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Perception and Interpretation of Leisure Travel Articles

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Limited attention has been paid to how readers perceive and interpret media messages about leisure travel experiences. This study examined college students' perceptions and interpretations of newspaper leisure travel articles revealing three central themes: intimacy and trust, tradition and authenticity, and socio-cultural knowledge. These themes are explored in order to understand the social justification of beliefs used by these college students when assigning meaning to leisure travel articles. Among the findings is the considerable role that leisure travel writers play as cultural intermediaries between local realities, readers, and future tourists. In particular, perception and interpretation of leisure travel articles revealed the expectations and shared meanings of these college students.

Introduction

With an increasing accessibility to remote destinations, people commonly embark on journeys around the world. The images carried about these destinations, however, are increasingly determined by a variety of mass mediated leisure travel texts. These texts are limited by the discourse and socio-cultural beliefs of the community in which they are produced. Leisure travel texts, therefore, are written in a manner that is consistent with a reader's social-cultural perspective (Santos, 2004). Consequently, readers accept dominant meanings promoted in leisure travel texts as accurate, except when compelled to question the socio-cultural forces that constructed them.

To examine the social justification of beliefs used by readers when assigning meaning to leisure travel texts, we must identify the central themes in readers' perceptions and interpretations of those texts. One such mass mediated leisure travel texts are newspaper travel articles. While we are aware that individuals consult the travel section of their newspaper when making travel decisions (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998), little is known regarding the audience reception of these leisure travel articles.

A lack of understanding also exists concerning college students as a leisure travel population. American college students continue to be a considerable market for leisure travel representing 29% of international travelers (Bureau International du Tourisme Social, 2001). In a year, college students spend on average 32 to 36 weeks in classes and 20 to 16 weeks free from academic obligations. As a result, leisure travel has become part of the experiences

of many American college students. Most leisure and tourism research involving college students, however, has primarily focused on the opportunities for leisure travel during school recesses (Bywater, 1993; Epperson, 1977; Hobson & Josiam, 1992) with few researchers attempting to examine meaning making (Masberg & Silverman, 1996). Considering the multitude of meanings available in any given text (Bhabha, 1994), it is important that we examine college students' perception and interpretation of mass mediated leisure travel texts as they reveal how readers socially justify meanings assigned to destinations and the "Other."

I identified the *New York Times* travel section as a site for the study of how college students perceive and interpret articles promoting a particular destination: Portugal. The goal was not to provide a complete analysis of audience reception of leisure travel texts, but a more limited approach to understanding the social justification of beliefs used by college students when assigning meaning to leisure travel texts.

Background Issues

The Construction of Destinations by Mass Media

Morgan and Pritchard (1998) argued that "the circular nature of culture suggests that it is not only the media but also consumers who are active participants in the production of touristic identities and representations" (p. 43). As the amount and authority of international news reporting is declining the authority and educational power of non-fiction entertainment (e.g., travel writing) is increasing. This shift from international news reporting to non-fiction entertainment suggests that opportunities for learning about the Other are increasingly produced and dependent on travel writing (Fürsich & Kavoori, 2001; Fürsich, 2002). Identities and representations of the Other are a product of the socialization of powerful cultural symbols increasingly provided in leisure travel texts. In this sense, travel writers have become socio-cultural decoders.

Considering that "the presentation of social reality influences perceptions of collective and individual identity and the socialization process" (Hall, 1994, p. 189), MacCannell's (1992) suggestion that present day leisure travel calls for a nonexistent relationship between the host and tourist brings into question media representations. Boorstin (1992) argued that society, consumed by extravagant expectations, creates a demand for illusions that are ultimately shaped and satisfied by the media. These expectations insist in making "exotic an everyday experience (without it ceasing to be exotic)" (Boorstin, 1992, p. 77). After all, tourists often look for the culture that the tourism industry has defined for them rather than gaining a less idealized version of a culture (Adams, 1984). This leads to a modification in what is "ordinary" and consequently what people see as "extraordinary" (Urry, 1990, p. 102). Ultimately, tourism is a "cultural activity that has not only always produced the Other, but has thrived on the portrayal of the iconic Other as an object of wistfulness, longing, and captivation" (Hollinshead, 1998, p. 52). This production of the Other authenticates specific and limited conceptions of the world, often through the discourse of authenticity.

Issues of Authenticity

MacCannell (1973, 1992) first introduced the concept of authenticity to the study of tourism by observing how tourist motivation and experience related to authenticity. Cohen (1974), however, questioned MacCannell's view of authenticity by proposing concepts of relativity and negotiation as a way to understand authenticity. He asserted that notions of authenticity are often attached to ideas of underdeveloped societies (Cohen, 1988). These notions, constructed by travel texts, promote the idea of tangible authenticity. The main problem

with this view of authenticity is the reliance on homogeneity, and as Cohen (1972) argued, tourists and populations are not homogeneous—neither in race, ethnicity, nor class. People are different. They travel for different reasons, with different purposes. Therefore, what they perceive as authentic differs (Cohen, 1972, 1979, 1988; Shaw & Williams, 1994). Other socio-cultural elements such as social class and life stage have also been identified as significant and complex influences on leisure travel and notions of authenticity (Bristow, 1990; Seaton & Palmer, 1997; Yuan & Fridgen, 1995). Cohen (1979) and Wang (2000) maintained that when it comes to authenticity, tourists seek to confirm their impressions and interpretations,

> That which is judged to be inauthentic or staged authenticity by experts, intellectuals, or elites may be experienced as authentic and real from an 'emic' perspective. Indeed, this may be the very way that mass tourists experience authenticity. (Wang, 2000, p. 51).

