Selling the world: airline advertisements and the promotion of international aeromobility in National Geographic, 1964-2004

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.


Additional Information:

- This is a book chapter from the book Technologies of Mobility in the Americas [© Peter Lang].

Metadata Record: [https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/9891](https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/9891)

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © Peter Lang

Please cite the published version.
This item was submitted to Loughborough’s Institutional Repository (https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/) by the author and is made available under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.

For the full text of this licence, please go to: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/
Selling the world: Airline advertisements and the promotion of international aeromobility in *National Geographic*, 1964 - 2004

Lucy Budd

*National Geographic* has been a part of my life for almost as long as I can recall. Both my father and my late grandfather subscribed to it and, as a young child, I can vividly remember looking through the magazine’s glossy pages and imagining myself visiting the strange and wonderful places that were depicted therein. The publication proved to be an indispensable aid to various pieces of high school homework and it was a familiar reminder of home when I went away to university. Five years ago, while helping my grandparents to move house, I came across my grandfather’s collection of old issues of *National Geographic* and my interest in the title was rekindled. Despite their age (some dated back to the late 1940s), each copy had been perfectly preserved and the contents offered a tantalising glimpse into the past.

In addition to featuring lavishly illustrated articles on recent geographic explorations and detailed written descriptions of anthropological encounters, the magazines also contained a number of advertisements that promoted the consumption of luxury consumer goods and travel. A half-page advertisement for South African Airways, caught my eye. “Come where the giraffes, klipspringers, and tseebees play” it implored and, quite spontaneously, I found myself imagining that I was standing in the African bush with the roar of lions in the distance and the warmth of the sun on my face. Returning reluctantly to reality, yet curious at the advertisement’s ability to affect my thoughts and transmit me to a land that I had never visited, I turned the page and found another similarly enticing proposition. “Wherever the land of your dreams - no matter how seemingly distant - it is only a few hours away on Lufthansa” it read.
By alerting readers to the existence of a world beyond the confines of their everyday environment and emphasizing the relative ease with which exotic destinations could be accessed and consumed by air, both advertisements were seeking to generate a desire for international travel. In so doing, they actively espoused a particular form of post-war international (aero)mobility that was predicated on speed and unfettered access to worldwide networks of commercial air services. The two advertisements also caused me to reflect on how the co-evolution of multiple technologies (including the airplane but also print, advertising media, and worldwide postal distribution) had both enabled and also stimulated demand for a new type of mobility that transcended the boundaries of the everyday and metaphorically brought geographically distant people and places closer together in time and space. Crucially, despite the existence of a substantial body of literature which critically analyzes the articles and the visual images that have published in National Geographic (see Lutz and Collins, 1993, and Rothberg, 2007), no equivalent research has examined the nature or content of the advertisements that were published alongside them. This is unfortunate, as my encounter with the South African Airways and Lufthansa advertisements led to believe that advertisements are important cultural artefacts that can reveal much about changing societal attitudes and practices of mobility and consumption.

In recognition of the absence of any academic consideration of the advertisements within National Geographic, the present research sought to identify the strategies that were used by commercial airlines in an attempt to “sell the world” to potential passengers and generate a desire for international travel and wanderlust among the magazine’s estimated 38 million readers. The chapter begins with a discussion of aviation and American culture and the role of National Geographic in both disseminating news of aeronautical achievement and shaping public perceptions of the world beyond the US border. This is followed by a description of the method that was employed before the findings are presented and their
implications for furthering academic understandings of past practices of aeromobility discussed.

**Commercial aviation and the American imagination**

To mark the centenary of Orville and Wilbur Wright’s first successful heavier-than-air powered flights on the windswept sand dunes of Kill Devil Hills, near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, the December 2003 issue of *National Geographic* magazine contained an article on the future of flying. The cover image, framed by the magazine’s instantly-recognizable vivid yellow border, featured a dramatic close up photograph of the nose of one of the United States’ Air Force’s new supersonic stealth fighters, the F/A-22 Raptor. Inside, and accompanied by vivid full-color air-to-air photographs of close formation flying, backlit images of high performance turbofan engines, and detailed descriptions of computerized flightdecks, the article reflected on 100 years of aeronautical achievement and postulated on a future in which hypersonic aircraft would be able to reach any point on the earth’s surface in under four hours (Kleisus, 2003). The article spoke to a technologically sophisticated, globalized, and highly-interconnected world in which aviation had overcome the tyranny of distance, rendering geographically remote countries effectively near neighbors and enabling affluent members of global society to participate in worldwide networks of trade, travel, and commerce.

