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Research Paper

## Female sex tourism in Jamaica: An assessment of perceptions

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## ABSTRACT

Much has been said about tourist sexual behavior in the Global South. These studies range from those who view men's and women's sexual sojourn as distinctly different activities (sex versus romance tourism respectively) to those who consider sex and romance tourism as independent of sexed and gendered bodies. This work attempts to assess this critical aspect of tourism in Jamaica. Through data collection in two phases and using mixed methodology, the study seeks to assess the perception of local hotel workers and female tourists to the issue of sex and romance tourism. Findings indicate that while male and female hotel workers tend to view men as searching for sex and women for romance, female tourists are largely discrediting the perception that men and women seek distinctly different things while on vacation. The paper argues that there is therefore need to shift the paradigm of sex tourism research to include a wider range of perceptions. The implications for destination marketing are then discussed.

## 1. Introduction

The pursuit of sex has consistently been one of the key reasons why people travel around the world and sex tourism is the product of an industry that places different values on male and female bodies. The overriding image of sex tourism is that of men, mainly white, who travel to the Global South to partake in exotic indulgences. While this pattern is perhaps the more common, women are also becoming increasingly engaged in pleasure-seeking travel expeditions and since the mid-1990s there has been a growing interest in female sex tourism among researchers of tourism and prostitution. In some cases, the act of women engaging in sexual liaisons while on vacation has been considered a slightly different phenomenon from the male version of the same activity. Indeed, the classification 'romance tourism' has been used to categorize these actions by women, while 'sex tourism' is largely accepted as a male-tourist dominated activity (Herold, Garcia, & DeMoya, 2001; Jacobs, 2006; Pruitt & LaFont, 1995). Other scholars however consider that women's behavior should be included within the category of 'sex tourism' (Kempadoo, 1999a, 1999b, 2001; Taylor, 2001). These writers use the construct of 'female sex tourism' to argue that the behavior of women can be just as exploitative as that of men, or even that there is nothing gendered about prostitution (Jeffreys, 2003).

This work attempts to test these concepts in the Jamaican space using the perceptions of hotel workers (who are often witnesses to such activities) as well as female tourists who visit the island. It highlights

the difference in perceptions about men's and women's sexual activity with locals while on vacation and comments on the categorizations as being reminiscent of essentialist ideologies relating to differing value judgments placed on the sexual activities of men and women. As such, the paper is not only interested in the varied perceptions of local hotel workers and international female travelers but also seeks to challenge the notion that male and female's search for sexual partners while on vacation are dissimilar behaviors based on female tourists' views of women's sexual desires while on vacation.

## 2. Contextualizing sex tourism: Theory and practice

The history of sex in the Caribbean has been intertwined with control of one race/people by another. The power that European colonizers exalted over colonized peoples was not only for monetary gain and political status but also for rights to sexual access to those considered to be subordinate. Shepherd (2007) has illustrated that male plantation administrators used their position as owners or managers of the subaltern to render colonized women sex objects over whom they could exercise power. Sexual power and colonization in the Caribbean arena went hand in hand, and 'sexploitation' of indigenous, African enslaved and Indian indentured women was part of the imperial project and led to ranking of some hues and bodies as being more desired than others; a legacy that continues to have an impact to this day (Mohammed, 2011).

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This 'exotic' label given to the women of colonized peoples was an attempt on the part of colonizers to understand what was considered strange and legitimize them as sexual fantasies. As G.S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (as cited in Kempadoo, 2003, p. 161) argue 'labelling the anthropological other as exotic legitimated treating the peoples of the 'third world' as fit to be despised and destroyed...while constituting them as projections for western fantasies'. Knowledge produced about the colonized Caribbean is conflated with the fact that sex has historically been high on the list of reasons to travel. The politics of enjoyment (Kingsbury, 2005) and anonymity that is provided by vacationing has allowed men and women to be free to explore various sexual fantasies rather than having to perform their socially accepted gender roles in order to maintain 'good standing' at home (Weichselbaumer, 2012; Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2013). The politics of identity in the region (Mohammed, 1998), and connections to the 'exotic' and unequal power relations between and among different classes, races, and genders is critical to a full understanding of the motivations for travel as well as the implications of that travel on the sustainable development of the industry.

This work is guided by a Caribbean feminist theoretical framework of sex tourism, which considers the nuances of interlocking issues of race, class, gendered power relations, and globalization. Globalization creates and heightens the production of globalized sex tourism through the increased movement of bodies related with migration and tourism. It is essential to understand that the concept of 'sex tourism' aims to encompass the variety of activities associated with tourism and prostitution, which are both pivotal to the analysis of sex tourism. Notably, the singular concepts of tourism or prostitution do not adequately capture the meaning of sex tourism in its entirety. Rather, sex tourism emphasizes the merging between prostitution and tourism, connects the local and the global and highlights the production and consumption of sexual services (Wonders & Michalowski, 2001). Therefore it can be debated that globalization acts as the conduit for the increased consumption of sexual services allowing the commodification of desire and bodies within the global capitalist economy (Mullings, 1999; Wonders & Michalowski, 2001).

