# CAN MIMETIC THEORY NURTURE TOURISTS TO RENOUNCE IDOLIZING NEOLIBERAL MASS-PRODUCED DESIRES?

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The article posits that if the tourist's lack of being is addressed (as being responsible for mass touristic consumption), a thorough sustainable tourism could be proposed by a conscientious industry of tourism empowered by a social marketing. Many believe that "idealistic values regarding environmental and social goals can be translated into economic assets". Hence, this article raises the question of whether connecting personal idealistic values, as well as self-realization with social marketing can achieve profound social change. In addition, whether or not the role of social marketing in addressing the tourist's Girardian lack of being could help in saving us from the "apocalypse.

**Keywords:** Social Marketing, Sustainable Tourism, Mimetic Theory, Self-Realization, Mass Tourism.

#### INTRODUCTION

In his post 9/11 essays, stated that if the apocalypse were to come, it would not come provoked by a punitive god angry at human beings' offenses against the divine as "men" were sufficiently powerful and clueless to do it themselves through their violent misdeeds against the innocent nature, environment and human beings. Indeed the race after growth illustrates that violence in the coronavirus crisis transports out by our neo-liberal system identified as a cause of the latter interdependent crises instead of being a victim (Milano & Koehns, 2022). More than ever the current (2022) environmental and sanitary crises, being apocalyptical in a Girardian sense, reveal how our commodity economy is destructive. What is more, that relentless race spares no industry, including tourism.

Victims are numerous and encompass the human, animal, natural, environmental and atmospheric world in today's prolongation of the post Covid crisis provoked by an anthropogenic climate change and zoonotic pandemics; hence, Girard's mimetic theory as anthropology of the victim can be helpful to answer the article's question. In his theory Girard, literary critic, and philosophical anthropologist unravels the idea that human beings imitate each other's desires, which often leads to rivalries and violent conflicts. The latter are partially solved by finding a scapegoat. This theory is to him anthropological as it answers to the age-old questions "what is to be human" and "how do you explain violence" in human behaviors believed that since the origins of manhood paradoxically "humans had dealt with the problem of violence with lesser violence" (Internet encyclopedia of philosophy) in finding a scapegoat to bring back temporarily peace to the community. It is late in his life that he identified that with modernity, violence had reached a new momentum with its 'escalation to extremes' as epitomized with 9/11 but also with the worsening of our environmental crisis of global warming (2009).

For what concerns us, to this "rise to the extremes" extends to our dominant cult of consumerism essentially driven by mimetic theory and its apparatus of advertising, marketing and management to excite the consumption appetites and their respective desires. Girard's analysis "reveals the link between the cult of consumerism and the sacrifice of the Earth: the Earth itself becomes the victim, the necessary oblation and scapegoat" (Kirwan, 2020).

If tourism has been examined at the anthropological level, no one to my knowledge has examined tourism and tourists from the Girardian anthropological approach that is according to the concept at the origin of the mimetic desire, namely the insufficiency of being.

"Mimetic desire is driven by our sense of inadequacy or insufficiency," Girard arrives at a profound insight: our desire is not fundamentally directed toward the other's object but toward the other's being. We perceive the other to possess a fullness of being that we lack. Mimetic desire devolves into violence when our quest after the being of the other remains unfulfilled".

Such finding is important because it stands at the root of all our behaviors including our consumption patterns responsible for mass consumption and its responsibility in the Anthropocene and its apocalyptical global warming. Yet such abstract theoretical finding is of no prescriptive use if management and marketing cannot take into account and transform through their influence consumers' behaviors in order to contribute positively to the Anthropocene (Bennett et al., 2016).

Therefore, to the great ills of our environmental and social crises (epitomized by the alarming daunting global warming and the indecent screaming growing gap between the rich and the poor), great juxtaposition of philosophical, anthropological, economic, managerial and marketing fields side by side are sought in this article; to hopefully envision some possible changes to prevent apocalyptical scenarios. Consequently, the daunting interdependent crises we are living require a complex multidisciplinary approach.