Far from being a one-off, the article represented the latest in a long line of features that the magazine had published on the subject of flight. As part of the National Geographic Society’s mission to promote “the increase and diffusion of geographical knowledge”, over 115 individual articles concerning different aspects of military and commercial aeronautics were published in its members’ magazine between 1918 and 2010. The earliest articles considered aviation’s role in World War One (Berroeta, 1918; de Sieyes, 1918; Grosvenor,
1918; Tulasne, 1918), the industry’s strategic importance to US national defence and future economic development (Mitchell, 1921), and air travel’s role in “opening up” remote regions of the world to geographic exploration and anthropological discovery (see, for example, Blacker, 1933; Byrd, 1925, 1930; Cobham, 1928; Dargue, 1927; Goddard, 1930; Grosvenor, 1924, 1933; Groves, 1926; Hildebrand, 1924; McKinley, 1932; Street, 1926; Van Zandt, 1925, 1939; Wilson, 1926), whereas later features addressed the development of post World War Two aviation infrastructure (Colton, 1948) and described how the introduction of increasingly sophisticated aeronautical technologies, including autopilots, fly-by-wire controls, and instrument landing systems, would improve the safety and efficiency of the air transport system (Long, 1977; Kleisus, 2003).

If one subscribes to the arguments advanced by aviation historians Joseph Corn (1983), Joe Christy (1987), Tom Crouch (2003) and Robert Wohl (2005), aviation performs an important role in American society and occupies a particular place in the American national psyche. Certainly, in a little over a hundred years between the birth of the modern aerial age and today, air travel has emerged as the normal and dominant mode of long-distance mobility for a significant (and growing) section of American society and flying has become a routine activity for many. Every day, hundreds of thousands of US citizens travel to airports, buckle themselves into airline seats, fly through the troposphere at close to the speed of sound, and deplane at their destination a few minutes or hours later. They do so not because they actively enjoy the experience of flight (although some undoubtedly do) but because their personal and/or professional lives demand the routine performance of high levels of long-distance mobility. At any given time, it has been estimated that as many as 300,000 people and 6,200 commercial flights will be airborne above the United States (Kleisus, 2003) and such habitual volumes of aerial mobility have arguably become one of the defining features of contemporary American (and increasingly global) society.
Modern commercial airplanes and air traffic control systems enable considerable numbers of people to routinely undertake long-distance journeys (that they believe to be necessary) to distant places (that they perceive to be desirable) to pursue particular experiences or encounters that are not available at home, both safely and also more quickly and more cheaply than alternative transport modes. Yet while much has been written about the changing spatialities of air service provision and the growth in global air travel modern aeronautical technologies have effected (see Graham, 1995; Hanlon, 1996), it is only relatively recently that the cultural and embodied dimensions of human aeromobility have begun to be systematically explored (Adey, 2010; Budd, 2011; Millward, 2008; Rust, 2009).

The commercial aerial age

The origins of commercial flying in the United States can be traced back to the Wright Brother’s pioneering heavier-than-air flights in 1903 and the first domestic air mail services that were inaugurated by the US Post Office and the US Air Service in 1918 (Christy, 1987). Despite only seeing limited service during World War One, the potential for aircraft to be employed on peacetime civilian operations had been recognised and immediately after the conflict ended American aircraft manufacturers began producing more sophisticated and reliable aircraft for civilian use. The development of these new aircraft enabled pioneering US airlines to begin offering regular scheduled services for paying passengers. A period of regulatory and operational reform during the early 1920s resulted in formation of specific national regulations for civil aviation. This framework enabled a growing band of American entrepreneurs to begin to exploit aviation’s commercial potential by conveying growing volumes of passengers, mail, and freight. Charles Lindbergh’s successful transatlantic flight between New York and Paris in May 1927 stimulated further interest in the scientific
discipline of aeronautics and ensured that aviation entered mainstream American public consciousness.