In travel texts, authenticity is introduced through descriptions of rituals, artifacts, and artistic performances. Furthermore, authenticity is used as a way to distinguish between products and performances created for tourist consumption and those products and performances that are true to historical significance and tradition. As a result, leisure travel texts are filled with ideologies authenticating experiences, people, and destinations. In short, these texts highlight destinations as legitimate purveyors of authenticity. Therefore, as travel texts provide a picture of the location, readers then place that picture in the context of all other pictures they have previously been exposed to and "the immediate experience is lost in the meeting of past expectations" (Redfoot, 1984, p. 294).

Audience Reception

A cultural homogenization scenario assumes that the model of audience reception of information occurs in a linear, uniform direction from sender to receiver with a specific intent. This idea must be treated with significance because it represents a critical point of struggle where questions of interpretation are often acknowledged. Little doubt exists that the homogenizing effect of the news media is perhaps best reflected in the reductionist images and travel texts created to satisfy a mass audience, as well as in the soft demands directed toward destinations to preserve a innocence that never existed. Nonetheless, analysis of audience reception reveals that reception takes place in significantly different contexts according to the group's previously acquired symbolic tools and personal social conditions.

As indicated by reception studies, audiences create meaning from messages that relate to the everyday context of their lives (Ang, 1991; Morley & Silverstone, 1991; Radway, 1984). Since reception relies on activation of prior knowledge and experiences and is a function of both how the message is framed (Graber, 1988) and prior knowledge (Knitsch, 1988; Livingstone, 1990), perceptions of leisure travel texts reflect *how* readers perceive the world. Therefore, perception and interpretation of leisure travel texts can be explained by the third-person effect and social learning theory approaches. Third-person effect states that people tend to believe a message has a greater effect on others than themselves (Davison, 1983). Considering that leisure travel texts are based on stereotypes of the "Other" (e.g., O'Barr, 1994), a reader will argue that he or she is not influenced by its socio-cultural stereotypes but will argue that others are vulnerable to it. Furthermore, when prompted to discuss this use of stereotypes, the reader will provide socio-culturally appropriate responses. This behavior is explained by social learning theory (see Bandura, 1986; Mischel, 1970) suggesting that as social awareness increases, messages are used for their sense of social appropriateness.

Methods

This study examined media reception and interpretation in an effort to: 1) identify the central themes in college students' perception and interpretation of newspaper leisure travel articles and 2) discuss the social justification of belief used by readers when assigning meaning to leisure travel texts. Four major assumptions guided data collection and analysis. First, that a difference exists between *what is said* and how *what is said, is said*. The assumption here is that what a message is about and how it is presented impacts how the message will be understood, as well as the responses it will create (Watzlawick, Beavin-Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). Second, texts are perceived and interpreted through human experience, which is largely influenced by language. Third, meanings emerge from the social interaction of a group of people at a particular time and place. Fourth, meanings are perceived through an interpretative process (Blumer, 1986).

A multi-staged method was utilized to identify the central themes in college students' perception and interpretation of newspaper leisure travel articles. First, key representational dynamics regarding leisure travel in Portugal were identified. A framing analysis of all feature travel articles published between 1996 and 2002 by *The New York Times* was conducted and later replicated with the *Washington Post, Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*. Articles were analyzed in three stages by three separate coders: (1) read in their totality for terminology use; (2) based on terminology, descriptions were assigned to each article; and (3) descriptions combined and appropriately labeled revealing relationships and differences in framing that allowed organizing narratives to be identified. The analysis revealed two frames regarding tourism in Portugal: a *traditional* frame and a *contemporary* frame (Santos, in press). The traditional frame was defined as "*containing nostalgic themes and narratives that negate socio-cultural development.*" This frame provided the appearance of "time stood still" by presenting Portugal as frozen in time through the use of two main organizing narratives: 1) "*the unchanging host and culture*," which referred to romanticized perceptions and implications of the past that portrayed Portugal as reluctant to modernize and 2) "*exploration and discovery*," which represented Portugal as impervious to development and promised exciting discoveries in an otherwise fully discovered world.

The second frame regarding tourism in Portugal, the contemporary frame, was defined as "*containing nostalgic themes and narratives that assert particular views of socio-cultural development.*" This frame provided notions of a developed Portugal through the use of two main organizing narratives: 1) "*modern Portugal*," which described Portugal's state-of-the-art attractions such as postmodern exhibits and architecture and 2) "*urban Portugal*," which promoted leisure in urban destinations.