This essay is structured in the following way. Following this introduction, the essay examines the ills of tourism as a way to observe if they abide to a common model of tourism. Second, the essay inspects the model at the origin of the homo turisticus, which is the homo economicus responsible partially for sacrificial economics and global warming. In section three, the essay examines tourism seen as an ontological illness or lack of being observable as if it lies at the root of the ills it begets. In section four the essay presents prescriptions and explores the journey up to the tourist aiming to renounce idolizing neoliberal mass-produced desires (i.e. *via* negativa). Finally yet importantly, the final remarks will inspect the findings concerning the Girardian ontological illness or lack of being and their implications in the possible positive role of social marketing to modify consuming behaviors as a way to contribute to a positive Anthropocene through a genuine sustainable tourism.

#### **Destructive Dimensions of Tourism**

Tourism has had and continues to have its positive characteristics in many ways. Anthropologically, tourism nurtures curiosity and induces people to travel, which in turn empowers them socially. In the eighteenth century during the Enlightenment era, tourism was seen as serving peace in bringing people closer and by the same token, nations. Yet, in the second part of the twentieth century tourism became a destructive behavior supported by "a political and marketing gimmick (opening) the door to unwelcome mass tourism" (Poelina, & Nordensvard, 2018). Destructive tourism owns a gamut of dimensions and facets: these are short stays in countries with attractive sites and/or climates requiring long periods. The types of touristic travels that are achievable by doing the latter are achieved without real cultural

exchange possibilities with the inhabitants of the visited country and without empowering the poor reinforcing the growing division between the rich and the poor of the touristic spot (Poelina, 2018). This growing division generates spell-bounding nuisances: traveling became a means of transport that consumes fossil energy and emits greenhouse gases (among others), staying in hotels, clubs or RBNBs (often distorting the local architecture and town planning. The growing division also refers to consuming imported or improperly cultivated foods, poor souvenirs and sites visited with subsequent waste production and site degradation. Studies describe the volumes and damage caused by international tourism (including passenger distances, kerosene, fuel, and abundant weight of waste (Gössling et al., 2013). More generally, some of the dimensions of violence covered in tourism (among many others) encompass the significant problem of the sheer volume of tourism (Gössling et al., 2013), hospitality and violence (Hoel & Einarsen, 2003), the commodification of culture, structural violence (Büscher & Fletcher, 2017). They also encompass the connection between power, vanity and its impact of the deviant tourist's behaviour on the host population, tourism's impact on environmental and social degradation (Balsalobre-Lorente et al., 2020), or the dire need to set limits on the culture consumerism and pro-growth ideology (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020, 2021, Büscher & Fletcher, 2015). They all relevantly describe the ills of tourism and tourists caused mostly by neoliberalism: that is the over-tourism excesses as seen with the mass tourism model of the Mediterranean region (through the internationalization of Spanish hotel companies or balearization or Latino americanization. Mass tourism has had negative impacts but so do "modern day alternative tourists or so-called sustainable tourists". See also the research that is done on overtourism, which described and tried to reinterpret concepts such as carrying capacity, Doxey's Iridex model, or the Tourism Areas life Cycle (Koens et al., 2018). Hence, today's extraordinary context of the Covid crisis attached to global warming caused by mass consumption forces us to reconsider our current model of tourism and its type of tourist (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

#### The Homo Economicus Model and Its Offspring the Homo Turisticus

Referring to models, one comes to mind when trying to understand what influenced and molded the destructive tourism and its tourists. The Homo economicus heralds that model, which epitomizes humans as rational agents who are narrowly self-interested, basing their choices on a consideration of their own personal "utility function" i.e. the rational choice theory. Homo economicus uses rational assessments and attempts to maximize utility as a consumer and economic profit as a producer. Expected to be selfish, the homo oeconomicus instrumentalizes people and nature. So much so that "the modern citizen" has fully become "unbeknownst to himself, homo economicus" (Dupuy, 2013) and has become colorblind to ethical and environmental stakes. That model has begot its respective model within tourism (i.e., the homo turisticus, which encapsulates a certain tourist model). Coined by French university professors in an ironic documentary made in 2013, the term homo turisticus describes a man that abides to mass tourism or "idiotic" tourism. Interestingly enough, idiotes in Greek, refers to a man or woman interested merely with his or her personal affairs and not with political affairs or the ones of the "City". Translated to today's reality, this means only concerned with one's comfort and pleasure and not caring for the common good. Such tourist epitomizes the offshoot of the normalizing of pathological narcissism in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American culture (Lasch, 2018), which currently prevails in our glocalized world. Narcissism coupled with speed and growth has had the effect of time bomb on the planet due to a juggernaut of commercial violence. Tourists like any consumers mostly greedy became like spoiled children (Zhang et al., 2019) wanting

