TYPE VERSUS STEREOTYPE: AN ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF US CITIES AND PUBLIC SPACES

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.26687/archnet-ijar.v12i2.1630

Abstract

In their minds, people have images of places they have never visited. In the twenty-first century, the constant exposure to media has had a great role in shaping people’s perception of foreign places. Despite the revealing aspect of media, they also play an important role in creating misconceptions about other countries. This paper explores international college students’ perceptions of United States cities and public spaces before and after coming to study in the US. It also investigates the role of media and representations in shaping their conceptions or misconceptions of the US. Forty-one Kansas State University international students from different countries participated in an online survey about their perceptions of US building types, infrastructure, and governance/policy regarding the built environment. About 58% of the participants claim that their image of US cities and public spaces changed after studying there; with only 15% claiming that US cities and public built environment are shown “like they are” in their home countries. Small US cities have a poor image in international students’ perceptions in comparison to the rich image of big cities most notably New York City. This paper not only argues that peoples’ perceptions of places can change after visiting them in person, but also it highlights the role of media in creating misconceptions about foreign places. The findings can highlight the importance of media in managing city branding.

Keywords

International students; perception; cities; public spaces; media; USA.

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INTRODUCTION

People choose where to travel, work, study or live based on what they perceive from the representations of the selected urban or rural areas. Creating favorable images has become a growing competition among cities (Avraham, 2004: 478) and nations worldwide to entice people to visit them for different purposes. The role of media in today's world for choosing our spatial destinations cannot be ignored. Mass media has influenced human lives to a large extent (Mastronardi, 2003: 83) such that it has been turned into the primary cultural resource for youths in industrialized societies (Brown et al., 2002).

This research project arose from an interest in young people’s perceptions of places they have never visited and the role of media in shaping their conceptions or misconceptions. The study focused on international college students studying in the US because Millennials’ media usage is significantly higher compared to both Generation X and Baby Boomers for both utilitarian as well as entertainment purposes (Moore, 2012). If they choose to study abroad, they usually use various resources to do research about the quality of life and characteristics of living in a new country. Therefore, media affects their image of the destinations before they relocate.

The US itself is one of the leading countries of the world that has been frequently shown in the media. People around the globe claim that they closely follow news about the US (Pew Research Centre, 2018). The US is also among one of the top choices of higher education for internationals. Research done by IIE Centre for Academic Mobility Research and Impact Institute of International Education in 2015 shows that the US is well-positioned in the international student marketplace, with various pull factors attracting non-American students including quality of higher education, a wide range of programs and schools, and welcoming atmosphere for internationals.

Although there are studies on the perceptions of the US impact on other countries’ social and economic issues, like How Do the Others See Us? An Analysis of Public Opinion Perceptions of the EU and USA in Third Countries by Braghiroli & Salini (2014), the portrayal of US cities and public spaces in media selected by non-Americans has never been systematically studied. The primary research question of this paper focuses on whether international college students’ perceptions of US cities and public spaces changed considerably after coming to the US. The secondary question explores whether media affects their perception before visiting the US. The study also investigates the role of media in their assumptions. It seeks to explore how media has shaped their conceptions or misconceptions of the US.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Perception of Built Environment

"Design is communication" (Starck, 1997:9) and, like any other external stimulus, offers messages to the five known human senses. Simultaneous reception of these messages creates human perception, leading to the perceiver’s impressions such as excitement, convenience, softness, and beauty or to their opposites. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964: 1) emphasizes this simultaneity of experience and sensory interaction as follows:
“My perception is [therefore] not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once.”

Likewise, Juhani Pallasmaa (2014: 232-233) considers judging environmental quality as “a complex multi-sensory fusion of countless factors which are immediately and synthetically grasped as an overall atmosphere, ambiance, feeling or mood.” All individuals may be unable to describe the characteristics or recognize the constituents of their emotional assessments of a situation but can recall a “firm image or emotive attitude” about it (Ibid). Kotler et al. (1993) define the image of a place as the sum of beliefs, ideals, and impressions people have toward a certain place. They discuss that people can have a positive, negative, or mixed images of cities. Such images can be bold in people’s perception. Elizur (1986) refers to these images as “rich images” in comparison to “poor images” that are the images of cities we have little information about and are weaker in people’s minds. In an earlier attempt, Kevin Lynch (1960) used mapping technique to assess how public perceive the physical characteristics of city and what would be the richest paths, edges, nodes, districts, and landmarks in peoples’ mental images. To sum up, the interrelationship between people and built environment is defined based on human perception (Agael and Özer, 2017: 157).

