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Tracking destination visual narratives: photographic compositions from longer stay tourists

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The photographs that contemporary travellers disseminate quickly and effortlessly to a global online audience are a valuable resource for scholars and for practitioners seeking to shape destination image. They merit more in-depth understanding. However, viewers are detached from the process of producing photos for online dissemination, thereby limiting insights provided by examinations of what the photos were intended to represent. The current authors pursue deeper understanding by studying visual effects at “face value”, rather than interpreting intended meanings. The authors consider the visual effects of narratives that longer stay tourists to Hong Kong share on social networking sites, including content, colour, spatial organization, and expressiveness elements. A longitudinal and non-representational research approach is adopted to address the disjuncture and separation between the photo production and reception processes. It is concluded that tourist photographs: a) form groupings around compositional elements; b) change in content and composition over the course of an extended visit and c) generate identifiable visual impacts, based on their compositions. Destination authorities can develop emotion-inducing visual compositions with online resonance by considering the aesthetics of tourist photographs.

Keywords: compositional analysis; visual narrative; longitudinal study; social networking sites, online photography

Subject classification codes: tourism visual research

Introduction

Prospective travellers form destination images by interpreting many destination messages provided by a diversity of operators and via a multiplicity of communication media. Tourist generated photographs are one of the many types of contributing messages (Balakrishnan et al., 2011; Tasci & Kozak, 2006). There has been increasing incorporation of such photographs into destination marketing and promotion activities. It is timely to conduct innovative analyses in light of the universal dissemination of digital images and consumption of photographs in multiple localities, contexts and ways (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012; Pink, 2013). Previous investigations of traveller photographs have focused on understanding the underlying meanings. Such approaches fitted the pre-digital age, whereas the now ubiquitous mobile technologies have enabled photographs to be disseminated *instantly*. Such practices minimize the time taken to produce photographs and the context within which they are viewed by others. There is unprecedented potential for an immediate impact during the formation of destination images and such impacts are increasingly independent of what the image creator intended.

Noting the ubiquity of social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram and WeChat, online photographs are becoming increasingly de-contextualized and their creators increasingly mobile. Hence, investigations of their underlying meanings can give only limited insight into the viewer perspective of their influence on destination image formation. The present research addresses the immediate dissemination that now characterises online tourist photographs, to examine their influence on viewer destination images. The authors seek deeper insights by lessening their emphasis on the role of photographs as signifiers and examining stand-alone messages within an online communications process (Kress, 2010; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Pink, 2013; Rose, 2012). The authors seek to inform tourism practitioners about how destination

imagery is influenced by the creation and dissemination of images by contemporary travellers.

The research can also contribute to

The authors adopt an ad hoc visual analysis scheme. They investigate how photographs are configured through communicative resources to orchestrate images, similar to analysing the structure of sentences in a language to illuminate its immediate effects. The focus is on the visual impact, rather than the meanings. The communicative resources include: content, colour (i.e., hue, modulation, saturation, and value), and spatial organization (i.e., arrangement of volume, logic of figuration, gaze, and lights). The authors view photographs as resembling words in their diverse communicative potential, albeit through the conveyance of visual effects (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012; McGregor, 2000; Rose, 2012). They emphasise the power of photographs to recall emotions, performances and affects (Xiao et al., 2013). The study adopts a longitudinal and compositional analysis that captures sensory aspects of experiences, reflecting the unfolding of everyday life over the course of an extended journey (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012; Jensen, 2016). The research results can inform destination marketers about emotional responses and aesthetics that have particular resonance amongst Millennials who are particularly reliant on instant communications and who favour visual marketing and storytelling (Bernardi, 2018).

This research paper adopts a non-representational research approach to investigate the following questions:

- What affective responses are tourist photographs capable of eliciting by means of their composition?
- How do such compositions change over time?
- What if any changes in destination image are associated with the changing composition of tourist photographs?