everything cheaper and faster echoing Eddy Mercury's lyrics:"I want it all, I want it now". The documentary Homo Turisticus shows the millions of people who, driven by the pursuit of pleasure at all costs, migrate each year to the most diverse places on the planet while defiling it. The homo turisticus belongs to the same family as the homo oeconomicus because they share the same ethos. Sharing the same identity irrelevant of where they come from, they are alike: in terms of what they do through practicing sacrificial economics but also by whom they are and what they suffer from.

#### Tourism Seen from the Ontological Illness or 'Lack of Being'.

Acquisitive mimesis, sacrificial economics have been thoroughly exposed and clear-sightedly revealed by Girardian scholars such as among others. They have illustrated how mimetic theory was at work in the market economy or liberal world due to the idolatry of the economics. Many scholars did also research on how the lack of being or the ontological disease have been underplay in the modern, liberal word exacerbating violence as epitomized in the economic, political (with terrorism) and environmenta 1 crises as crystalized in the last work of Rene Girard & Benoît Chantre's Battling to the end (2009).

Yet in an attempt to be synthetic, what reunites acquisitive mimesis, sacrificial economics and the lack of being can be encapsulated in the words of Max Sheller: "Man believes either in a God or in an idol". Flowing from it, your actions depend on what you hold as God or what you idolize. Logically, if your idea of God is violent, anything justifies violence. With neoliberalism as the idolized religion, any industry will be under its "influence". Because of the idolatry of the economy and its short-term logic, economics and temporal optimization have colonized completely the touristic panoply of activities but also has turned people prisoners of their desires formatted by the models of touristic consumption. The dependency and submission to the market as epitomized in tourism has been reinforced by "the structural context set by powerful corporations, subservient governments and consumerised citizenry" (Higgins Desbiolles, 2018). Yet what does motivate people to captivatedly consume a short-termed type of tourism that continues to pollute in a myriad of ways? Such as touristic charters that take tourists to polluting structures resorts consuming lots of CO<sub>2</sub>, water, electricity, while deteriorating the flora, the fauna through polluting entertaining sports (sea scouters, golf in dry barren places, or snow skiing in unsnowed places while taking cars, buses to reach their destinations).

Hence, the radical Girardian analysis of the tourist's metaphysical motivations (his or her mimetic desire) being at the origin of behavior can be extremely opportune and providential in view for the change of scenery. For a quick recap, mimetic desire encapsulates that something becomes precious in one's eyes, because someone else owns it, whether it is a beautiful car, husband, a gift, a quality, a trip or a touristic experience. Desire spreads from a person to another like an epidemic (Meaney, 2010). To Girard, that imitative desire or envy reveals that we people are not autonomous in our desires but are instead enslaved by them. The underlying reason for it, is the magnetic pull that mimetic desire holds revealing not only "the idolization of another" but "ultimately the self" (Meaney, 2010).

To tackle the tourist's lack of being thanks to Rene Girard's neuralgic point of concept of conversion or lucidity, we have to make a little detour back to Girard's Deceit, desire and the novel (1965). To Girard, novels are best to identify and bring to the fore the truth of desires and openly opposes their respective nature of vertical and deviated transcendence. Thanks to universal novelists and their respective characters, Girard identifies and opposes the characters'

vertical desires (truly aspiring to the essence of the religious concept of transcendence) and/or characters' desires aspiring to a deviated transcendence explains, Girard makes the best of the tension in the secular world "in terms of the relation between the literal religious and figurative—secular levels of signification." For instance, points out how "secularism is simply a perversion of religious forms that the desire to negate or transcend religion results in a parody of the sacred: the negation of God does not eliminate transcendency but diverts it from the above to the below; the imitation of Christ, becomes the imitation of the neighbor".