During the 1930s and 1940s, millions of dollars were invested in developing new aircraft and aero engines that could out-perform all exiting machines and, by the end of the Second World War, American aerospace companies, including Lockheed, Pratt and Whitney, Douglas, and Boeing, were well placed to begin construction of a new generation of post-war commercial aircraft. Although the world’s first jet-powered commercial aircraft had been designed in Britain, structural problems with the airframe ensured that American manufacturers quickly gained the ascendancy and ultimately dominated the market for post-war jet-powered passenger aircraft. With their sleek aerodynamic fuselages, superior speed and range, and sophisticated technology, the new American-built “jetliners” of the late 1950s and early 1960s represented all that was exciting and progressive about modernity. The new airframes, including Boeing’s 707 and Douglas’ DC-8, could fly more people further, faster, longer, higher, and more economically than the piston and propeller-engined aircraft they replaced and journeys that had once taken the best part of a day to complete could now be accomplished in a matter of a few hours. The British-designed Comet, for example, reduced the flight time from London to Johannesburg from 32½ hours to 18, enabled Singapore to be reached in 25 hours rather than 2½ days, and cut the flight time from London to Tokyo from 86 to 33¼ hours (Herusser, 1953) and continued innovations in aircraft design and performance during the 1960s and 1970s progressively reduced the monetary cost of air fares and stimulated a new vogue for international travel and long distance aeromobility.

These wide-ranging social and technological changes were predicated on a number of diverse yet interlocking factors. For aviation historian Roger Bilstein (1984, p.232), the growth of post-war civil aviation in the United States reflected “a host of changes and social effects that had been gathering momentum” for a number of years. Increasing affluence,
growing social mobility, and enhanced technological capabilities in the fields of material sciences, aerodynamics, microelectronics, and propulsion, enabled growing numbers of American citizens to take to the air. By the time the Boeing Company launched their eponymous 747 “Jumbo Jet” in 1969, airlines were already carrying 17.1 million people a year, a figure that had increased from 3.1 million in 1958. In a spirit of post-war optimism, US politicians and social commentators alike asserted that the provision of regular non-stop international airline services to/from the United States would not only promote global peace and understanding but also open up foreign markets to American overseas trade and investment (Crouch, 2003).

In addition to creating new opportunities for international business and communication, post-war passenger aviation also transformed US citizens’ leisure and vacation habits. Whereas well-heeled American tourists of the 1920s and 1930s traditionally spent their summer holiday in Atlantic coast resorts such as Cape Cod or Atlantic City, the rapid growth of air travel from the early 1960s onwards meant that far-flung and ever more exotic destinations were suddenly within reach. Airline advertisements were instrumental in alerting Americans to these new travel opportunities and the marketing rhetoric the campaigns employed resonated with, and reinforced, the developing worldview of a new generation of young, increasingly affluent, and fashion conscious “jet set” travellers. Jet flight was promoted as offering a portal into a streamlined, exciting, and fashionable future in which the whole world was a playground and the sun-kissed beaches of the Caribbean, the fashion houses of Europe, or the plains of Africa, were a mere few hours flying time away.

**Reconstructing past mobility regimes from the pages of National Geographic**

Within the last decade, in particular, scholars from across the social sciences have become increasingly attuned to the myriad ways in which people move and to the socio-cultural,
economic, and environmental significance of these different forms of mobility. Taking their cue from the seminal work of John Urry (2000, 2007), geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and cultural historians (among others) have employed numerous innovative research techniques to examine the mobility patterns and spatio-temporal practices of everything from routine daily commutes to student gap year travel, international business trips, and “once in a lifetime” adventure tourism. Some of this work has been motivated by a desire to better understand the practical decision-making of business travellers and tourists whereas other research has sought to examine the personal and/or embodied aspects different modes of transportation engender (on which see Bissell, 2008, 2009 and Edensor, 2003).

In the context of commercial aviation, such approaches have led to examinations of the socio-cultural and “affective” dimensions of air travel and have prompted considerations of the extent to which human language, travel choices, diets, working practices, and experiences of becoming and being mobile have been influenced by developments in aeronautical technology and commercial aviation practice (see, for example, Adey, 2010; Budd 2010, 2011; Gordon, 2004; Gottdiener, 2001; Fuller and Harley, 2004; Millward, 2008; Pascoe, 2001; Rust, 2009). Such accounts serve as effective counterpoints to other literature which has merely commented on the technological innovations which resulted in aviation evolving from a specialized activity, which was pursued only by a few wealthy and/or foolhardy individuals, into a multi-billion dollar enterprise that facilitates the global mobility of over 2.4 billion passengers a year.

