

MERMAIDING AS A FORM OF MARINE DEVOTION

A case study of a mermaid school in Boracay, Philippines

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ABSTRACT: Mermaiding, the practice of wearing a mermaid tail and/or costume, and often swimming in costume, began in the mid-20th Century and has since grown into a global phenomenon. Despite its increasing popularity, there appears to be no research exploring mermaiding as a tourism activity. Consequently, this is the first study exploring the motivations and experiences of mermaid tourists, employing a case study approach at a mermaid school on the island of Boracay in the Philippines. Semi-structured interviews with one male and eight females, including an instructor/owner, revealed three major themes – fantasy, coastal and marine environment and the marine “other” – with a further overlapping of three core subthemes – power, beauty and hedonism. These subthemes helped explain the motivations to partake in such activities, which included being a waterperson, mythology, novelty and marine conservation. Despite a range of nationalities among the respondents (Brazil, Germany, New Zealand, United States, Philippines and Sweden), it is suggested that more extensive research on mermaiding be undertaken, especially at various locations around the globe.

KEYWORDS: Mertourism, human-aquatic relationships, mermaids, coastal and marine tourism, Boracay, Philippines

I think it's like a dream, you know? Everyone likes to dream a little bit.
(Mermaid photoshoot participant)

Introduction

Mermaiding, the practice of wearing a mermaid tail and/or costume, and often swimming in costume, began in the mid-20th Century (Kokai, 2017). The Weeki Wachee Mermaid Show in Weeki Wachee, Florida, one of the earliest underwater performance attractions, first opened in 1947 and has continued to be a frequently sold out show (Robertson, 2013; Weeki Wachee's History, n.d.). In the recent past, various aspects of mermaiding have kindled significant interest in popular culture and social media. Companies have sought to profit from the popularity of mermaid paraphernalia by producing all types of wearable and

decorative mermaid 'gear' (eg bras, leggings, makeup, cushions, tail blankets, pet costumes, souvenirs). The term "mermaid" describes a female mer (short for mermaid). To avoid the repetitive use of hyphenated mer terms, we use the term "mermaid" as inclusive of both female and male participation (eg, mermaid gear, rather than mer-gear) and using "mer" when possible. With the mermaid trend swimming strongly, being a professional mermaid has become a reputable career path (Porter, in press). It is common for highly successful, professional mermaids, such as Mermaid Mahina, to found a brand, which often includes the sale of mermaid tails (Mermaid Mahina, 2018). Mermaid tails vary not only in colour and patterns, but also in composition and design. The most popular choices include a standard hard plastic monofin encased in a Lycra skin, a moulded-rubber monofin, and custom-moulded silicon prosthetic tails. Prices for tails range from around \$100–150 USD for the Lycra and rubber monofins, into the thousands for custom-fitted silicon prosthetics.

The rapid commercialisation of mermaid gear has aided in the growth of mermaiding. Whereas mermaid tourism was previously limited to observing underwater mermaid performances, more recently mermaiding has evolved from a passive tourist experience into an active experience in which tourists don tails and 'become' mermaids either on the beach as a photographic opportunity or by partaking in in-water swims. Since one of the first mermaid schools – the Philippines Mermaid Swimming Academy (PMSA) – opened its doors in 2012, other mermaid schools have been rapidly opening around the world and are now present on at least five continents (Keate, 2018). In addition to becoming a popular tourist activity, mermaiding has been declared a fitness activity (see Sassman, 2017) and is considered a sport, at least by those who partake in the Merlympics.¹ A notable difference of mertourism, as compared to most other types of coastal and marine tourism, is the crossover with carnival-type or costumed celebrations (eg Ziakas and Coukas, 2013). Despite these activities there is little in the literature on mermaiding.

Robertson (2013) focused on the Western re-enchantment with mermaids, looking at both historical references and modern-day expressions or interpretations of the creature. Guitton (2017) explored health issues arising from mermaiding. He documented issues relating to both equipment (eg tail and fins) and the water environment (eg waterborne diseases). Guitton's study also found significant differences in mermaiding-related health issues between professionals and recreationists. Other scholars have looked at certain aspects of mermaids and tourism. Kokai's (2017) book probes into the theatrical history of aquatic spectacles, more particularly mermaid shows as novel tourist performances. Bom (2012) used the popular tourist attraction and iconic Danish sculpture of the Little Mermaid to analyse authenticity and meaning-making in heritage tourism. Her research followed the bronze statue to an expo in Shanghai and she found the culturally symbolic value of the Little Mermaid statue to be fixed despite its relocation. In a different investigation of culture and mermaids, Hayward (2018) explored the cultural representations of mermaids in Filipino society. His work references iconic mermaid statues in the Philippines and the discusses the use of mermaids in tourism marketing in the Philippines. While mermaids are gaining traction as a distinguished topic of research, to our knowledge, scholars have yet to study mermaiding as a tourism activity, what we refer to as "active mertourism". Therefore, this study aims to open the academic discussion to an increasingly popular tourist opportunity through the exploration of first-time mertourism experiences.