Following Girard, our desire being intersubjective, characters that are not able to break free from the idolatry of the others (whom have become gods in the eyes of one another, will, not only never be self-fulfilled but they will become alienated because of their deviated transcendence. Their cravings or despair stem from their lack of being, lack of true autonomy that is their impossibility to renounce to their dependency on the other's desires. Back to our tourists, it is this specific unfulfilled lack of being at the origin of the mimetic desire that has a destructive impact on the environment (fauna, flora, the commons) while increasing poverty and decreasing human development. In this case, any person lacking in being and having both leisure time (vacation or recreational time) and purchasing power will go to the tourist facility with the idea of filling his lack of being by moving his being wherever s/he wants. "The selfie in front of the visited sites attests to this, such as the sending of postcards or the purchase of souvenirs. The contemporary tourist is a collector of various destinations: he must have seen the 100 most beautiful sites, the 100 most beautiful monuments, an aurora borealis, a sunset on such and such a beach, a tour of Mont-Blanc, etc. And a collection always needs to be completed, it is never completed: the trap of massification becomes a spiral." (Bourdin, 2021). One should note that the very term vacation comes in a way to redouble the feeling of lack of being and the desire to remedy it by a rewarding occupation. Let us dig further into the lack of being or ontological disease.

To Girard, opposed to vertical transcendence lies deviated transcendence. If vertical transcendence refers to the religious conception of transcendence, the deviated one relates to the metaphysical desire for the other's being (i.e., the desire to the model of desire). Girard explains that the negation of religious transcendence amounts to the idolatrous imitation of the other's being. As many Girardian scholars pinpointed marketing, advertising used and abused of the power of acquisitive mimetic, desire to lure people into imitating others' desires in the last two decades social networks in the realm of tourism have become the new super magnets exciting acquisitive mimetic desires, like never before, helping increase herd mass tourists to reach and consume in the enticed lured touristic spots thanks to social media. What is tragic though is if acquisitive mimesis (as described by Girard in novels) were leading to the despair or spiritual death of the novels' protagonists reflecting hidden anthropological scapegoat or sacrificial mechanisms since the foundation of the world, they are now jeopardizing humanity's survival as we know it today in a matter of decades. Hence, can we self-alienated consumers and particularly liberate ourselves of our mediated desire, desire by another? Alternatively, more accurately can andragogy direct tourists to renounce idolized neoliberal mass produced desires (i.e.), via negativa?

## Anthropological Journey Up to the Tourist Aiming to the *Via* Negativa (I.E., Renouncing The Idolized Neoliberal Mass Produced Desires).

Describing the state of the art of tourism through the lens of the tourist's lack of being is of no avail if some conversion of the tourist's deviated transcendence does not loom in the horizon.

Yet in order to have a go to answer that question, a little paleoanthropology cannot harm a Girardian analysis; and historically, long-distance travel was very early present for economic reasons (imports with high added value), but also out of curiosity and taste for exoticism in the educated and wealthy sections of the population. "The tourist problem as you deplore it was born from the democratization and massification that pleasure travel experienced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Marco Polo has become a breeding battery for Marcel Poulet" (Bourdin, 2021)! It also seems difficult not to evoke in this world history, the origins of tourism, of colonization, which has many features in common with tourism, which is a sort of late emanation in a reduced model. Consequently, tourism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until the sanitary crisis of our 21<sup>st</sup> century has growingly been identified as being neo-colonial and neo-imperialist in the neoliberal system of ours; instrumentalizing not just human population (increasing fundamentalism of all kinds) but its eco-system pushing to their extinction limits of many of its diversity.

What is interesting in the anthropological approach of tourism evokes curiosity and displacement but also busyness, which have always been determining characteristics for the human species in its conquest of the planet. Consequently, holidays, and tourism are synonymous to active and "busy holiday". Yet we tend to forget that we have inherited an old imaginary of 'voyage', which ideally were not constrained by time (Damilano et al., 2020). The paradox of modern holidays is that we leave on holidays for a week or two, and it turns out impossible to leave for 2 or 3 months, let alone for a year or two. Nonetheless, literature tells us it would be the right way to do a' voyage'. The idle travelers in the XIXth century, who would come back with his traveling notebook, from which was coined the term 'globetrotter', were all rentiers or annuitants.