Elizur (1986) also defines “stereotypical image” as simplified attitudes or beliefs about a place that are not reassessed enough by people and are difficult to change. Richard Dyer (1999) considers stereotypes as “the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights.” In an earlier work, he differentiated ‘type’ and ‘stereotype’. He referred to type as “any simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characterization in which a few traits are foregrounded and change and development is kept to a minimum” whereas in stereotypes those traits are “exaggerated, simplified and fixed” that reduce the type to a one-dimensional characterization. Stereotypes split normal and acceptable from the abnormal and unacceptable; insiders from outsiders (Dyer, 1977:28).

The Role of Media in Shaping Perception

We are daily exposed to various representations about almost everything. Hall (1997:15) considers the use of representations via “language, of signs and images” as “an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged” between people. In today’s world, technology has given us a variety of sources and representations to gain knowledge about different places all around the world. We are now in touch with media more than any previous time in history. Media is constantly affecting our opinions about almost everything in the world. To explain the extent of the influence of mass media on the readers and audiences Marshall McLuhan refers to medium as the message itself.

George Gerbner, a noted communication scholar, also argues that television directly influences how people see the “real” world around them. Gerbner introduced “Cultivation Theory” which suggests that “the entire value system made of ideologies, assumptions, beliefs, images and perspectives is formulated, to a great extent by modern media when consumed in sufficient quantities” (Mosharafa, 2015:24). Among different media, television with “its drama, commercials, news, and other programs bring a relatively coherent world of common images and messages into every home. The repetitive pattern of television’s mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of a common symbolic environment” (Gerbner et al., 1986: 18). Relph (1976:58) also described the content of mass media as
being "simplified and selective identities" creating "a pseudo-world of pseudo-places". Less authentic images of places shaped by mass media result in a “growing uniformity of landscape and a lessening diversity of places by encouraging and transmitting general and standardized tastes and fashions” (Ibid:92). Therefore, media has influenced our understanding of what certain places mean or what characteristics a certain place should have even if we have never visited it. As Avraham mentions: “media is no more than an institution that transfers human and geographical stereotypes.”

Our perceptions are also defined by our own identity and cultural background. Walter Lippman in his book Public Opinion (1998: 81) states that:

“For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.”

Lippman also highlights the importance of perceptions in shaping preconceptions about places:

“We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception.”

Several types of research have been done on the influence of the media and popular culture on peoples’ representation of places (e.g. Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Béneker et al., 2010). Béneker et al. (2010) analyze students’ drawings regarding the physical characteristics, activities and issues of cities. They find out that many students had “mediated or stereotyped images, rather than actual representations of the place they live or actual cities in their country.” However, there is no literature on how people’s perception of place can change after living in foreign places which they used to see only in media before. The study seeks to reveal the role of media and representation in shaping peoples’ perceptions and misconceptions that they have of foreign places. The outcomes of this study would also be beneficial in the field of city branding management as cities unique branding elements can be distinguished by image acquisition (Aysu, 2013: 258). This paper also reinforces the role of media in peoples’ perceptions of cities that would affect their choices of where to travel, work, study etc.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The method which used for data collection was online survey distributed through mailing lists of the International Student Center of Kansas State University. The criteria for the selection of participants were: (1) be a college student; and (2) not be a citizen or permanent resident of the US. According to the nature of qualitative research and to collect reliable data, the study sample size was not determined from the beginning. The sampling was random and continued until theoretical saturation, when no new data, occurred. Overall, 41 responds were received for analysis. All the surveys were answered during one week in March 2018. The survey questions were about the following aspects:

- Where they come from;
Their perceptions of US cities and public spaces before and after coming to the US; and

The role of media in shaping their perceptions.

