



When is a picture not worth a thousand words? The psychological effects of mediated exposure to a remote location



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ABSTRACT

The Internet has radically decreased the influence of physical distance by allowing people to share images and information about distant places at the click of a button. But we still do not understand how exposure to this information influences our mental conception of places that are far away, and how these effects may change our attitudes towards distant locations. This has implications for both tourism marketers and travelers consulting social media sites for information on destinations. We conducted an experiment to see if exposing participants to one of four mediated representations of an unfamiliar environment impacted their attitudes towards the location. We found that mediated exposure to a distant place positively influenced desire to visit the location through different routes: 3D panoramas heightened feelings of spatial presence which translated into more positive attitudes towards the place, while textual descriptions decreased psychological distance which in turn was associated with more positive attitudes.

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1. Introduction

The Internet has given us global reach – the ability to interact with people around the world and experience distant places through images, video, and even interactive panoramas. Since potential travelers generally have limited knowledge about the attributes of places they have not yet visited (Um & Crompton, 1990), they are likely to seek out and be influenced by travel information online. We can experience distant locations prior to visiting them through computer-mediated experiences, or what Lee, Gretzel, and Law (2010) refer to as “pre-experiences”. But are these experiences as good as being there? How does mediated experience of a distant place influence our attitudes and perceptions of the place?

Research on psychological distance suggests that we mentally conceptualize distant individuals and objects in a very different way than those that are physically proximate, and this can change our attitudes and behaviors towards them accordingly. For example, work by Bradner and Mark (2002) suggests that people are less cooperative and more deceptive towards people they believe to be in a distant city as opposed to in their own city. However, little research has investigated the effects of psychological distance or a range of different media types on desire to visit a place. There are additional ways of experiencing a place as opposed to interacting with a person (for example, navigating a cityscape using

interactive 3D software). It is possible that experiencing the same place via different media will lead to differing levels of perceived distance and thereby affect attitudes towards that place, because different media vary in the level of detail they provide and their ability to make a person feel like they are “really there.”

Consuming multimedia content online, whether created by destination marketers or by other users, is important for travelers' information search and decision-making processes (Yoo & Gretzel, 2012). There is evidence that potential travelers want to use new technologies to actively experience destinations as part of their decision making process (Huang, Backman, & Backman, 2010). Although technology now gives us seemingly endless reach, human cognitive abilities have not necessarily evolved to leverage this reach. For example, as individuals become removed from the direct experience of an event, they lose the ability to think accurately and reliably about it. We therefore have difficulty thinking about people who are physically distant or events that are in the future (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006). Thus, although we can interact with and experience distant places online, it is unclear to what extent these experiences may influence our mental conception of those places or our attitudes towards them.

According to Cho and Fesenmaier (2000), tourists have difficulty forming a clear destination image without direct experience. However, virtual environments that incorporate interactivity and multimedia can help provide virtual experiences that help in the formation of a more vivid destination image. Travel destination-related information presented online can come in a variety of media formats, the differing impacts of which are not well under-

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stood. We are now able to share very detailed information with others about location, and make this information interactive. 360-degree panorama programs are available for mobile phones (e.g. Fig. 1) which allow end-users to easily capture interactive panoramas of any location and share them through the browser. It is even easier to share videos and still images of different locations, and easier still to simply describe these locations on blogs or wikis.

Content producers such as tourism marketers have the possibility of helping visitors get a more detailed mental image of a location by providing access to multimedia depictions of a place. However, destination image has the potential to be affected by both the medium in which information about a place is presented and the content that is presented. For example, photographs and tourism brochures are a popular means of transmitting information about a destination (Hunter, 2008; Molina & Esteban, 2006) but social media now also allow users to contribute their own content. For example, consumer-generated videos of places now exist alongside videos created by destination marketing organizations (Lim, Chung, & Weaver, 2012). The experience of viewing a photo versus a video of the same location could be quite different on a number of levels, including interactivity and media richness.

Given all the different ways we can interact with and learn about distant places, several open questions remain: How does exposure to media about distant places influence the way we think about those places? How does virtual exposure to a distant location influence the way an observer thinks about and perceives the depicted location? We addressed these questions by conducting an experiment looking at the effects of different media depicting a distant, unfamiliar location on observers' experience of the location and attitudes towards the location. Our results suggest that different media influence attitudes towards a distant location via different routes, with an interactive 360-degree panorama increasing positive attitudes towards a place by increasing feelings of spatial presence, and text increasing positive attitudes through increased vivid mental imagery of the place.