¹ The inaugural 2015 Merlympics were established by the International Mermaid Swimming Instructors Association (IMSIA). Both the 2015 and 2017 'games' were held in Germany. The 2018 Merlympics were held in Dorset, UK.

Research design

The genesis of this project began in 2012. The primary researcher (first author) was living in the Philippines during the 2012 opening of the PMSA and introduced the concept of a study on mermaid tourism. Following years of delightful reflexive and reflective discussions, the idea has developed into a postdisciplinary project in which we integrate multiple fields such as tourism studies, cosplay, conservation psychology and marine ecology to explore the experiences of first-time participants in mermaid schools. Given the postdisciplinary nature of the research and the newness of the phenomenon, we adopt a pragmatic approach as our research paradigm, in this case study exploration (see Schuh and Barab, 2007).

The motivations and habits of mer-school tourists will be explored through the following research questions:

1. Do demographic similarities exist between mertourists?
2. What are the main motivations of mertourists?
3. How do mertourists relate to and identify with marine environments?

Case studies provide important contributions to tourism research (Beeton, 2005). More specifically, they create context-dependent knowledge and, thus, the improvement of context-independent theories (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Additionally, case studies, although context-dependent, contribute transferable pieces of knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1978). Operating on the belief that a single case can prove critical, we follow Flyvbjerg's (2006) understanding of the central role of case study research in the social sciences:

One can often generalise on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalisation as supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalisation is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas 'the force of example' is underestimated. (ibid: 12)

Following the common approaches associated with case studies, our case study relied upon qualitative inquiry and interviews (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009).

Study site

There are over 7,000 islands in the Philippine archipelago with well over half of the Filipino population residing in coastal areas. It is no surprise that aquatic folkloric entities are present in the Filipino culture. Hayward (2018) provides a thorough account of both historic and modern references to mermaids. Though now threatened due to anthropogenic issues, dugongs were once abundant in the seas surrounding the Philippine Archipelago, perhaps, further fuelling mermaid folklore (see Kania, 2014). Today both dugongs and mermaids are recognised as tourism attractions in the Philippines.

Tourism is a rapidly growing economy in the Philippines with the government depending heavily upon its growth (Republic of the Philippines Department of Tourism, 2009). The Philippine Statistics Authority reported a 12.2% annual contribution to the Philippine economy in 2017 (Philippines Statistics Authority, 2018). The Philippines Mermaid Swimming Academy (PMSA) located on the island of Boracay, Philippines, was identified as the primary research site for this study (Figure 1) as it was one of the first organisations to open its doors as a 'mermaid school'. The school was opened by two Filipina entrepreneurs, one of whom is certified and trained as a diving and swimming instructor. As the school

evolved, the owners/operators decided to establish the International Mermaid Swimming Academy (IMSA), which is roughly based on a PADI (SCUBA school)-like tiered certification system as opposed to franchising the school. PMSA follows strict safety guidelines and practices. Similarly, IMSA focuses on safety and, in addition, marine conservation.

Boracay is a small island and just over 10 km² accessible only via ferry. Flights from major cities (eg Manila) arrive at Caticlan airport. Visitors are then bussed to the ferry terminal to access coastal locations. Best-known for its clear waters and sugar-like white sand, Boracay is a popular tourist destination for both foreign and domestic tourists, with these tourist groups arriving in near equal numbers. The Malay Municipal Office reported over two million annual visitors to Boracay in 2017 (*Boracay Informer*, 2018). The popularity of the island has led to cases of rapid and unregulated development and environmental concerns (Ong, Storey and Minnery, 2011). Recent research has highlighted the rapid urbanisation of the now densely populated island, and the resulting influx of migrant families (Maguigad, King and Cottrell, 2015). As a response to rapid environmental degradation, the current government declared the total closure of Boracay to tourism for a maximum of six months beginning on 26th April 2018. The closure statement was issued on 5 April 2018 with environmental rehabilitation of the island being the main reason for the closure (Palace, 2018). Fortunately, scheduled data collection fell just before the main closure; however, there was much public uncertainty surrounding the pending closure and the consequent ability to travel, and this likely affected visitor numbers and thus the number of potential participants at the PMSA at the time of our research.

