Travel Selfie – An Element of Destination Image Co-Creation

Abstract

The connection between photography and tourism has already been studied previously, however, till today, a travel selfie and its influence on a destination image has been a niche topic. Therefore, this academic paper analyses selfie photographs that are shared online on social networks and are related to a certain destination and it intends to uncover whether travel selfies might be considered as an element of destination image co-creation. Literature review has been used in order to provide relevant background for the study as well as to set in concrete the research gap. An observational photography content analysis has been conducted and more than four thousands photographs have been studied, focusing on four Spanish touristic cities – Barcelona, Madrid, Santiago de Compostela and Seville. It has been discovered that travel selfies are elements of destination image co-creation and they promote same or very similar destination attractions as the official destination management bodies do. Moreover, most popular categories have been listed and concrete attractions at each of the destinations have been unnamed. Additionally, a brief description of a selfie-taker has been given. It is recommended that travel selfies are considered as more important elements by official destination offices as they are part of destination image creation.

Keywords: destination image, social media, selfie

1. Introduction

Photography and tourism are nowadays considered inseparable; however it was not before 1979 when first authors started to examine this relationship. Concretely, Richard Chalfen was the first researcher that had studied the connection between these two areas and had created a base for further research. Other authors that have continued in this direction were Martin Parr (1995) and Kevin Markwell (1997) which concluded that 'to be a tourist, it is almost necessary to be a photographer'. However, it can be argued that not all tourists necessarily take photographs and therefore there exist some 'travellers' which prefer not to be seen with a camera to be able to experience the real local culture (Hsiu-Yen Yeh, 2009, p. 200). From that time many more authors have deepened the knowledge about these two phenomena and their relation.

The well-known author Urry (2002, pp. 127-129) has also described the photography as a way to interpret the reality, the confirmation that something has happened. Moreover, he has also considered it to be an appropriation of a certain object which creates a power/knowledge relationship and thus gives the photographer a certain momentary control over it. At the same time, photography leads to democratisation of all kinds of tourist experiences as it allows everything to be transformed into images and everyone being free to do it (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016, p. 128; Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 169).

Later on, researches also started to examine the influence of photography on marketing strategies as well as its influence on a destination. The way a destination image is created has changed and nowadays there are many new forms that influence and co-create the place image.

Generally, trends in photography as well as its technology have significantly shifted and have become much more complex and online-based. For the past two decades, the activity of domestic photography has also been going through continuous changes. Those changes have not come about overnight. They have started in 1830s with the invention of photography, continued in 1888 with the advent of consumer photography and kept coming in 1990s when the first digital camera was produced. With global development and technological progress, the purposes and uses by people have also shifted into new forms. What once has been known as contact printing nowadays is replaced by activities such as sharing, editing, publishing, posting, commenting upon or displaying (Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011, pp. 1-2). These technological progress and changes in society have caused that, nowadays, thousands of people share their 'lives' online with their friends and relatives or even strangers. Sharing has become a very popular activity, not only regarding website links or documents but mainly referring to photographs.

The destination image creation has also drastically evaluated. The first research on the destination image, in the tourism industry, has its roots back in the early 1970s when it had been considered as a representation of the destination. Since that time, the destination image has been of a high importance among many researchers (Frochot & Batat, 2013, p. 115). It is a very important component and an influence of the tourist experience and destination-making process (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Frochot & Batat, 2013; Gartner, 1993). Therefore, there have been conducted many studies related to this phenomenon, not only in the tourism field but in other disciplines too (Draper & Minca, 1997; Selwyn, 1996; Sternberg, 1997). The main topics of the study have been divided into various categories: the conceptualization, the measurement, the formation process and the management policies (Frochot & Batat, 2013, pp. 114-115).

The information consulted and information sources used by tourists also significantly influence a destination image. Nowadays, with the use of Internet, people trust the online sources and often consider them as a proven font of information, what in consequence influences one's perception about the destination (Frochot & Batat, 2013, p. 115).

