

The Image of Orlando as a Tourist Destination: A Reflection through Postcards

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ABSTRACT

Postcards feature multiple interpretations of a single destination including sequential snapshots of change in the destination over time. Given the sustainable role of postcards in promoting destinations, there is a lack of research on postcards within the context of destination image representation. The purpose of this exploratory study is to test an existing conceptual model (Milman, 2010) that analyzed the perception and interpretation of reality as featured in the postcards offered for sale at a major tourist destination. This study applied the model to understand the various postcard image approaches representing Orlando as a tourist destination. In addition, this study investigated some of the constituencies involved in the decision making process associated with the choice of postcards being offered for sale. The authors found that the majority of the postcards offered for sale did not feature a realistic representation of Orlando but a misleading environment or fantasy.

Keywords: postcard, destination image, model, Orlando.

INTRODUCTION

The picture postcard is the most widely distributed and easily accessible souvenir that is available at various sites at any tourist destination (Albers & James, 1988; Markwick, 2001). People purchase picture postcards to keep as evidence of their travel experience. Also, people send postcards to friends and relatives to validate the trip, either to brag about their travel or to simply let them know they are thinking about them. When receiving a postcard, the recipient gets a visual piece of information on the destination that a friend or relative is visiting.

Despite the growing advance of electronic communication such as e-cards and video postcards that are offered for free and delivered instantly, traditional postcards continue to be a popular form of souvenir for tourists as well as an economical means of communication. The popularity of postcards has been accredited to its broad visual communication appeal as mentioned above. Visual images are indeed a powerful component of tourist destination

marketing and dominate all forms of tourism promotion, from travel brochures and television commercials to Internet websites (Jenkins, 2003). Picture postcards not only represent destinations, but also communicate attributes, characteristics, concepts, values, and ideas (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 2007).

Today's postcards feature multiple interpretations of a single destination image including sequential snapshots of change in the destination over time. Although the role of postcards in promoting destinations has been recognized over the years, there is a lack of research on postcards within the context of destination image representation (Yüksel & Akgül, 2007). The purpose of this exploratory study is to test a conceptual model that analyzed the perception and interpretation of reality as featured in the postcards offered for sale at a major tourist destination (Milman, 2010). This study attempted to apply the same model to understand the various postcard image approaches representing Orlando as a tourist destination. Moreover, this study investigated some of the constituencies involved in the decision making process associated with the choice of postcards being offered for sale.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Postcards as image makers

Studies have found that consumers recall and recognize pictures better than words (Childers & Houston, 1984; Lutz & Lutz, 1977; Singh & Formica, 2006). Empirical research confirmed that pictures in advertisements had a positive effect on consumers' memories for product-related information (Lutz & Lutz, 1977) and that the effect of visuals was superior to texts on memory (Childers & Houston, 1984). Since tourism activities are primarily experience based, photographs, pictures, or other symbolic images are crucial when communicating the destination's image to consumers (Mackay & Fesenmaier, 1997).

The power of picture postcards in depicting destination image is substantial (Markwick, 2001). From a sender's perspective, postcards denote the tangible proof of a traveling experience. For a recipient, the postcard can raise awareness, generate interest in visiting the destination, and help to consider the destination as a potential vacation place. Moreover, compared with other commercial agents, information transmitted through postcards is more trustworthy since it is from a friend or a relative.

Some studies looked at the role of postcards in developing or representing a destination's image. Markwick (2001) studied postcards from Malta and concluded that while certain stereotypical images of Malta were sustained, the image presented in postcards has expanded the destination's image. Yüksel and Akgül (2007) found that postcard-induced feelings about the tourist destination determine the degree to which the destination would be valued as a travel destination. Milman (2010) developed a conceptual framework of four types of postcards. The author found that only a small proportion of the postcards represented authentic and true images of Alanya, Turkey while the majority of the postcards provided unclear and confusing images of the destination. This conceptual framework of Milman (2010) was applied to this study.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was used to understand the perception and interpretation of reality as featured in the postcards offered for sale at a major tourist destination, Orlando, Florida. Orlando is home to major amusement attractions including the Walt Disney World Resort, the Universal Orlando Resort, and SeaWorld. Since the establishment of theme parks in the 1970s, Orlando has grown significantly as a major international tourist destination. Tourism is the largest employer in Metro Orlando, accounting for 31% of total employment in the community. In 2009, visitors contributed \$27.6 billion in spending to the area's economic impact. The area received a total of 46.6 million visitors of which over 43.3 million were domestic while more than 3.2 million were international visitors (Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau [OOCVB], 2010). The city ranked fourth in the United States in terms of overseas visitation (Office of Travel and Tourism Industries [OTTI], 2009).

