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**International Resort Holidays: What are These
Companies Really Marketing?
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Intro

While the idea of a relaxing, exotic and international bound vacation, complete with crystal blue water and towering palm trees sounds ideal, the reality is that these international tourist hot spots are in no way representative of that country's economic, historical, political, or cultural aspects. In fact, rather than experiencing the true culture and nature of that country, tourism companies are marketing a more Americanized, exclusive view of exactly what these travellers want to see when they go on vacation. This form of marketing not only inhibits the indigenous cultures and suppresses their true history, but also leaves travellers with a false image of the nature of the country. In this study, I will take examples from popular tourist destinations, including the Bahamas, Jamaica, Dominican Republic, and Mexico, in order to study the marketing strategies employed by these tourist operations and seek to better understand the effect that these strategies have on all parties involved. In doing so, I will primarily seek to understand the ways that these strategies invoke a false understanding of the countries, as well as how this form of tourism contributes negatively to the local economies.

Approach

In this study, I will be conducting qualitative surveys on a sample group of 45 individuals in order to gain an understanding of the ways in which tourist agencies aim to present vacation imagery, culture, and experience. My approach will be to analyze interpretations and perceptions, both in the form of advertisements such as commercials and in the form of personal experience at resort locations and vacation retreats, in order to better identify how these images, constructed by tourism industries, shape and create calculated perceptions of the culture.

In conducting this research, I will be drawing from the style and structure of Russell W. Belk in the article "My Library: The Marketing Professor in the Age of Electronic Reproduction". In this article, Belk looks at consumer behavior and marketing to assert the importance of images on human perception. In his research, Belk focuses on how visual depictions shape how individuals view and form insights on different cultures. He takes an interpretivist style. Belk states that "many researchers have discovered how parts of feature films and other visual and oral media can also convey 'truths' about human behaviour" (Belk, 2002,124). Belk asserts that "words can do a good job of conveying what has been called 'propositional knowledge,' but visual images are generally superior for conveying 'experiential knowledge' of what someone feels like. Whereas propositional knowledge is knowledge about something and produces cognitive understanding, experiential knowledge is knowledge of something and produces emotional understanding that ideally enables the recipient to gain a shared sense of what it might be like to be another person embedded in another culture" (Belk, 2002, 123). In much the same way, I mirror Belk's interpreters' approach by using the visual experiences of individuals, both in the form of advertisements and in the form of personal experience at resort locations and vacation retreats, in order to better identify how these images, constructed by tourism industries, fabricate those individuals' perceptions of the culture.

Survey

As stated previously, I used a qualitative survey to gain the majority of my primary information. This survey consisted of 15 questions and was developed with the intention to gain a more accurate look at how individuals view these resorts and how the imagery shaped their perceptions. The survey was constructed in a way that it could be answered by individuals who have had their own experiences on international resort vacations, as well as by those who have only seen these images portrayed through the media (ads, commercials etc.). Within the survey, I included questions such as, "From what you observed, how were the country and its inhabitants portrayed?" in order to shed light on how individuals perceive and view the inhabitants of the country and the culture. In order to ensure that the survey was as unbiased as possible, I went on to ask the individuals being interviewed if they had ever been to the country in question in other circumstances, and in doing so, not been in contact with a tourism industry or resort company. I primarily asked this question in order to see if individuals, who had been to the country without being under the "guidance" of tourist companies and resort locations, had differing perceptions on the country, the culture, and the inhabitants. I surveyed a random sample of 45 individuals in total to gain a representative sample.

General Results of Survey

The information from my survey asserted that tourism companies do in fact use mechanisms of imaginary and selective information to leave tourists with certain feelings. These companies, understanding that people want/ expect to be provided with opportunities such as experiencing the culture, relaxing on the beach, and trying exotic foods, direct their marketing techniques to accomplish these goals. When asked, "On your trip, did you experience any cultural aspects of this country?" an overwhelming majority of the participants responded affirmatively. When asked how, responses included, "buying souvenirs from local vendors," "going into the town with my tour group," "trying Jamaican drinks at my hotel," "eating international food and drinking margaritas on the beach," "watching a dance performance." Of those who specified the types of souvenirs they bought, these included "Rastafarian beads, shell bracelets, traditional hats, jewelry and local outfits, instruments, and postcards."

When asked, "From what you observed, how were the country and its inhabitants portrayed?", results were a little more split. While 13 of those surveyed responded with answers such as "poor," "less well off," "not as modern," "simple minded," "dirty," and "too persistent on trying to get us to buy stuff," 27 individuals used terms including "helpful," "nice," "friendly," "spoke English very well," "funny," "laid back," "always having fun," "smiling a lot," "kind," and "relaxed." Of these 27 respondents, 21 had been on an international resort vacation while the other six had gotten their information from commercials, signs, and other forms of advertisements used to market these resorts.

Of the 45 surveyed, five respondents did not answer the question. While the five respondents, all of which had previously stated that they had never been on an international resort vacation, did not answer the question, there were still six other individuals who had also not been on an international resort vacation but, through commercials, ads and media

portrayal, were among the 27 individuals who had positive associations of the country and the inhabitants. Further, none of the 11 individuals who have never been on an international holiday vacation gave a negative portrayal of the individuals or the country.