In addition to altering the trajectory of conventional transport research, the “mobilities turn” has also been instrumental in stimulating innovations in empirical practice. A growing number of academic studies now employ historical artefacts, including personal travel diaries, postcards, timetables, travel brochures, and other tourist ephemera, to help reconstruct past mobility regimes and further our understanding of past practices of
movement (Walsh, 1990; Watts, 2004). Advertisements, in particular, have become an increasingly popular object of academic inquiry, as their marketing rhetoric and visual presentation provide “a window on to the landscape of our social culture” (Lyth, 2009, p. 2). Far from being mere transient promotional tools, advertisements speak of changing socio-cultural fashions, trends, and tastes and their study offers valuable insights into how particular brands or industrial sectors, including travel and transportation companies, present themselves to the public and evolve over time. This awareness has led to a panoply of studies which have examined the design histories and corporate publicity strategies of inter-war British railway companies (Harrington, 2004; Hewitt, 2000; Watts, 2004), Atlantic steamship lines (Swinglehurst, 1982), and American bus companies (Walsh, 1990). However, despite an emerging literature on the role advertisements play in the promotion of particular forms of maritime and surface transport mobility, and an established body of popular/enthusiast texts which examine the graphic design histories of individual airlines and aerospace companies (see, for example, Cruddas, 2008; London, 2007; Lovegrove, 2000; Remmele, 2004; Szurovy, 2002), little academic research has examined how airlines use printed advertising media to generate a desire for travel and wanderlust among potential passengers.

*National Geographic* was selected as the source material for this analysis owing to the availability of examples and also to the publication’s status in, and importance to, American popular culture. Launched in 1888 as a sporadic scientific journal, the publication rapidly evolved into a monthly magazine that disseminated news of geographic exploration, technological development, and cultural anthropology to the Society’s growing membership. Many of the articles conveyed details of daring Society-funded expeditions and informed legions of “armchair travellers” about the earth, its seas and sky, and outer space. By the 1950s, the magazine’s format was firmly established and its archetypal “white, Christian, middle-class, small-town” American readers (Rothberg, 2007, p. 2), were receiving a regular
diet of carefully selected and scripted information on the world as the Society’s correspondents and editors saw it. The magazine’s core editorial objectives, its high production values (which, since the mid-1960s, included the extensive use of colour printing, glossy heavy-weight paper, and the provision of pull-out maps and posters), and its iconic vivid yellow-framed title page have made *National Geographic* one of the world’s most popular and visible expressions of geographic knowledge. From a print run of 750,000 copies during the early 1920s, the magazine’s circulation grew steadily during the twentieth century to the point where approximately eight million copies are now published every month. The Society estimates that each issue is read by around 38 million people across the world and the title is published in 34 different languages (National Geographic, 2011).

Owing to the title’s extensive circulation and readership, Lutz and Collins (1993, p. 1) opined that, during the twentieth century, *National Geographic* was one of the “primary means by which people in the United States receive information and images of the world outside their borders”. The articles and images the magazine contained undoubtedly helped foster awareness of the world beyond the US border. However, critics have suggested that the selection and (re)presentation of certain “foreign” cultures and civilizations served to create a distinct American identity based on notions of US “civil and technological superiority” (Rothberg, 2007, p. 5; see also Abramson, 2010; Bryan, 1987; Jansson, 2003; Pauly, 1979; Tuason, 1999). Arguably, this discourse of US capability and “superiority” was created and reinforced not only by the articles but also by the advertisements that that each issue contained.