2. Related work

2.1. Social media and travel

With the advent of Web 2.0 and growth in popularity of social media sites, Internet users are increasingly able to produce, consume and distribute information in a variety of media on the web (Sigala, 2008). Social network sites with user-generated content have changed the way that travelers access and evaluate trip-related information by allowing them to post and share travel-related experiences in a variety of formats, including text,

audio and video (Ip, Lee, & Law, 2012). One recent study estimated that more than 80% of leisure travelers have been influenced by various types of travel-related consumer generated media such as reviews, videos, and blogs (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011).

Besides being helpful to information-seeking travelers, this increase in user-generated content is also of interest to tourism marketers because potential visitors may form impressions of destinations based on the material they are exposed to on the Web. Tourists can gather more detailed information on their desired locale (Pantano & Servidio, 2011,) which may produce extrinsic cues influencing their mental picture, or brand image of a destination (Christou, 2007).

Given that tourists are strongly motivated to use the Internet to research and plan trips (Parra-López, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutiérrez-Taño, & Díaz-Armas, 2011), there has been interest in what types of social media-related material they encounter and how this influences their behavior. Recent work by Xiang and Gretzel (2010) discovered that search queries conducted in their study yielded social media results, from virtual community discussions in forums like Lonely Planet to review sites to blogs and media sharing sites such as YouTube. Another recent survey found that many travelers engage in information-seeking behaviors prior to a trip where they consult information others have posted online, such as review comments and pictures of the destination, or look at the destination on Google Earth (Parra-López et al., 2011).

In addition to the popular social media contents such as blogs, photos, and videos, advances in technology are also making it easier to create and share more immersive representations of a destination, such as 360-degree panoramas. Web communities such as 360cities.net allow for the sharing and viewing of such panoramas, and mobile phone apps such as 360 make it possible to create these interactive panoramas on one's mobile phone. There are even virtual panorama tour guides in which a person can virtually visit a place without even leaving their own town (e.g. <http://starcitywalk.com/apps.html>).

Social media are providing a vehicle for people to share and view visual and textual information about destinations; however, the psychological and behavioral effects of exposure to these different types of information may vary based on the type of media being used. Different media vary in terms of the amount of information they can transmit in a given time interval; this concept is known as media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Richer media have the potential to more effectively reduce uncertainty and ambiguity about a place by providing more detailed information about it to multiple senses. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) classify social media sites along a continuum of media richness. Text-based sites like Wikipedia and blogs are ranked low on the scale of media richness, while content communities such as YouTube occupy a "medium" position. Virtual game worlds, which replicate a 3D environment, are ranked as providing the highest level of media richness.

There has been minimal previous research on comparing the impact of varying media richness or information presentation mode on impressions of distant places. Relevant related work outside of the tourism domain has compared the impact of various mediated communication experiences on person perception in dyadic interaction (e.g. Nowak, Watt, & Walther, 2005). This research has theorized that media vary on a continuum of richness as a function of the extent to which they recreate the affordances of face-to-face interaction. At the same time, we know that not all affordances are necessary to engender positive attitudes towards a person, with static photographs of a previously unknown other increasing interpersonal attraction. However, the focus in this work has been on recreating the feeling of co-presence with another person, and is not suggestive of the influence of mediated experiences on perceptions of a place beyond advocating 'richer' representations.

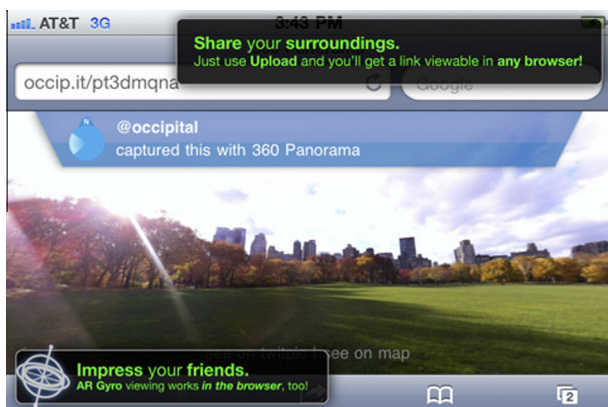


Fig. 1. 360 Degree panorama sharing program for mobiles.

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