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Photographs in tourism research: Prejudice, power, performance and participant-generated images

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ABSTRACT

Photography has often been considered tainted as a source of research data, even in tourism, its natural habitat. This situation is undoubtedly a legacy of the prejudice that many social scientists held toward the use of visual data when the academic study of tourism took off in the 1970s and 1980s. Tourism research has therefore persistently favoured textual data over visual data. This paper argues that the power of photography to prove and move can be harnessed to bridge this theoretical and practical cognitive gap. Issues relating to the performance of photography, including those of timing and intent, as well as the speed of information exchange, need however to be considered when designing and implementing research using photographic data. This implies a need to review the 'circle of representation' of tourism destination images, as well as to divide participant-generated image methods into two strands: found photographs and commissioned photographs.

1. Introduction

Despite the ubiquitous use of photography in recording the tourist experience (Urry, 1990) and, more recently, performing it (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Tribe & Mkono, 2017), current tourism research remains predominantly textocentric (Balomenou & Garrod, 2014). As Conquergood (2002) asserts, the problem with such an approach relates not to the use of text per se but to the rigid separation between theory and performance. It has been acknowledged that the tourist experience includes elements of performance (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009; Scarles, 2011) and that valuable insights may be lost in research that only utilises canonical methods such as interviews, questionnaires and observation (Latham, 2003). A variety of ways of understanding perceptions, realities and experiences holistically, and of treating the "other" as complementary and reciprocal rather than oppositional or irrelevant (Nancy, 2000; Stoller, 2010), can be achieved by accepting other methods alongside or even instead of these canonical methods. This paper sets out the argument that photographs are legitimate agents of inquiry, not just when accompanied by text (Pink, 2013), that provide tourism researchers with a different kind of information that is able to embrace the embodiment of experiences (Bell & Davison, 2013; Emmison & Smith, 2000). Although the "felt" characteristics of embodiment (Simpson, 2011) cannot be demonstrated directly through photography, its 'descriptive and aesthetic dimensions' can be said to 'together form an equal music of rationality and emotion in their making' (Spencer, 2010, p. 202). Photographs can thus achieve a multisensory effect, conveying complex meanings and visualising perceptions. They remain, however, underused in tourism research (Balomenou, Garrod, & Georgiadou, 2017; Grimwood, Arthurs, & Vogel, 2015; Smith, Li, Pan, Witte, & Doherty, 2015). This paper will argue that, in tourism research especially, photographic data represent an important means of bridging two vital cognitive gaps: the gap that exists between words and visuals, and the gap between researchers and participants. Such discussion has been largely absent in the tourism literature to date. Making better use of photographs as data may be vital, however, if tourism research is to maximise its full potential.

The first of these two cognitive gaps has special relevance to the use of theory in tourism studies. Bell and Davison (2013), in their much-needed review of the use of visual methods in the various management sub-disciplines, argue that such methods are more beneficial in theoretical as opposed to empirical research contexts. Their review included only two tourism studies, however, and overlooked two key theoretical considerations with regard to tourism applications of visual research methods: firstly, the element of "performativity" in tourism (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009; Larsen & Urry, 2011), and secondly, the inextricable link between tourism and photography (Albers & James, 1988; Caton & Santos, 2008; Chalfern, 1979), as embodied in the "circle of representation" and driven by the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990, 2002). Bell

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and Davison's thesis therefore does not do justice to the centrality of photography in the tourism experience. As this paper will demonstrate, visual tourism research has tended to place substantially more emphasis on the development of theory than its application. At the same time, it is evident that the limited number of tourism studies that have used photographs as data sources have tended to under-emphasise the role of theory, either to underpin the research design in the case of empirical studies or as the object of endeavour when grounded theory is being employed. Either way, there is a gap between the theoretical and the empirical in terms of the use of visual data in tourism research. This paper aims to demonstrate the importance and consequences of this cognitive gap, with particular reference to the potential for the wider use of participant-generated image (PGI) methods in tourism research.

The second cognitive gap is between the researcher and the participant. Bell and Davison (2013, p. 174) categorise visual elicitation strategies as being empirically driven, ‘because visual data are produced during the research, expressly for the purposes of research’. Such strategies employ methodologies in which data are produced by the researcher and the participant, usually alongside pre-existing data, and subsequently used as stimuli for discussion. The present paper argues that Bell and Davison's observation fails to take into account certain fundamental concerns that pertain to the timing (Rakić & Chambers, 2012; Stanczak, 2007) and intent (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Halpern, Valenzuela, & Katz, 2016; Lo & McKercher, 2015) of photo-taking: methodological considerations that can have important implications for the practices of data-collection, data analysis and the drawing of conclusions. Furthermore, in studies using pre-existing photographs, such photographs become data only when the research team decides to treat them as such. This includes research conducted with photographs downloaded from online platforms such as Flickr and Google Images (Hao, Wu, Morrison, & Wang, 2016; Matteucci, 2013; Straumann, Coltekin, & Andrienko, 2014) or travel blogs (Osmond & Pearce, 2014), and those requested after a trip (Loeffler, 2004; Pan, Lee, & Tsai, 2014). These observations relate to the quadrumvirate model of ‘sites and modalities of interpreting visual materials’ proposed by Rose (2016, p. 25), which specifically embraces issues of intent and timing, the circulation and “audiencing” of the photographs, the time lapse between photo-capturing and photo-sharing, and the time of taking (which in the tourism context relates to the duration of the photographer's holiday).