A cursory glance through any post-1945 issue of *National Geographic* reveals the presence of multiple advertisements for high-end luxury goods and services, including designer watches, automobiles, high specification photographic and optical equipment, and discretionary travel. The latter group included advertisements for overseas tourist agencies,
airline operators, and hotel chains, all of which aimed to generate a desire for wanderlust by emphasizing the ease, affordability, and rapidity with which exotic (and, therefore, exciting) destinations could be accessed and consumed. In order to obtain data both on the frequency with which airline advertisements appeared and also the nature of the marketing message they employed, I performed a detailed content analysis of all the airline advertisements that appeared in all 492 issues of National Geographic that were published between January 1964 and December 2004. Content analysis enables “the objective, systematic, and quantitative description” of the manifest content of communication to be undertaken and allows the manifest content of different types of media to be objectively evaluated and recorded (Berelson, 1952, p.18). A preliminary scoping study of 50 randomly-selected examples of the genre indicated that every advertisement could be classified into one of three broad themes according to whether it emphasised an airline’s geographic, service, or technological attributes.

Advertisements that stressed a carrier’s worldwide scale, scope, and global connectivity or which conveyed details of a new route launch were classified under the category “geographical attributes”. Those which promoted various aspects of an airline’s product, including affordability/value for money, seat comfort, leg room, the quality of in-flight entertainment and in-flight food, and the professionalism and attentiveness of cabin crew and pilots, were described as primarily promoting “service” characteristics, while those that made reference to particular types of aircraft or aeronautical technologies, such as onboard weather radar or automatic instrument landing systems, were classified as “technological”.
Selling the world: principal findings and discussion

In total, 1181 advertisements, which promoted the virtues of 56 different airlines and one global airline alliance, were identified and coded. Interestingly, for an American publication, by far the majority (61%) of the advertisements were for European carriers (North American operators only accounted for 17% of the total). Lufthansa, the German national carrier, and Air France were the most prolific advertisers, placing 205 and 126 advertisements respectively during the period. In comparison, the US airline with the most advertisements, the now-defunct Trans World Airlines (TWA), only placed 70. The dominance of European operators suggests that the type of aeromobility that was being promoted through the pages of National Geographic was very specific and geared towards generating demand for US consumers to undertake international, as opposed to domestic US, travel. It could also be argued that the presence of advertisements for smaller foreign airlines, such as Belgium’s SABENA, Jordan’s Jordanian, or Pakistan’s PIA, within the pages of National Geographic were taken out in the hope of raising their respective brand’s profile in the lucrative North American market. An indication of the variety of airline advertisements that were published is provided in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

Of the three coding categories, geographical attributes were the most frequently employed method by which airlines attempted to “sell the world” to consumers, accounting for 47% of all the advertisements that were identified. Williams (2008) argued that historical patterns of global tourist and business travel mobilities are, to a significant degree, shaped by how individual places are perceived by different groups of consumers and how these perceptions change over time in response to new geopolitical, economic, and environmental
conditions. While images of distant places have long been used to generate a desire for mobility and travel (see Watts, 2004), post-war airlines arguably took the creative promotion of tourist spaces to a new level. In order to stimulate consumer demand for flight, airlines had to convince potential customers that flying was not only safe and comfortable but also that it offered unrivalled opportunities to further professional development and personal fulfilment. The processes involved in packaging and then selling the world to American travellers required the selective (and often highly politicized) transformation of ordinary and everyday places into exciting travel destinations. Many of the airline advertisements in *National Geographic* were unashamedly escapist in tone and used lavish color photographs and lengthy textual descriptions to emphasize the difference, exoticism, timelessness, romanticism, and/or cultural attraction of the destination they were seeking to promote.

As Urry (1990) has explained, the role of vision and, in particular, the “tourist gaze”, is intrinsically bound up with notions of difference. Foreign places have to be seen to be sufficiently different as to render them interesting (and thus worthy of visit) without that difference being considered so extreme as to render that destination dangerous or unsettling. In order to reassure potential passengers that the airlines took consumer concerns about the potential for culture shock seriously, Pan American published a traveller’s companion book for prospective passengers. This “New Horizons World Guide” contained information on where and when to travel, what to pack, how to behave, what to see and do in different locations, and how to successfully navigate one’s way through international airports. The guide professed to contain all the information that any potential traveller might want (or need) to know about the idiosyncrasies of global aviation and foreign customs but was too afraid to ask.