The current paper will contribute to theory by advancing destination image research. The uniqueness of the study lies in the approach to data interpretation, which, by following a non-representational approach, it does justice to the reality of contemporary communication media and how they are received by their viewers. The paper is structured as follows. In the methodology section the authors will explain the instruments used for data analysis and the reasons why they are suitable for reading photographs from the viewer perspective. The results are discussed in the following section, and the authors will provide a sensorial reading of the images to explain the affective impact of images when they are decontextualized from their production and publication contexts. The implications for destination image are discussed in the discussion section, as well as potential alternative affective impacts of the photographs. Finally, the authors propose conclusions, highlighting the findings that what an affective reading of the photographs unearthed would have been impossible using a more traditional reading of the visual data. Limitations and managerial implications will also be discussed.

Literature Review

Previous scholars have claimed that tourism narratives offer the prospect of capturing tourists' destination experiences and images, and approximate what they will tell others about the destination (Guthrie & Anderson, 2010; Tussyadiah, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2011; Woodside, Cruickshank, & Dehuang, 2007). The seminal work by Leiper (1990) portrayed destinations as consisting of system of attractions, with tourists progressively engaging with a hierarchy of clusters and markers. The formation of engaging narratives has always involved taking photographs as well as purchasing souvenirs.

Tourist photographs are particular contributors to visual narratives of the destination experience by preserving fragments of an experience and stabilizing moments-in-time in an image (MacKay & Couldwell, 2004; Michaelidou, Siamagka, Moraes, & Micevski, 2013). They capture senses, affections and emotions and possess a “corporeal uniqueness”, which viewers can sense, and convey an *as if they were there* feeling (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003; Scarles, 2009). In this sense, photographs may be interpreted as embodied visualities. They play an important role in the development and refinement of destination images. Early work by Gartner (1986) demonstrated that temporal factors impact on image formation, with reference to both affective. He subsequently noted that “images are formed and modified continuously through various means” (Gartner, 2001: 295).

Tourist photographs are apposite for discussing destination image, particularly in the case of the perceived rather than the projected image. Recent researchers investigated such differences in light of the surge in tourist generated content. They identified strong differences between induced and organic sources, with smaller differences between the autonomous and organic sources (Ferrer-Rosell & Marine-Roig, 2020). They proposed relevant implications for the use of tourist generated content (TGC) by DMOs to promote their destinations.

The literature on TGC has given considerable attention to the dissemination of tourist photographs through social media and to the construction and sharing of sights and related visual materials (Jansson, 2018). Social networks are probably the most common medium for photo sharing, and tourists often deploy multiple media (Rodriguez Gonzalez et al., 2011). Recent research concluded that the extent to which social media influence destination decisions is influenced by the context within which decision-making occurs (Tham, Mair & Croy, 2020). Researchers uncovered the sharing on social networks of particular numbers of photographs with a view to advancing a certain desired impression, self-image or identity, thereby conveying

experiences aligning with preferred interests and affiliations. Sharing tourist images online has been described as performative, because photographers engage in a form of impression management when selecting and sharing photographs at different stages of the experience (Emmison et al., 2012; Lo & McKercher, 2015). Hence, online photography may elicit not only viewer tourism narratives, but also social identities. Since tourists base their photographic selections for sharing via social media on their desired image creation, their considerations extend beyond the subject of the photo taking. Since the sharing of photographs to elicit certain viewer impressions implies a purpose for certain compositions, the latter are important. While researchers have focused on photographers' desired impressions, the authors were unable to identify any interpretations of such images by viewers in the context of online photography. These are increasingly relevant, given the instant dissemination and ubiquity of tourist photographs via social media.

Scholars have made increasing calls for investigations about how photographs have become curated "proprioception[s] of fragments of reality" (Scarles, 2009, p. 471) rather representing "ongoing, multiple and precarious" realities (Bajde, 2013, p. 237). An important dimension is the change over time. According to the so-called travel career pattern, tourists enter new and distinct phases through different stages of travel sophistication as the experience unfolds - similar to an evolving career at work (Pearce & Lee, 2005). Researchers have recently called for more longitudinal approaches that can capture changing destination perceptions over time, based on how the phenomenon evolves at the source of the projected image (Thelen, Kim & Scherer, 2020). However, the increasing recognition of performance and embodiment elements shows how understandings of tourist photography continue to evolve. As tourists move through a place they engage in a *rewriting* of their experiences (Scarles, 2009).

