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Selfie-taking as touristic looking

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ABSTRACT

This paper reconceptualises the tourist gaze as facilitated by smart phones and social media, with a focus on selfies. It presents selfie-taking as a new way of touristic looking in which tourists become the objects of the self-directed tourist gaze. The paper suggests that the practice of selfie-taking in tourism is constituted by othering, stylized performing and producing/consuming visual culture of the self. Through these processes, tourists are able to ascribe the characteristics they otherwise associate with tourist sights onto themselves. Rather than fetishizing the extraordinary at the tourist destination, tourists seek to capture the extraordinary within themselves. Traditional tourist sights and attractions take on different relative importance.

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Introduction

The visual is central to tourism as tourists travel to collect images, and, through photography, come to understand destinations and attractions as tourist sights (Chalfen, 1979; MacCannell, 1976). Taking pictures of the unfamiliar or extraordinary in tourism has long served as a demarcation to the ordinary character of everyday life (Urry, 1990). Recently, the focus of tourist photography has moved from trying to capture the extraordinary to producing social relations—between tourists and hosts at the destination, between tourists at the destination and between tourists and those that stayed home (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Social media play a large role in keeping tourists connected to those who stayed home (Germann Molz, 2012) and are a foundation for the concept of networked travel (Germann Molz & Paris, 2013; Larsen, Axhausen, & Urry, 2006; Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2007). This means that tourists

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may immediately connect to online distant others. With tourists' increasing use of social media for photo-sharing (Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011), one of the core concepts underlying tourist photography is digital immediacy (Bell & Lyall, 2005, p. 136), which means that because of networked travel photos communicate: "not just, 'I was here'; but 'I am here, right now, having this experience in real time, and here is the evidence that this is the case.'"

Such developments indicate that changes in tourist photography parallel shifts in the functions of personal photography which—facilitated by social media—are characterized by the increasing importance of communication (Sarvas & Froehlich, 2011; Sontag, 2004) as well as self-expression and identity formation (Shanks & Svabo, 2014; Van Dijck, 2008) relative to memory creation. Within this realm, photos of the self or 'selfies' have become ubiquitous on social media (Senft & Baym, 2015; Wendt, 2014). As a result, we expect them to become an important part of producing and sharing tourist photographs. The literature provides multiple definitions for 'selfie' (Hess, 2015; Senft & Baym, 2015) and we understand it not as confined to one specific type of technology or a specific genre of photograph or video but as characterized by the desire to frame the self in a picture taken to be shared with an online audience. We therefore view the selfie both as a photographic object as well as a practice (Senft & Baym, 2015). This allows us to fit the selfie in with tourist photography which we also see as "a social practice, a networked technology, a material object and an image" (Larsen & Sandbye, 2014, p. xxiii).

While the selfie in relation to tourism has received a lot of attention in the popular press, currently only one academic study on selfies in tourism exists. The study explores the influence of personality traits on selfie-taking behaviours in the context of travel (Paris & Pietschnig, 2015, p. 5). Based on their exploratory findings the authors argue that the selfie in tourism is a complex phenomenon in need of critical examination that has "evolved from the continued convergences of travel, digital culture, and communication technologies". This paper fills this need for critical examination by exploring the theoretical foundations of changing visual cultures in tourism. Specifically, it positions the selfie as a phenomenon shaped by changing technological affordances, social practices and social functions of photography based on the concept of networked travel (Larsen et al., 2007).

Informed by Xin, Tribe & Chambers's (2013) guidelines for conceptual research in tourism we contextualize the selfie-phenomenon and situate it within existing tourism theory. In particular, we conceptualize the tourist selfie as a symbol of a changing tourist gaze. As such, the tourist selfie manifests itself in aspects of the tourist experience beyond photography. We take a practice-oriented perspective with the intention to focus on the act of taking selfies rather than the products of this activity. Previous research taking such a practice-oriented perspective to tourist photography has explored how and why tourists take pictures (Baerenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2007; Larsen, 2008; Robinson & Picard, 2009) and what the implications of 'staging' photographs for tourists' experiences are (Larsen, 2005; Noy, 2014; Scarles 2009, 2013; Stylianou-Lambert, 2012). We offer an additional dimension to such practice-oriented approaches by looking beyond what the implications of the selfie are for photographic tourist practices to explore how selfie-taking informs and shapes tourist experiences. We therefore introduce the self-directed tourist gaze as one perspective and lens through which tourists participate in tourism and tourist photography. We extend theoretical foundations of the tourist gaze to explain and accommodate the phenomenon. We build on the tourist selfie as a symbol for a conceptual paper that examines selfie-taking as a new way of touristic looking and the processes it entails. We present othering the self, stylized performing the self and producing as well as consuming the self as practices through which tourists themselves become tourist sights.

Photography and the tourist gaze

Review of the tourist gaze

Visual practices in tourism are intricately connected with the concept of the tourist gaze. Urry's concept of the tourist gaze (1990) explains the relations between tourists and the tourist environment as socially constructed. Through its three editions (Urry, 1990, 2002; Urry & Larsen, 2011), the tourist gaze has widely both grounded and inspired academic work in tourism and beyond prioritizing different foci. Larsen's (2014, see for a review) chapter "The Tourist Gaze 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0" describes shifts from an emphasis on the visual and the ordering of social relations in the tourist gaze 1.0 (Urry, 1990)

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