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THE INFLUENCE OF MASS MEDIA ON CONSUMER CULTURE: RELIGIOUS TOURISM¹

Žiniasklaidos įtaka vartotojų kultūrai: religinis turizmas

SUMMARY

The article considers the impact of the media on shaping the perception of monuments and objects of modern digital consumer culture in omnipresent and never-ending communication. The focus is put on the creation of images of religious and cultural tourist destinations. The analysis of cultural diversity is presented as one of the crucial components of contemporary culture. The article reveals the grounds and opportunities of religious tourism in contemporary multicultural and polyreligious societies. Specific examples are provided regarding the formation of media representation of sacred sites in various cultures, highlighting the vital role of mass media in modern and postmodern cultures.

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas žiniasklaidos poveikis formuojant su šiuolaikine skaitmenine kultūra susijusių paminklų ir kitų objektų suvokimą niekada nenutrūkstančioje komunikacijoje. Pagrindinis dėmesys skiriamas religinių ir kultūrinių turistinių vietų įvaizdžių kūrimui. Kultūrų įvairovė nagrinėjama kaip vienas iš esminių šiuolaikinės kultūros komponentų. Straipsnyje pateikiamas religinio turizmo apibūdinimas, analizuojami jo požymiai ir galimybės šiuolaikinėse daugiakultūrinėse ir polireliginėse visuomenėse. Konkrečių pavyzdžių analizė patvirtina svarbų žiniasklaidos vaidmenį formuojant suvokimą apie šventąsias vietas įvairiose šiuolaikinėse ir postmoderniose kultūrose.

INTRODUCTION: MEDIA IMPACT ON CONSUMER CULTURE AND TOURISM

When considering the contemporary world, we need to keep in mind that nowadays individuals enjoy a completely new paradigm of media consumption.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: skaitmeninės medijos; vartotojų kultūra; religinis turizmas; kultūrų įvairovė.

KEY WORDS: digital media; consumer culture; religious tourism; cultural diversity.

A subject is submerged in the endless flood of information. At the beginning of the 21st century, media production and consumption witnessed a real revolution. That being the digital one, which was begotten by and closely associated with globalization, informatization, and overall incline to technocratic Weltanschauung. Instead of the so-called old, or traditional, emerge new, digital media (including the Internet, mobile, alternative informational, and social networks), embedded into the lives and culture of our contemporaries, gaining increasingly more influence. These new digital and omnipresent media not only seize and keep an individual in the flow of information but also shape the individual and public consciousness. This situation creates a seduction to manipulate and to create the phenomena of the public opinion, which is often illusory, existing ad hoc, as beautifully highlighted by the French philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his speech *Public Opinion Doesn't Exist* (Bourdieu 1972).

Mass media also play a significant role in shaping consumer culture in polyethnic contemporary societies. Digital technologies and the advent of social media greatly facilitate the intensity of communications, submerging an individual into the race to consume. Jean Baudrillard, in his classical *The Consumer Society*, quotes an American historian Daniel Boorstin: "At home we begin to try to live according to the script of television programmes of happy families, which are themselves nothing but amusing quintessences of us" (Baudrillard 1999: 195). Now multiply the images of

happy families by millions, disseminated via Instagram, and not just TV screens.

It has to be argued that the media effects on human beings are specific. Generated and disseminated messages, images, symbols, and signs create the perception of social facts and serve as a necessary key to the exegesis of social life. In extreme cases, these generated messages even replace reality itself, creating hyperreality of simulacra and simulation in terms of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. It has also to be stressed that contemporary information and communication technologies are accelerating these processes.

The Slovak academic Slavomír Gálik is quite correct in this regard, pointing out the great importance of the incoming digital information and the significant problem of its in-depth perception. The problem is that the continuously coming information in the network society is so vast that a person is simply unable to analyze it, unable to distinguish objectivity and subjectivity of products. S. Gálik writes: "The news media offer an enormous amount of information of varying quality – starting with verified news and ending with mistakes and fake. Recipients, facing enormous information overload, find themselves standing before a difficult if not even impossible task. How to select and verify information?" (Gálik 2019: 1–2).

Stress should be laid on the fact that in the 21st century, media, consumer culture, and tourism, including the religious one, are intertwined and are almost inseparable. In Russia and CIS, there are a dozen TV channels dedicat-

ed to tourism alone – and we cannot even count specialized programs, travel blogs, and YouTube channels. Media influence tourism with the most obvious example is the increase of PR and advertising spend, leading to the growth of interest and subsequently journeys to a certain destination.

The latest and unfortunately sad example is right here, in front of us.

United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) names China the largest spender in international tourism: in 2018, Chinese tourists spent an impressive \$277 bln (UNWTO 2018). According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the spread of coronavirus (COVID-2019) and reaction to it have led to the cancellation of thousands of flights. The final damage to the global tourism industry is yet to be counted (Northam 2020). Gloria Guevara, the president of World Travel & Tourism Council, estimates the losses to be between \$20 to \$22 bln. However, the experts are wary that their assessment may double or triple if the spread continues (Hernandez

2020). The latest report by UNWTO states that international tourism could decline by 60–80% over the year, translating into the loss of about \$80 bln in exports of tourism (UNWTO 2020).