If we start from the lack of being, which seems the relevant anthropological point of departure, the commodity economy is no longer a sneaky cause but an opportunist activity that confronts the desire to fill this insufficiency, the (fallacious) promise of disorientation and exoticism (Bourdin, 2021). The problem of destructive tourism, in its different dimensions, as listed above, can be tangibly dealt with by several solutions of different scope as proposed already by many tourism's scholars and practitioners. We can already find eco-responsibility of course, but also, the scarcity of travel (Higgins Desbiolles, 2021). It encompasses the shortening of trips made by gentler modes of transport (Milano & Koens, 2021), the not so distant "guest room" with a semblance of participation in local life in little-frequented areas, spreading tourists to scarce touristic spots, not looking just for solutions found in technological areas as epitomized by the discourse of the smart city (Cohen & Hopkins, 2019). Finally yet importantly, experiencing a new tourism coined "detourism" (the adventure nearby our place of residence). In addition, it includes the inner journey, the spiritual quest, with or without the help of nature nearby once the vanity of 'the collection of sites' has been recognized (Andrade et al., 2021). To that effect, the sanitary crisis starting in 2020, which is by far unfinished will dwell on for some time, may well be the auspicious eve-opener or simply the revelation.

For the tourist, to achieve the via negativa or renouncing the deviated transcendence of the desires conveyed by the idolized neoliberal mass produced desires, s/he needs a little outside help. The sanitary crisis can be received as an opportune gift in forcing him or her to take distance from the former deviated transcendence through the idolization of the other's desire in consuming the neo-liberal touristic enticing luring. Distance from the technological, acquisitive mimetic tourist's panoply thanks to a forced contextualization of nature in its "pristine" appearance. The examples abound, yet one comes to mind, the ones from the French tourist anthropologist Sylvain Venayre and the alpinist and moviemaker Francois Damilano among

many others in the world as epitomized by the World Indigenous Tourism Alliance (Poelina & Nordensvard, 2018).

After the economic shock of the sanitary crisis both witnessed how during the winter 2020 2021 the people who work in the winter sports' tourist activities and who live from them have started praising the joy of walking, hiking or cross-country skiing after they suddenly stopped working. This is how cross-country skiing or ski touring took the upper hand. Meanwhile people were walking in ski touring, they had more and more the impression of being already in the kind of post-crisis world (post-war world) when passing by the industrial wastelands of ski lifts, since everything was stopped a bit frozen with the cold of winter but also by the economic shutdown, which was quite striking and impressive. Damilano reckoned: "It is not because the ski lifts have stopped working that there is nothing more to do; we know that these are places of wilderness, places of connection and we also know that it is the mechanics that disconnects us from the elements and in the mountains we reconnect with the elements. We must not confine the mountain in a kind of reductive practice, which is only that of consumption in the form of mechanized leisure" Damilano et al. (2020). From a sociological point of view the discourse of the leisure time occupation is dominated by the discourse of the industry. That is, the discourse is that time must be filled by activities so we consume the transport of the activity and always more activities. From this point of view the industry confronted to that change of scenery had to go far and claims that we will not survive without occupation, witnessing their "mauvaise foi" bad faith.

In opposition, the way high mountain guides have reflected on these economic difficulties and this crisis is the way in which they continue to deliver their message that walking is still the most beautiful exercise of man there is no place as beautiful to walk as in the mountain. So this moment in time, may well be the "Kairos' (propitious moment for decision or action) to remember that the mountain is above all a place of full nature (embodying the "anti the anti-Facebook spirit", a place that is extremely enriching to immerse yourself and which reconciles people with each other. They reckoned that the new tourists that came to the mountains (because they had no other option) and spent their first holidays just pacing though the mountains discovered a new reality, one that could be called spiritual (which resonates with Mircea Eliad's words "the simple contemplation of the celestial vault is enough to trigger a religious experience"). Some even added that they would again experience nature without artifice with or without the forced curfew immobilizing 'mass mechanical touristic activities'.

Both intellectuals and nature lovers may well testify to their first constrained' tourists' reactions to their first experience of the "via negativa" in which they perceived consciously or not that their 'lack of being' was gone.

