



Tourist clusters from Flickr travel photography

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ABSTRACT

During decades researchers have been interested in investigating the most salient elements of tourists' pictures, without considering whether there might be different patterns of photographer behaviour. Considering this background, this paper aims to examine the common features of the tourist-photographer's gaze. By analysing a sample of pictures of a Pyrenees destination (Boí Valley) uploaded in Flickr, the authors first identify the attributes of photos; and second, by means of a cluster analysis, determine the existence of four groups of tourist photographers. The analysis reveals that although all photographers share common features in their pictures, there are other elements which define different photographer's behaviour.

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1. Introduction

The tourism image of a destination has received considerable interest in academic literature over the past three decades (Andreu, Bigné, & Cooper, 2000; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Dann, 1996; Dille, 1986; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Garrod, 2009; Jenkins, 2003; Mackay & Fesenmaier, 1997). Tourism image is an essential factor when tourists select a destination; it also conditions both visitors' perception of the place and their behaviour. In order to understand consumer behaviour in destinations better, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms that explain how tourist images are formed and reproduced.

In the vast field of tourism image, photography plays a very important role. Photo shots are a prime element of the image perceived by visitors and also a path to understanding processes in the symbolic construction of destinations. Every time a tourist takes a picture, the value given to what is photographed is explicitly expressed; we can therefore consider each photograph to be an exercise in tourism semiotics.

Access to these images has always been a methodological difficulty. Fortunately, in the digital age many tourists have adopted the habit of sharing their pictures online and labelling them with geographical tags, making it relatively easy to access a representative catalogue of photographs for a given destination. When tourists upload their pictures onto Internet, they make a selection of pictures that they want to share, and at the same time they also choose a limited number of elements (monuments, visited places, landscapes...) from all of those that are photographed along their route. So, this process is a "double filter".

Previous research has essentially been focused on the most salient elements of tourist pictures of specific destinations. For example, Mackay and Couldwell (2004) analysed 1642 pictures from 129 tourists using visitor-employed photography (VEP) methodology to collect data. They conducted a content analysis approach, giving as a result 50 subjects classified in 7 categories. A final classification leads to an understanding of the main elements that catch the attention of tourist photographers.

However, none of the previous studies consider the principal common features of the tourists' photographic gaze. Perhaps this perspective was not taken into account because the previous studies focused specifically on determining the elements of the pictures and not the photographer gaze. For this reason, this paper aims to determine if there are different ways of seeing a tourism destination; and attempts to detect tourist clusters sharing similar photographic criteria. So, considering previous studies in this field and that "photography has been crucial in developing the tourist gaze" (Urry & Larsen, 2011:186), this study gives an in-depth understanding of the patterns of this gaze. This is particularly useful from a managerial perspective, as insight give a deeper understanding to tourist image as a factor conditioning decision-making processes. In turn, identifying profiles of tourists' gaze in a destination allows for better marketing and segmentation strategies.

Therefore, this study shows the possibilities of analysing photographs of a tourist destination shared on the social network Flickr, the most popular online photo-sharing application (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012), using photographs, taken by a sample of tourists in the Boí Valley (Spanish Pyrenees) as a case study. The method of analysis used was content analysis to determine pictures' features and cluster analysis in order to find evidence of profiles of tourists' gazes. Finally, the conclusions focus on some practical aspects of this study, its limitations and guidelines for future research.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Tourist image conceptualization

Numerous authors have attempted to define and conceptualise the tourist image. One of the most widely accepted definitions is that proposed by Crompton (1979: 18), which determines a tourist image as “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has of a destination”. If we turn our attention to the numerous definitions provided by other authors, a general consensus is observed in determining that the image of a destination entails the existence of prior knowledge and impressions of the place in question (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Kotler, Haider, & Rein, 1994; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 2000).

Images are formed from messages transmitted consciously or unconsciously by a number of different agents. Gartner (1994) identified 4 groups of agents involved in forming the tourist image: induced agents (spokespeople and journalists), highlighting agents (tourism managers and travel agents, who create the tourist image intentionally), autonomous agents (newspapers, books, art, and so on) and organic agents (the tourists themselves, who, although contributing to forming the tourist image, do not have this as their aim).

Furthermore, forming the tourist image in individuals' minds requires a process of internal reflection influenced not only by the sources of information consulted, but also by numerous personal variables such as psychological and socio-cultural characteristics, motivations, needs, and prior experiences, among others. In respect of this, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) determined that variety and types of information source, as well as age and level of education, are all variables that affect the cognitive evaluation of the tourist image. All of these factors together make the individual's tourist image highly subjective on both an individual (Barroso, Martín, & Martín, 2007; Gunn, 1988) and group level (Crompton, 1979).

The tourist image is positioned as an element of extreme importance that conditions tourist behaviour and the decision-making process, as demonstrated by numerous studies (Chon, 1990; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Prebensen, 2007; Stabler, 1988). It is a key element of the tourist experience. Following the 7 stages of the tourist experience proposed by Gunn (1972), the perceived image evolves over time as the tourist moves from using generic information regarding the destination (organic images) to using sources of information that have been previously designed to capture their attention (induced images).