With the invention of social media, several social networks have appeared. They have been first mentioned by Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2004, as cited in Glynn Mangold & Faulds, 2009, pp. 357-358) that defined this phenomenon as "a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues". Frequently, impressions, opinions,

experiences and feelings are also included in this definition (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010, p. 180). Some of these networks are only focused on photography. Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter are the most popular and known ones. Daily, thousands of photographs are shared online on these networks and thousands of interactions are taking place. These shared photographs may serve various purposes, for example connecting a person with further relatives or even making an advertisement for a certain product or service. Therefore it is important to study the influence of online posted and shared photographs on a destination and its promotion.

Recently, a word 'selfie' has come into life and it has spread out extremely fast to the world. It was only in 2013 when the type of photograph was officially named and just few years later it is one of the most popular words worldwide. Overall, there already exist several selfie types, for example prelfies of pregnant women, welfies or healthies or even drelfies or drunken selfies, which have been studied from a different point of view. However, a travel selfie, as a recent phenomenon, has never been studied from tourism point of view, just from psychological one, and therefore it has deserved author's special attention in order to be able to progress in the study of destination image that tourists may project with the realization of their selfies while travelling.

2. Aim of the research

The academic paper focuses on the importance of travel selfie photographs, which are shared online on social media, for the tourism field. It investigates the correlation of the selfie photographs content and the online content shared by official tourism bodies and thus it intends to prove whether travel selfies do co-create the destination image. As the phenomenon of travel selfies is constantly growing, it is of a high importance to confirm this concern. That is the reason why this study investigates these issues and the major findings intend to answer the following questions:

1. Do travel selfie photographs co-create the destination image?
    1.1 What do selfie photographs promote?
    1.2 Does the content of travel selfies go in line with what official destination management promotes?
2. Do official channels of destinations publish selfie photographs? If not, who publishes travel selfie photographs and through which channels or social networks?
3. What is the profile of a travel selfie-taker?

Furthermore, additional information was gathered, such as facts about social networks, popular selfie categories or the most frequently shared attractions.

3. Methodology

Regarding the methodology, firstly, an extensive in-depth literature review was used to explore the already known background of the study as well as to support the photography, destination image and social media topics which were relevant for this paper.

Secondly, content analysis as the objective, systematic and quantitative research method was applied in order to answer the previously mentioned research questions. As Kim and Stepchenkova (2015, p. 30) identified, there exist two types of content that can be analyzed: manifest and latent content. As in this case the surface structure of the photography has been investigated, it was the manifest type of content that was studied. To justify this choice, observable features of the images were analyzed and numerical representation of the data was needed to quantify and generalise the results from the sample to the population of interest. Furthermore, manifest content comprised denotative meaning which applied that the content represents the same meaning to many people and to different researchers (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015, p. 31).

Hence, a study of social media of four Spanish touristic cities, concretely Barcelona, Madrid, Seville and Santiago de Compostela, was conducted and used as a major source of information. Social networks, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter, were followed during a month period, from 1st April 2016 till 30th April 2016 (both dates included), and from all posted photographs travel selfies were identified and downloaded manually or using Instaport tool in concrete cases. Even though some of the previously mentioned networks serve also different purposes and not only for photo-sharing, in this study have all four been regarded as equal and comparable.

After analyzing approximately 493 000 online photographs, the sample of 4 677 photographs has been obtained which only contained selfies that were publicly available online and thus no private material was used. Neither the selfies nor the names of the users who have published them are revealed, therefore the whole study and its results are completely anonymous. All the process was performed following the pre-established folksonomies (Instagram hashtags, Twitter tagging, Pinterest word combination and Facebook geo-tagging) and , in such way, the photos were definitely related to the studied destination and the number of photos could be more concentrated.

4. Analysis and Results

After having finished manually downloading the photographs from above mentioned networks and following the pre-established folksonomies, travel selfies have been categorized, according to their content, into groups which were inspired by the study conducted by Rabassa-Figueras, Paniagua and Setó Pàmies (2014) and continuously modified and adapted for the present research. All categories and their subcategories can be observed in the following table 1.