Next focus groups were conducted. Stromer-Galley and Schiappa (1998) argued that in order for scholars to make claims about textual meaning the audience must be included. Texts do not have "universal determinate effects" on audiences, nor do they have just one meaning. In order to make claims of what the audience does with a text, the audience must be studied to obtain "thick descriptions" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, in their attempts to investigate institutions' and individuals' capacities to address critical public issues, media researchers have used focus groups to access how individuals interpret and make meaning of their interaction with media products. Moreover, focus groups have proven to be a particularly valuable method for gathering data for media reception analysis, because they allow researchers to move beyond issues of media content into how audiences interpret the media themselves (see Ang, 1991; Davis, 1989; Fingerson, 1999; Gillespie, 1995; Hodge & Tripp, 1986; Morley, 1980; Morley & Silverstone, 1991; Radway, 1984). According to McRobbie (1991) we are unable to determine meanings of media texts through content alone; rather, meanings are shaped by what audiences determine as salient and significant.

Several reasons guided my choice of focus groups as a method of data collection. First, a focus group setting served to minimize power differentials between the researcher and individuals being studied. I anticipated that college students would be more comfortable when surrounded by an interpretive community (Radway, 1984) that collectively shared their language. I also believe that this collective process, which encouraged interaction among participants, enhanced the quality of the final product (Greenbaum, 2000). Second, focus groups allowed me to understand the why behind college students' perceptions and interpretations because, as discussion occurred in a group setting, students were able to build upon each other's answers (e.g., "That's true, because when I read it I thought . . ."). Finally, Morgan and Krueger (1993) argued that focus groups "are especially useful when working with categories of people who have historically had limited power and influence" (p. 15). The gap between travel writers and college students allowed me to inquire into a population that traditionally has had limited influence on what gets published in newspaper travel sections.

Focus Group Stimuli

According to the most recent publication date, two leisure travel articles were selected for use in focus groups as examples of the previously identified traditional and contemporary frames. These articles were slightly abridged by removing the advisory information on hotels and restaurants traditionally included in a separate column at the end of an article. Article A "The once and future Oporto" (*The New York Times*, March 11, 2001) illustrated a contemporary frame and described how Porto, famous for its port wine, is building new housing for the arts such as a new library, two museums, three theaters, and a concert hall. The article described how the city, punished under the old political system, has grown in the past 20 years by fostering new technologies, innovative businesses, and new housing for the arts. Article B "Monuments to love's labors" (*The New York Times*, August 15, 1999) illustrated a traditional frame and described some of Portugal's northern monuments. The article described the love story of Queen Isabel who was given the town of Óbidos in 1282 by King Dinis as a wedding gift. It continued by describing the Alcobaça monument, a 12th century monastery founded by the first king of Portugal, and the trysting spot for the 14th century lovers Inés the Castro and Dom Pedro. The article ended by encouraging readers to take a trip back in time at the 15th century monastery of Batalha built to commemorate the 1385 battle of Aljubarrota.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection in this study was conducted through the use of focus groups ranging from 8 to 12 participants. Participants (N = 42) were college students representing a variety of major fields of study and travel experiences. Thirty six percent were males and 64% were females, aged 18 to 24, who were enrolled in general education communication courses. A total of four focus groups were conducted between November and December 2001. Each focus group lasted between one and two hours. Focus group #1 was composed of students with international leisure travel experience, and participants were asked to read article B (traditional article). Focus group #2 was composed of students with international leisure travel experience, and participants were asked to read article A (contemporary article). Focus group #3 was composed of students with no international leisure travel experience, and participants were asked to read article B (traditional article). Focus group #4 was composed of students with no international leisure travel experience, and participants were

asked to read article A (contemporary article). By dividing focus groups according to their international travel experience, the power of their "interpretive communities" was maximized as students were surrounded by a social group that collectively shared their language. Also, students who had visited Portugal previously were excluded from focus group discussions as their perception and interpretation of the articles were assumed to have been affected by previous exposure to the destination and its people. Also, students who had lived or studied abroad were also excluded from focus group discussions as their responses would not have been reflective of leisure travel.

Initial focus group discussion was introduced by the facilitator and evolved into participant-led debate. Questions posed were general enough to allow for a variety of perceptions and interpretations to be identified and discussed. Following each focus group, data were transcribed. For verification and feedback purposes, three members of each focus group were sent a full transcript of their focus group discussion. In addition, these three individuals were sent a list of the themes that emerged from the data analysis of their focus group transcript and asked to comment on the validity of the interpretation.

Treatment and Analysis of Data

I conducted and transcribed all four focus group discussions. A discourse analysis of the transcripts was performed and followed four stages: 1) basic description of overall discussion; 2) identification of the emergent themes within recurring discussions; 3) recognition of the social justification of belief identified in these themes (e.g., the reasons given by participants as to why they perceived the writer to exclude the hosts' voice); and, 4) development of an enhanced understanding of identified themes within the context in which they were collected. This analysis represented a search for latent content embedded in the transcripts. The underlying central themes of the focus group discussions were derived through personal interpretation of the material (Babbie, 1995). A three-character label identifies excerpts used (e.g., 1YT). The first character refers to the focus group number, the second character refers to international travel experience (Y = travel experience; N = no travel experience), and the third character refers to the article introduced (C = contemporary article; T = traditional article).

Findings

The findings of this study have been divided into two sections. First, I introduced the central themes in college students' perception and interpretation of newspaper leisure travel articles. Next, guided by these central themes, I examine the social justification of belief involved in assigning meaning to leisure travel texts.