As one of the premium travel brands of the 1960s, Pan Am evidently took its educational responsibilities seriously. An advertisement from the late 1960s, for example,
featured a large colour photograph of a relaxed and carefree young (white) American couple strolling along the bank of the River Seine in Paris and was accompanied by the reassuring message:

“The Martins had never been to Europe before. That’s why they came to us… We told them how to get a passport. What to pack. How to plan an itinerary. How to clear customs. Where to look for bargains on the left bank. Where to be seen on the Via Veneto. How to tell if a restaurant’s expensive without walking in…”

In short, the advertising copy sought to contain everything that any self-respecting, yet perhaps inexperienced, American tourist might want to know in order to be able to relax and enjoy their trip. In addition to acting as a “traveller’s friend”, Pan Am’s advertisements also sought to stimulate a desire for wanderlust by emphasising the number of different destinations served by their aircraft. Many advertisements from the mid-1960s featured specific destinations and provided glossy photographs and descriptions of the delights that could be found there in an attempt to entice people into the air - “We fly to more Caribbean favourites than anybody”, boasted the airline in 1966, “15 in all, and every one different. Head for Barbados or Antigua for British accents. Mark down Martinique and Guadeloupe for French flavour. Go Latin in Puerto Rico. Or try our Dutch treats—Curacao and Aruba. Just pick your sun spot. Then call your Pan Am travel agent. Or call us. And fly away with the best there is in the world”.

The ways in which destinations are visualized by travellers was (and remains) highly subjective and politicized (Williams, 2008). Places that were once favoured and considered desirable destinations to see and be seen in can rapidly be marginalized in favour of newer “up and coming” resorts. As air travel became an increasingly routine activity, the nature of the advertisements changed and airlines began promoting ever-more distant destinations. The
trend towards the consumption of increasingly exotic destinations was evident in displays of geographical and corporate “one-upmanship” in which airlines engaged in competition with their rivals by advertising the inauguration of ever more unusual, preferably “undiscovered”, and therefore “exciting” destinations. “You’ve taken your fill of the Acropolis, you’ve stormed the seven hills of Rome. Now… capture the city Pizarro couldn’t! …visit Machu Picchu”, suggested Latin American airline Panagra Grace in 1965.

As Fleming (1984) and Cosgrove (1994) have demonstrated, the strategies airlines employ to promote particular places often rely on highly selective projections of the world and the cartographic equivalent of artistic licence is frequently employed in an effort to communicate the worldliness and prestige of an airline’s route network. As Wood (1993, p. 73, original emphasis) similarly observed with reference to the route maps that were printed in Delta Air Line’s in-flight magazine:

“Delta’s Domestic Route Map, that is, the United States and part of Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean…[is] all but obscured beneath a think weave of blue lines symbolising not merely Delta’s routes, but the embarrassing abundance of Delta’s routes. What does the map say? It says “we blanket America”, that is “we will keep you so warm you will never want to go to bed with another carrier”… The point is merely to dissuade you—though the exploitation of age-old rhetorical devices (emphasis, exaggerations, suppression, metaphor)—from thinking of American or TWA or USAir next time you want to fly.”

The 1970s saw a move away from the promotion of particular destinations and towards advertising campaigns that emphasized the international reach and connectivity of an airline’s
services. “161 cities in 77 countries…See the whole world” from Paris, suggested Air France in 1974, while Saudia, the national flag-carrier of Saudi Arabia, employed an Apollo photograph of the Earth from space on one of its advertisements as a visual metaphor for their route network. Such emphasis on individual carriers’ global connectivity was evident right through until the late 1980s. We are “Here, there, and everywhere” promised Lufthansa in May 1987 while, in July 1988, Swissair proudly offered “over 100 landing sites on 5 continents”. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, the effects of ongoing structural changes within the global airline industry—most notably deregulation and the formation of code-share arrangements and global airline alliances—were increasingly evident in the advertisements that were published. Not only did advertisements for different airline alliances start to appear, but individual airlines increasingly placed the logos of the alliance to which they belonged on their advertisements in an effort to emphasize their global status, prestige, and network.

