiences as stories about drug czars.<sup>9</sup> How can the Mexican cultural diplomacy replicate the success of *Coco* to showcase our cultural wealth, boost the country's image, and promote the development of the Mexican economy and its tourism industry?

The challenge is to strike the right balance when incorporating pop culture and commercial platforms into the country's cultural diplomacy strategies, while allowing the cultural and creative industries to continue creating products, services and contents independently.

## Off Screen

Film and audiovisual media are perhaps two of the most sophisticated creative industries, whose impact is easier to identify or to attribute to a country's global image and its cultural influence, since both industries are measurable in terms of tourists and demand for products or the emergence of new trends. But other creative and cultural industries are also powerful boosters of a country's image, while creating jobs and expanding or diversifying its tourist attractions.

Before its adaptation to the big screen, Harry Potter was a best-seller backed by the British solid publishing industry, which has a strong international presence. Other disciplines and creative industries have the same potential to project a positive image of a country and impact its economy. There are plenty of examples to choose from, including Chef Gastón Acurio, whose rise to fame paved the way for the internationalization of Peruvian cuisine—with the subsequent increase in exports of Peruvian foodstuffs—and attracted food tourism to Peru. Likewise, music festivals are a global

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<sup>9</sup> Scott Mendelson, "Box Office: 'Coco' Shows China, Not America, Is Supporting Diverse Movies", in *Forbes*, May 2, 2018, at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2018/05/02/coco-shows-overseas-audiences-not-americans-are-supporting-diverse-movies/#3d0b03001466> (consulted on: August 15, 2019).

industry that could generate as much as US\$4.6 billion in 2020, according to the specialized consulting firm Sound Diplomacy. So popular are music festivals that the Brand USA promotional agency anticipates the music industry will be the main tourism driver to the United States in 2018 and 2019.<sup>10</sup>

Truth be told, all the artistic disciplines, folk art and the creative industries have the potential to enhance a country's image, create new jobs and sources of income, and attract or diversify tourism flows. It happens with museums, art fairs and galleries; popular fiestas like the Day of the Dead and religious ones like Easter; certain architects, buildings or monuments that have shot to international fame; antiques markets; certain craft products, street art and even comic books and video games. Clearly, popular Mexican culture and the creative industries have a valuable part to play in the international promotion of the country.

*The Cambridge Dictionary* defines *pop culture* as any expression of culture, be it music, television, cinema or books that are popular and enjoyed by ordinary people, rather than experts or highly educated people,<sup>11</sup> while the sociologist Dustin Kidd from Temple University in the United States and author of several books on pop culture and social media, defines it as the “set of practices, beliefs and objects that make up the meanings most broadly shared by a social system”, including media contents, entertainment and leisure activities, fashion, and linguistic trends and conventions.<sup>12</sup> According to Kidd, pop culture is usually related to the culture of the masses and folklore on the one hand and to cultural products created for mass consumption for the purpose of economic gain.

<sup>10</sup> Sound Diplomacy and ProColombia, *Music is the New Gastronomy: White Paper on Music and Tourism-Your Guide to Connecting Music and Tourism, and Making the most out of It*, Bogota, Sound Diplomacy/ProColombia/UNWTO, 2018, 13-14, available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/593eb2a837c58172ed556cbb/1/5be06883c2241b7f4fc6a64d/1541433502686/White+Paper+Music+10.pdf> (consulted on: August 12, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary*, “Pop Culture”, at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/pop-culture> (consulted on: October 1, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Dustin Kidd, “Popular Culture”, in Oxford Bibliographies, February 28, 2017, at <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0193.xml> (consulted on: October 1, 2019).

The International Trade Center (ITC), dedicated to the internationalization of small and mid-size enterprises (SMES), defines the *cultural and creative industries* as activities that require creativity and intellectual capital to create products and services with artistic, cultural and creative contents.<sup>13</sup> And according to the criteria of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the creative industries encompass all the arts, architecture, handicrafts, all branches of design, marketing and publicity, research and development, software, virtual games and other creative endeavors. Generally speaking, though, the creative industries are a platform for the dissemination and marketing of pop culture.

The creative industries generate revenues via qualified jobs, exports of products or services and intellectual property royalties. Despite a slowdown in global trade, these industries have proven resilient, reporting an average annual growth of 7% in exports of creative products and services between 2002 and 2015, according to the most recent UNCTAD report, which states that, in this period, the global market for creative goods increased twofold from US\$208 billion in 2002 to US\$509 billion in 2015.<sup>14</sup> The Inter-American Development Bank estimated that the creative industries (visual arts, music, design, fashion and video games) generated US\$124 billion and created more than 1.9 million jobs in Latin America.<sup>15</sup>

The transition from an industrial economy to an age of knowledge, along with the advent of new lifestyles, is driving the growth of the cultural and creative industries. According to UNCTAD, Mexico is one of the ten developing countries that is cashing in on this global trend and whose exports of creative products and services have registered exponential growth: a leap of 67% be-

<sup>13</sup> ITC, "Creative Industries", at <http://www.intracen.org/itc/sectors/creative-industries/> (consulted on: August 12, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> UNCTAD, "Global Creative Economy Shows Resilience, Growth-Report", January 14, 2019, at <https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=1975> (consulted on: August 12, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Inter-American Development Bank. "Nuevo informe explora el futuro de la economía creativa y cultural", press release, September 12, 2017, at <https://www.iadb.org/es/noticias/comunicados-de-prensa/2017-09-12/bid-explora-como-potenciar-economia-creativa%2C11877.html> (consulted on: August 12, 2019).