Sampling and data collection

A purposeful sampling method was used. A variety of highly tourist frequented retail stores (i.e., grocery stores, drugstores, independently-owned souvenir stores) located on the main tourist strip – International Drive – was selected. The strip stretches about 14.5 miles offering 6 theme parks, over 100 accommodations, more than 150 restaurants, and the 2nd largest convention center in the nation. The strip is also home to two major outlet malls and numerous souvenir shops (International Drive Resort Area, 2010). The grocery stores and drugstores were regional/national chains but present unique characteristics from the typical stores. Due to its location on the main tourist strip, these stores market heavily towards tourists by offering more souvenirs and products which appeal to tourists.

A total of eight stores were visited, observed and managers/owners of each store were interviewed. Upon arrival to each store, the purpose of study was discussed with a manager/owner and an information sheet approved by the IRB that explained what the manager/owner should expect was presented. Only the stores that granted permission were included in the study. Data was collected during the fall of 2009 using a combination of store manager/owner interviews and passive observations of postcard displays and tourist behavior near the displays coupled with digital camera photography of postcard display racks/shelves. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers/owners of the selected retail stores to understand the decision making of displays and ordering, information about the sales, and perceptions of the images depicted on the postcards in reflecting Orlando. The types of questions consisted of experience/behavior questions and opinion/values questions. General observations of the postcard displays and the tourist behavior near the postcard displays occurred during each visit. As a part of the observation, pictures of the overall displays and postcards were taken using digital camera photography at stores with permission.

Data analysis

Interviews with store managers/owners were audio taped with permission coupled with running notes. There was no personal information collected or used for this study. During the observations, data was collected in the form of running field notes which were turned into

observation notes for further analysis (Glesne, 2006). The audio tapes were transcribed and then erased to ensure confidentiality. Data from both the interviews and observations were coded and analyzed for common themes by each researcher individually. The results from each researcher were discussed and put together later for further analysis. The data from the digital camera photography generated 140 photographs of postcards and display racks/shelves. The postcards were analyzed and sorted according to the pictures and other iconic representation (e.g., actual settings/surroundings, tourist activities, communication messages featured on the postcards) based on the sorting mechanism presented by Milman's (2010) model.

RESULTS

Postcards' display methods

Postcards were displayed in two ways: one method was a revolving rack where postcards were displayed in a circle and customers could browse the postcards while moving the rack from side to side. The other method was a rectangular shaped shelf with different levels where all postcards could be viewed at once. In general, there were three types of postcards in terms of size and shape: 4x7", 5x8", and cut out postcards (shaped as figures). The price tag on top of the postcard racks indicated that the larger the postcard, the more expensive its price. Moreover, the postcards could also be classified into four categories according to the images depicted: Orlando; Florida; theme park related (including characters); and "sexy" or "funny" images. In most cases, if two or more revolving racks were present, one would be for Orlando/ Florida postcards, and the other would be exclusively for Disney postcards.

The location of the postcard display racks differed among the stores. In souvenir shops, postcards were displayed among other souvenir items in the middle or back of the stores. Furthermore, managers/owners of the souvenir shops revealed that many tourists look for postcards as they walk in the shop. Therefore, postcards were located towards the back so that people would pass other merchandise on their way to the postcards. However, in drugstores or grocery stores, postcards were displayed separate from other merchandise but in an easily visible spot, either on revolving racks in the front between the exit and entrance of the store or on the rectangular shelves at the corner of the store, revealing that postcards were auxiliary of drugs and groceries. All managers/owners agreed that the purpose of the postcard display was to make it convenient for customers to look at and purchase. Further, in many instances, it was the store's corporate policy or postcard vendors who made the decisions on what type of postcards to display, with the manager's final approval. It was found that the decision was ultimately influenced by the sales of each postcard.