Media react to the COVID-2019 differently with sports TV channels, OOH and print being hit the hardest. However, digital outlets, including streaming platforms, and ICT companies currently benefit from the situation and enjoy the increase in traffic. Technavio forecasts the growth of the streaming services by \$149.96 bln during 2020–2024 (Business Wire 2020). Yet, the platforms may face difficulties in 2021–2022 since the consumers have burned through hundreds of hours of content, and the production for at least Netflix and Disney is currently stopped (McGowan 2020).

Thus, the article focuses on the influence media have on consumerism, religious and cultural tourism, and how communication technologies outline the perception of tourist destinations. That is particularly interesting considering the religious and ethnic variety of Russia.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY, CONSUMER CULTURE, AND MEDIA

Tourism in contemporary society reflects postmodern principles. Some of the crucial principles, describing the culture and religion of any country, including that of Russia, is *diversity and focus on consumption*. Most of the world's states are represented by various religions that coexist in a single cultural space. The institutionalization of tourism makes it possible to present religious diversity as a unique core of any country's culture.

Quite obviously, tourists tend to visit other states to get a taste of something new, unique, unusual, to get acquainted with something different from their everyday practices. In that respect, religious tourism seems to be the crucial component of economic and spiritual development of any country and Russia as well, due to its multiethnic and multi-religious nature. Religious tourism brings profit and forms the intellectual

basis of consumer culture, creating images and knowledge and ideas about this or that country.

However, when researching the interrelations of communication technologies, tourism, and culture, we encounter a few problems arising from the peculiarities of the contemporary stage of culture associated with rapid technological development.

One of the approaches, following the interrelation of media and religion, perceives the former as a technology for the dissemination of images, signs, and messages containing representations of religious customs, norms, and traditions. In such a case, religious diversity is not just merely present in information flows. Religious and cultural diversity radiates itself. Able to reach designated target audiences, media, both old and new, is a powerful conductor of ideas. Accordingly, one of the most vital issues is the question of control, either social or state, over information, and its dissemination. Quite frequently, of course, the representations of religious and cultural diversity vary from social and cultural contexts, sometimes conflicting with the owners of media channels. A researcher of religious tourism from the points of its cultural and economic constitutive parts Eva Hvizdová notes: "The main factors that drive tourism towards religious aims are: the expansion of certain religious traditions, the diversification of the tourist motives, the development of the media and their interest in religious sites and events, and the dynamic and coordinated activity of religious and secular authorities" (Hvizdová 2018: 89).

An American sociologist Carl L. Bankston offers an insightful economics-based conception of religious marketplace strongly associated with the torrents of information and the commodification of religion. According to the researcher, religious consumers are dependent on supply and demand laws, including those of brand awareness and marketing (Bankston 2002).

We are thus entering fascinating interdisciplinary land of sociology, contemporary communication theory, philosophy, theology, and economics. I assume that a postmodern person, striving for some kind of spirituality, may choose among a comprehensive option of religions, masterfully designed, carefully labeled, and available anytime through modern technology and the Internet. So, following C. Bankston, in a highly competitive market – which is one of the most crucial traits of contemporary consumer societies, red ocean, religion shall use a masterful media strategy, just as PR specialists develop and use worldwide for their respective companies and clients (ibid).

Charles Taylor's conception of the *immanent frame* also comes to mind (Taylor 2007) while analyzing the relationship between religion and media effects. The creation of privacy and individualism came after the disenchantment. The immanent frame can be closed or open, allowing for the possibility of transcendence. Our contemporaries may be intensely religious, although not necessarily requiring any formal religion to explain it. In this hyperreal world, traditional religions encounter weird new competitors. For example, I would suggest viewing the

trendy health and self-optimization practices (omnipresent mindfulness, athleisure – tyranny of being perfect (as beautifully put by The Guardian newspaper (Tolentino 2019)) as quasi-religious. Inspired by images of an ideal or imperfect celebrity, mirroring our wants and desires, people may drive themselves dysfunctional in an almost religious frenzy.

J. Baudrillard's hyperreality theory is inseparable from the consideration of the social world, which hosts the objective processes of the material world's transition to simulation. That process is governed by the replacement of real facts and events by the artificial ones and media construction of the models of perception of the environment (Chistyakov 2019). Recall the French philosopher's take on the Gulf War, which was the first war ever happening virtually, interrupted by commercials and weather forecasts. Since then, the development of information and communication technologies skyrocketed, reassembling, and submitting every sphere of social life to the new logic.

We agree with Jean Baudrillard, that by producing endless illusory images and notions of the attractiveness or unattractiveness of any social objects media thus creates specific images of destinations and a vision of this or that culture. Therefore, depending on the goals and preferences of the editorial offices, of the outlets, of the social inquiries, particular representations of tourist destinations are created, forming public opinion about the object of ethnic and religious cultures. Media, having a vast technological and creative potential, may shape the models of perception of a religious or ethnic culture that they need. They not only deter-

mine the perception of sites but also partially form the recipient country's culture.