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tween 2005 and 2014.<sup>16</sup> The main exports of Mexico's creative industries, valued at over US\$5.2 million a year, are interior design, video games and new media, publishing, arts and crafts, while Mexico is also on its way to becoming a global leader in audiovisual and interactive contents.<sup>17</sup>

## Cultural Tourism

The economic implications of the creative industries go far beyond the creation of jobs and exports. As the case of Harry Potter and the aforementioned examples of "film tourism" illustrate, the tourism industry reflects increasing demand for cultural services and products, the creative industries included. Worldwide, the tourism industry is becoming more and more specialized and segmented with innovative, but, more importantly, differentiated, one-of-a-kind products and services. In most cases, this segmentation is closely linked to the cultural and artistic attractions available

<sup>16</sup> UNCTAD, *Creative Economy Outlook: Trends in International Trade in Creative Industries, 2002–2015: Country Profiles, 2005–2014*, Geneva, UN, 2018, 304, at [https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/dicted2018d3\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/dicted2018d3_en.pdf) (consulted on: September 1, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.



in each destination: tourists are no longer looking for flight-and-hotel packages, but are interested in sampling the local food, taking a cooking class or shopping at the local food market. Today's tourists also expect the services and amenities of their hotel to have a special touch: guestrooms decorated with crafts or regional arts, a spa offering local products or techniques, a unique menu, excursions, shows and workshops that allow them to interact with the local community and learn more about its culture and traditions. According to the 2015 Tourism and Culture Survey conducted by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 40% of international tourism was classified as "cultural tourism".<sup>18</sup> This same organization defines *cultural tourism* as "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination",<sup>19</sup> while cultural products or attractions refer to "a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional features of a society that encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions".<sup>20</sup>

Among other trends, tourists now prefer to stay among members of the community (community tourism) or go on vacations where they can take a photography workshop, attend a festival, visit a film location or follow themed itineraries like The Way of Saint James or the Inca Trail. All these examples illustrate the importance of marrying efforts to promote tourism in hand with the cultural agenda, taking advantage of the platforms provided by the creative industries.

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<sup>18</sup> UNWTO, "Survey on Big Data and Cultural Tourism", at <http://www2.unwto.org/webform/survey-big-data-and-cultural-tourism> (consulted on: October 1, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> UNWTO, "Tourism and Culture", at <http://ethics.unwto.org/content/tourism-and-culture> (consulted on: October 1, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> *Idem.*



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## Diplomatic Creativity

Such is the impact of the “creative economy” that the UNCTAD report on the sector states these industries have a substantial contribution towards achieving sustainable development goals, including poverty reduction.<sup>21</sup> Some industries like film, television and audiovisual media require large capital investments and technology, but other, more traditional ones need only manual labor, such as the traditional arts, popular festivals, handcrafted and bespoke products, which represent opportunities for individuals and SMEs for exporting talents.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, Mexico’s cultural diplomacy needs to address more than traditional interests in displaying the country’s best facet to the world; it also needs to create economic opportunities and jobs in the creative industries. Moreover, these are jobs that cannot easily be transferred to countries where labor is cheaper, environmental standards slacker or taxes lower because they require the culture, talent and hallmark of that specific country.

<sup>21</sup> UNCTAD, *Creative Economy Outlook...*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> ITC, *Position Paper: Challenges and Opportunities in Export Development of Creative Industries: ITC’s Future Technical Assistance for the Product Sector*, Geneva, ITC, December 2004, 3.

What can Mexico's foreign missions do for promoting the exports of the cultural and creative industries? Indubitably, they would do well to better integrate promotional activities related to trade and tourism with the cultural agenda. This does not mean the cultural agenda should be comprised only of profit-making cultural activities or ones that promote trade and tourism, but it *does* imply a new way of thinking about the cultural agenda, the promotion of trade and the budget allocated to the promotion of cultural activities.

The following are some suggestions as to how Mexico's foreign missions can better promote the creative industries, based on global trends in the sector and a study of the strategies adopted by other countries.