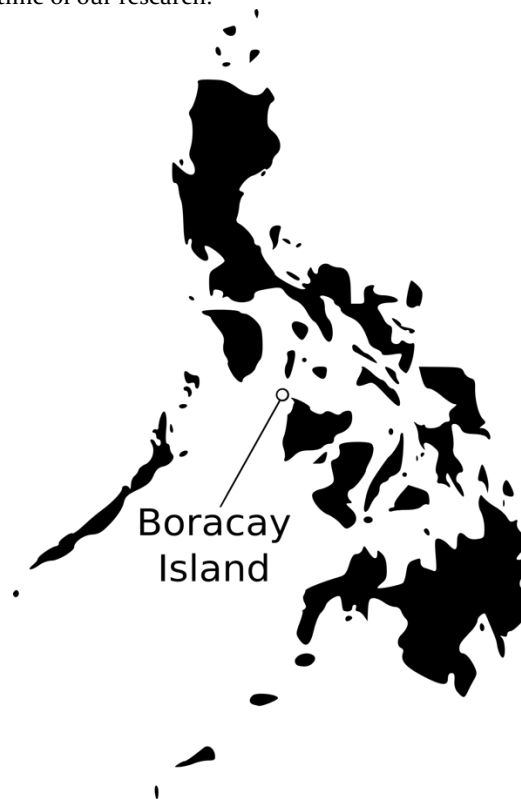


Figure 1 – Map of the Philippine archipelago showing location of Boracay

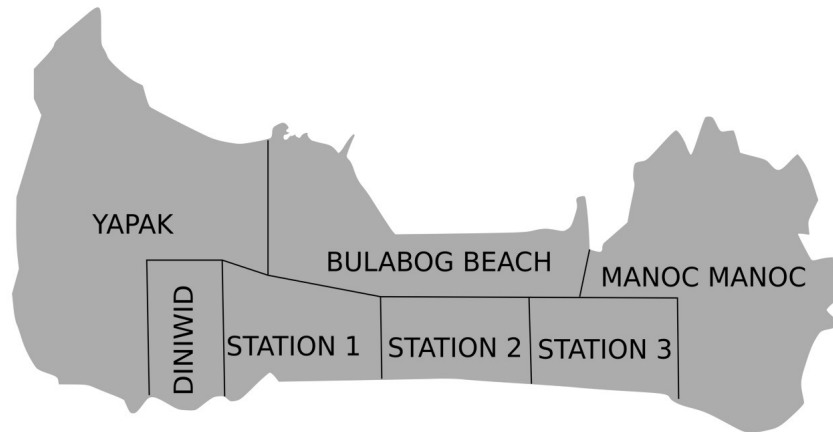


Figure 2 - Map of Boracay showing the main 'stations', or tourist areas.

The PMSA offers various types of activities such as mermaid swims, mermaid photo shoots, and a mermaid instructor course, which are based on the International Mermaid Swimming Instructors Association guidelines (see IMSIA, 2018). Potential offerings include both wet/in-water activities, and land-based photo shoots (see Figure 2). Table 1 presents a brief description of activities offered at the PMSA. The Academy utilises monofin technology with Lycra tails that are available in a range of sizes suitable for ages 3 years and older. Mermaid tails are also available for purchase on their website.

Table 1: Philippines Mermaid Swimming Academy activities

Name of activity		Brief description	Length of activity
Mermaid Photo Opportunity		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mermaid tail fitting and rental Directed photoshoot on dry sand and in knee deep water (swimming not permitted) 	30 minutes
*Introduction to Mermaid Swimming Lesson (IMSIA Level 1 or 2)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mermaid introduction Mermaid tail fitting and rental Tail etiquette Safety briefing Directed photoshoot Mermaid lesson including the four basic swim strokes and breathing techniques Freestyle session (maximum depth 3m) IMSIA certificate card 	90 minutes
Advanced Mermaid Swimming Lesson (IMSIA Level 3)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction to and theory on Advanced Mermaiding (maximum depth 10m) Learn proper use of snorkel gear Learn how to execute handstands, bubble-blowing and other underwater mermaid tricks Learn advanced breath-holding techniques Learn safe equalisation techniques Practice rescue and self-rescue exercises 	3 hours

**Mermaid Course (IMSIA Level 4)	Performer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance training using freediving techniques and/or with compressed air Mermaid performance makeup tutorial Professional videoshoot 	20 hours (5-day course)
***Mermaid Instructor Course (IMSIA Level 5)	Swimming Course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In-depth training manual Underwater photography workshop including basic editing Certification of completion template Waiver, student forms and instructor form templates One-year membership of IMSIA 	20 hours (5-day course)
Scuba Mermaid (for certified divers only)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction to Mermaid Swimming Lesson (see above) Mermaid tail fitting and rental Scuba gear rental One tank boat dive 	4 hours

Notes: IMSIA=International Mermaid Swimming Instructors Association. *The Introduction to Mermaid Swimming is also available as a private lesson. **Prerequisites include: PADI certified SCUBA diver or certified freediver, IMSIA Levels 1, 2, and 3, Water safety training certification. ***Prerequisites include: PADI certified SCUBA diver or certified freediver, IMSIA Levels 1, 2, and 3, CPR and First Aid certificate (Philippines Mermaid Swimming Academy [PMSA], 2014).



Figure 2. Example of a mermaid photo shoot. The participant is directed by the mermaid instructor (indicated with an X) to lie in various poses while the PMSA instructor/employee (shoots photos with the participant's own device).



Figure 2 - A 'mermaid' posing on the beach. It is commonplace for passers-by/tourists to take photos of the activity despite having no involvement in the activity and/or relation to the mermaid participant.