Table 1: Categorization of photographs, including sub-categories

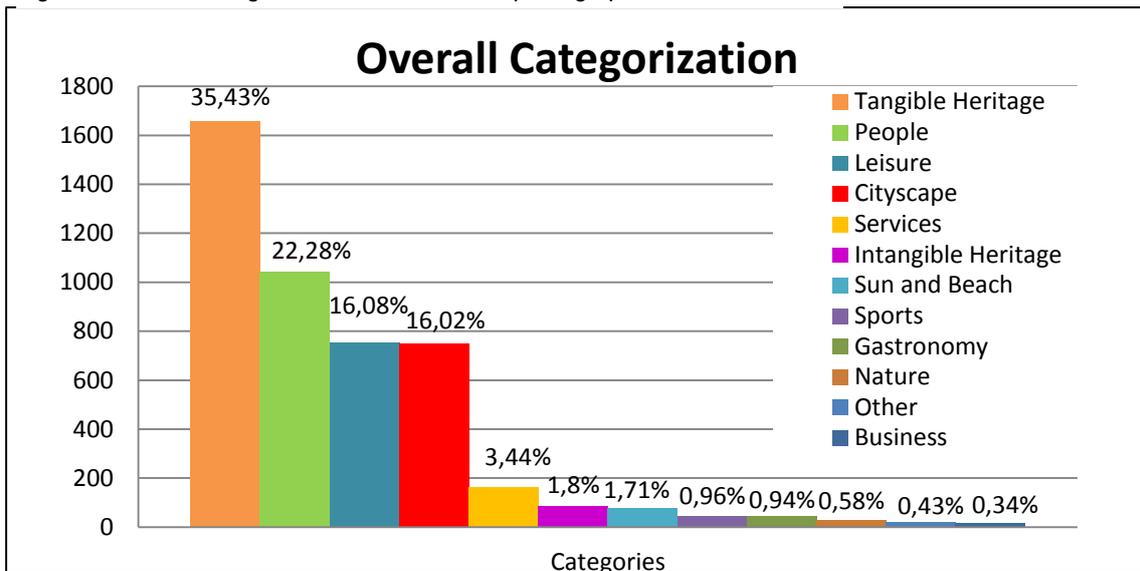| TOTAL CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORIES				
Business/trade					
Cityscape	Architecture			Urban Planning / Landscape	
Gastronomy	Food / Cuisine			Wine Tourism	
Intangible heritage	Intangible heritage/ Popular culture/ Traditions		Anthem / Flag / National Symbols		
Leisure	Urban and cultural leisure		Night life	Shopping	
Nature	Nature and nature landscape	Rural landscape	Mountain	Ecotourism	
Other					
People					
Services	Hotel / Lodging		Transport	Other services	
Sports	Summer Sports	Winter Sports	Water Sports	Adventure Sports	Elite Sports	Other Sports
Sun and Beach	Sea / Beach		Sun	Climate / Weather	
Tangible Heritage	Sights	History	Religion	Works of Art	Museums
Things to Do					

Source: by the author, modified from Rabassa-Figueras, Paniagua and Setó Pàmies (2014)

Using the research method, from all analyzed photographs, the sample of 4 677 selfies was categorized into established categories. It is interesting to observe that the most frequent category of all selfie photographs has been the tangible heritage which represented 35.43 % and significantly dominated all the other categories. Thus, as all four cities are important patrimonial cities, it is possible to conclude that travel selfies, in the case of overall categorization, represent the destination image and contribute to its creation.

Category 'people', which represented pictures that only showed human faces and no other concrete content, has been the second most popular type of selfies shared on the social networks and represented 22.28 %. Hence, travel selfies fulfill the same self-presentation function as the classical selfie photographs.

Moreover, categories leisure (16.08 %) and cityscape (16.02 %) represent almost the same percentage of all photographs and therefore they could be both considered as the third most popular type of selfies shared online. Other categories stand only for the rest 10 % of all travel selfies and their values may be consulted in the figure below.

Figure 1: Overall categorization of travel selfie photographs

Source: by the author.