The Central Themes in Readers' Perceptions and Interpretations

Three central themes surfaced with respect to college students' perception and interpretation of newspaper leisure travel articles: intimacy and trust, tradition and authenticity, and socio-cultural knowledge. These themes will be described in the following sections of the manuscript.

Theme 1: Intimacy and Trust

The first central theme identified in college students' perception and interpretation of the articles revealed the use of notions of intimacy and trust when discussing the relationship

between the writer, reader, and host. Overall, participants perceived the articles they read to use notions of intimacy and trust between the writer and reader effectively. A concern was expressed, however, regarding the writer's exclusion of the hosts' voices. This exclusion of the hosts' voices led to the perception that little to no effort was spent at establishing a level of social interaction between the writer/tourist and the host. Participants interpreted this exclusion of the hosts' voices as indicative that the leisure activities proposed in the article read were not consistent with what hosts believe to be important and unique to their culture. As some participants stated:

> He (author) never talks with anybody? I think it's odd. I expect him to tell us about a conversation with a local or how a local thinks; because I don't hear about locals, I get the feeling that they don't want me there. [3NT]
>
> . . . it shows what they (*authors*) deem as important—like art—a richness in aesthetics; but you cannot tell if culture—if the people—appreciate art or if it is there for tourists. We never hear from the locals. [2YC]
>
> How can you describe the culture when you don't talk with the people? [1YT]
>
> The writer gives us a rundown of the culture. They have to be careful to be . . . they must understand the culture. You don't want to be printing something about the culture that is considered by them (*the locals*) as inappropriate. [4NC]
>
> Anyone could have gone to the library and written this article. It's like a story book, like a kids' book. [4NC]

Participants interpreted the exclusion of hosts' voices as an indication of a lack of social interaction leading to repeated observations that the articles displayed a rather condescending style of writing. This style of writing, where communication with locals is absent, was perceived as detrimental since it implied that tourists understood local culture without social interaction.

> . . . so I can go there, not talk to anybody and get them? Can you write a story like that? Without talking with the people? How good is it? [2YC]
>
> Tourism as an industry is kind of a tricky industry, per see. If you are going to a hotel in a foreign country they will do as much as possible to keep you at that hotel—and show you the things they want you to see—and that is not exactly what I see as travel. If I was going somewhere else I would like to soak up as much as I could, aside from what is cut in a little piece for you to be hand-fed. I want to talk with the people from there. I want to know what they really think, what they think about Americans. I want to interact with them. That's what traveling is all about. [3NT]

While students reiterated that the perception that social interaction and understanding is necessary, the interpretation of social interaction and understanding was not agreed upon, especially by focus groups participants with international travel experience:

> When I travel I want to talk to people and see what it is all about, and not look like a tourist. If you do the things they tell you (*the travel writers*), you will be a tourist. [2YC]
>
> When I travel I want to know the locals. I love just sitting down and watching them go by. I have learned a lot that way. [2YC]
>
> (*Reply by another focus group participant*) But that's not knowing them. To know them you need to talk with them. You need to ask them questions. [2YC]

(*Initial speaker*) You can know a lot by just observing them and their rituals. I don't need to ask them, I can just watch. [2YC]

I feel that I learn more about the culture if I can see it in a comfortable manner. I need to have the basics that I have here in the US . . . [1YT]

To understand the culture you need to know what they think, how they feel. You need to communicate with locals and tell us how they think of us. [2YC]

Finally, the concern that others are not as knowledgeable about global culture and will depend on these messages to determine leisure activities and experiences while at the destination was mentioned particularly by focus group participants who read the traditional article. Overall, participants perceived the travel article they read as persuasive, arguing that while they were unaffected by its persuasive nature others would be influenced by the information.

But we know that this is not the 'truth'. Others don't. We've traveled. It's hard for us to believe stuff. It's so different when you never done it. [1YT]

Mass tourism is bad because tourist groups don't immerse themselves in the culture. They get an outsiders' perspective. But some people want that because it is easier for them. I don't because I'm educated about global culture. [3NT]

This article plays on western European stereotypes and readers' ignorance. Talking about castles and grandmothers? Very generic Western European. This article could have just as well described any other European location. [3NT]

(*Reply by another focus group participant*) Yeah, this is why you know that when you travel you don't find this. [3NT]

(*Initial speaker*) You know that but others don't. That is why they go. They buy into it. [3NT]

Theme 2: Tradition and Authenticity

The second central theme identified in college students' perception and interpretation of the articles revealed the use of tradition (i.e., precedent customs and practices) as well as a dispute of notions of authenticity (i.e., real, of undisputed origin) when discussing the articles' descriptions. Overall, participants perceived the articles to rely significantly on precedent conventional destination marketing portrayals, such as descriptions of long lost lifestyles, rituals, and folklore, to create a dreamlike scenario.

It's like the country is lost in time. If I go there they are still living the way they were. I never thought: 'cell phone, computer'; it's all the ingredients for a fairytale. [1YT]

This would be a very cool place to go. You could get lost. From reading I get the feeling that I could just disappear for months. [3NT]

This emphasis on precedent conventional destination marketing portrayals was perceived by participants as necessary for successful destination marketing.