Qualitative method was used for analysis. Data analysis was done in three phases: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. For data reduction, participants’ answers were summarized; one expression was selected for synonyms used in the answers to ease data categorizing. Participants’ answers are analyzed through a thematic analysis to understand the participants’ perceptions of American cities and public spaces and to answer the research questions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The respondents of the survey are from 21 different countries around the world, studying 22 different majors at Kansas State University. Such diversity within participants enriched the overall findings. Out of the 41 participants in the online survey, 63.4% of the respondents were female and 36.6% were male. But there was no clear difference in replies between genders. About 54% had not been to the US before starting school. Under 15% had visited the US once and about 32% had visited the US twice or more before starting school in the US. About 60% had been to at least five states before answering the survey. About 30% of participants chose the US for education mostly because of the education quality and program diversity. Being close to family, advanced technology for doing research and job opportunities after graduation are among the other frequent reasons for choosing to study in the US. It is worth mentioning that our respondents are studying in a small midwestern city, Manhattan, Kansas, a place which is not usually shown frequently by media outside the US. If, for example, participants were students who study in big cities like New York City, different results could have obtained from the same survey.

Perceptions of US Cities and Public Spaces in Media

Before coming to the US, about 76% of the participants had thought while in studying in the US they would have the same experiences offered by these big cities like “San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and Miami” and their urban landscape elements like “luxury malls, cinema and concert halls”. 58.5% of the participants claim that their image of US cities and public spaces changed after coming to study here. This change is classified into categories and confirmed by quotations from the respondents. The former image of US built environment was more about big cities than small ones:

*My image of US was LA and New York. I never imagine small towns.* (quoted by an Iranian student)

The great number of public spaces and the extent of urban sprawl were also among other aspects of which they had no idea. Some also had more ideal images of cities and public spaces before coming to study in the US:

*My perception has become more realistic. Not idealizing US.*  
(quoted by a Venezuelan student)

The other misconceptions they had were about building modernity, building material, housing types. More modern and less aged buildings were what they expected in comparison with what they see in reality:
They are old, and less technological. (quoted by a Costa Rican student who visited 16 states)

I was expecting stronger materials in the houses, not paper walls. (quoted by a Colombian student)

Types of housing in US was also among the things mentioned by non-American college students:

What I had in my mind, was [that American’s] have big size[d] modern houses. (quoted by an Iranian student)

I thought they were more like apartment buildings. (quoted by a Lebanese student studying architecture)

We asked our participants about surprising facts that they discovered about American cities and public spaces after coming in the USA, and about 54% mentioned they found surprising facts regarding building types, public space modernity, transportation, small towns, cleanliness of public spaces and prohibition of alcohol consumption in public spaces. Lack of adequate public transportation and reliance on automobiles for everyday life were also surprising for young international newcomers.

About the monotony in building types, students commented in this way:

All public facilities have a common structure. (quoted by a Sri Lankan student who visited 15 states)

All the buildings, houses for example, are like each other. Do they actually benefit from any designer in designing them? (quoted by an Iranian student studying architecture)

As a part of the survey, we showed respondents sets of four images showing different types of American cities and public spaces and asked them which image best describe their former perception of certain categories regarding built environment of the US. The images depicted different types of cityscapes (big versus small), downtowns, streets, roads, residential buildings (both single-family and multi-family), commercial districts, festival market places, public recreational spaces, public civic spaces, and playgrounds. Images selected in a way, so they can represent different types of each category. Also, they were chosen from different parts of the US to cover different contexts as best as possible. Table 1 shows the types of US cities and public spaces that international colleges students had envisioned before starting school there.
Table 1: The types of US cities and public spaces that international colleges students had envisioned (Source: Author, 2018).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Images of Different Types</th>
<th>Respondents' Answers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cityscapes</td>
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<td><img src="source" alt="Pie Chart" /></td>
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Source: A: (Fayetteville Flyer, 2016), B: (Shutterstock, n.d.), C: (Garrett, 2012), D: (NDTV, 2018).

| 2   | Downtowns | ![Image A](source), ![Image B](source), ![Image C](source), ![Image D](source) | ![Pie Chart](source) |