Postcard sales

Generally speaking, postcards sold well. Therefore, the stores did not use any other strategies to promote sales other than a sign indicating the price or the "Disney" sign at the top of the rack and the location of the racks. In most cases, the best prices were offered in souvenir shops, whereas the best quality was provided by drugstores and grocery stores. Neither the store managers nor employees recommended customers to purchase a certain type of postcard over another. In addition, managers did not mention making profit from the postcard sales. Postcards

sold well but they are low cost. For most stores, postcards diversified their merchandise categories and may have attracted more people to visit their stores. All the managers/owners agreed that it was important to have postcards available in the stores. Most postcards were purchased by adult tourists who seemed to prefer postcards featuring Orlando pictures. In comparison, children preferred the Disney postcards. Overall, postcards that represented the “real” Orlando were the most popular sellers. Furthermore, the postcards’ price had a great impact on people’s purchasing decisions. In other words, the smaller sized postcards sold better than cut out postcards (shaped as figures) which were mostly larger in size.

Representation of images in postcards

The initial review of the 140 postcards and the analysis of the images featured yielded a few interesting observations. Although sold well, only a small proportion of the postcards were a factual photographic representation of Orlando throughout the stores. In addition, those postcards enhanced the identity of the destination by adding “Orlando” in script. This shows the lack of identity that the city of Orlando possesses as a tourist destination. According to the managers/owners, a realistic photograph of downtown Orlando was not widely identifiable to the typical visitor. Therefore, it is understandable that these postcards could be used to educate or inform tourists about Orlando in general.

The majority of the postcards offered for sale featured photographs of a beach with the script “Florida” superimposed on them. In addition, some postcards featured seashells and animals, such as alligators, turtles, dolphins, manatees, flamingos and the word “Florida” on them. While there is no beach in the Greater Orlando area (the closest beach is approximately 65 miles away), the stores wanted to broaden their selling opportunities by featuring an aspect of Florida that is popular among tourists. Other types of postcards featured photographs of different attractions within the area (e.g., Walt Disney World, Universal Orlando, Sea World, Gatorland) as well as distant (e.g., Kennedy Space Center) from Orlando. There were also postcards produced by the different attractions. Interestingly, a large number of postcards offered for sale depicted a “sexy” or “funny” image. Most of these postcards were associated with females or males with either a “sexy” figure or in groups on a beach with a humorous script/phrase written on them. These postcards have no direct association with Orlando or Florida but were likely produced and offered for sale solely for entertainment.

Most of the managers/owners stated that postcards should represent the destination well. However, they agreed that only a small number of postcards had the most appropriate representation of Orlando. Despite this observation, a great variety of postcards was provided in the stores to cater to different needs of customers. Overall, the grocery stores and drugstores had postcards with a better representation of Orlando than the souvenir shops. In other words, the souvenir shops held a much larger collection of postcards with a “sexy” or “funny” image.

Applying a conceptual model for categorization of the Orlando postcards

Further analysis of the postcards was necessary to better understand the reasons behind the decision to display certain postcards in the various retail outlets investigated. Understanding better the various categories of postcards displayed might hint on the potential influence of

souvenir and other retail stores in developing the image of Orlando as a tourist destination among tourists who visit the destination.

The sample of postcards offered for sale in Orlando was further categorized based on a conceptual framework developed by Milman (2010). The model presented a matrix with two dimensions that captured pictures and other images depicted on the postcards: (1) level of authenticity displayed in the pictures portrayed on the postcards and (2) level of contextual representation of the tourist’s potential experience at the destination.