They realize that they have a profitable business that they are trying to market so they focus on the old stuff but give it a modern twist. [2YC]

He doesn't write anything that is totally wrong. When you write for this type of publication, when you are trying to get people to visit, you need to write in a way that we can all understand. [1YT]

However, participants who read the traditional article interpreted it as overly emphasizing precedent conventional destination marketing portrayals, of being "too old" [1YT], "too stuck in the past" [3NT], and of not making references to modern Portugal. Interestingly, although participants called for travel articles to describe "what it is like today" [3NT], when contextualized within their perception and interpretation of the travel articles, I realized that what they desired was to observe living tradition (i.e., how precedent customs and practices are observed in modern living).

> I would love to see some of the places the article talks about; it would be very cool to say that I saw that. [3NT]
>
> We are all Americans, but at the same time we all have ancestors who came from other places, and like, we get to see what their life was like, and what the architecture and stuff is like. There is so much more ancient stuff there. There's not that here, everything here is modern. We don't get to see, like, Roman and Greek architecture in its real situation, where it first started. When I go there I want to see that. I want tradition. [1YT]
>
> It would be good if people actually live that way there, if it really is true. [3NT]
>
> I would expect to see it (*country and attractions*) as they describe . . . I don't want to get there and see something totally different. [1YT]

Conversely, participants who read the contemporary article interpreted it as emphasizing present-day Portugal, of being "too modern" [2YC], and of not making references to precedent customs and practices. Participants perceived the contemporary article as focused on present-day Portugal and interpreted this focus as an indication that the writer failed to understand that "tourists do not want that (*modern*)" [4NC].

> I wonder if the city itself . . . if people came and just looked at the new things and never got interested in the old part of it, would that be OK for them? Do they just want us to recognize them as modern? What kind of tourist wants that? [2YC]
>
> Portugal is right next to Spain, isn't it? I would think that a country like Portugal would have awesome weather. Why don't they talk about the beach area? [4NC] (*reply by another focus group participant*) Yeah! I would want to return to a place because they had great beaches, not because they have castles and history. But maybe that is not what they want. [4NC]
>
> (*reply by initial speaker*) They want us to recognize them as modern. [4NC]
>
> I live in New York. I get enough modern, contemporary art. I travel so that I can see other things. This story talks too much about modern day. As a tourist I don't want modern day. I want to forget about time. I just want to have fun [2YC]

As college students' perception and interpretation of the articles rooted leisure travel within a search for tradition, a dispute over authenticity ensued.

> If I was going to spend that much money I want to see cultural landmarks, not modern day architecture and modern art. I can see that in my own country . . . in my own city" [4NC]
>
> Portugal is trying to get back to tradition because that is what people want to see. You go there to see real history and real culture. Articles like this one prepare you for what you see. They let you understand what you will encounter. Of course,

not everything will be the same, but most will ... it's authentic. You know what you will see is the real thing. [3NT]

We all know that Colonial America does not tell America. This article is about history, not culture. Is it still this way? If people came here looking for Colonial America they would not understand modern America. I think it would be the same if I traveled to Portugal with the knowledge given to me in this article. [1YT]

This dispute addressed the existing debates on authenticity (Cohen, 1988; Redfoot, 1984; Wang, 1999, 2000). Overall, college students perceived the travel articles as conveying symbols of authenticity.

Further analysis of authenticity, however, revealed differences in interpretation accounted for by the presence or absence of international travel experience among the participants. Those students with international travel experience interpreted descriptions of the host as a symbol of authenticity.

Why does he tell us that this is the real thing? The real thing are the people. You discuss the people and what they do, it makes the story real ... [1YT]

It is one thing if you see something on television or hear something about it, but it is a completely different experience if you are actually there and you get to see something first-hand. And also, I mean, me personally, like, I enjoy it because it gives me a better perspective about, like, that part of the world, that country, that culture, the real people. You get a better world view if you get to see something first-hand; if you can experience it, if you can talk to the people who are really from there. If you get to know the people, that makes the experience authentic. [1YT]

Tourists don't understand that real people live there, and like, they have a regular life. Tourists just use the place. They don't respect the culture for what it is. They just see it as entertainment. They don't know the authentic, the people. [2YC]

These participants criticized attempts to articulate objective authenticity (i.e., artifacts and artistic performances) and interpreted the writing style as a strategy to dupe readers.

The question is: do these places actually exist? Do they exist the way they are being described? Or is it all just to get us to go there? [3NT]

I don't know if the stuff they talk about was there before, or if it was created for tourists. [2YC]

Conversely, those with no international travel experience interpreted descriptions of artifacts and artistic performances as a symbol of authenticity.

I like how they (*the writer*) describe the things they have ... it's cool to learn about what is authentic to them. They see it that way (*as authentic*) since they put it in their museums. [4NC]

To a point it is manufactured. I think they ... it is not completely manufactured, but they exploit. Naturally, it is good business. They think this is what people want to see, and ignore the rest of the culture. As long as the stuff they show is the real thing, then I do not see a problem with that. [3NT]

Finally, participants suggested that if Portugal wanted to attract American college students it should make the most of its unique traditions, authenticity, heritage, and historic landmarks by bringing novelty, oldness, and American standards together.

