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Matthew J. Stone

Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Studies, Texas A&M University

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Matthew J. Stone
Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Studies
Texas A&M University

ABSTRACT

This study investigated dining and drinking experiences presented in popular media travel articles from three publications. Content analysis was used to investigate which experiences were mentioned, how restaurants and bars were presented, what cuisines were featured, and differences among cities. In total, 107 experiences were analyzed from eleven articles covering four cities. Results indicated a variety of experiences (both local and cosmopolitan) for each city, but also an emphasis on overconsumption. Overall, the articles presented a dual role of presenting each city as possessing a unique dining culture, while also presenting it the same as (or similar to) other cities. Marketing implications for cities and restaurants are also discussed.

Keywords: travel writing, culinary tourism, destination marketing

INTRODUCTION

Representations of destinations are provided through travel media, including guidebooks, blogs, and travel writing, which have the power to both construct and represent destinations (Santos, 2004). These representations, through continued use and reuse, create a “knowledge” about a destination, and people use them to draw their representations of people and places (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998). Contemporary popular travel writing, appearing in newspapers, magazines, and online, is a major way in which readers are exposed to destinations, and serves both entertainment and marketing goals. Today’s travel writing, straddles the boundary between induced (intentional or marketing-driven images) and organic images of a place (Daye, 2005).

While travel writing has a marketing value to destinations, most academic analysis of travel writing has not come from tourism scholars but instead from scholars in literature (e.g. Bendixen, 2009; Buzard, 1993; Zilcosky, 2008) and geography (e.g. Duncan & Gregory, 1999). Primarily, literary scholars (e.g. Clark, 1999; Pratt, 2008; Zilcosky, 2008) have taken a critical approach, viewing travelogues through lenses of post-colonialism, imperialism, feminism, and orientalism, while criticizing travel writers’ depictions of foreign encounters. These critics have focused on travelogues by Westerners to exotic destinations; however, much of the academic analysis ignores the contemporary popular travel writing, which covers a variety of domestic destinations also.
Once, travel literature may have been a substitute for travel (Zilcosky, 2008), as travel writers penned travelogues of far-flung adventures, but contemporary travel writing is often an extension of a destination’s marketing efforts, inspiring readers to visit. Travel editors admitted that the “pleasures of the text” have been replaced with the “use-value of the text” (Seaton, 1991, p. 18), as the travel article has become more commercialized. Santos (2004) claimed that mass media travel writing blurs the line between fact, fiction, and marketing, and it can be considered an offshoot of the leisure industry rather than journalism (Seaton, 1991).

Those analyzing contemporary travel writings have demonstrated the marketing attributes of the writing, as well as discussing how destinations have been represented. Santos (2004) concluded that articles on Portugal focused on travel planning aspects and served as marketing tools. Daye (2005) revealed that the travel press used “stylized” representations in presenting the Caribbean, while Costa (1998) examined how travel writers presented paradise in similar ways as marketers. There are also similar studies in the tourism field, but they do not specifically analyze travel articles in the popular press. Sourander (2009) studied representations of Finland in brochures, while Pan, MacLaurin, and Crotts (2007) analyzed the representations of Charleston in online blogs. However, there is little research on the content of travel articles across multiple destinations, and domestic writings have not received attention from researchers. In addition, a thorough analysis of how different activities, like shopping, dining, and sightseeing, are presented by travel writers has not been presented.

METHOD

This study utilized travel articles from print media, and articles were sought that a reader might encounter without actively seeking out travel information. For this reason, articles on online travel websites and travel magazines were ignored because it would be more likely that a person would be searching for a particular destination instead of serendipitously encountering an article about a destination in the publication. Second, articles were sought which would allow for comparison of the representations of cities across multiple destinations. Articles were selected from each of three sources, all of which featured a similar format: “Three Perfect Days” from United’s Hemispheres in-flight magazine; “Postcard from ___” a Reuters feature syndicated to papers like the Chicago Tribune; and “36 Hours in ___” from the New York Times travel section. The works analyzed are not travelogues (as dissected by literary scholars), but travel articles in popular media. This type of “what-to-do-in-wherever” article is one distinct type of contemporary travel writing, which focuses more on the use value to the reader (a potential visitor) than literary value. In order to minimize any aspects of post-colonialism or imperialism, only articles about American cities in American publications were considered.