In the first dimension of the framework, the postcards were sorted on a continuum ranging from low to high level of authenticity. The evaluation of authenticity in each postcard was based on how close the picture, image, or item featured on the postcard was a truthful and accurate representation of Orlando. The second dimension was the contextual representation of the potential tourist experience while visiting Orlando. The evaluation of each postcard on this dimension depended on how close the picture, image, or item featured was to the potential experience by the tourist while at the destination. A picture of a geographical area that is distant from Orlando (e.g., eco-tourism, the Everglades) is a low contextual representation of the tourist’s experience as the likelihood to experience the image in the picture is low. The cross-reference of the two dimensions yielded a typology of four types of postcards that represent a destination: realistic, refurbished reality, misleading, and fantasy (Milman, 2010) (Figure 1).

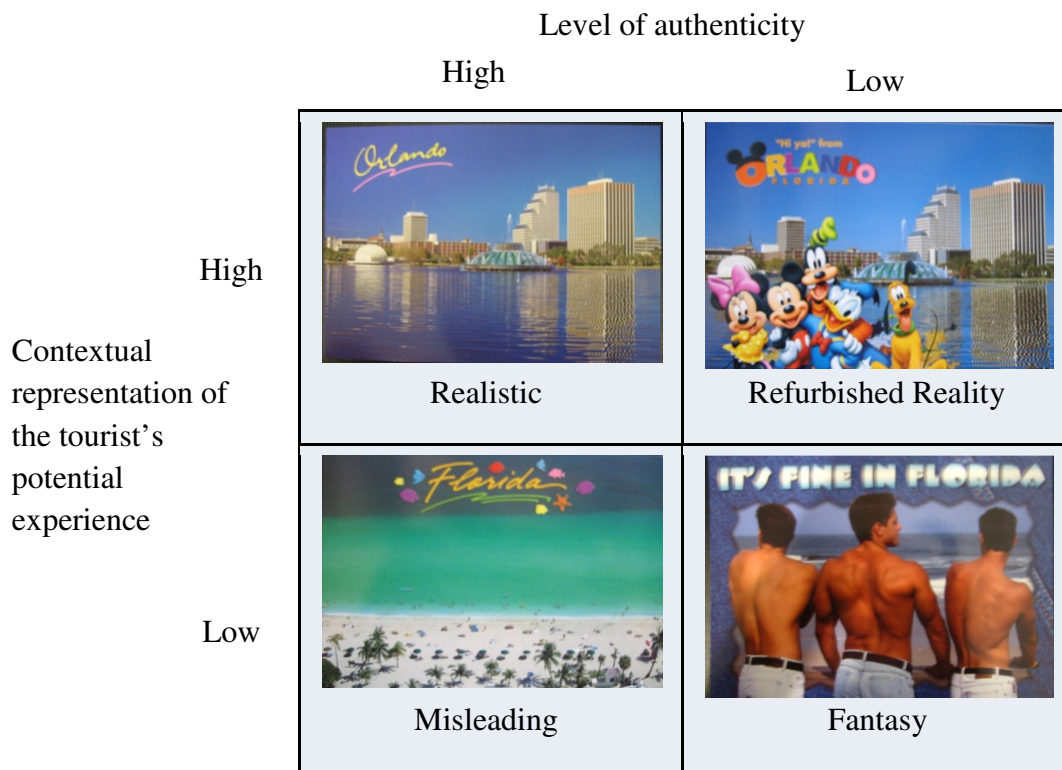


Figure 1
Classification of Postcards Offered for Sale at Orlando, Florida

Realistic postcards represented the condition of things as they actually exist. These postcards featured downtown Orlando with the high-rise buildings and Lake Eola both during the day and night. Refurbished reality postcards featured additional items such as theme park characters superimposed on a realistic picture which reduced the level of authenticity. Misleading postcards featured well-known tourist attractions or experiences in Florida, such as beaches and the Everglades. Also, there were postcards that featured animals that are associated with Florida, such as manatees, flamingos, alligators, and dolphins. These pictures are a realistic overview of the places and wildlife represented; however, they are misleading tourists as they are not physically in Orlando or near-by and the potential for tourist accessibility to these destinations and wildlife while in Orlando is minimal. The last category, fantasy postcards portrayed “sexy” or “funny” images of people or animals with no direct association with Orlando. These postcards featured females or males with in groups on a beach with a humorous script/phrase written on them.