Their desire as ontological lack had vanished; not thanks to their own doing but because it was imposed on them from the outside. Because of outside constrains not to experience mass winter ski resorts with its mechanical leisure and its respective deviated transcendence of the idolized neo-liberal model of tourism, they were able to 'decentralize themselves from their own selves'. Closer to nature, these tourists felt probably encompassed by a totality that freed them from the metaphysical desire that used to make them crave for being someone else achieving by so doing to the reorientation of their desire. This *via* negativa induces the person to make the effort or exerting oneself to take distance with one's desire, decenter it if required, to achieve good mimesis and experience a receptive mimesis. The recentering of the desire as a tourist, or as any human being that manages to shush rivalrous desires emanating from deviated transcendence allows us to recover desires aiming to vertical transcendence and to feel like the

cosmopolitan. Coming out of the glorious blue Mediterranean Sea burnt by the sun he reckoned in his poor childhood in Algeria, "I was from the race of the lords, the one that envies nothing 1996"

Finally, confronted to the major crises that dangerously bring humans nearer to the abyss, these findings are of little avail if humans want to achieve lasting changes to prevent "the fire of the Earth" (Bennett et al., 2016). What is more, trying to relate this 'spiritual' experience to more materialistic ones may be far-fetched to some. As to linking it to social marketing and management might even be preposterous to others! Yet to be able to carry out the required deep transformation of consuming behaviors and habits, we have to approach it from the cultural side that is currently under the yoke of consumption society's values and pro-growth ideology (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010) and therefore require the all-powerful help of marketing among other actors.

Social marketing can positively contribute not with a downstream focus that is too narrow for social marketing's potential but with an upstream approach, since society requires fixing the structure upstream that first initiated the problem question still echoes with today's environmental crises "Are we fiddling while Rome burns?" (1995). With the devastating tourism industry's impact, do we need social marketing to influence the irresponsible polluting multidimensional tourists' behaviors or do we need it to pay more attention to influencing the touristic industry's behavior that is creating the problem? Hence, social marketing's task is huge and is a call for action not just to influence the individual but also the political, economic, social, cultural and physical determinants of that behavior. The task is monumental as all the later actors "influencers" are at the exclusive service of economics and not serving the common good. Yet, that task is not impossible; and against all odds, this article is not intended to be a killjoy.

Quite the opposite since examples of sustainable luxury tourism with tourists reconnecting with their inner resources, the original roots of luxury (Cristini et al., 2017) and wholesome governance already exist empowered by social marketing (Poelina, 2018). These examples of sustainable luxury tourism are good news for the ones who fear the new trend of "degrowth" in order to cope with global warming. Definitely not, growth is still expected but one that connects with the political virtue of the common good that is inclusive in encompassing not just the exclusive individualistic well-being but also the ones of the poor, fauna, flora, environment and the earth atmosphere.

Hence, social marketing in the touristic industry having for target "the common good" influences people to live better by building better human and natural relationships and is an eye-opener to alterity (Poelina & Nordensvard, 2018). Examples of social marketing are numerous in supporting sustainable luxury tourism with indigenous communities (Poelina, 2018) in Australia and in New Zealand among others, that are dedicated to serve the common good.

As a matter of fact, these indigenous sustainable touristic examples supported by a different type of marketing (social) play an enormous role in expressing deeper values of luxury referring to the essence of luxury (Cristini et al., 2017) and "create unique spiritual experiences for tourists in an unparalleled vast and pristine landscape" (Poelina, 2018). Sustainable luxury tourism empowered by social marketing incorporating the ethics of care for visited places serves at once the tourists' well-being, the local touristic visited place's broad interest and contribute to a positive Anthropocene (Bennett et al., 2016).

Non-obstent, social marketing may prove to be insufficient to change tourists' desires and their respective behaviors if it is not accompanied by two concomitant major transformations. First, the current prevailing Benthamite (utilitarian) consumption values of well-being (i.e.

materialistic approach of happiness (Cristini & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2022) needs to yield room to the Aristotelian ones conveyed by a respective dominant culture that promotes "autonomy, search for meaning, spirituality, commitment and ethical behavior, respect and sense of achievement in life".

#### **CONCLUSION**

Second, politics need to operate a breakthrough achieving a structural governmental political change opting for leaving the neoliberal vision of economy. To make a long story short, social marketing alone cannot save us from the apocalypse but it can definitely help to influencing change in the touristic industry and by so doing addressing the tourist's ontological illness.

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Received: 04-Jan-2022, Manuscript No. AMSJ-22-10960; Editor assigned: 06-Jan-2022, PreQC No. AMSJ-22-10960(PQ); Reviewed: 20-Jan-2022, QC No. AMSJ-22-10960; Revised: 23-Jan-2022, Manuscript No. AMSJ-22-10960(R); Published: 27-Jan-2022