The publications were reviewed to find cities which had been featured in at least two of the sources between 2008 and 2012. Eleven articles about four cities were analyzed: Austin (3 articles), Baltimore (2), San Francisco (3), and Seattle (3). Choosing articles on the same destination allowed the content to be compared across destinations, in addition to comparison across sources. Following Costa (1998) and Daye (2005), I used content analysis to look at representative themes across the works. Instead of an in-depth study of how a particular destination was presented (e.g. Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007; Santos, 2004), this study focused on the presentation of dining and drinking experiences in each city. The articles were
read, and all dining or drinking representations were listed, along with the mealtime, cuisine, chef’s name, notes on décor, specific foods and drinks mentioned or recommended, and any additional descriptions. First, the experiences were reviewed for each city (across the multiple publications) to add up the number of experiences and to look for themes among the cities. Then, once each city had been analyzed, common themes were sought across all of the cities to determine commonalities and differences. In total, 107 dining experiences (bars or restaurants) were analyzed. The intent was to determine how travel writers represent a city through dining and drinking experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current study sought to identify themes about dining and drinking in contemporary mass media travel writings about American destinations, and several conclusions about the articles in general were found. First, this type of “how-to-enjoy-a-city-in-X-days” was essentially promotional copy and could be considered an extension of a city’s marketing efforts. All articles were written in second person, almost commanding the reader to follow orders. Perhaps because of the limited time period in the articles, the focus was particularly rapid consumption of dining, drinking, cultural, and sightseeing experiences. The average numbers of bars and restaurants visited by the authors was: 11 establishments in three days (Hemispheres); 8.5 in 36 hours (New York Times); and 10 in 48 hours (Reuters). This emphasized and encouraged the indulgence of travelers while on vacation. This excessive consumption would also serve an economic benefit to a destination.

The articles presented a dual (and potentially contrasting) role of both trying to present a city as possessing a unique culture, while also presenting it the same as (or just as sophisticated as) everywhere else. Every article presented a meal that could be thought of as representative of the local culture (e.g. crab in Baltimore, barbeque in Austin, salmon in Seattle); however, every article except one also presented an international cuisine (e.g. Afghani in Baltimore; Mexican in Seattle; Indian in San Francisco). This could be viewed as an attempt to make every city appear more cosmopolitan, but it also could be considered to be formulaic. Another contrast was that each author presented an upscale, sophisticated dining experience, as well as a local “dive” or diner in each city. This may indicate the prevalence of and need to please a cultural omnivore, who seeks both highbrow and lowbrow experiences (Peterson & Kern, 1996). A variety of experiences, although somewhat repetitive, was presented for each city. In addition to the presentation of a local and an international cuisine, every article featured an upscale dinner, a local dive, a cocktail or wine bar, and a local breakfast/brunch restaurant. (The only exception was an article on Baltimore which did not include an upscale restaurant by name.) It is unclear whether this was in order to offer something for everyone (each reader can find at least one restaurant to enjoy) or to present variety for a cultural omnivore. It is also notable that only four establishments were mentioned in more than one article. Otherwise, each author presented unique (albeit formulaic) experiences. Writers did not just focus on dinner, as breakfast/brunch restaurants and coffeehouses were also featured prominently.

Travel writers reduced each dining or drinking experience into a succinct sound bites or one-liners, such as “a classy informal restaurant” (Laskin, 2011) or “a Prohibition-era inspired speakeasy” (Nayak, 2012). Signature items were featured more prominently than signature
chefs. The writer directed the reader what to order to eat or drink in over half of the establishments. However, the chef or owner’s name was only presented for about ten percent of the establishments. In addition, few choices were given to the reader. Only a few authors gave the readers a choice of restaurants (e.g. there are three good restaurants in a neighborhood to choose from) or entrees, instead commanding the reader what to order. Overall, the ambiance of a restaurant was secondary to cuisine and location. For drinking, cocktails were featured most often, followed by wine. Despite the prevalence of craft beers across America, only two articles mentioned a local beer by name.

There were no key themes unique to particular publications, as the primary difference was in the length of the articles. Authors in each publication were susceptible to superlatives (the “best ___”) and hyperbole, although that may be a criticism of writing style more than representation. Because the writers attempted to capture the essence of a city in such a short article, stereotypes were likely unavoidable. The question also persists as to whether these writers have adequately and accurately represented the cities and if the experiences are typical for the traveler or just showcased for convenience (or formulaic) purposes.

The prevalence of these “quick consumption” articles, coupled with the increase in short trips, may indicate that travelers benefit from easy-to-digest itineraries and experiences. There appear to be several marketing implications. First, it provides a blueprint for destination marketing organizations to present dining experiences to potential visitors: a collection of local and foreign, as well as fine dining and down-market restaurants. A featured local cuisine could be identified to provide visitors with a unique experience. Restaurants may also benefit from this research. Restaurants could focus on naming the signature cuisine for each restaurant, as well as identifying a signature dish or cocktail. Because coffeehouses and breakfast restaurants were featured in the articles, destination marketing organizations could focus on engaging these local establishments in their marketing efforts. The formulaic nature of the articles across the sources provided an itinerary for tourists to follow, and establishing similar itineraries may be beneficial to destinations. This itinerary could also be used for familiarization tours for travel writers.

This research just provides a starting point for analyzing contemporary travel writing from a destination marketing perspective. Additional publications, destinations, and variety of experiences should be analyzed. The accuracy of the depictions in these short articles could also be explored, as there is the possibility that writers have not accurately represented the destinations. Additionally, the impact of these representations on the potential and actual traveler should be explored further.

REFERENCES