These responses and many others within the survey assert the notion that tourists traveling to these international resort vacations are, in a sense, being guided through the lenses of what the tourism industry wants them to see. These companies are providing a glimpse of a country that is both skewed and unrealistic. While many of the indigenous populations of these countries live in poverty, tourist companies are selling the resort as a false representation of that country's historical and cultural spirit.

False Marketing: The Caribbean

The Caribbean region, and many of the countries within, is one such example of a resort hotspot where tourism companies draw in visitors using this type of "false marketing." In studying these notions, I primarily focused on the Bahamas, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic. As mentioned earlier, in a qualitative survey, I surveyed a random sample of 45 individuals in order to get insight into their perceptions of tourism and vacation resorts in these locations. Overall, an overwhelming 29 respondents, rounding up to roughly 68 percent of participants, stated that local inhabitants were "happy," "nice," "really friendly," and "helpful" when asked the question, "What were your perceptions of locals?" Furthermore, when asked whether the trip changed or confirmed previous expectations of the country, 22 respondents said that their experiences led them to view the country as "laid back," "relaxed," "exotic," "paradise-like" and "did not change [their] perceptions."

These perceptions can be attributed to the way in which tourism companies market the resort, the inhabitants, and the culture of that country. Many tourism ads use proponents of this type of marketing by portraying images of servile yet happy locals, ethnic charm, romantic getaways and exotic. These lead foreigners to think that the majority of the inhabitants live care-free lives, hardly work, are constantly relaxing and smiling, are servile and willing to aid tourists, and are sometimes even promiscuous and sexually available. These agents also fuel the stereotype that the Caribbean is serene, tranquil, romantic, and relaxing.

Overall Effects

However, the effect of this type of false marketing is that it not only skews the reality of the matter and leads tourists to earn false impressions of the area, but it also contributes to the demise of the country. By only focusing on a minuscule and vastly altered view of the country, many of the infrastructural, agricultural, economic, political, cultural, and social problems go overlooked. While I have attempted to categorize these effects under different headers, many of these effects are intertwined and therefore not only affect the economic conditions of the country but also influence many other aspects.

Economic Effects

While tourist companies portray the locals as laid back and fun, the reality of it is that many of the inhabitants are extremely hard-working and even have multiple jobs. Problems arise, however, with the fact that there aren't enough jobs for all those in need. Although many of these inhabitants want to find jobs in order to support themselves and their families, the job market is not large enough to include them all; therefore, many inhabitants are left unemployed. In 2009 the UN forecasted that the Caribbean would be likely to face unemployment rates increasing to between 7.8 and 8.1 percent. (West Orlando News, 2009). Looking more specifically at the countries that lie within the Caribbean, it can be seen that these forecasts are more than accurate. In 2010 the CIA World Factbook estimated that the unemployment rate in the Dominican Republic had reached 14.2 percent, and in 2004, the population living below the poverty line reached 42.2 percent (CIA World Factbook, 2004). Similarly in Jamaica, the CIA World Factbook stated that the unemployment rate reached 12.9 percent in 2010, and in 2003, roughly 14.8 percent of the population was living below the poverty line (CIA World Factbook, 2003).

Instead of shedding light on this problem, however, tourist companies simply market these inhabitants as easy going, fun loving, outgoing, and servile. Therefore, in order to even have a chance of getting their foot in the door of the tourism industry, the employed inhabitants must live up to the expectations of being happy go lucky, servile, and promoting of the notions of paradise and perfection. This, however, is very far from the true conditions of the countries. While a small number of local inhabitants do have the opportunity to work for a travel agency, these agencies intentionally provide minimal contact with locals and keep tourists from seeing the more impoverished, yet realistic areas of the country. In a way, these agencies skirt around the "natural" and true vibe of the area in order to provide tourists with a refined and calculated view of the country.

Even with the emergence of hotels and vacation resorts in these areas, the economy within these areas is still volatile. In "Caribbean News Now," the author argues that although the tourism rates have increased in the past two years in the Caribbean, the unemployment rate in these areas remains excessively high. Between 2009 and 2011, the total number of overnight tourists increased by 8 percent, reaching approximately 18 million visitors.

In 2010, tourism in the Dominican Republic increased to 4.1 million travellers and the hotel industry is currently in the works to create another 1,000 hotel rooms in the next three years. The Bahamas, Barbados, and Jamaica are also increasing their number of hotels in order to accommodate the high rate of tourism. Across the 22 islands, there are currently 10,500 rooms within 60 projects under construction. While the construction of these developments does provide job opportunities for local construction companies, a large percentage of the spending "goes to companies controlled by foreign owners." "For example, China-based banks, contractors, and architectural firms are involved in the construction of the Baha Mar project in The Bahamas. Local workers are likely to receive less than 15 percent of total labour spending" (Caribbean News Now, 2011).

In Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, there has been an emergence of walled resorts that act as their own cities. However, because these tourist communities and many of the other

exotic resorts are owned by American or European companies, the majority of the profits earned are sent back to their companies' base; therefore, even travel packages that provide local and "traditional" experiences often only provide the host country with a small cut of the profits. Furthermore, in many of these walled resort "cities", tourists scarcely leave the perimeters of the resort and food and service are imported from the United States rather than from the locals.

Food is yet another aspect of the overall package that not only comes as a skewed and Americanised version, but contributes to the demise of local agricultural operations in these countries. While one would think that the inhabited country could financially and agriculturally benefit from having a huge influx of tourists each year, the truth of the matter is that it often ends up hurting the countries more than helping them. Rather than coming from local farmers and agricultural agents, the food served in resort locations is often imported from Miami or other cities in America in order to provide tourists with food that is more familiar to them. Even basic food staples, such as fruit and vegetables, are imported as large American businesses are able to grow, package, and produce these products at a much lower cost than the local inhabitants would be able to. Therefore, local farmers and agricultural businesses within these host countries are never able to compete with the prices or quantities of the imported food and consequently do not profit from the infiltration of tourists each year.

In fact, local research groups argue that tourism ends up hurting the local economies as it drives up the price of land of oceanfront properties and allocates government money to developing infrastructure that benefits these walled compounds.

Cultural Effects

Knowing what the tourists want to see, these tourism companies often create and over promote Americanized perceptions of "ethnic" dances, ceremonies, and other celebrations in order to leave the tourist feeling "cultured" and "worldly." However, these are detrimental to the country; not only do they fuel false stereotypes and devalue local tradition and culture by creating an "Americanized" view of these countries but, in placing such a large emphasis on the Americanized view of what the tourist should get out of a resort vacation, these aspects channel funds and revenue away from cultural and historical infrastructures and towards these "walled" tourist-based, idealized institutions.

Tourists visiting these resorts hardly leave these walled compounds in order to experience true local culture or interact with local businesses. Food sold in these resorts is imported, and many skilled and highly paid workers are also brought in from Europe or North America.

Through the hyperreality created by the resort, culture becomes a commodity and the tourists' demand that defines the "product."

“Hyperreality”

The marketing of cultural festivals is another way in which tourism companies provide foreigners with the “hyperreality” and an Americanized, calculated, and incomplete perception of the country at hand. While these festivals once served as cultural and historical celebrations for the indigenous people, many of these customs have been “reinvented” in order to appeal to the fascination of the tourists and come off as exotic. However, rather than recreating celebrations which reflect their history and origins, these shows are an exhibition of what the tourists want to see on a trip. For instance, holidays and festivals which have traditionally been celebrated in winter have been switched by tourist companies to the months defined as “the high season” in order to attract as many tourists as possible and mirror these companies’ ambitions.

Even within our own country, there are manifestations of this “hyperreality.” In Umberto Eco’s work, *Umberto Eco and His Travels in Hyperreality*, “Eco takes the reader across an American landscape that he says is being re-created in the image of fake history, fake art, fake nature, and fake cities” (Eco, 2009, 1). Eco uses the term *hyperreality* to describe the notion of creating a “fake” reality centered on people’s notions of history, culture, etc. In essence, this is a means of forming a world that is completely fake, with the intentions being to reproduce while improving it. Eco sites locations such as the modern day wax museums, where masterpieces such as the Mona Lisa and replicas of the Venus de Milo are duplicated, possess pieces whose characteristics are altered in a way that the new artist believes to be more aesthetically pleasing.

The notion of “hyperreality” goes on to include “fake” and recreated cities such as Disneyland, Las Vegas, Plymouth Plantation, Celebration Florida, Wild West replica towns, and other “cities” that are meant to mirror people’s interpretations of American history and culture. These cities do not portray complete historical and cultural interpretations, but rather build a more idealized version of the notion in order to replicate images that tourists want to see. In the Black Hills of South Dakota, tourists can visit imitation Native American reserves and “experience life as a Native American.” This experience includes the opportunity to sleep in an improvised Native American tipi, try stereotypical Native American foods, and try on many of the stereotypical Native American garments.

For instance, rather than showing the negative or even unsavory aspects of that city that are present today, these replication cities and towns portray history and culture in such a light that it appears to be perfect, ideal, and precisely what the tourist imagined the area to be. In replica cities of the Wild West, such as “Donley’s Wild West Town,” tourists can take part in the Wild West show, horseback riding, imitation gun firing, carriage rides, gold mining, and other Wild West stereotypes. In Las Vegas, tourists can see imitations of Paris, Venice, and other worldly attractions without leaving the country.

Is It False Marketing?

But the real question of it is much more complex: Is it in fact false marketing when the company is marketing a product, service, or good that the consumer wants, even if it does not reflect the indigenous background?

However, the question must be asked as to whether these replications and “enhanced” structures really do improve these originally historic and cultural aspects of culture and history or if they hinder the truly cultural and historical integrity of the work. On one side, it can be argued that while these interpretations are meant to restore the original works, they hardly give historical, cultural, or artistic justice to the original piece at hand. However, on the other side of the argument, it can be argued that these modern day interpretations provide Americans with the chance to see reconstructed versions of famous works of art that may otherwise have been closed off to them.

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