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# Public Perceptions of the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro

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## Introduction

When Rio was awarded the opportunity to host two major global sports events, World Cup 2014 and 2016 Olympics, it was clear that the issues of both infrastructure and crime needed to be addressed to improve the image of Brazil as a tourism destination. In particular, the federal state and local governments developed plans that focused on reducing crime in the over 1000 favelas (slums) in Rio. The purpose of this research was to assess public perception of the favelas in view of all of the media exposure surrounding the two major sports events.

## Literature

Prior to 2002, there was a lack of academic research on tourism as an economic activity in Brazil. However in 2014 in the Journal of Vacation Marketing, Rezende-Parker reported that North Americans were an important and highly attractive market for Brazil tourism. They found that most North Americans knew little about the country, however, they were motivated to travel there due to the perceived reputation of the country as being exotic and having natural attractions. The average stay of a North American tourist is 11.8 days which makes them a valuable tourism market.

## Methods

A survey of qualitative and quantitative questions was developed and pilot tested before being administered to 250 subjects at major hub subway stations in New York City during October, 2014.

## Results

Virtually all of the 250 people surveyed had heard of the term " favela" (96.4%, n=241) with no significant difference between the females and males. When asked about when they learned about the favelas, 71.3% (n=170) said they learned about favelas before the World Cup 2014 with only 23.1% (n=56) learning about the favelas during the coverage of the games. Only 37.6% (n=94) had actually travelled to Rio de Janeiro.

Fifty-two percent (52%, n=49) of the people who travelled to Rio ended up visiting a favela. The numbers of people who visit the favelas has increased over the past four (4) years. Most of the visits to the Rio favelas were spontaneous independent visits (66%, n=34) whereas 22.7% (n=11) took organized tours offered by various tour companies. Of those who visited the favelas, few could remember the specific name of the favela visited. About half (52%, n=25/49) knew if the favela they visited was pacified or not. Of those people who had been to a favela 75.2% (n=37/49) said that experience did not change their views while only 24.1% (n=12/49) said their views became more positive. The respondents were asked to rank their current views of the favelas as extremely unfavorable, unfavorable, mildly unfavorable, neutral, favorable and extremely favorable. Sixty percent (60%, n=150) of the respondents who previously reported unfavorable views of favelas still had the same unfavorable views. Most people learned about the favelas from mainstream news sources/networks (54.3%, n=114). The next most common way they learned about favelas was through travel to Brazil (14.8%, n=28) and through films/movies (13.3%, n=28). The most commonly mentioned movies were 'City of God" and " Fast and

Furious". Very few learned about the favelas through work/research, alternative news sources, advocacy groups such as nonprofit organizations and charities. When the respondents were asked to describe the Rio favelas in a few words, the primary descriptors they used were all negative in conation- crime, dangerous, poor, poverty, dirty, ghetto and slum..

## Conclusions

The survey results indicate that regardless of the efforts taken by the federal, state and local government in Brazil to reduce crime in the favelas, the favelas of Rio still present a negative image to the public which can, in turn, impact traveler's perception of the city and desire to travel there.  The respondents in this study were educated, ethnically diverse and were represented by a high percentage of students and managers.  Of those who travelled to Rio, half of them ended up visiting a favela for one reason or another, but they were unaware of the level of pacification of the favela that they visited. Of those visiting the favelas, most said that their visit did not change their initial unfavorable views.  Most respondents knew about the favelas before the global coverage of the World Cup 2014.  The most common way that the respondents learned about the favelas was through mainstream media and film/movies which has also been demonstrated in past research (Williamson, 2015).

Because the image of Rio favelas is so negative, efforts to promote positive news through mainstream media is suggested.  Less emphasis on crime and drugs in Brazilian film would also contribute to a better image of the Rio favelas.  Filmmakers could focus on the more positive aspects of Rio.  To improve perceptions of the favela, news releases of the positive improvements in infrastructure, housing, sanitation, environment, and access to gyms for use by the local community should be featured.  The pacification of the favelas should continue more aggressively to favela all over the city as opposed to mainly focusing on area most frequented by tourists. It would also be advisable to capitalize on the positive images such as interesting destinations to visit, natural parks, abundant wildlife, beautiful beaches, variety of music and dance, scenic beauty, friendly people, nightlife, adventure and cultural opportunities as demonstrated in recent research by Rezende et al. (2003).

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