> Every time I travel I expect to see things that I have never seen before, and I expect to do things that I have never done before. You don't want the same thing over and over. [1YT]
>
> I believe that tourism (*travel articles*) capitalizes on our culture. A lot of times they (*travel writers and the destination*) know what we like in our country, and they bring it to their country, so that we are comfortable there. That we want to be there, and we are familiar with what they have to provide us, like burgers and fries. [2YC]

Theme 3: Socio-Cultural Knowledge

The third central theme identified in college students' perception and interpretation of the leisure travel articles revealed the use of notions of socio-cultural knowledge when discussing the writer, reader, and host. Socio-cultural knowledge, according to participants, constituted a deep-seated understanding of the individualisms (i.e., the distinctive behavior) of a particular group of people that allowed one to fully appreciate and describe the culture.

> The writer gives us a synopsis of the culture. They have to be careful to be . . . they must really understand the culture. [4NC]

Participants also suggested that a high level of socio-cultural knowledge allowed for the differentiation between tourists who were perceived as inactive, and explorers who were perceived as actively interested and keen on socio-cultural differences.

All participants viewed the writer as an "outsider." Differences existed, however, among participants as to the extent and validity of the writer's cultural and social knowledge. Those students with international travel experience were critical of the writer's outsider role which, according to them, deprived the author of socio-cultural insight.

> But why are they doing this? For the people or the tourists? We don't know about the people . . . because the author writes as a tourist. Most tourists don't know the culture anyway. [2YC]
>
> They (*authors*) show you what you want to see. No one is going to say 'Go check out the cheap housing!' But that is also part of the experience and only the people from there know about it. He can't tell you about it because he does not live it . . . he is a tourist. [1YT]
>
> I want people from there talking about it. I want to know what the Portuguese think, where they think I should go and do. [2YC]

These participants interpreted the articles as misleading, because they provided an understanding of the Portuguese based on experiences with one particular group.

> I feel that the author assumes too much. I could never assume that I knew the Portuguese based on this authors' account of Porto. I am sure there are differences among people in Portugal, but you would never think that based on this article. [2YC]

Conversely, students with no international travel experience perceived the writers' outsider role as one that provided the writer with a stronger understanding of the insights and experiences sought by tourists. These participants viewed the writer as better positioned than the host, who was too closely associated with the community, and would fail to understand what visitors are looking for in their leisure experiences.

> The writer needs to write as a tourist because locals may not pay attention to their own location. The writer can identify what tourists want and like . . . [4NC]
>
> The article is very well written and it had me from start to finish, although it got boring when he goes into too much detail on the history and the castles. I would visit Portugal. The writer gets us and knows what we are interested in. [3NT]
>
> If you want to attract people to come, make it short and to the point. You cannot get too serious into the culture, you need someone like you—who knows what you are looking for—and like, you associate with. [4NC]

These participants expressed concern that if left to the host, only cultural messages favoring the hosts' views and perspectives would result. Finally, these participants perceived the writers as attempting to articulate notions of what "real" Portugal was accusing them of generalizing based on their experiences in one particular area.

> I want to know how it is now, but I want to know why, the background information. This does not tell me what Portugal is like, just this one area of Portugal. [3NT] (*reply by another focus group participant*) But the point is to get you to go there, they can't tell you everything. [3NT]
>
> (*reply by initial speaker*) As long as you know what Portugal is like then you can choose. [3NT]
>
> (*reply by another focus group participant*) But you don't know Portugal, you know this town. You can't just say it all looks the same; just like the U.S. [3NT]

Discussion

As Rorty (1989) argued, "We understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief" (p. 170). Through focus groups, this study identified three central themes in college students' perception and interpretation of newspaper leisure travel articles: intimacy and trust, tradition and authenticity, and socio-cultural knowledge. These themes provided insight into the social justification of belief used by college students when assigning meaning to leisure travel texts.

The first central theme revealed that college students discussed relationships of intimacy and trust between writer, reader, and host in order to justify their perception and interpretation of the newspaper leisure travel articles read. The concept of intimacy and trust allowed participants to discuss their interpretation of the writer's exclusion of the hosts' voice. This exclusion of the hosts' voice was interpreted as problematic for three main reasons. First, participants inferred that leisure activities proposed were not particularly significant to the host culture as the hosts' input was not sought. This implied that participants searched for the hosts' stamp of approval when processing information concerning leisure activities. This finding, however, is puzzling considering the proliferation of non-native leisure activities (e.g., bungee jumping) in tourist destinations. At best, this finding indicates that while participants may interpret the lack of the hosts' input concerning leisure activities as detrimental, "the bodily source of the authentic self" (Wang, 1999, p. 362) is ultimately illustrated in the proliferation of non-native leisure activities as the object of a pleasurable experience.