In addition to marketing their services based on the range and connectivity of their international route network, airlines also sought to establish a brand that was based on positive images of customer service and their in-flight product. Such service attributes were used as the primary selling point of 44% of the advertisements that were surveyed. Basic consumer theory suggests that people purchase products according to the images they form of competing brands (see Heding, Knudtzen, and Bjerre, 2009). In the case of air travel, customers purchase a ticket with a particular carrier based not only on whether the carrier flies to the destination they wish to reach, but also based on the perceptions that traveller has of the competing brands. Such perceptions are based on a range of expectations which are established through the words, pictures, and images in advertisements as well as prior experience and reputation. As all airlines essentially sell an identical product (air travel from A to B), airlines are forced to differentiate their service from those of their competitors by
emphasizing different attributes of their service. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the resulting advertisements revolved around notions of service and airlines attempted to out-do one another with catchphrases which promised superlative passenger experiences, sumptuous levels of in-flight comfort, and elegant and discrete service. Panagra marketed themselves as the “World’s friendliest airline” (1965), while Pan Am reported that its service “Makes the going great” (1967). Elsewhere, Belgium’s SABENA promised “Savoir faire in the air” (1984), while Libyan Arab Airlines promoted itself as a “24 carat airline”. Very often, such promises were accompanied by photographs of female cabin crew offering fine wine and cuisine to pampered and contended-looking passengers. Far Eastern operators, in particular, were keen to emphasize the high levels of care and consideration their cabin crew bestowed upon their passengers but European airlines too sought to reassure potential passengers that their every need would be attended to. “How do you get to Spain and Europe?” asked Spain’s national airline in 1965, “Relaxed…with Iberia”. British Airways, meanwhile, promised that “We’ll take more care of you” (1980).

In addition to questions of comfort, concerns about price were increasingly starting to dominate the airline agenda and, from the mid 1960s onwards US airlines, in particular, were keen to promote the fact that the cost of flying often compared favourably with road or rail travel, especially when the time savings were factored in. Nevertheless, air tickets remained beyond the financial reach of many and, in an effort to increase the affordability of tickets and get more people into the air, major airlines began introducing a range of new products, including advance purchase, apex, and tourist class fares, in an effort to stimulate demand. “Think air travel is out of bounds for your budget?” asked TWA. With our “Sky Tourist Fares” you can “save dollars”. “Our Economy Tour Fares…make it easier than ever to fly away”, promised Pan Am in 1967. In order to help passengers pay for their tickets, US carrier TWA established a “Time-Pay Plan” that essentially enabled passengers to “fly now, pay
later” and Pan Am introduced an air travel card that allowed customers to pay in instalments and spread the cost of travel.

As well as arranging individual flights, airlines also promoted their own range of travel tours. Lufthansa’s “pick a tour” programme of the mid-1960s allowed customers to choose from 32 options, with the 30-day round the world package, which included stops at Athens, Beirut, Cairo, Bombay, Delhi, Agra, Calcutta, Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei, and Kyoto, reportedly being very popular and a bargain at $2,349. British Overseas Airways Corporation operated a similar package that would enable American tourists to sample the “best” of British history and European heritage. For $399, US tourists could undertake a two-week programme incorporating eight European countries, while the all-inclusive 15 day “Pageant of Britain” tour cost “only” $559 from New York. Through these tours, European carriers were seeking to promote inbound US aeromobility and encourage American tourists to bring over their cash.

The third, and by far the smallest, category, which accounted for the remaining 9% of all the advertisements, concerned the utilization of new aeronautical technology, particularly the jet engine. Airlines including BOAC, British Airways, Lufthansa, and Air France used the allure of jet flight to stimulate passenger demand and photographs and abstract images of certain jet aircraft in their fleets featured heavily in their marketing strategies during the 1960s and 1970s. The majority of these “technological” advertisements focused on the launch of a new aircraft into revenue service. Spanish airline Iberia promised American passengers that their daily DC-8 service from New York to Madrid in the 1960s was only operated using the new “extra power” jets (emphasis in original) while BOAC boasted that it “moves six years ahead of any other airline” on April 1st 1965 when their new “triumphantly swift, silent, [and] serene” Super VC-10 takes off for London.
The promotion of individual aircraft types was similarly apparent the following decade when Air France and British Airways became the only global operators of the supersonic Concorde. Both airlines were keen to emphasize the time-saving abilities of their new aircraft and marketed the new machines as something akin to time machines. Given that both airlines had sought to establish high-value brand propositions, superlatives were at a premium and British Airways had to anticipate Concorde’s launch into scheduled service with the promise that “Now Super Superflight is on the way”. In addition to marketing the benefits of particular aircraft, some carriers, most notably Lufthansa and Iberia, were keen to emphasize the strict maintenance regimes and employee training programmes that were performed to ensure passenger safety. Passengers thinking of flying on Iberia, for example, were promised that “only the plane gets more attention than you”. Such direct communication ensured that the advertisement did not passively wait for its meaning to be exposed, but rather, through a combination of visual and written stimuli, grabbed the reader’s attention and pushed two of the virtues of the airline’s product: safety (founded on technological capability and competency) and customer service.

