



## Research Paper

# The spectacular and the mundane: Chinese tourists' online representations of an iconic landscape journey

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## ABSTRACT

Building on the theory of social representations, and some new lines of work asserting the importance of mundane components of the tourist experience, the aims of the study are to categorise and interpret Chinese tourists' online visual representations of an Australian iconic landscape: the Great Ocean Road. Over 10,000 pictures posted online were coded using a nine-part scheme developed by the researchers. The work builds an understanding of the content of Chinese tourists' photographs and highlights a way to uncover the social representations in such material. The study provides evidence that a two-part emancipated social representation characterises the online photographs: one portrays the spectacular physical environmental features of the setting, while the other represents many small-scale and mundane places, contacts and sites. The study articulates a role for mundane authenticity in tourism studies and provides evidence for this emerging perspective through the analysis of the photographs.

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## 1. Introduction

There is mounting consensus in the academic literature that the images of tourist spaces and places are constructed by multiple stakeholders. Destination marketers, government authorities, individual businesses and ordinary citizens are all key players (Morrison, 2013; Wang, 2011). Tourists themselves are also core contributors to this image construction process, not only while they engage with the locations they visit (Baerenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2004), but also through the process of sharing their experiences (Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel, 2012). Tourists' online photographic posts are arguably worthy of study and research interest because they represent a cutting edge in this shared, image-based communication about visited places (Rakić & Chambers, 2012).

This study seeks to understand how tourists represent a key landscape using their photographs. Chinese tourists and Australia's Great Ocean Road, a leading international road trip, are of particular interest in this study. In detail, this study aims to categorize the Chinese tourists' representations of this iconic landscape. This study also seeks to examine the image categories in terms of the main kinds of social representations for this evolving Chinese market.

The issues of accessing and using tourists' photographs as a research resource are of global interest (Hunter, 2012; Rakić &

Chambers, 2012). The work is set within the context of seeking ways to better understand the construction of destination images and place reputations. Social representations theory is employed as an organising perspective to determine the uniformity or heterogeneity of the photographic records. The analysis of the photographs pays particular attention to the possibility that everyday or mundane topics might be of greater importance in tourist experience than has been recognised in the long tradition of literature commenting on authenticity and the tourist gaze.

## 2. Conceptual foundations

### 2.1. Destination images: Visual representations

The study of destination images has been a long-standing tourism research topic because of its importance in influencing tourist decision making (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Gunn, 1988). Multiple stakeholders, particularly the destination marketing organizations, the media, and tourists themselves contribute to the creation of destination images (Mercille, 2005). Various types of materials have been analyzed including brochures (Molina & Esteban, 2006), postcards (Milman, 2012), magazines (Aramberri & Liang, 2012), literature (Seaton, 1998), and movies (Hudson, Wang & Gil, 2011).

Contemporary tourists planning their travel now also have the resources of multiple social media to formulate their destination images and shape their decisions (Sigala et al., 2012). It has been

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suggested that tourists are always looking for reliable information sources, for example suggestions by friends and relatives and from leading travel blogs (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012). Recent studies have indicated that travel blogs and reviews are usually seen as a trusted information source (Volo, 2010). The materials provided by other tourists are seen as having high credibility since the travel blog reports are not promoting or defending an image. Instead, blogging behaviour is seen as largely helpful and altruistic (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008).

The specific power of visual material to influence tourists' destination images has been suggested by multiple researchers (O'Connor, Wang & Li, 2011; Rakić & Chambers, 2012). These general assertions are supported directly by the empirical work of Ye and Tussyadiah (2011) who established that photographs do inspire visits. Additionally, they noted that tourists with different views of desirable experiences often selected and preferred photographs which suited their underlying reasons for visiting any destination. These results are consistent with the theatrical metaphor used by Ryan (2005). He suggested that photographs depict the stage where tourists may, in future, act out their own personal performances.

There are five features of photographs which underpin their power to influence others. First, photographic stimuli are easier to recall and remember than text-based information (Ye & Tussyadiah (2011). Second, O'Connor et al. (2011) noted that photographs are quickly scanned and accessed and, if liked, prompt viewer reflection. Arguably, videos also stimulate and direct the attention of blog readers but they do require a little more effort to view and assimilate. Third, photographs are seen as trustworthy and highly credible. Some doubts have been raised about the trustworthiness of some blogs and on-line reviews in social media outlets (Munar & Jacobsen, 2013; Puri, 2007). As a counter to this view, it can be noted that tourists' photographs are a powerful supplement to blogs and are often candid in their style. Additionally, since the viewers have the ability to extract meaning and interpret the images for themselves, it is unlikely that multiple photographs will consistently misrepresent a destination. A fourth feature of photographs on the blog sites is that they are recognised as being up to date. The blog postings are date-stamped and so the viewer can check the currency of the images. This feature supports the credibility and immediacy of the photograph as an influence on tourism destination image formation. A fifth feature of photographs, recognised by Wang and Fesenmaier (2004), is their simple hedonic value. For many would be tourists, examining photographs is an intrinsically enjoyable activity and one to which they are often prepared to commit solid amounts of leisure time. Together, the attention-getting, easy-to-use, trustworthy, up-to-date and enjoyable features which define looking at blog photographs explain their power in building destination images. These considerations indicate that the study of tourists' photographs is not a peripheral research topic but may offer value for understanding contemporary influences shaping travel choices.

