



Effect of tourist photographs on attitudes towards destination: Manifest and latent content



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Analyzed how tourist photos posted online are “decoded” on the receiver’s end.
- Examined latent and manifest content of tourist photos and their interplay.
- Manifest content influences attitudes towards destination.
- Both cognitive and affective latent attributes influence desire to visit.
- Mediating role of affective latent attributes is identified.

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ABSTRACT

In the sender-message-receiver communication model, tourist photographs project organic destination images which are interpreted on the receiving end of the communication channel by potential tourists, influencing their tourism-related attitudes and affecting behavior. This study investigated how photographs taken by American and Korean tourists while visiting Russia and posted in travel blogs and on media-sharing websites affect perceptions of Russia as a travel destination by those who view these images. The study specifically focused on latent content of tourist photographs with respect to such destination attributes as crowdedness, cleanliness, level of economic development, personal safety, level of modernity, friendliness, uniqueness, and extent of commercialization, as well as affective qualities of destination places. Researchers evaluated the interplay between the manifest and latent content of the images and how each type of content separately and both types together affected attitudes of viewers towards the destination and their desire to visit it.

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1. Introduction

Destination photography communicates images that shape and reshape tourists' destination perceptions and, consequently, influence their decision-making process. Destination photography is influenced by both organic and induced sources; the first being motion pictures, television shows, documentaries, paintings, photo-art exhibitions, and books (Jenkins, 1999; Yüksel & Akgül, 2007), while the second being primarily commercial images and

advertisements produced and managed by destination marketing organizations (DMOs). An important role of commercial photographs was to construct “place-myths” (Jenkins, 2003; Urry & Larsen, 2011) that would project desired destination images to potential tourists for consumption (Butler & Hall, 1998; Molina & Esteban, 2006; Santos, 1998; Sönmez & Sirakaya, 2002). However, the image that the viewer is “reading” from the photographs crafted by tourism industries may not be a direct reflection of the physical reality of a destination. Often, commercial photographs are edited by professional photographers to favorably position a destination and may present the image in an exaggerated and inaccurate manner (Crawshaw & Urry, 1997). While positioning a destination is a core activity of DMOs (Day, Skidmore, & Koller, 2002), positioning is “not so much what you say about your products or company as much as it is what your customers say

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about you” (McKenna, 1991: 44). Development of the Internet presented people with previously unimaginable communication powers, and tourist travel accounts proliferate in blogs and on social networks. On the receiving end of communication channels, user-generated images of the destination (made without ties to destination promoters and, therefore, being organic in nature (Gartner, 1994)), influence perceptions of the destination by tourists-to-be who view them. The extent of this influence needs to be investigated.

The essence of studying communications, that is, the “sender-message-receiver” flow, has been summarized by Lasswell (1948) in his famous quote as “who says what through which channel to whom with what effect.” In the travel context, the senders are tourists who take photographs while they travel and then post these images (the message) on social networks and media-sharing websites. Posted photographs, sometimes accompanied with a title, tags, or a short description, constitute a projected destination image (Jenkins, 2003), which is decoded by the receiver, or tourist-to-be, at the other end of communication channel, and, as such, contributes to the perceived image and, possibly, attitudes towards the destination. Granted, the intended meaning that the sender attaches to a photograph may be different from how it is interpreted by the receiver. As studies on the hermeneutic circle of representation show, one of the motives behind why people post their travel accounts is “been there and seen that” (e.g., MacKay & Couldwell, 2004; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013; cf. Chalfen, 1979); moreover, travelers’ accounts are often based on previously seen destination representations (Jenkins, 2003). However, while the link between visual destination representations and visitations has been documented, primarily in the studies about effect of a motion picture on visitation numbers to the film site (e.g., Riley & Van Doren, 1992; Tooke & Baker, 1996), the process through which images influence tourist-related attitude and behavior is not well understood, and the studies on the topic are scarce.