Irrespective of the theme into which individual advertisements were categorized, all of the airline advertisements sought to promote pleasurable consumption. This pleasurable consumption could be of the airline product itself, via exquisite levels of in-flight service and convenient worldwide connections, of carefully selected and scripted foreign tourist spaces, or a combination of the two. Every advertisement sought to stimulate an emotional circuit in potential consumers so that alerting them to the prospect of obtaining a pleasurable experience created a desire to purchase the “enabling” product that would deliver it. In the case of air travel, the demand for aeromobility was derived from generating an individual or a collective desire to engage in new experiences that could not be encountered at home.
Conclusion

The enabling technology of the airplane and, in particular, the jet engine, undoubtedly facilitated the creation of new patterns of international mobility. However, these new spatialities of global aeromobility were shaped, to a large extent, by practices of place advertising and airline marketing which sought to alert passengers to new travel opportunities and promote the consumption of ever more varied and “exotic” destinations. Advertisements presented the world as the airlines wanted their consumers to see it – vast and exciting, yet also affordable and easily accessible. However, as Urry (1995) and others have convincingly argued, the manner in which individual travellers “gaze” at different spaces is highly subjective and the particular images and perceptions that are held of different places change over time in response to new socio-economic, geopolitical, and environmental circumstances.

Airline advertisements, in common with other forms of communication media, undoubtedly reflect the dominant socio-economic and socio-cultural trends of the time in which they were produced. In the case of the examples from *National Geographic*, a clear change in advertising form and function was observed. In the mid-1960s, for example, the majority of advertisements were emphasising the ease, safety, and utility of air travel. During the oil crises of the mid-1970s, the marketing message shifted towards the price of air tickets and the promotion of a range of flexible “fly now, pay later” payment options that, it was hoped, would entice new passengers into the air. By the 1980s, in-flight service has become a key selling point and important product differentiator but, from the early 1990s onwards, this was displaced by advertisements that stressed seamless worldwide air connectivity. The changing emphasis has the potential not only to inform research into the changing nature of transport and mobility but also on discourses of consumption and marketing.

Although based on a single source, the airline advertisements that appeared in *National Geographic* between 1964 and 2004 illustrate the myriad ways in which post-war
aeromobility in the United States has been promoted. While it is impossible to quantify the impact that exposure to these advertisements had on the travel patterns of *National Geographic* readers, the continued presence of airline advertisements over the forty-year time period demonstrates that individual airlines considered the magazine to be an important marketing and communication channel that represented an effective way to raise awareness of their brand and disseminate news of product innovations and route launches.

The advent of powered flight (and the subsequent growth of commercial air travel) during the twentieth century is often cited as a triumph of human ingenuity. Air travel facilitated globalisation and enabled people, goods, capital, and information to circle the world and the airline advertisements in *National Geographic* reflected this sense of optimism and achievement. However, recent concerns about long-term energy security and aviation’s environmental sustainability have caused certain sections of global society to question our reliance on air travel and try and imagine a world in which alternative modes of travel have replaced aviation as the dominant mode of long-distance mobility. Given that the mobility practices of the future are likely to be very different to those of the past, printed records including, but not limited to, advertisements will form increasingly valuable repositories of information that will enable us to unpick the ways in which social practices of mobility and consumption have changed over time.

References


Groves, P. R. (1926). Flying over Egypt, Sinai, and Palestine: Looking down upon the Holy Land during an air journey of two and a half hours from Cairo to Jerusalem. *National Geographic*, September, 312-335.


McKinley, A. C. (1932), Mapping the Antarctic from the Air. *National Geographic*, October, 470-485.