- Include more expressions of popular and contemporary culture and traditions in the cultural programs of embassies and consulates. Korea and Japan are examples of countries whose cultural influence has grown worldwide and that have taken the lead in creative exports with their pop culture products—K-pop, J-pop, manga, animé, Japanese and Korean television programs, youth and street fashion—, creating a cool image of countries that have fused their traditions and ancestral cultures with the modern world. Popular culture better represents the diversity of a country, is accessible and has a much broader appeal, including international audiences. Mexico's popular culture ranges from distinctly Mexican turns of speech, *lucha libre*, graffiti and piñatas to votive offerings, signage and even advertising. This is what sets Mexico apart and what foreigners find new and exciting. The success of *Coco* demonstrates the wide international acceptance of certain aspects of popular Mexican culture presented in innovative formats like animated films. As an example, the declaration of Day of the Dead as Intangible Cultural Heritage is an opportunity for Mexico's foreign missions to promote this tradition through food, folk art, film and literature, and encourage tourists to visit the destinations where it is still practiced.
- Plan interactive cultural and tourist activities. Today's audiences are no longer content to be passive spectators, but are in search of experiences, therefore activities should preferably include courses and workshops, social media interactions, opportunities for selfies or videos, tasting sessions, competitions, and simulations.

- Identify opportunities and partnerships available for Mexican SMEs and creative talents participating in international events like book and art fairs, literature festivals, design and fashion weeks, comic conventions, video games, music and film industry events, specialized conferences and seminars. The organizers of such events often invite embassies and diplomatic representations and while the spaces they offer can be basic and somewhat limited, these opportunities tend to be wasted due to difficulties sending product samples or due to a lack of available staff to attend or man stands. These invitations could be extended to the private sector and independent artists, so they can familiarize themselves with their competitors in other countries, contact potential clients or partners, and study industry trends.
- Identify local partnerships with e-commerce platforms abroad interested in introducing or promoting Mexican handcrafted and design products. The UNCTAD *Creative Economy Outlook* report states that e-commerce will give creative exports an additional boost because it is cheaper and easier for small and independent producers to market and sell their products online. However, countries with developing economies tend to lack the infrastructure for exporting products and producers tend to be uninformed as to customs regulations and reliable methods of payment. Mexico's foreign missions need to approach local e-commerce platforms and invite them to promote Mexico's creative products and services, and obtain useful information for the country's producers and professionals.
- Bolster Mexico's cultural presence in countries where demand for creative goods and services is growing. The United States remains the main market for Mexico's creative exports,<sup>23</sup> but growth here has been stable compared to countries like China, where supply and demand have quadrupled. Latin America and Asia are the two regions with growing middle classes that are traveling abroad more and seeking out new entertainment options and cultural products.
- Encourage Mexico's foreign missions to forge ties with influencers and opinion leaders and keep abreast of social media trends in their

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<sup>23</sup> UNCTAD, *Creative Economy Outlook...*, 305.

- districts for purposes of promoting cultural activities, trade and tourism. Bloggers and social media celebrities have the power to introduce a destination, product or service to hundreds of thousands or, in some cases, millions of online followers at a lower cost and more effectively.
- Set up a classified ad platform for sharing business opportunities for Mexico's creative and cultural industries in other countries in coordination with the ministries of Culture, Tourism and the Economy. A good example is the site operated by the UK Department for International Trade, which lists openings in other countries for tenders to design fair pavilions, the development of art education plans, publishing and graphic design services, etc. Individuals and small companies can use the same site to create profiles and offer their products and services to potential clients abroad.<sup>24</sup>
  - Step up efforts to integrate audiovisual platforms with activities promoting culture and tourism. Mexico is a cinema powerhouse and one of the markets most attractive to the international audiovisual industry by virtue of its leadership in the Spanish-speaking world. Mexico's foreign missions could seek more synergies with audiovisual companies abroad as part of their endeavors to promote culture and tourism.

## Conclusion

In light of their impact on economic development, the promotion of Mexico's creative industries abroad needs to become a priority of the country's foreign policy and a basic component of diplomatic activities to promote culture, tourism and the economy. Whether festivals, traditions, books, handicrafts or digital animation, the creative industries contribute much more than economic growth and jobs. By their very nature, they encapsulate the imagination, talent and cultural values of Mexico, and promoting them internationally has the potential to increase Mexico's

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<sup>24</sup> The UK Department for International Trade, "Find Export Opportunities," at <https://www.great.gov.uk/export-opportunities> (consulted on: September 1, 2019).

cultural influence on the world, while reinforcing the cultural identity of Mexicans and their sense of pride to be Mexican.

Among developing countries, Mexico is the only non-Asian country that is spearheading creative exports, yet tourism and cultural diplomacy have a great deal of untapped potential when it comes to consolidating and promoting Mexico's creative exports to the benefit of a wider cross-section of its people. Mexico needs to capitalize more on its international standing as one of the ten countries with the most historic and natural World Heritage sites, the international prestige of its cuisine and cultural events, and the quality of its cultural infrastructure to promote its creative exports for the sake of the country's image. This, however, demands going beyond traditional cultural diplomacy. Specifically, it requires that Mexico's diplomatic missions identify and incorporate new methods and opportunities for the promotion of trade and tourism into their cultural agendas.