

What's in an Image? A Critical Look at Study Abroad Programs Going to Africa

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Abstract

As the U.S. continues to prioritize the internationalization of higher education, study-abroad participation has doubled in the last decades. To correspond with this increased interest and prepare students for an intercultural workforce, study abroad programs have diversified travel destinations to include countries on the continent of Africa, most of which have colonial histories. However, many scholars have contended with the problematic nature of study abroad programs, especially interactions with host countries in the Global South. Specifically, the depiction of Africa is often othering or in a subjugated manner. Additionally, there is a lack of concise scholarship on the representation of people and places of travel destinations in study abroad programs images. As such, this exploratory study uses a postcolonial lens to understand how Africa is represented in the imagery of study abroad programs at selected Research 1 universities in the U.S. Results of the study and practical implications are presented.

Keywords: Africa, internationalization, postcolonial, representation, study abroad

Introduction

Prior to the covid-19 pandemic, there was a steady increase in the United States (U.S.) study abroad programs in efforts to offer students the opportunity to build a sense of global citizenship (Wynveen et al., 2012) and to acquire internationalization (Bishop, 2013). Internationalization refers to integrating intercultural or global dimensions into the higher education experience (Knight, 2008). Study abroad programs are vital to these efforts as more institutions incorporate a 'global mandate' into their academic plans (Jorgenson & Shultz, 2012). Other U.S. institutions have sought to reflect the world's connectedness in ways that have expanded their curricula and their campuses and learning opportunities (Bjarnason et al., 2000). As institutions push for "borderless education" (Bjarnason et al., 2000), study abroad was a growing part of that experience at most U.S. colleges and universities (IEE, 2019).

Received August 15, 2022; revised October 26, 2022; accepted November 02, 2022

Research on study-abroad highlights several significant benefits for participants. Among these are global competency, intercultural learning, transformative learning, students' academic performance, global citizenry, serving-learning, and communication skills (Asada, 2019; Hunter, 2015; Lui et al., 2022; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2014; Salisbury et al., 2013). To offer these experiences to students, U.S. study-abroad destinations are diversifying to include regions beyond the popular European destinations (i.e., Latin America/Africa). It is essential to “educate [U.S. students] about a multitude of cultures to diversify student perspectives on world cultures and politics” (Soobrayen Veerasamy, 2021, p. 11). Without taking away from the benefits of study programs to these destinations, unintended consequences include challenging intercultural situations (Asada, 2019) and saviorism (Nordmeyer et al., 2016). Although few scholars (Oyenekwu, 2016; Oyenekwu et al., 2017; Khoo, 2011) have examined colonialist discourses and the effects of representation on creating a ‘global citizenry’ in the emerging intercultural world, there is still a need for extensive research in this area. Former colonies, mainly those in Africa, are often presented in a subjugated manner (Mudimbe, 1988). As such, this study sought to understand how study abroad programs from U.S institutions represent Africa.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the postcolonial lens of V.Y. Mudimbe (2013) to examine images created by U.S. study-abroad programs in Africa. Postcolonial theory critically analyzes the representation of non-Western subjects in an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy (Said, 1994). In doing so, a postcolonial study investigates issues of power and control used to examine how images of non-westerners are constructed by western societies (Fanon, 1991). A postcolonial view of Africa speaks on representation by departing from the western trope of a constructed Africa through western hegemony (Mudimbe, 1988). Mudimbe specifically identified three core elements to look for in Western representation of Africa: 1) The colonial attempt to transform savage spaces into civilized settings, 2) the anthropologist codifying humans, beliefs, and institutions, and 3) the Christian missionary self-sacrifice to be among the primitive to show them the true light (Mudimbe, 2013). These elements were useful in analyzing images from Africa as they are presented through U.S. higher education institutions’ websites.

Methodology

This study is a pilot of a dissertation that uses content analysis as a qualitative research approach. Content analysis provides researchers the advantage of studying documents and artifacts to examine available patterns in a systematic or replicable manner (Marying, 2000). Particularly, influenced by the study methods from Buzinde et al. (2006), which looked at ethnic representations of destination imagery, I explored how Africa is represented in study abroad programs by examining images on institutional websites.

Data Collection

The four selected institutions for this study, ranked in the top 75 higher education institutions in the U.S. (U.S. News Report, 2020). All four institutions have a mandate to support study-abroad as a tool to create a global community. Specifically, I selected Predominately White Institutions (PWI) institutions where most study-abroad participants were White students (IIE, 2019). I intentionally targeted four-year research institutions (R1) with at least five programs going to African countries from the east, west, and mid-Atlantic region for broad-based representation of U.S. institutions.

Collectively, the institutions have study abroad programs going to more than 15 countries in Africa. Each institution offered more than 10 programs and their websites have regional search features, allowing me to target search ‘Africa’. Using this feature and focusing on the representation of Africa and African people, I searched 46 study abroad programs going to Africa on the institutions’ websites; and collected imagery and text used to market the programs. I found and retrieved 111 photos. These photos were downloaded and saved with accompanying text descriptions in a folder for analysis.