Semi-structured interviews

As the study was exploratory in nature, the goal for this sample was to better understand motivations for participation in mermaid-related activities. Criteria for inclusion included ability to participate in English, being 18 years of age or older. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over a one-week field visit from 9-15 April 2018 with participants of the Philippines Mermaid Swimming Academy, Boracay. PMSA is located beachside at Station 1 (refer to Figure 2). These semi-structured interviews were based on a pre-designed common set of questions. The interview format was near identical with indicative questions asked in the same order. Despite the multiple nationalities of participants, all interviews were conducted in English. The length of visitor interviews varied between around 10 minutes to 25 minutes. During the final evening of the field visit, the co-founder of the mermaid school was interviewed as a key actor. Not surprisingly, this interview format varied significantly from those of the participants and lasted beyond 45 minutes. Months prior to the start of the research, the research team discussed research protocols with PMSA via email correspondence. These communications contributed significantly to the design of the research. Participants were recruited with the help of PMSA introducing the research prior to the beginning of the activity or immediately following the activity. When possible, the

primary researcher would join the activity/lesson either on the beach or in the water (without a tail) to familiarise herself with the participants and to gain an understanding of PMSA in-water protocols. In the case that mermaid swims were overlapping, as was the case with a regular mermaid swim and private mermaid swim, the primary researcher would exit the water in attempts to recruit additional participants. During the time of fieldwork, 13 visitors participated in a mermaid photo shoot and/or swim. Of these visitors, eight met the eligibility criteria for participation in the research at a response rate of 100% of eligible participants, a total of eight participants were interviewed during the course of six interviews. It is noted that the five additional participants (all females under 12 years of age) were willing to participate; however, they were unable to consent due to age restrictions imposed by our ethics application (AUTEC application 18/105). In one case, the primary research spoke candidly with a child's mother. Notes from the conversation were later recorded as field journal notes. In a second case, three of the female adolescents were accompanied by their grandmother who consented to participation in the research. In the third case, no communications were made with the group.

Interviews were conducted in public locations at Station 1 (refer to Figure 2), either at the mermaid headquarters located in the FishEye Dive Shop or on the beach nearby. The interviews had the "feel" of casual conversations rather than formal research given the subject matter, beach setting and the attire of both the researchers and the participants. Interviewees were offered a beverage (eg coconut water) while the research protocols, including informed consent was explained.

Data Analysis and Results

All interviews were recorded using a mobile phone and a recording app (Sound Recorder) and later transcribed verbatim by a research assistant. Transcribed interviews were manually coded according to the conventions of Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcription records were supported by field journal notes, which included the primary researcher's reflection on participation in a mermaid swim².

During the preparation for this research, many peers (both academics and non-academics) were, understandably, intrigued by the topic. Similar levels of interest were mirrored by the participants in the research. During introductory conversations, after being introduced to the research subject, nearly all participants re-confirmed the subject of the research: mermaid tourism/mer-tourism. Interview questions sought to document participant demographics, motivations for participation and participants' relationships with aquatic environments. In total eight tourists participating in mermaiding were interviewed. In addition, an interview was conducted with the co-owner/operator of PMSA.

Demographics

Brief demographic information including gender, nationality, and age were collected. Other demographic data such as relationship status, employment status, and income that are commonly collected in established fields of tourism research (eg surf tourism) were not deemed as important to this exploratory research of which the main aim was to explore mer-tourism participants' relationships with the marine environment. During the week of

² On the final day of data collection, the primary researcher joined a group swim taking the role of customer-participant. She participated in the majority of the mermaid 'lesson'; however, she exited the water early to collect interviews from a private swim lesson.

data collection, 12 of the 13 total PMSA customers were female. Eight of these thirteen customers participated in the research. Participant ages ranged from 30 years to 61 years (mean = 37 years). Five nationalities including, Brazilian, German, Swedish, New Zealander and United States American were represented. Table 2 summarises the demographic data as well as the types of activity of the participants with either participant-assigned or researcher-assigned pseudonyms.

Table 2: Demographic details of the eight participants

Pseudonym	Type of activity	Age	Nationality
Carla	Photo Opportunity	33	Brazilian
Paolo	Photo Opportunity	33	Brazilian
Carmen	Photo Opportunity	33	Brazilian
Inga	Introduction to Mermaid Swimming Lesson	30	German
Nana	Introduction to Mermaid Swimming Lesson	61	New Zealander
Jennifer	Introduction to Mermaid Swimming Lesson	25	US American
Jill	Introduction to Mermaid Swimming Lesson	29	US American
Camilla	Advanced Mermaid Swimming Lesson	50	Swedish

Motivations for participation

As one aim of this research was to explore participants' motivations for participating in marine tourism, general questions regarding length of stay were asked as well as how participants came to know about the mermaid school and if it was a main motivation for travel to Boracay. All of the participants had learned about the PMSA prior to their trip and cited it as a main motivation for or an important component of their travel to Boracay and/or the Philippines in general. Social media was an important information channel for learning about the PMSA. For example, Inga, Carmen and Paolo first learned about the mermaid school on the social media outlet Instagram. Others, like Carla and Jill, were led to the PMSA as a result of an existing enchantment with all things mermaid. The novelty of participating in the mermaid school was a specific draw. For example, during the interview Mermaid Jill stated:

I'm obsessed with mermaids. And I've seen all these videos with girls with tails and stuff. So when we were researching things to do here, this [PMSA] popped [up] and I knew we had to do it.