This paper therefore seeks to address four main aims:

- To explain the persistence on textocentrism in much of current tourism research
- To explode the myths surrounding the unreliability or photographs as research data
- To advocate the greater use of photographs as data in tourism research
- To explore some of the theoretical considerations arising from the use of PGI methods in tourism research

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 argues that the limited use of photographs as data in tourism research might be attributed to the subject's traditional reliance on the social science disciplines as the source both of supporting theory and tools of inquiry, and to the prejudice that is often manifested in those disciplines with respect to the use of photographs as data. Section 3 then explores the characteristics of photography, such as its inherent subjectivity and its power to “prove” and to “move”. While these are sometimes suggested to be shortcomings of photography as a research tool, they should not cause tourism researchers entirely to reject it. Section 4 examines how the prejudices developed against photography in the 1970s and 1980s have critically impacted on contemporary tourism research. The major arguments in favour of using photographs generated by participants as a research data are presented in Section 5. Here the paper will argue that the weaknesses of photography proposed in the previous section can actually be harnessed and transformed into strengths. Several proposals are then put forward to bridge the gap between theory and practice, one of which is to reconsider Jenkins' (2003) “circle of representation” of tourist destination images in the light of new digital technologies and the speed with which photographic images can nowadays be shared. Section 6 then draws together the main threads of the arguments presented and sets out the main conclusions.

2. Textocentrism and mistrust of photography in the social sciences

2.1. A short history of the use of photography in research

Writing in the early 1930s, Benjamin (1977, p. 6) described an attempt in 1838 by the physicist and politician François Arago to convince the French government to acquire the patent for the pioneering daguerreotype photographic process invented by Daguerre and Niépce:

> When inventors of a new instrument apply it to the observation of nature, the hopes that they place upon it are always insignificant compared with the number of subsequent discoveries of which the instrument was the origin.

In support of Arago's enthusiasm for photography, Benjamin noted its potential to assist all kinds of research, from astrophysics to philology, including its potential to capture a corpus of Egyptian hieroglyphics on film.

As illustrated in Fig. 1, photographic practice has changed significantly over its 200-year history, from the invention in the mid-19th century of a prototype of the modern photograph, the *daguerrogram* (Benjamin, 1977), to a technology available to many but by no means all ordinary people in the mid-20th century (Bourdieu & Whiteside, 1996), to near-universal access to photography as a popular technology by the early 21st century (Moore, 2017). Access to cameras is now so ubiquitous, particularly because of commonplace smartphone ownership (Van House, 2011), that the general public is able to photograph almost anything and everything. Photography is so ingrained in everyday life that photographing even mundane aspects of daily lives, such as meals, is considered normal (Murphy, 2010). Parking bay numbers and cloakroom tickets are photographed as aide-memoires. Nokia has responded to a possible concern that some thing or event might be missed by producing the first smartphone to be able to capture images from both lenses, yielding dual images known as “bothies” (Gibbs, 2017). The seemingly limitless capturing of things of interest is also partly due to the removal of the quantity limitations imposed by the 24- or 36-exposure chemical film.

In spite of its universal availability and popular use, photography has had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with research methodology. Its potential for use in academic research had been documented as early as the 1830s (Wickliff, 2006). Photographs have since been routinely employed by scientific researchers, not only as a means of collecting and cataloguing data but also of furnishing proof of the findings from the analysis of such data (Harper, 1988), notably in the natural sciences (Behrend, 2003; Gelderloos, 2014). Research in fields such as astronomy, biology and physics would be unthinkable without the use of photography. Indeed, photographs of aspects of star formation or cell development in plants make the findings they illustrate less likely to be challenged because they are understood to represent proof, in some sense. Behrend (2003, p. 131) suggests that photography contributed to the development of a ‘modern, positivistic culture of realism’ in the natural sciences. Amirault (1993) discusses the influence of the presence of the photographer on the “objective truth” of illness with reference to a photograph of circa 1866 in which the photograph aimed to be aesthetically pleasing while objectively presenting the impact of trauma on a patient (Leger et al., 2014). O'Connor (1995) discusses anorexia, medical photography and medical positivism. Despite the debates on the role of photography in the field of medical