Second, participants inferred that the exclusion of the hosts' voice promoted the view that tourists could understand the hosts' culture without interacting with the host. This lack of social interaction was interpreted by participants as problematic because it fails to recognize that for leisure travel to further ones' understanding of other cultures, the traveler must have social contact with the host. Although MacCannell's (1992) argument that tourists are looking for observation rather than social interaction is contested by these participants, the statements regarding the interest in social interaction may be anchored in the desire to give socially appropriate responses. Other literature supported the selection of these socially appropriate responses which suggests that as people age, social awareness increases and people perceive and use messages for their sense of social appropriateness (Bandura, 1986; Mischel, 1970). Mutz (1989) also argued that the fear of others' reactions guides our responses. The students possibly felt compelled to recognize leisure travel as furthering ones' understanding of other cultures, because it was the dominant social-cultural perspective of their group setting. This finding affirmed that negotiation is a social construct where statements confirming the readers' agreement with the dominant social-cultural perspective become important indicators of social and cultural sophistication. Moreover, I argue that participants gave socially appropriate responses, because while they criticized articles for not including the hosts' voices and instead relied on conventional portrayals, later participants argued that articles had to capitalize on precedent conventional destination marketing portrayals for successful destination marketing.

Finally, the lack of social interaction between the writer and host was interpreted as problematic due to what participants deemed to be the persuasive nature of the travel articles read. This lack of social interaction was viewed as problematic because the only information readers got was persuasive messages written from the writers' perspectives. Participants feared that others, who were not as knowledgeable about global culture and therefore unaware of other perspectives, would be influenced by the persuasive nature of the travel articles read. Statements such as: "others will buy into these messages" [4NC], "you know they don't have the different cultural perspectives we do" [2YC], and "we know that this is not the 'truth'. Others don't." [1YT], confirmed participants' belief that they were better equipped to deal with these persuasive messages. This position is described by studies that indicated third-person effects increase when readers believe that it is socially undesirable to be influenced by a particular message (Davison, 1983). According to Perloff (1989), and Cohen and Davis (1991), people react to messages depending on how they think others will understand those messages. In this study, the perception that the articles' message would have a greater effect on others than themselves was attributed to the participants' interpretation that these articles were persuasive messages, and that they (the students) were educated, universal citizens who were not easily duped by travel writers.

The second central theme revealed that college students used notions of tradition and authenticity to justify their perception and interpretation of the leisure travel articles. The perception that successful destination marketing was dependent on the use of conventional destination marketing portrayals allowed participants to discuss their interpretation of the writers' portrayal of Portugal. Overall, participants who read the traditional article interpreted its portrayals as "dated" [3NT], leading participants to argue that the writer failed to understand that tourists want travel articles to describe "what it is like today" [3NT]. This finding suggests that the use of dated, conventional portrayals in leisure travel articles can be interpreted by readers as undesirable. However, when contextualized within the interpretation of the contemporary articles' portrayals as "too progressive and developed" [2YC], this finding suggests that participants desired portrayals that explored cultural realities but maintain a sense of underdevelopment. Therefore, "they must keep their traditions alive" [3NT], because "if they develop and change, and become like us, tourists will not go there"

[2YC]. This interpretation confirmed that "the experiences of (the) tourist are constantly in relation to the reality back home—the trip is simply a temporary escape" (Redfoot, 1984, p. 295).

As participants' perception and interpretation of the articles rooted leisure travel within a search for tradition and underdevelopment, a dispute over authenticity ensued. This dispute suggests a confirmation of Cohen's proposal that notions of authenticity are attached to ideas of underdeveloped societies (1988). Participants' desire to develop a socio-cultural understanding of a destination's "authentic culture" [2YC] relied on perspectives that equated authenticity with underdevelopment. Hence, notions of authenticity become attached to ideas of non-technological, undeveloped societies (Cohen, 1988). Interestingly, participants unknowingly interpreted authenticity as something that existed prior to tourism but was "created" in these travel articles according to the "things American tourists want to see" [4NC]. Tourism then, becomes a way for one to navigate different cultural realities according to Western norms and values. In the end, the personal reconciliation between something that was "created" for the purpose of attracting tourists, and something that existed prior to tourism, was one of the multiple forces working in the focus group discussions.

Consequently, leisure travel articles were perceived and interpreted according to the articles' ability to construct valid notions of authenticity. However, agreement of what constituted authenticity proved to be difficult. Discussions regarding perception and interpretation of travel articles read revealed that what constituted authenticity was accounted for by the presence or absence of international travel experience among the participants. Those students with international travel experience interpreted descriptions of the host as a symbol of authenticity and perceived attempts to articulate objective authenticity as a strategy to dupe readers. Conversely, students with no international travel experience interpreted descriptions of artifacts and artistic performances as a symbol of authenticity.

These findings are consistent with existing literature suggesting that different types of tourists are looking for different types of authenticity (Cohen, 1988; Redfoot, 1984; Wang, 2000). Inferring two approaches to authenticity (i.e., authenticity of the host and subjective authenticity) followed Wang's (1999) arguments of a separation in authenticity of *experiences* and authenticity of *toured objects* as the outcome of social construction. Redfoot (1984) expanded on the issue of authenticity and tourism by discussing what he proposed are first, second, third and fourth-order tourists that progress by what he maintained are the levels of authenticity sought. According to Redfoot (1984), while first and second-order tourists may take interest in the lives of the natives, "the second-order tourist, unlike the first-order tourist, is keenly aware of the inauthenticities of the tourist role . . . and seek(s) ways to distinguish 'real' experiences from their inauthenticity" (p. 296). However, this search for authenticity is not necessarily rooted in a search for the hosts' culture, because as Cohen (1979, 1988) maintained, today's tourists are much less concerned with authenticity and are much more concerned with confirming their impressions and interpretations. This idea is particularly relevant when one considers that tourists are no longer simply looking for authenticity of the "other" but are looking to authenticate themselves as tourists.