In a further example of mermaid enchantment, Camilla had substituted her annual surf trip with the mermaid school and planned her entire travel around PMSA offerings with the goal of becoming certified as an advanced level mermaid (ISMIA Level 3) over the course of two to three days:

I googled 'things to do in Boracay' and then I found the mermaiding and I just got super excited and thought "wow, can you do that?" The colourful fins and the costume. When there has been a costume party, I have always said if I go to one, I want to be a mermaid (laughing).

Social media sharing was an important motivating factor for many first-time mermaids. Given that understanding social media motivations was not a goal of this research, the desire to share the experience on social media was coded as hedonism, rather than narcissism or egocentricism. All participants who took part in the Photo Opportunity activity (see Table 2) were excited about sharing photos on their social media accounts. Even Paolo, who, when

asked what it felt like to have the tail on, said he felt "a little ashamed", stated he was eager to share the photos on social media. Social media sharing was also important for participants in the swimming activities. Jennifer and Jill mentioned that the "look" was important. They had both purchased special swimwear for the lesson. In describing this, Jennifer emphasised that: "because my top was blue and orange. I had to have the blue one [tail]". Field journal notes reflect this, indicating that "colour-coordination was a priority for all participants, and in many cases tail choice took an extraordinarily long time". Likewise, Mermaid Camilla, who planned to purchase mermaid gear post-activity, explained that "choosing a colour would be the difficult part".

Participants' relationship to the marine environment

Beaches and marine settings were considered important spaces by all of the participants, generating the theme "coastal and marine environment". Further, many declared the broader marine realm, including island spaces, to be personally significant. This was expressed in multiple forms such as identifying as a marine conservationist, water-person and/or water recreationist. All participants reported frequent participation in other water sports such as surfing, stand-up paddleboarding (SUP), kayaking and/or snorkelling or Scuba diving.

Skill and ability were identified as significant by those participating in any activity – both photo opportunity and in-water. All participants communicated their surprise at the difficulty of mermaiding. Nana, who identified as a competent waterwoman stated:

the effort it took to coordinate stuff – that was the biggest surprise for me (laughing). I'm reasonably coordinated and it was like "if you don't do it right, you roll around like a ball".

Camilla, an avid surfer and wakeboarder, noted the difficulties with the associated free-diving skills:

The breathing. I think my breathing is really bad. I'm in bad shape. After the three metres I felt I have run five kilometres.

Even those remaining on dry land for the photo opportunity commented on the weight of the tail: "It's hard to move your body because you have one leg!" (Carla). The level of skill required "to mermaid" was confirmed by the co-founder of the PMSA who explained:

That's why we require qualified swimming instructors with a water safety background ... you can usually prevent an accident before it happens. Compared to someone [untrained] who's like: Oh, a mermaaaaid! Just jump in and look pretty! There are these misconceptions that we want to avoid and our instructors never assume anything.

The skill and ability associated with mermaiding translated into an additional alternate theme: the desire to be a 'marine inhabitant'; this was summarised as 'marine "other"'. A specific query asked participants if they identified as a mermaid. The desire to identify as either a mermaid or a marine inhabitant was expressed by many, as summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Participants' relationships with the marine realm

Participant	Response to identifying as a mermaid	Regarding marine conservation
Carla	I always wanted to be a fish or a mermaid (laughing).	[When I'm in the water], I clean up debris, like plastic. I picked up a few pieces during the photo shoot.
Camilla	I always wanted to be one although of course you cannot be one because they don't exist but, you know ...	I don't eat fish or seafood. Then there is the part with all the rubbish floating around, in the ocean. So I actually plan to take all my garbage with me back home, after this week. And I try very much to not even use stuff so that it becomes garbage. I'm very worried about plastic and what it does to the ocean and I know that fish eat plastic and then humans eat the fish, so yeah I'm thinking a lot about those things.
Inga	Everybody wants to become a mermaid (laughing).	I speak up when I see fish feeding and report it. I don't support that at all. When we see rubbish in the ocean, we pick it up.
Mermaid	Yes, but for me it's probably, it's not so much about being a mermaid, but being back in the water ... underwater.	I identify as a marine conservationist. Whenever we go for a walk along the beach, we're picking up plastic bags or any sort of rubbish that might come back.
Jill	I mean I say that a lot, yeah [I am a mermaid].	I care about the environment, but I don't do anything actively.
Jennifer	No. [Does not identify as a mermaid]	I'm a vegan that hates straws and plastic.

This identity as “other” in some cases had multiple layers, which were interpreted as subthemes. The association as “other” vis-à-vis a mermaid identity was thought to be a form of identification as a water-person. This was apparent in those desiring to be a fish or simply to be connected to the water. Additionally, many of those identifying as a marine inhabitant expressed marine-conservation oriented beliefs; these are described in Table 3.