The authors were able to categorize all the postcards according to the model. The observations and content analysis of postcards concluded that the majority of postcards offered for sale were misleading, followed by fantasy postcards. Therefore, based on the model, the authors may conclude that postcards offered for sale in Orlando’s tourist outlets do not necessarily represent the destination accurately. This finding confirms the outcome of Milman’s (2010) study. In Milman’s initial study of postcards in Turkey, most of the postcards displayed in Alanya, Turkey were not realistic of the destination. Perhaps this is what both retailers and tourists want to see in postcards. While it is unclear why misleading or fantasy postcards were produced and offered for sale, managers/owners recognize the value of commercially symbolic souvenirs of a destination (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2007). This may be attributed to the fact that authenticity is probably not highly important to some tourists, as long as the images on the postcards represent their state of mind when buying and writing them.

CONCLUSIONS

This study extends the body of knowledge on postcard research by using a qualitative approach in studying the role of postcards in representing a destination image. In addition, the study attempted to investigate the decision making process of managers/owners of stores involved in the sales of the postcards. The authors tested an existing theoretical framework developed by Milman (2010) to facilitate the understanding, to classify the various images and features displayed on postcards, and to assess their potential impact in representing a destination image. The postcards were classified into four groups – realistic, refurbished reality, misleading, and fantasy – according to the level of authenticity depicted on the postcards and the level of contextual representation of the tourist’s experiences at the destination.

The content analysis of postcards concluded that the photographs, symbols, and icons featured on the postcards provided ambiguous multiple meanings of Orlando. The majority of postcards offered for sale were in the misleading category, followed by fantasy category of postcards. This was more evident at souvenirs shops. Although the drugstores and grocery stores sampled were geared toward tourists than local residents, they usually do not belong to the supply chain of the tourism industry as much as the souvenir shops do. The tourism industry could be presented to the Orlando tourists as an industry that sells an experience and fantasy.

Therefore, this could be one of the reasons why a relatively large collection of fantasy postcards were found at souvenir shops. Another reason could be attributed to the perceived lack of identity the city of Orlando has in terms of cultural, historical, environmental, or political aspects. Orlando is a unique destination that has been placed on the map by Disney and other major players in the hospitality and tourism industry.

In a study regarding motivations for attending theme parks in Orlando, the largest group of respondents selected fantasy and myth as the most important motive (Park, Reisinger, & Park, 2009). In Milman and Pizam's (1995) study about awareness, familiarity, interest, and visit intention to Central Florida respondents perceived the destination being dominated by Disney. Hence a lot of postcards exhibit Disney characters superimposed on a realistic picture of downtown Orlando or purely fictional Disney postcards. This could partially explain the small number of realistic postcards and the large number of misleading and fantasy postcards.

The implications of this study may suggest that postcards are still a popular sale item for tourists based on the opinions of managers/owners interviewed. The managers/owners expressed that many tourists come in specifically seeking postcards and purchasing them. While the postcard sales provide small economic value for the stores, both the local public and private sectors in destinations should consider enhancing the destination image through postcards. On a wider scale, in an effort to enhance a destination's image, it is necessary that local authorities and tourism industry leaders work together with constituencies involved in the production, selling, and purchasing of postcards to develop exclusive images of the specific destination and market the destination according to the image. Destination marketing organizations should take into account the lack of authenticity of the images featured on the destination's postcards to represent the destination in a more realistic way.

An extension of this study should include research on tourists who purchase the postcards. Vendors or store managers/owners assume that they have an understanding of what the customers want based on the sales numbers. However, the purchases could be made based on several different reasons (e.g., price, image, size). We will never know until we ask the people who actually purchase the postcards. It is always important to study the demand side of the market as that is what drives the success of any business. Research on tourists and their postcard purchase behavior should provide us some answers to the questions raised in this study. In addition, future research should be developed to understand whether postcards are produced to endorse the "real" images or "true" experiences of tourists at a certain destination. Lastly, future research should explore the reasoning for postcard producers to feature one image over another.

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