The message, that is, a tourist photograph, has two types of content: manifest and latent. Manifest content, as the name suggests, refers to all signs depicted in the image that are interpreted at their face value, such as images of nature landscapes, buildings, or people in traditional clothes. In contrast, latent content is concerned with what the image signifies beyond mere appearances. Latent content, with all its signs, collectively alludes to a meaning that lies outside of the particular picture; for example, an impression of a destination being unsafe is a possible result of reading the latent content of a photograph. In the “sender-message-receiver” triad, the middle link, or message, has received incomparably more attention than the other two links, the sender and the receiver. Moreover, the meaning of the message is primarily decoded by the researcher from the perspective of the researcher’s theory (Roberts, 1997). To study the effect of the manifest content on audiences, this is understandable, as manifest meaning is arguably invariant to who reads the image; it is decoded in a similar way by anyone who views the image, whether they are a researcher or a potential tourist. Content analysis is the main “quantitative” method for studying manifest content of the destination photography. This method “equates” the researcher’s “reading” of the images with “reading” of the people on the receiving end of communication. With respect to the latent content, which is much more interpretive in nature, such equating is questionable; therefore, decoding the latent content of tourist photographs relies more on the techniques of semiotic, discourse, and critical analyses, the group of approaches that belong to the “qualitative” epistemological paradigm.

Thus, the study investigated how photographs taken by tourists while visiting a destination are interpreted by those who view the images; i.e., what meaning tourists-to-be attach to them. The study specifically focused on latent content of tourist photographs with

respect to such destination attributes as crowdedness, cleanliness, level of economic development, personal safety, level of modernity, friendliness, uniqueness, and extent of commercialization, as well as affective qualities of destination places, such as whether the destination is perceived as a pleasant and relaxing or an arousing and exciting place. Researchers were also interested in evaluating the interplay between the manifest and latent content of the photographs and how each type of content separately and both types together affected overall attitudes of viewers towards the destination and their desire to visit it.

2. Study background

2.1. Manifest and latent content

When developing analytical dimensions for analysis of visual images, researchers must make a decision regarding which content to analyze: manifest or latent. Manifest content has been compared to the *surface structure* of the message (Berg, 2004): it is explicit, refers to observable features of the images, and can be recorded with a high degree of reliability. Latent content, in contrast, is implicit, embedded in the message, and requires “reading between the lines” (Holsti, 1969: 12). The researcher has to interpret the presence of latent content, a process that can range from cognitive deductions (that is, judgments), evaluations, and interpretations, to impressions and feelings (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). Most studies that used tourist photography analyzed visual messages using either content analysis for manifest content or an approach from a repertoire of more interpretive techniques for latent content. Interpretive approaches such as discourse analysis (Markwick, 2001; Pritchard & Morgan, 2003), critical analysis (Hunter, 2008; Mellinger, 1994), or semiotic analysis (Albers & James, 1988; Cooper, 1994; Selwyn, 1993; Uzzell, 1984), as well as others, may be combined in one study to explore the range of diverse meaning (Rose, 2012); however, from the methodology perspective, they substantially differ from content analysis with its emphasis on quantification. Because of this difference, it is rare that manifest and latent content are examined in one study (Jenkins, 2003; a recent example would be Pan, Lee, & Tsai, 2014).

Within the content analysis research stream, Garrod (2009) has compared photographs taken by visitors to the Welsh resort of Aberystwyth to the city postcards along such manifest categories as attractions, locations, panoramic/close-up distinction, etc. MacKay and Couldwell (2004) compared and contrasted photographs of a Canadian national historic park with promotional images of the site, using seven manifest categories such as exterior buildings, interior of the main house, demonstration of the past way of life, farming equipment, animals, grounds, and people. Jenkins (2003) contrasted the photographs from travel brochures of Australia that targeted two distinctive travel segments, backpackers and mainstream tourists, by examining such manifest features as iconic landmarks, landscapes, people, animals, active sports, passive activities, and “group fun.” Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013) comparatively analyzed destination images of Peru produced by the destination’s DMO and photos of tourists to the country, using 20 categories, including nature landscape, people, archaeological sites, way of life, traditional clothes, etc. While it has been noted that linkages between the message and the sender are often slight (Chadwick, Bahar, & Albrecht, 1984), Stepchenkova, Kim, and Kirilenko (2014) addressed visual communications from the perspective of the sender and analyzed Russian travel photographs taken by two culturally different groups of tourists, American and Korean; the study used ten manifest dimensions, including people, nature landscape, urban-rural distinction, activities, architecture, etc.

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