Chapter XI

Sex Tourism and the Internet: Information, Amplification, and Moral Panics

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Abstract

This chapter examines the relationship between the Internet and sex tourism. It argues that interest in sex tourism in the media erupted in the early 1990s, about the same time that the Internet itself was becoming popular. The relationship between the two was both positive and negative. On the one hand, the Internet has allowed members of sexual subcultures to contact each other and for new forms of sex tourism to be marketed. On the other hand, the Internet also provided a platform for those opposed to sex tourism to raise the profile of the issue, in the process conflating images of sex tourism with those of Internet pornography, pedophilia, and child abuse, particularly in relation to tourism destinations in the Southeast Asian region. It has therefore aided the amplification of moral panics surrounding these issues. This sensational coverage has, however, tended to overshadow other forms of sex tourism, including those in which consenting adults meet together in resorts of clubs for recreational sex with each other. Thus, while the Internet has created moral panics and led to crackdowns in certain sections of the sex tourism market, it has allowed other alternative lifestyles to flourish on an unprecedented scale in an increasingly liberalized environment.
Introduction

Probably no sector of the tourist market has been more affected by the rise of the Internet than that of sex tourism. In fact, as will be shown below, until the advent of the Internet, “sex tourism” as a concept was rarely discussed in the media, even though sex as a motivation for travel has a very long history. But the relationship between sex tourism and the Internet also is extremely complex and contested, as befits such a controversial subject.

In this chapter, I first argue that the emerging literature on sex tourism has, in general, tended to concentrate on the commercial provision of sex to the exclusion of other types of sex tourism, with the greatest attention being given to the relations between prostitutes and tourists in Southeast Asia.

Second, I argue that in relation to this particular type of tourism, the Internet has proved a double-edged sword. Even though it has provided greatly enhanced opportunities for members of a wide variety of sexual interests, orientations and subcultures to contact and interact with each other, it also has provided an environment in which certain types of sex tourism have been increasing demonized by the media, civil society, and the politicians, resulting in the imposition of increasingly severe regulation and sanctions in a number of countries. The Internet has greatly assisted the stereotyping of the “sex tourist” as typically an overweight middle-aged Western male on the prowl for underage sex victims in the main Asian tourist resorts. This in turn has resulted new type of crime being brought onto the statute books in many countries, such as accessing and downloading child pornography. It also has made it possible for interest groups such as ECPAT (originally “End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism”) to get their message across more effectively, increasing the pressure on governments to take action. In the mid-1990s, a number of countries introduced new legislation controlling the extraterritorial sexual activities of their nationals, and a number of well-publicized prosecutions have taken place since. Media reporting and its dissemination on the Internet have generally contributed to the sense of moral panic and indignation surrounding this issue, as well as conveying the comforting impression that something is being done about it, a questionable assumption given the small number of prosecutions and the large number of tourists.

My third argument, however, is that prostitution in Southeast Asia is only part of the story. Elsewhere, other forms of sex tourism involving consensual sex between tourists are flourishing, having been greatly facilitated and supported by the Internet. Far from experiencing increasing pressure from the law, these activities in some countries are enjoying an increasingly liberalized legal environment. The Internet acts both as an important source of information for the participants, as well as (to judge by the massive popularity of some of the sites where this information is disseminated) a significant source of entertainment for the casual cybervoyeur.
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