Beyond the desire to be a merperson, participants also associated power with mermaids. Jennifer's appreciation of mermaids included their ability to “turn men to stone!”³ Similarly, Jill described mermaids as being “powerful women”. In discussing re-enchantment and embodiment, the PMSA co-founder explained mermaids as embodying “being strong and protecting yourself, and being your own person”. She also eluded to the darker side of this power, referring to mermaids as “man-eaters” and “temptresses”. Beauty was also repeatedly associated with mermaids, evidenced through explicit descriptions: “They are pretty; they are beautiful” (Camilla). Another form of attention was derived from other tourists/passers-by who were simply observing the activity (see also Figure 23). Jennifer stated, “We were so

³ While this actually blends mermaid mythology with that of the Medusa, it is more important that this comment matches her perception of mermaid powers.

popular for the tourists", while Mermaid Jill said, "We're like celebrities now". According to the PMSA co-founder:

Whether people are interested or not [in mermaids], when they see someone on the beach with a mermaid tail, they're like "Ahhhh, there's a mermaid!" even though they know they are in a costume. It attracts attention.

The mythology surrounding mermaids was identified as an important factor motivating participation. This idea was interpreted as a subtheme under the broader theme of "fantasy". An exemplary statement describing this came from the musings of Camilla: "You know that they don't exist, but you still want to think that they do". This allure towards the imaginary was further evident in the partner of Inga who, during the interview, shared her detailed acquisition of the mermaid mythology:

When I was younger I totally believed that mermaids are real. We were in Alabama and my dad had a motor sailboat ... One of my dad's best friends was a boat captain/sailor. ... He showed me pictures of mermaids ... Some of them [the photos] were blurred ... but they looked so real ... HE completely believed in them, something that comes off weird when you're an adult. There are all kinds of tales ... But in the last decade or maybe 15 years, there are creatures that we have discovered. Creatures that they always thought were a myth! ... When we discovered the real [giant] squid I remember, immediately my thought was: "I wonder if this mermaid story could be real?"

The emergent themes are summarised in Figure 3.

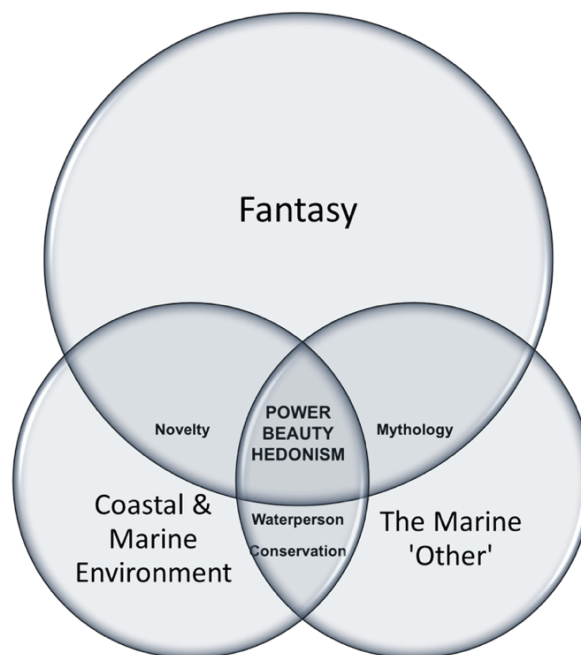


Figure 3. Major themes and subthemes of the experiences and motivations of mermaid tourists, based on interviews

The organisation of the Venn diagram in Figure 3 is significant as there was notable overlap between the three main themes. “Fantasy” was placed at the top-centre and is considered a critical theme in this piece of research. The circle depicting “fantasy” is largest. Participant responses indicated that the desire for mermaids to exist was what triggered the imagination and provided an underpinning for the desires and motivations for participation. In essence, mermaiding and the mertourism experience are contingent on the element of fantasy. Additionally, the intersection of “fantasy” was considered important in the identification of the other two broad themes, “coastal and marine environment” and “marine ‘other’”. Though these two themes are closely linked and further entwined by the two subthemes “waterperson” and “conservation”, the element of fantasy was considered divisive. For example, a waterperson – an adventurous and skilled user of aquatic spaces (eg a fisher, swimmer, freediver or sailor) – is often metaphorically compared to something “other” (ie non-human or sub human), such as a fish. More specifically, water lovers and waterpersons are often described as “having gills”. However, this identification as fish-“other” differs from the “other” of mermaid or merman. A waterperson can be “like a fish” without embodying the sliminess, scaliness, or other less-desirable traits of a fish. Alternatively, a mer as marine “other”, is dependent on the embodiment of both the physical (eg tail and/or costume) and non-physical traits (eg power, beauty); in other words, fantasy. The second common subtheme, “conservation”, was present in participants who identified as merfolk as well as those who did not. This desire to preserve the marine realm was associated with an affinity for coastal and marine environments as well as identifying as a marine inhabitant. The PMSA co-founder also described the potential for mermaids to capture an audience and become conduits for marine conservation outreach:

And so, for the kids to be engaged, sometimes you know when you do a talk, it's “blah blah blah” and it gets boring and people turn off, but with children it's like: “oh it's a mermaid!!!” Even with the adults the focus is there. So you catch them as a mermaid and then you try to impart the conservation ... And if you teach the children, the parents well, the kids will shame the parents (laughing). Cause that's the best way to do it!

The subtheme “mythology” connected the broader themes of “fantasy” and “marine ‘other’”. It is noted that, in the case of being mer-“other”, fantasy is ever-present. However, what separated the two broader themes was the idea that identifying as ‘other’ is possible, albeit dependent on fantasy, while “fantasy” as a theme encompassed the idea of believing, or wanting to believe in, something surreal, magical or even impossible.