<p>| 3   | Streets   | <img src="source" alt="Image A" />, <img src="source" alt="Image B" />, <img src="source" alt="Image C" />, <img src="source" alt="Image D" /> | <img src="source" alt="Pie Chart" /> |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4    | <img src="image1.png" alt="Roads A" /> <img src="image2.png" alt="Roads B" /> <img src="image3.png" alt="Roads C" /> <img src="image4.png" alt="Roads D" />  |
| 5    | <img src="image5.png" alt="Single-Family Residential Buildings A" /> <img src="image6.png" alt="Single-Family Residential Buildings B" /> <img src="image7.png" alt="Single-Family Residential Buildings C" /> <img src="image8.png" alt="Single-Family Residential Buildings D" />  |
| 6    | <img src="image9.png" alt="Multi-Family Residential Buildings A" /> <img src="image10.png" alt="Multi-Family Residential Buildings B" /> <img src="image11.png" alt="Multi-Family Residential Buildings C" /> <img src="image12.png" alt="Multi-Family Residential Buildings D" />  |
|      | Source: A: (Nelles, 2016), B: (Fairview Regional Medical Center, 2013), C: (my Planet, n.d.), D: (Yu, 2009).  |
|      | Source: A: (McGraw, 2015), B: (Broadway Mansion, n.d.), C: (Max Pixel, n.d.), D: (City Lab, 2015).  |
|      | Source: A: (Square Foot, 2018), B: (Rickbern, 2012), C: (BrightMLS, 2018), D: (Grootethkeens, n.d.).  |</p>
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<th>7</th>
<th>Commercial Districts</th>
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<td>Source: A: (Sann, n.d.), B: (Dagnall, 2013), C: (Jefferson County Democratic, 2010), D: (Case, 2006).</td>
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<th>8</th>
<th>Festival Market Places</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Source: A: (Brod, and Thomas, 2016), B: (The Odyssey Online, 2016), C: (Agnosticpreacherskid, 2011), D: (Wheelchair Traveling, n.d.).</td>
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<th>9</th>
<th>Public Civic Buildings</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Source: A: (Mezeul, n.d.), B: (Pare, 2013), C: (HDR, 2015), D: (Chensiyuan, 2010).</td>
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There is more consensus on the pictures in the three categories of cityscapes, downtowns and roads. More than 70% of the respondents chose pictures related to big cities to show what they had in mind about US cityscape and downtowns (Figures 1 and 2). A couple of respondents referred to the influence of movies and media on shaping these images about US cityscapes and downtown areas.

*This is the type of city mostly portrayed in movies.* (quoted by a Sri Lankan student)

*Movies and Instagram posts made me think that the US almost looks like this.* (quoted by a Lebanese student)
More than 70% of the respondents chose this image as what they had in mind regarding US cityscapes before coming to study there.

Figure 1: Statue of Liberty (Source: NDVT, 2017).

More than 70% of the respondents chose this image as what they had in mind regarding US downtowns before coming to study there.

Figure 2: New York City (Source: Panmacmillan, n.d.).

Road images are among the sets of images that they have the most consensus on. “Fast and large interstates” (quoted by a Brazilian student) is what they had expected to see in the US. About housing types, they mostly chose dense “monotonous” single-family suburbia and short multi-family apartments rather than tall residential complexes. The indoor space of a mall is also the strongest image they had in mind as commercial districts in the US. For public recreational spaces, the images depicting a riverside park and a big theme park were chosen by most of the participants. There was not a great consensus on the type of streets and civic buildings envisioned. However, a view of a small town main street was chosen by only about 17% of the respondents.

There was not a repeated pattern to the answer of the question regarding what types of buildings, open spaces, or infrastructure have respondents become familiar with after coming to the US. A wide range from residential to civic buildings was mentioned; from “picnic
areas,” “housing types,” “small malls” to “skyscrapers”. One interesting point that one respondent mentioned “Walmart” as the building type he/she got most familiar with after living in the US.

**US Cities and Public Spaces in Media**

The second part of the survey was about media, including television and online information provided by social media and websites, and their role in shaping participants’ perceptions of the US built environment before coming to study there. About 73% of the respondents said that they did research about the US before starting their education. Of those, social media was the primary source of information for about 30% of them. Acquaintances, television and visiting in person were respectively other options to get familiar with the US for participants. 90% of the respondents mentioned that media had affected their perceptions of the US highly or moderately.