Number of photos per each category and more detailed division into sub-categories can be found below in Table 2. It is interesting to observe that the most popular sub-categories were people, sights, religion, urban and cultural leisure and urban planning and landscape.

Table 2: Overall categorization of travel selfie photographs, incl. sub-categories

OVERALL CATEGORIZATION			
Category	Total Category	Sub-category	Total Sub-category
Business	16	Business	16
Cityscape	749	Architecture	78
		Urban planning/ landscape	671
Gastronomy	44	Food/ cuisine	44
Intangible Heritage	84	Popular culture	18
		Tradition	66
Leisure	752	Night life	8
		Shopping	14
		Urban and cultural leisure	730
Nature	27	Mountain	2
		Nature and natural landscape	25
Other	20		20
People	1 042		1 042
Services	161	Hotel/ lodging	3
		Other services	17
		Transport	141
Sports	45	Other sports	26
		Summer sports	13
		Water sports	6
Sun and Beach	80	Sea/ beach	80
Tangible Heritage	1 657	Museums	18
		Religion	805
		Sights	812
		Works of Art	22
TOTAL	4 677		4 677

Source: by the author.

Moreover, in the detailed study, each of the four Spanish touristic cities – Barcelona, Madrid, Santiago de Compostela, Seville – have been also categorized individually and the most popular categories have been discovered. The individual city results were comparable to the general results. Furthermore, concrete attractions or/and elements of the city have been unnamed and it has been discovered that travel selfies promote same or very similar attractions as the official destination management does.

As a minor part of the study, the profile of selfie-takers has been observed. By investigating the characteristics and personality of people who take selfies, it has been intended to find out what type of tourists are the ones that co-create the destination image and thus should be addressed more by the official tourism bodies.

It has been discovered that the major part of selfie-takers are young people between 25 and 35 years old who frequently take photographs of themselves in a way that their complete faces are not shown. Furthermore, it was surprising to disclose that even the selfie photographs are very popular mainly within teenage generation, there are not many children or teenagers' selfie photographs posted online that relate to a certain touristic destination. Thus this generally popular phenomenon contrasts in the tourism field.

Moreover, the trend of taking the 'classical selfie' of only oneself has also passed by as nowadays majority of the selfie photographs are taken in a company of another person or even of a group.

Much more interesting facts and characteristics could be found out studying the profile of selfie-takers, such as for example whether the person wears sunglasses or not, however this was not the objective of this study and therefore it might be a possible research topic for further investigation.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Firstly, it has been discovered that within the major photo-based social networks, Instagram is the most important one when considering the number of posted and shared selfie photographs. This social network definitely provided the major part of selfies and thus made this research possible and valuable.

Furthermore, official accounts do not post selfie photographs on their networks and therefore do not support this type of image co-creation. Reasons for this might be a subject of further research.

During the collection period, it was also interesting to discover that even though Facebook is nowadays the most popular social network and one can see with his/her private profile many friends' selfies, publically there does not exist an access to selfie photographs which are related

to a tourism destination via geo-tagging. This fact significantly affected the number of analyzed photographs and possibilities for further research.

Finally, it has been proven that selfie photographs do co-create the destination image and they present same or very similar values as the official destination management does. The most frequent types of photograph content of each of the studied touristic cities have just confirmed it.

Referring to the general results, the main attraction of the four popular Spanish cities – Barcelona, Madrid, Santiago de Compostela and Seville – has definitely been emphasized as the most frequent type of selfies has been the tangible heritage. All these cities as well as Spain as a country really stand out in this category. Moreover, selfies taken with other people highlighted the importance of Spanish social life and their warm and open character as they were rated as the second most popular selfie content. Leisure, mainly emphasizing the football, is the third most popular activity during which tourists take a selfie. Last but not least, Spain is worldwide well known for its cityscape and architecture and therefore it is not surprising that travellers share online their selfies taken next to famous buildings or other elements of cityscape.

Hence, by the above research, it has been proven that travel selfies shared online on various social networks do co-create the destination image and promote place's main attractions which go in line with what the official destination management promotes, even though travel selfies are not shared by the official destination network accounts.

6. List of References

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