The final relationship among the three main themes was between “fantasy” and “coastal and marine environment”. As previously mentioned, coastal and marine environments are important to participants. Mermaiding is thought to be one of the few, if not the only, way of combining fantasy in a coastal and marine tourism setting. Participant responses suggested that mermaiding was a different way of expressing or reinforcing a relationship with coastal and marine spaces, and a novel way at that. This is underlined by Nana comment: “just being back in the water ... being underwater” (see Table 3). The subtheme “novelty” was used to describe the originality associated with mermaiding and mertourism as an expression of a human-aquatic relationship.

At the centre of the three major themes were three core-subthemes: “power”, “beauty”, and “hedonism” (indicated in capital letters in Figure 3). These principal subthemes were also interrelated with the other subthemes. The idea of power was related to the movement

through the coastal and marine space; yet it was not only mythology-related power (ie “turning men to stone” or “being a temptress”), but also the physical power required by mermaiding and the power to engage people in marine conservation through mermaiding. The idea of mermaids as beautiful creatures was mentioned by many. It was the fantasy of acting as something imaginary, yet also the act of becoming something “other”. Given the acute focus of participants towards choosing tail colours and costumes, this “transformation” to a mermaid was considered fundamental. The final core-subtheme, “hedonism,” translated to the enjoyment of the experience. For example, participants gained pleasure from being in the marine and coastal environments, from “believing” in the idea of mermaids, and becoming something extraordinary. Similar satisfaction was derived from ideas presented within the other subthemes, from sharing the experience on social media to finding another form in which to express one’s identity as a waterperson (ie the human-aquatic relationship).

Discussion

Our sample suggested a global awareness of mermaiding with our participants representing multiple ($n = 5$) countries. According to PMSA co-owner/operator, the split of domestic and foreign tourists is influenced by the season, with more Filipino tourists typically participating during the Filipino summer holiday (March through May/June) and more foreigners during the ‘winter’ months. The ages of participants were varied and would have varied further, had our ethics application allowed for interviews with minors. While it may be expected that an activity such as mermaiding would attract youth rather than adults, our results showed otherwise. Further, the co-founder/operator of PMSA estimated youth to account for only around 20–30% of the school’s total annual participants. Mirroring the professional mermaiding industry globally, our results indicated that recreational mermaiding remains a female-dominated activity. To address research question three, we conclude that while there are similarities in some demographics, mostly in gender, mermaiding is an activity that appeals to a wide audience. The following sections explore the other research objectives regarding participant motivations and how mermaids relate to the marine environment.

Fantasy, coastal and marine environments, and the marine “other”

Although this piece of research represents one of the first investigations into mermaid tourism, some of the emergent themes have been previously exposed in other fields, such as in tourism and recreation. Coastal and marine environments have long been considered important spaces in both the tourism and recreation literature (Lück, 2015; Orams and Lück, 2014). While our findings overlapped with research exploring other types of marine and coastal activities (eg Scuba diving, surfing, beach going), we found our main emergent themes from mermaiding to be closely related to concepts that have been associated with surfing, as previously reported in the surf literature. Clearly, both mermaiding and surfing are most commonly associated with coastal and marine environments. Many of our participants actively sought out these types of spaces both for travel (eg beaches), but also frequented these spaces outside of organised travel. For many, travel is often seen as a way to experience something foreign and different; however, the repetitious pursuit of environments similar to people’s everyday experience is reported in the surf literature where surfers, despite having a “home wave,” frequently travel to surf different waves (Barbieri and Sotomayor, 2013). For surfers, this desire to seek out new, yet, similar spaces, is driven by the fantasy of the perfect wave (Ponting and McDonald, 2013; Towner, 2016). For surfers, there will always be a “more perfect” wave, giving way to an endless chase, or, as stated by Ponting and McDonald, surfers invoke “their own past embodied experiences to engage in surfing fantasies triggered by Nirvanic imagery” (2013: 421). This belief – that something superior is attainable – that serves as motivation for surfers was similarly evident in mermaiding

participants. Participants from our study found motivation in the mythology of mermaids. Their performances of being mermaids served as a semiotic advancement of the fantasy. Again, similar ritualistic expressions have been documented among surfers as waterpersons, with scholars describing this associated spirituality as an aquatic nature religion (Taylor, 2007). This further establishes the linkages of the environment and the marine 'other'. Becoming a mermaid, or the marine "other", even as a temporary experience, provided participants an opportunity to create and perform a "reflexive personal mythology" (Robertson, 2013, n.p.). Ultimately, our mermaiding participants want to believe in something better and more magical and actively pursue this utopic image; this is something the surf literature refers to as "nirvanification" (Ponting & McDonald, 2013: 421) and something the sparse literature on mermaiding describes as "contemporary re-enchantment" (Robertson, 2013: n.p.). In the case of both mermaids and surfers, becoming "other" means becoming something extraordinary, something perceived as better than "plain-old-human", something a bit more wild and exotic (Robertson, 2013; Rutsky, 1999).