Table 1: Definitions of Themes

| Theory (Mudimbe, 2013) | Description | Total Images |
|---|--|---------------------|
| 1) The colonial attempt to transform “ savage spaces ” into “ civilized settings ” | Images include wild animals, torn up, no clothing or shoes, mentions of wildlife, wilderness, red dirt roads, or transformation | 49 |
| 2) The anthropologist codifying humans, beliefs, and institutions | Images include people gathered around U.S. students, things described as “exotic”, rituals, cultural ceremonies, note-taking, fieldwork, and everyday activities (cooking, fetching water, etc.) | 31 |
| 3) The Christian missionary self-sacrifice to be among the “ primitive ” to show them the “ true light ” | Images include development-related programs (i.e., building wells, painting, building houses, etc.), religious figures, children, mentions of development | 11 |

Data Analysis

In the analysis of images, many layers of meaning can be conveyed (Pieterse, 1995). By this, no one image was bonded to one theme, but for consistency, images were not placed in more than one theme. The multidimensionality of the images was leveraged to have them assigned to categories based on Mudimbe’s (2013) three elements of Western representations of Africa (colonizer through “savage spaces”, missionary, and anthropologist), which are critical in exploring how the West subjugates Africa. This was done after several hours of sorting and paying attention to every aspect of the images, with all contexts considered through reading descriptions of the programs.

A total of 91 images are categorized using the prior coding scheme (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Weber, 1990) and 20 images were excluded as they did not conform to Mudimbe’s (2013) elements.

Results

Using the postcolonial theoretical lens in the data analysis enabled me to present my findings under three major categories per Mudimbe’s (2013) elements: *The Missionary*, *Savage Space*, and *The Anthropologist*.

The Missionary

Overall, there were more images containing children than any reoccurring theme. Many images had people holding children or petting them like you would a baby animal. Other images included children by themselves or in a classroom setting. For one program, there was a slide of 39 photos; 24 of them contained children. That is an astounding 62% of their images represent Africa. So, images of children were used to link study abroad experiences. Similarly, in the case of an education program images of wildlife and mentions of excursions to local orphanages. Again, an incomprehensible relationship between the children portrayed and the program. Similarly, images of children in classroom settings had no connection to the orphanage’s exertion mentioned. These images suited *The Missionary* category due to the impressionable characteristics of children and the ways missionaries aim to show audiences the “true light”.

Savage Space

The second reoccurring theme was wild animals (elephants, lions, zebras, etc.), which were placed in the *Savage Space* category. Essentially, most of these programs were ecology and conservation-focused. However, some programs

with wildlife images had no bearing on conservation, ecology, and safari excursions. For example, a pharmacy program going to an East African country had images of elephants and zebras. Also in this category, students were posing with huts, on red dirt roads, or the images were spotted with locals wearing little to no clothing. Program descriptions in this category read “transformation from economic challenges”.

The Anthropologist

In this category, the images were of people doing everyday chores like cooking, fetching water, and walking. These were documented as the anthropological gaze on the community. Often, these images were taken when the locals were not paying attention to the camera. This mirrors the interactions of anthropologists during fieldwork in Africa. Another example of codifying everyday activities of people’s lived experiences that might seem alien to visitors. Additionally, descriptions of some of the program’s cultural excursions were referred to as “exotic,” offering students “exotic animal interaction.” The emphasis on ‘exotic’ is a fetishization that presents Africa as a subjugated and unknown place that needs discovery.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore Africa’s representation in U.S. study abroad programs through a postcolonial lens. Postcolonial scholarship highlights the colonial attempt to “other” certain people and places. The study results showed U.S. study abroad programs’ representation mirrors the missionary, savage space, and anthropologist narratives from colonial eras. The promise to transform or the helping and self-sacrifice of U.S. students going to Africa directly connects with Mudimbe’s (1988) critique in “Invented Africa.” Though Africa has a variety of wildlife, impoverished people, and many low-income countries, it is not the ultimate representation of Africa. By portraying Africa solely as a jungle that is lagging in civilization, needing transformation, and a savage space, these images align with a colonial lens and deprive students of the depth of a diverse continent.

This study is well situated in comparative and international education’s scope, advancing cross-cultural scholarship and practices. Specifically, the study speaks to study abroad programs on the role of being culturally and ethnically conscious in representing travel destinations. This research suggests that in the glitz and glam of study abroad, institutions must ask the question of representation to avoid unintended consequences (Asada, 2019). Previous work in *JCHIE* shared constraints and possibilities of study abroad experiences and other shared lived experiences and quest to find new destinations (Asada, 2019; Woodman, 2019). This work brings into that conversation African countries and connects postcolonial studies to the field of study abroad while also asking to what extent are images detrimental in aligning with colonialist discourses.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions must recognize that images influence the representation of people and places. Therefore, they are responsible for creating culturally relevant images that consider the colonial history of people and places. As such, future researchers must consider the general question of knowledge production and representation of Africa and African people in study abroad by interviewing host communities about their interpretations of Africa as it is presented in U.S. programs. This is vital when we consider colonial subjects’ silence and the co-production of knowledge in a global society.

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