Ideal image in process: Online tourist photography and impression management

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of impression management in the production of online tourist photography and how it works along with other underlying dimensions that shape photographic decisions at various stages of image selection. The paper illustrates that the selection of photographs is so intimately linked to impression management that it even extends to the decision of whether to bring a camera along on a trip in the first place. Tourists are constantly caught in the dilemma of who to satisfy during the selection process. This study suggests that social media and photography facilitate social comparison, thus the tourist gaze is being redefined even more rapidly nowadays.

Introduction

More than 500 million photographs are uploaded onto social media daily, with more than half on Facebook alone (Kleiner Perkins Caufield Byers, 2013: May 29; Lafferty, 2013: July 11). The democratization of image production and circulation has had a great impact on the way the world is seen, experienced, and remembered (Hunter, 2008; Pocock, 2009). It has also transformed tourism, for social media now play a vital role in the construction of the tourist gaze, destination image, and travel decisions (Lin & Huang, 2005; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008; White, 2010). Therefore, tourist
photographic practices have become the focus of more research in recent years. In response to the rising concern on tourist photography, this study seeks a deeper understanding of tourist's image selection.

While it is acknowledged that tourist photography is to a certain extent shaped by predetermined norms and collective imaginary (Urry, 2002), a parallel body of literature suggests or at least implies that tourist photography is a performance of tourism (e.g. Edensor, 2000; Giovanardi, Lucarelli, & Decosta, 2014; Haldrup & Larsen, 2010; Larsen, 2005) and self (Belk & Yeh, 2011; Cederholm, 2004; Leung, 2010; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Through framing foreign places and otherness, tourists can exhibit their worldviews and a “heroic romanticized self” (Yeh, 2009) to their audiences, and by doing so they reconstruct and revitalize their everyday selves for idealization and to maintain a beneficial sense of presence (Belk & Yeh, 2011; Davies, 2012). Haldrup and Larsen (2010) argue that social media and digital photography technology now even allow tourists to experiment with their identities.

Consciousness of audience contributes to what and how travel experience is shared through photographs (Markwell, 1997). The absence of a face-to-face interaction does not reduce the impact of audience on online performance, as the anticipation of audience reactions encourages online sharing (Van House, 2007) and information posted on social media can also be a source for people to make judgments about each other (Walther, Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). Tourists are aware of the impressions that can be given to others through their online travel photographs (Belk & Yeh, 2011; Van House, 2007). What tourists share online is therefore an outcome of impression management (IM) in consort with other photographic and non-photographic reasons (Cederholm, 2004; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011).

If this is the case, then (1) when and how does impression management influence tourist photographic decisions? (2) Do tourists struggle in deciding what to achieve and who to entertain in the process of producing an ideal image? In light of this, this study aims to identify the process of producing travel photographs online and the underlying dimensions that influence this process. The findings of this study contribute to the existing discussion on how social media and digital photography redefine tourist gaze thus the tourism experience.

Tourist photography: the traveling self and the audience

More than just a representation of place, tourist photography is infused with personal meanings (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012). It is what helps link the traveling self with the audience, be it co-location (Yeh, 2009) or distanced (Haldrup & Larsen, 2010), present or future self and others (Crang, 1997). It acts as a form of aide-memoire and a communication tool, whereby tourists can capture the significant, what is worth to remember (Chalfen, 1981) and seize the frozen evidence of “I have been” (Sontag, 1977). In doing so, one can convey that sense of “I have been” to the audience as an ongoing, collective shaping of self (Palmer, 2010). Paradoxically, Barthes (1980) argues that, by instantly freezing and re-locating moments into “that-has-been,” photography produces a sense of “no-longer” and nostalgia for the past. Photography is, therefore, predominantly an emotional, nostalgic experience of time, place, self, and others.

Interestingly, as well, travel photographs simultaneously represent and deny reality. Sontag (1977) suggests that to photograph is to refuse what is given. Instead of accepting the direct experience of a scene, an event, or an object, photography allows one to only focus on what one wishes to see and experience through framing. This issue is especially prescient in tourism, for Pocock (2009) finds that photography allows the tourist to see and experience places in a new way that is only made possible through the camera. It also allows the photographer to frame reality in an idealized manner, and especially since the advent of digital photography and photoshopping software, to manipulate the image to create an ideal image of what could have been. Therefore, photography is not simply an aide-memoire but an aide-memoire of what helps suit the needs of the present yet ever-changing self (Scarles, 2009).

Photography has been intrinsically linked with tourism as if one cannot travel without being engaged in some forms of photography. This ritualistic or routinized nature of tourist photography is delineated by Urry’s (2002) concept of the tourist gaze, and that is fundamentally what sets it apart from other forms of photography. The tourist gaze sees tourism experiences as an escape from the
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