The enthusiasm amongst social science researchers for pursuing more work on the visual components of tourists' experiences is articulated clearly by Scarles (2010, p. 905) who suggests that 'when words fail, visuals ignite'. Similarly, Dann (1996), whose study concentrates on the language of tourism study and presentation, suggests that while text informs, photographs confirm core tourism messages. An increasing focus on the use of visual methods has been evident across a wide range of disciplines (Collier & Collier, 1986; Loeffler, 2004). Tourism researchers too are embracing the opportunities (Hunter, 2013; Prideaux & Coghlan, 2010; Rakić & Chambers, 2012). A wide range of different visual methods have been used in tourism studies. A broad division among three different types of visual methods can be made. Visual material can be: (1) collected from secondary sources and later studied by relying on analyses such as content or semiotic analysis; (2) created

and elicited for the purposes of a research project by research participants; and (3) used by researchers to generate other forms of data by employing visual stimuli in experimentation or survey work (Rakić & Chambers, 2012). The present study pursues the first of these three options.

## 2.2. Objects of photographic attention

There are several lines of inquiry which suggest that close attention to what tourists are photographing might also be especially interesting for the development and enhancement of conceptual schemes in tourism study. These diverse sources effectively connect some points in the study of authenticity, critical theory issues relating to the interests of tourism researchers, and work expressing the desirability of considering the everyday or mundane components of existence. As a first topic in this set of interests, the rich history of authenticity studies in tourism has led to a strong focus on existential authenticity (Wang, 1999; Cohen 2011, 2012). In Wang's own work, he argues specifically for a move away from MacCannell's object and setting-based authenticity and towards the authenticity of the experience (Wang, 1999: 359). The latter concept has an intrapersonal and an interpersonal component, where the former refers to a control over one's body and the building of a strong sense of self, while the latter focusses on the growth of relationships, often but not exclusively linked to family members. As these ideas have been developed in contemporary tourism study, concepts of transformative tourism based on the work of the educational theorist Mezirow have carried forward this theme of a grand role for tourism in people's lives (Pritchard, Morgan & Ateljevic, 2011; Reisinger, 2014). A similar but not quite so strong advocacy for the uplifting and existential moments of tourism can also be found in the studies edited by Filep and Pearce (2014) describing tourists' experience and fulfilment from a positive psychology perspective.

Hall (2004), Tribe (2010), and Bramwell and Lane (2014), amongst others, remind researchers that at times they need to reflect on their own positions and roles in formulating visions of who tourists are and what they do. In this context, there is a possibility that tourism researchers, in seeking to elevate the power and influence of the behaviours and settings they study, may be overemphasising the extraordinary and the special features of tourists' experiences (Higgins-Desbiolles & Whyte, 2013). Studies from outside the field of tourism have noted the importance of considering the role of mundane behaviours (Patterson, 2008), mundane consumption (Kleine, Kleine & Kernan, 1993; Caru & Cova, 2003), mundane heritage (Atkinson, 2008) and mundane mobilities (Edensor, 2007; Binnie, Edensor, Holloway, Millington, & Young, 2007). The common thread in these diverse studies is that the everyday places, activities and behaviours matter as much as the extraordinary ones, and engaging in such activities and with such places brings key rewards for participants in terms of personal identity, security and a way of ordering the world (Binnie et al., 2007). Additionally, a focus on the ordinary activities and sights of visited places may actually assist tourists in uncovering deeper power and cultural features of the visited community. The tourist here can be seen as somewhat analogous to Flyvbjerg's (2006) social scientist seeing the power and the social forces at work in individual case studies. There are some compelling examples of this suggestion in travel writing and photography with some authors making a career out of being 'connoisseurs of the mundane' (Allen, 2011). In particular, the ability to see the complex and the memorable in the ordinary is revealed in the work of such figures as Redmond O'Hanlon, Brad Herzog, Bill Bryson and Alain de Botton (cf. Holland & Huggan, 2000: 16).

One existing suggestion in the tourism literature which follows this thread of inquiry is offered by Pearce (2012). He suggests that there is a kind of mundane authenticity where tourists pay attention to non-tourist settings such as the supermarkets, street signs, the

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