The final central theme revealed that college students used the notion of socio-cultural knowledge to justify their perception and interpretation of the writers' accounts. The concept of socio-cultural knowledge allowed participants to discuss their interpretation of the writers' statements. As the creation of leisure travel experiences are built up in modern day travel writing (Löfgren, 1999, p. 14), the role of the writer as an outsider and a leisure broker was accepted by the participants. Discussions, however, revealed how the writer's dichotomous socio-cultural standing as an outsider and a tourist affected the participants' perception and interpretation of the leisure travel articles read. Participants with international

travel experience interpreted the writer's outsider role as a drawback because of the writers' lack of socio-cultural insight regarding the destination. Conversely, participants with no international travel experience perceived the writers' outsider role as one that provided the writer with a stronger understanding of the insights and experiences sought.

While these perceptions and interpretations of the same articles are contradictory, they are nonetheless "rooted in the paradoxical nature of the 'it' experience" (Redfoot, 1984, p. 298). While tourists take an enthusiastic interest in the lives and culture of the natives, this interest is always confined by the nature of the tourist as an outsider (Redfoot, 1984). In this case, the writer was interpreted as an outsider and tourist, and considering that decisions to travel "are increasingly dependent on the opinions of travel writers" (Williams & Shaw, 1995, p. 18), the concern by participants was that the leisure travel articles established expectations for leisure experiences that were determined by an outsider. This concern, however, seemed to vacillate when some participants argued that if left to the host, only cultural messages favoring the hosts' ideas and perspectives would result. As McRobbie (1991) argued, meanings of media texts are shaped by what audiences determine as salient and significant. In this case, the writers' role as an outsider was determined by participants as salient and significant to their perception and interpretation of the newspaper articles read.

The media, being a social product, perpetuate or create knowledge that is based on agreed-upon narratives that are not only easily comprehended by the audience but also understood to be "reality." As participants accepted the writers' accounts as "reality," their perception and interpretation of the articles read involved a struggle to bring together the roles of writer, outsider, and tourist. This struggle was confirmed by participants' search for affirmation from others in the group (e.g., "When I read it I thought . . . did you think that?" [1YT] and "I keep thinking about . . . but maybe I am the only one who thought that" [4NC]) indicating that negotiation of leisure travel articles is socially constructed through shared knowledge. Hence, I contend that perception and interpretation of leisure travel articles reveals the expectations and shared meanings of these participants. This search for affirmation is part of a larger societal system where shared knowledge becomes part of social capital.

Limitations and Recommendations

Data collection in this study was restricted by the population on which this research focused. Furthermore, it is important to reiterate that the narrow focus of the present study was intended to provide initial grounds for exploring ways in which college students perceive and interpret newspaper leisure travel articles. As the sample was college students enrolled in communications courses (although not all communication majors) it could be argued that these students possessed more elaborate frameworks that encouraged them to be critical. In addition, only two articles were used as stimuli for focus group discussions and only one article per focus group. Future researchers may want to employ a more diverse sample, as well as use a larger variety of stimuli. While focus groups mimic the process by which groups socially construct their world, these focus groups may have limited individual group members' influence on the groups' thinking. The articles were critiqued by a group, where individuals' contributions were built on others in the group, which constitutes a different process than individual reading. However, a future research direction is suggested where the differential dynamics of group versus individual negotiation and reflection can be examined and identified. Finally, although information about search behavior of potential travelers exist (see Eby et al., 1999; Fodness & Murray, 1998; Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998), a gap is evident on whether travel writing is read differently (i.e., more or less critically, or using different bases for critique) by those actively seeking travel information versus casual reading.

Conclusion

This study examined media reception and interpretation in an effort to identify the central themes in college students' perception and interpretation of newspaper leisure travel articles, as well as discuss the social justification of belief used by readers when assigning meaning to leisure travel texts. Overall, three central themes surfaced with respect to college students' perception and interpretation of newspaper leisure travel articles: intimacy and trust, tradition and authenticity, and socio-cultural knowledge. These themes served as social justification when assigning meaning to leisure travel texts. Among the findings is the considerable role that travel writers play as cultural intermediaries between local realities and readers/future tourists. Findings also indicated that international travel experiences are more likely to alter perception and interpretation of leisure travel articles than the structuring of messages alone.

As Allen (1992) suggested, textual reception is a meeting place. Consequently, readers do not simply embrace and accept leisure travel articles as reflections of truth, nor do they reject these articles in a uniform way. Therefore, when examining travel leisure articles we must move beyond notions of linear communication of a controlled dissemination from producers of meaning to receivers of meaning. Audiences are active participants in the construction and interpretation of meaning since they actively carve out spaces that help them situate their perceptions. When exposed to leisure travel articles, participants located themselves by what they chose to accept or reject. This construction of meaning in leisure travel messages is multi-layered in the sense that notions of intimacy, trust, tradition, authenticity, and social-cultural knowledge were simultaneously engaged by participants. Leisure travel articles are cultural products and their consumption indicates a never-ending process of identification and differentiation where notions of socio-cultural influence were often contested.

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