Dominant theoretical trends that have guided Caribbean writers' problematizing of tourism-related prostitution have undergone revision within the last 20 years. Singular frameworks that conceptualize tourists search for local companionship as representative of continued exploitation of the Global South by the Global North have given way to more plural views that address the gains locals accrue as well (Phillips, 1999). This paper undertakes an even further nuanced framework and contribution to theory by not only addressing the perception of female tourists related to their sexual motives but also by comparing these motives to local perceptions of those viewing the range of transactions and liaisons. We suggest that an assessment of various perceptions is necessary for a complete understanding of the phenomenon of sex tourism. Of particular importance is the prioritization of the perspectives of frontline workers who are able to make their own observations about tourist's behavior. This is particularly useful for a subject area that can prove difficult to research because of the sensitive and personal nature of the topic. This paper argues that an assessment of hotel workers' views on sex tourism can yield nuanced results and carry the area of research much further when these are compared to the views of female tourists themselves.

### 3. The development of literature on sex and romance tourism

#### 3.1. Concepts of sex tourism

The topic of sex tourism has traditionally been dominated by work focusing on female sex workers and male consumers. This focus is not without merit, as this is perhaps the most common form of sex tourism that occurs. Implications of these practices on health and sustainable

development have been thoroughly explored. Sex work, prostitution, sex tourism, romance tourism, HIV and love/power relations, sexual liaisons between tourists and hosts, both of a commercial and non-commercial nature, commoditized trading in sexual partners and spouses for purchase, and non-voluntary encounters with bodies in bondage are common streams of research in this vast area, with most focusing on the male tourists quest for local, exoticised, female bodies (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2013; Clift & Carter, 2000; Herold et al., 2001; Kempadoo, 1999a, 1999b; Oppermann, 1998).

Attempts at defining sex tourism include 'travel for which the main motivation is to engage in commercial sexual relations' (Clift & Carter, 2000, p. 6). Other scholars have focused less on the motivation but the outcome of engaging in sexual encounters with locals that involve monetary exchange and romance while on vacation, and potentially long-term relationships (Jeffreys, 2003; Kempadoo, 2004). Opperman's (1999) work is synonymous with studies in sex tourism. By revealing the previously narrow scope of the literature on sex tourism, he created a framework that moved beyond the traditional conceptualization of the use of monetary exchange as the key benchmark of sex tourism. By utilizing parameters including purpose of travel, length of time, and nature of the sexual encounter he attempted to attack the existing double standard towards sex tourism.

Kempadoo's groundbreaking edited collection, *Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean*, explored connections between sex work and the global economy, focusing on the experiences of women, men, and children who sell sex in Cuba, Barbados, the Dominican Republic, Belize, Jamaica, and the Dutch Antilles, to name a few. The collection illustrates how women's bodies, in particular, have become major commodities in the economic development agenda. Work on the English-speaking Caribbean, in particular Jamaica, Barbados and Guyana (Campbell, Perkins, & Mohammed, 1999; Phillips, 1999; Red Thread Women's Development Programme, 1999), illustrates that sex work is a 'complex social activity that encompasses patriarchal and racialized dominations and exploitations of black and brown bodies and labor, self-empowerment by women through strategic use of sexual labor for the own and their families' survival, and struggles by both men and women for liberation from oppressive colonial and neocolonial conditions' Kempadoo (1999a, 1999b, p. 28).

#### 3.2. Sex versus romance tourism

The race and gender discussion has been further complicated by research that has revealed that white female tourists arriving from Europe and North America comb Caribbean beaches and bars in search of young black men who fit their preconceived ideal racial images. Somewhat dated but important work by Pruitt and LaFont (1995) also attempted to explain the understudied instances of female consumers of sex in the Caribbean. In the study of female tourists in Jamaica, they coined the term 'romance tourism' to explain their observations as it appeared that both the female tourists and the local males saw their relationship as being focused more on romance and courtship than on sex for money.

On the other hand, de Albuquerque (1998a and 1998b) challenged the concept of romance tourism. While acknowledging the possibility that a woman may fall in love with a local man, he suggested that these cases comprise a small, even negligible number of the relationships. This is particularly plausible in the face of not only the rent-a-dread phenomenon endemic to the island, but also in the popular art form in some areas where 'the dread-locked male is portrayed nude, with a huge penis, often erect, dwarfing the rest of the body' (de Albuquerque, 1998b, p. 48).

In addition, Taylor's (2001) response to the concept of sex versus romance tourism pointed out some key problems with this differentiation. The argument is made that male sex tourism/female romance tourism simply reproduces essentialist binary stereotypes of male and

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