When respondents were asked how US cities and public spaces are shown in media in their countries, only 6 out of the 41 respondents (about 15%) said that US cities and public spaces are represented in media “like they are” in their countries. In contrast, about 80% mentioned a more ideal image of only big, busy, dense and modern cities with their associated architectural types like skyscrapers and political buildings is shown in media in their countries. Some descriptions that they wrote about how stereotypical images of US cities and public spaces are shown in media in their countries are:

- Big, clean, very active (quoted by an Indian student)
- High rise buildings, shopping malls, busy streets (quoted by a Lebanese student)
- Like a big city and a lot more fun than how they are actually. (quoted by a Costa Rican student)
- Much nicer and with different attractions (quoted by a Praguian student)
- Tall buildings everywhere (quoted by a Cypriot student)
- They represent White House, New York, Las Vegas, Miami. (quoted by a student from UAE)
- My country’s medias show New York Skyscraper, White House, Congress Building. (quoted by an Iranian student)
- This is interesting that they never show Kansas-like cities and landscape to foreigners! (quoted by a Chinese student)

Only 2 out of the 41 respondents mentioned rural areas and small towns being represented by media in their countries. It is worth mentioning that these two students are from North America and Europe (Canada and the Czech Republic). Less than one third of respondents believe that the image of the US shown in media in their countries match the reality mostly or completely. The pie chart shown in Figure 3 indicates the breakdown of what they think about their countries’ media content regarding US cities and public spaces.
Contextual facts might affect answers from students of different nationalities. Some respondents commented on some political issues that changed the image of US in media in their countries such as communist regime collapse of 1989, Venezuelan dictatorship, 1979 Iran’s Revolution, and the travel ban.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we first should consider that all the respondents have been living in Manhattan, Kansas which is a small college town in the Midwest, US. If we had used the same survey and asked students studying in big cities like New York City, the answers and findings could have been different. Probably because major US cities like New York are more like the image usually shown in media (as claimed by 80% of the respondents). However, the numbers show that media has a huge impact on young non-Americans' images of US cities and public spaces. Although social media was International students’ primary source to get information about the US before starting their education in the US; Hollywood movies play an important role in shaping their perceptions about the US. The word “movie(s)” was repeated 30 times by the respondents when describing their former perception of US built environment.

Even though there was not a repeated pattern regarding what types of buildings, open spaces, or infrastructure respondents have become familiar with after coming to the US, the answers to the other questions show that small US cities have a ‘poorer image’ in international students’ perspective versus the ‘richer image’ of big cities of the East and West Coasts most notably New York City. The word ‘New York’ or its abbreviations (NY or NYC) was repeated 50 times by the respondents. The new perceptions are generally less ideal than what the respondents had in mind before coming to study in the US. The main theme

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1 Executive Order 13769, titled Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, often referred to as the Muslim ban or the travel ban was an executive order issued by United States President Donald Trump. A part of the order bans citizens of certain Muslim countries to come to the US.
that rose to the surface is that many misconceptions are related to the difference between small versus large cities and their associated attributes. Main misconceptions about the US are about:

1. Urban density (High density in all areas was mainly perceived.)
2. The active population in public space (It was mostly perceived that all the areas would be crowded and busy.)
3. Building types ('High-rise buildings' were perceived to be the most common type. In addition, 'monotonous building design' were of the new things participants got familiar with after coming to the US.)
4. The modernity of buildings and urban infrastructure (Buildings and urban infrastructure are not as new and durable as many respondents had assumed.)

This paper not only argues that international students' perceptions of US cities and public spaces changed after coming to the US but also highlights the importance of media on non-American youths' conceptions/misconceptions about the US. The conceptual framework, represented in figure 4, is constructed based on this study’s findings and also related studies by other scholars mentioned in the literature review section. It reveals how stereotypes are actually types themselves, but they are the types that got exaggerated or simplified which can be poor or rich in peoples’ perceptions of those certain types. This study indicates that the diversity within US cities and public spaces has been simplified and led to the image of big cities of the East and West Coasts and their urban characteristics to become bolder for most of the young non-Americans. These findings can highlight the role of media in city branding and can be used in reconsidering the US urban and regional branding strategies specifically the international role of smaller cities and the Midwestern region.

Figure 4: The conceptual framework of the relationship between types and stereotypes
(Source: Author, 2018).
ACKNOWLEDGMENT
The author would like to sincerely thank Michael Gorgan, Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture at Kansas State University for his helpful advice on this manuscript.

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townhouses.jpg


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