Tourism is an institutionalized system. It may mirror practically all the social issues and put into the spotlight the cultural, communicative, and economic realities of society. Therefore, media bear considerable responsibility for forming the image of a receiving country. The issue of media and cultural diversity leads beyond the mere questions of representation, pointing us at the most complex conflux of ideologies, arising, clashing, mediating, and dying, permeating all the social spheres.

The observation that religion and media appear to be inseparable in the post-modern world has led some to assert that the latter's formats and institutions now shape religion to such an extent that "religion is increasingly subsumed under the logic of media" (Hjarvard 2008). This argument recalls long-standing claims that means of communications constitute the *a priori* sociocultural life, overruling the agency of human subjects. However, such a perspective does not take into account the multiple modes of governing religion that strongly affect media practices and representations.

The anthropological accounts of the plurality of bodily and sensorial engagement tied to specific contexts of religious practice put into doubt the assertion that the material and formal dimensions of digital technologies exert an overriding impact on religious experience (Chistyakova 2016). The diversity of spiritual mediation and the representation of religious diversity are not reducible to one another but must be understood as mutually constitutive.

RELIGIOUS TOURISM AND MEDIA IMAGES IN CONSUMER CULTURE

Religious tourism is quite promising, particularly in Russia, not only in terms of economic development but also for forming a positive image of the country. Religious tourism is a phenomenon of the intersection of other types of tourism, ethnographic, rural, ethnic, ecological, and others. Because of these consisting elements, it contributes to a holistic perception of a country. In the case of Russia, the religious sites, objects and traditions are plenty, varying from “the last pagans of Europe” – the Mari people – to the Hinduists, Buddhists, Muslims, Jewish people, and Christians of most of the denominations.

Religious tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of the travel industry. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that 300 million tourists visit the world’s major religious sites each year (one-fourth of all international tourist arrivals). 600 million national and international religious voyages are undertaken annually (Álvarez-García and Gómez-Ullate 2018).

Religious tourism is diverse and different in forms, depending on religion itself. It also differs from the pilgrimage, although there is a trend to identify these concepts. I agree with Eva Hvizdová, proposing the following: “Religious tourism in the broader sense is understood as participation in tourism, which is motivated by visits and sightseeing of religious monuments, such as churches, cathedrals, cemeteries, chapels, crossroads and so on. When visiting these monuments, it is essential to respect not only their piety but also the moral right

of the believers in order to preserve a dignified environment and a sacred atmosphere” (Hvizdová 2018: 91). The researcher elaborates that technical basis conditions the existence and development of religious tourism. To the essentials E. Hvizdová counts sacral structures, art and the places that offer the travelers and pilgrims opportunity to meet their cultural and spiritual needs.

However, it is not that easy to distinguish religious tourism since it is often used synonymously as cultural heritage tourism. The majority of tourism administrative offices count religious destinations as cultural heritage sites as well. Thus, travel agencies and media equate religious and cultural tourism, entangling further their goals and the methods of registering.

For example, the latest news considers the creation of the *Orthodox Vatican*. According to the Russian business newspaper *Vedomosti*, there are large-scale plans for the transformation of Sergiev Posad – from transport infrastructure to the construction of medical centers and new museums. City officials estimate the project cost at 120–140 billion rubles, which roughly equals 11 bln Euro (Yakoreva, Lyauv and Bazanova 2019). The project is still at its early phase, but it possibly may attract quite an audience to one of the significant Orthodox sites in the country.

Sadly, Russian mainstream and business media generally tend to overlook religious tourism. For example, Diveyevo, one of the main pilgrimage objects

in Russia, was only once covered in mainstream media. That was an article published eight years ago on an already archived web site OpenSpace. The report, however, is a beautiful piece of investigative journalism dedicated to lo-

cal practices (Reyter 2011). I believe that the suppliers of religious and cultural tourism activities need to intensify their presence in global communicative space since their visibility is quite low to a typical consumer of travel content.

CONCLUSION

Religious tourism relates closely to ethnic and cultural tourism. It is widespread and enjoyed throughout the world. However, it is vital to pay respect and preserve cultural and religious sites for the sake of the sustainable development of societies. Educational institutions and media may have a massive impact on the creation of positive images of religious places in the conditions of multiethnic countries and regions, including those in Russia. It is also up to media, both old and new, to decide whether religious sites would be attractive to the tourists around the world. I contend that ethnic and religious kinds of tourism may also fulfill a crucial function in multicultural countries, forming

and improving the relationship among peoples. The American sociologist Dean MacCannell comments on the perception of tourist destinations: "An ethnomethodology of sightseers would explore the touristic consciousness of otherness, and the ways tourists negotiate the labyrinth of modernity" (MacCannell 2013).

The rise of religious tourism brings an unprecedented potential to foster inclusive and sustainable development, creating jobs and livelihoods, allowing infrastructure, investment, and stimulating local culture, crafts, and food. Under these circumstances, religious tourism may indeed introduce spiritual grounds for the development of responsible and sustainable consumer culture.

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Endnotes

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