Following the parameters proposed by Galí and Donaire (2005), the image the tourist has at this stage is an a priori one, which evolves after the tourist's arrival at the destination to become a perceived image in situ. However, once tourists have returned from their trip, they have a complex perceived image (Gunn, 1972), which is constituted by memories of the experience they had at the destination (Leisen, 2001). Specifically, photographs play the role of recalling the experience they had on the trip and are a summary of the tourist's perceived image. All tourists experience the tourist image differently, which is why Dann (1996: 52), in his study on the tourist image of Barbados, argues that “two people cannot see a destination in exactly the same way”. Although some elements will coincide, others will be personal to each individual.

2.2. Photography and tourism

Numerous researchers have focused on analysing the relationship between photography and tourism (Albers & James, 1988; Garrod, 2008; Jenkins, 2003; Mackay & Couldwell, 2004; Markwell, 1997). Urry (1990) proposes a hermeneutic circle of representation, in which tourists are both consumers and reproducers of the images they have previously perceived, resulting in “a continuous reproduction and recirculation of photographic images – both iconic and everyday – that perpetuate the tourist image held by society” (Garrod, 2009: 347). “In this process, tourists reaffirm the privileged position of photography as a source of their own awareness” (Albers & James, 1988: 136). Diverse

authors have supported this view (Caton & Santos, 2008; Hall, 1997; Stylianou-Lambert, 2012).

For Sontag (1973), a photographic act is a means of certifying the experience, that is, irrefutable proof of the place visited. The photograph allows the ephemeral nature of the moment to be captured (Galí & Donaire, 2005), allowing the image to be linked to the real world as something tangible, a material proof (Markwick, 2001), documenting the sequence of consumption (Sontag, 1973), and converting it into a vehicle that allows the everyday consumption of the experience. “[Photography] has been used to gain understanding of the tourist experience” (Mackay & Couldwell, 2004), and “appears to be believable as a direct representation of reality, a ‘true’ reflection of actual places, people, and events” (Markwick, 2001). For Albers and James (1988), on the other hand, presenting photography as a window on reality is an illusion, as it is hardly likely to provide an objective representation.

According to Markwick (2001), photographs have the property of freezing time and space forever, decontextualising the photographed element and fragmenting it. Thus, “these fragments come to stand for the whole or the essence of things, often in representations which may extend, symbolically, far beyond that which is photographed” (Markwick, 2001:420). Thus, photography is the personal view of each individual, which is often seen as being stereotyped by images perceived previously, and therefore “travel photographs that are mass produced are especially influential arbiters of sight and knowledge. In subtle as well as obvious ways, these photographs not only formulate and institutionalize what tourists see and how they see it, but also how they know and understand what they see” (Albers & James, 1988:136). In short, photography is posited as an essential part of the trip. Markwell (1997), in his study on the photographic behaviour, determined that as the days pass tourists take fewer photographs due to the fact that they make a change from “looking at” to “involvement in”.

Most studies that analyse the photographic ritual highlight predictable tourist behaviours. Thus, for example, Harrison (2004) identifies photographic patterns, some with socially constructed behaviours. Bourdieu (2003) and Urry (1990) also believe that there is a tourist gaze that practically forces visitors to focus their photographic experience on certain items and therefore ignore others. This tendency is contradicted by studies showing that contemporary tourists are much more diverse and heterogeneous. For example, Barroso, Martín and Martín (2007) have demonstrated the relationship between heterogeneity in tourists and diversity in the perceived image; Pan and Li (2011) have incorporated the long tail concept to the tourist image of China and have shown that once the universal icons of the destination have been mentioned, the image tends to become considerably more dispersed.

Traditionally, showing photographs to friends and family and relating the holiday experience followed returning home after a trip. However, the dawning of the digital age has brought with it a new reality. Firstly, the appearance of digital cameras has led to a notable increase in the number of photographs per trip, particularly due to the lower cost entailed (Donaire & Galí, 2011). And secondly, “travel photo sharing [is no longer] a private endeavour, with pictures assembled into albums and shared with a small audience known well by the person” (Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011:726), instead it has become a social event. New digital platforms have opened the doors to the social sharing of private photographs. Web 2.0 websites, including Flickr, Picasa, Facebook or Pinterest, allow photographs to be shared online, often just a few moments after taking them, which suggests a democratisation in the process of creating and disseminating images (Lo et al., 2011).

The relevance of this new context lies not only in the social changes produced by digital photography, but also in the fact that on Web 2.0, website users become the protagonists of the content generated. They also play a key role in disseminating and communicating their experience and their impressions and thoughts regarding the destination (Camprubí, Guia, & Comas, 2013). Basically, “virtual communities are gradually becoming incredibly influential in tourism as consumers increasingly trust their peers better, as opposed to marketing messages”

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