Waterpersons, conservationists, novelties and mythologies

Some subthemes have been discussed in the above section. For example, the myth that something imaginary exists, be it mermaids or the perfect wave. The other subthemes require further discussion as well. It is well documented that surfers have created a culture in and out of the water (see Rutsky, 1999). Likewise, mermaids have a dry and wet merculture (Robertson, 2013). There are a multitude of factors that contribute to identification within these subcultures. Gear, apparel, and accessories are among some of the tangible elements, while online forums or in-water pods⁴ provide other expressions of belonging (Robertson, 2013). For in-water efforts, skill remains a critical component of a water-based activity. Participant responses from first-time mermaids illustrated the importance of having the skills to be confident in the water (as a mermaid) and being associated with the water. This delineation as and theme of "waterperson" is, thus, dependent on skill, identity and practice. Taylor (2007) examined the "practice" of surfing, explaining it as a ritual and spiritual behaviour or expression. This, too, has been seen in mermaiding where mermaids leave their weight (both metaphorically and physically) behind as they take to the water (Robertson, 2013; The Drs, 2017). It is through such critical expressions that mermaiding takes the form of a ritualistic or spiritual practice and participants gain an affinity for the aquatic realm.

Porter (in press) suggested the idea of a marine "other" identity; more specifically, identifying as a marine inhabitant is linked to the desire to conserve the environment. Likewise, Robertson (2013) discussed marine activism as an often shared role of professional mermaids. This idea was reiterated by the co-owner/operator of the mermaid school, but was also conveyed by some first-time mermaids. The notion that even first-time mermaids are inclined to participate in conservation efforts suggests that finding modes of maintaining the human-aquatic relationship, be it ritualistic, spiritual or something else entirely, is important.

Certainly, the novelty of the experience contributed to its perceived value as a form of expression. It was something that participants were anxious about and had planned in advance to share on various social media outlets. Multiple factors and subthemes contributed to this hedonistic desire to share, such as the uniqueness, the mythology and the marine "other" identity via merculture.

⁴ Many mermaids join community groups, termed 'pods'. These pods meet at aquatic spaces such as lakes, pools and beaches for social swims.

Power, beauty and hedonism

The core subthemes shared commonalities with all main themes and, further, they were interconnected among core and non-core subthemes. The need for physical power is apparent in a variety of watersports, including mermaiding. However, the power associated with mermaiding went beyond the physical. For the mermaids, power was also manifested in the marine “other” (Robertson, 2013 reported similar findings). The belief that mermaids could impart harm to men was mentioned repetitively. Of course, fantasy and mythology were at the core of this belief, yet the potential to be this powerful marine “other” was interpreted as a motivating factor. Still, participation required physical power. To effectively propel oneself through the water requires physical strength and coordination. In addition, mermaiding provided an outlet to be both powerful and beautiful at the same time. The fantasy elements surrounding this practice largely contributed to the core-subtheme of hedonism. In essence, mermaiding participants were being something they could not, challenging the boundaries of real and imaginary and doing it in a utopic location.

Despite the notable commonalities between our themes and those found in the surf literature, we do not mean to suggest the two activities are alike. While there are some similarities between mermaiding and surfing, such as taking place in a marine setting and requiring physical skills, they are notably different types of recreation and/or sport. We identify their equivalences as related to the concept that participation in either activity is seen by its participants as a form of maintenance of or devotion to (see Taylor, 2007) their human-aquatic relationships.

Limitations

Although we devoted one week specifically to this project, the sample size of mertourists in this study was notably low ($n = 8$). A crucial contributing factor to the low sample size may have been the impending closure of Boracay at the time of research. The closure of Boracay was announced well after the fieldwork had been planned, and travel arrangements made. During the time of the research, many Boracay residents were still unsure as to how they would be affected by the closure. Additionally, many residents of and visitors to the Philippines were uncertain about the closure and the associated implications (field notes). At the time of writing, it is still unclear when or how Boracay will reopen. For future research efforts in Boracay, a longer field visit should be considered. Additionally, interviews by video-link with past participants may supplement future samples. A final suggestion is to explore participant experiences in other mermaid schools around the globe.

Conclusion

This research explored the experiences of mertourists for the first time. Fantasy was a critical element in the mermaid tourism experience (see Porter, in press), which contributed to the novelty of the experience as well as supporting the notion that the unbelievable was possible, even if only for a few hours. Perhaps most interesting was the concept that mermaiding is another form of expressing and/or reinforcing the human-aquatic relationship. This, for many, was seen as a way to strengthen their aquatic identification and advance their skills as a waterperson. In essence, mermaiding was seen as an expression of ‘waterness’.

The crossover between fantasy and aquatic-human relationships is remarkable. While mermaiding may initially be perceived as a trivial activity, our findings suggest that through diverse forms of human-aquatic expressions, such as mermaiding, there is significant potential to (re)connect participants, as well as the general public with the marine environment. As expressed by Nana, “I think it’s a really good way of getting the next

generation, especially girls, to think about the marine environment ... It appeals to the imagination". Mermaiding is, thus, one expression of affection for and a form of devotion to the human-aquatic relationship that can be used to sustain it.

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