Most previous researchers have adopted representational approaches focusing on the meanings that were intended by the producers of tourist photographs. The present study addresses recent scholarly interest in more innovative and non-representational approaches (Xiao, Jafari, Cloke, & Tribe, 2013) and acknowledges that experiencing reality and sharing it via photographs can be un-reflexive, sensorial and ongoing (Thrift, 2008). According to representational tourism researchers, meanings and values are waiting to be discovered, interpreted, judged and represented. This prompts them on a search for explanations, understanding and representations of tourist places, activities and attitudes (Lorimer, 2005). Noting that visual narratives elicit *hypothesized* travel scenarios (Escalas, 2004; Scarles, 2009) and identities, investigations should take account of the corporeal uniqueness of tourist photographs and of the feelings of viewers. If researchers are to understand what tourist photographs embody and how they affect destination image, they must emphasise photographs' (multi)sensoriality and move beyond the previously dominant approach to visual research (Jensen, Scarles, & Cohen, 2015). This implies the absence of any pre-existing nature or culture that is to be revealed or experienced, and imagines diverse socially and materially constructed assemblages (Bajde, 2013). Tourism researchers have received encouragement to adopt non-representational research methods as a means of revealing the preconscious, subconscious or unconscious unfolding of experiences (Xiao et al., 2013). To appreciate images as embodied visualities, researchers should consider photographic form and composition and familiarize themselves with material qualities and with the strategies behind their formation (Rose, 2012).

Non-representational approaches are better suited to investigating images that are shared instantly and frequently as the experience unfolds. The present research focuses more on the non-conscious making of reality, its ineffable and affective aspects, and its onflow (Bajde, 2013; Hill, Canniford, & Mol, 2014; Xiao et al., 2013). The making and reception of online shared images

are contextualised in the “continual movement and processes of everyday life, especially with respect to the affective and sensual registers of the human body” (Hill et al., 2014, p. 384). By including this consideration in photographic interpretations, the researchers consider not only the affective performances and atmospheres of a particular place or event, but also situate the phenomena of interest within the *onflow* of everyday life (Hill et al., 2014; Xiao et al., 2013). They adopt a compositional interpretation approach which suits experiential and embodied responses to an image (Rose, 2012).

The current investigation deploys specific schemes that help to interpret the affective impact of the images. These are suitable for isolating visual narratives as they are presented at face value to viewers. The authors examine Hong Kong tourist photographs as communicative resources and refrain from explaining culturally specific meanings. In discussing how such resources are combined through visual statements, the study uses compositional vocabulary to describe the visual grammar of the photographs.

Methodology

The authors focus on the potential of tourist photographs as tourism narratives and as a form of communication with messages sent from producers to receivers. They seek to isolate messages from their producers as photographs are entering the online world, and to understand their immediate effects and impact, before interpreting the intentions of the producer. The current paper investigates photographs as both embodied visualities and as performative devices. The authors conduct a longitudinal investigation of how photographs change for the viewer through various unfolding realities. This paper is concerned with the evolution of photographic messages in the context of continuously changing online communications. The chosen research approach responds to scholarly calls to investigate the sensoriality and onflow of tourism experiences (Pink,

2013). Given the increasing mobility of millennials and the impetus to develop a global mindset in an increasingly interconnected world, the exchange experience is likely to be a significant component of the individual travel career for such students. The current investigation seeks to identify new and/or distinct phases of experience over an extended semester exchange period as a component of the previously mentioned travel career ladder.

This study focuses on visual narratives associated with the experiences of longer-stay tourists to Hong Kong. Noting that previous researchers have characterised University student exchanges as longer-term tourism experiences, the current investigators identified the relevant student cohort as a population that has potential to inform the phenomenon of interest (Freestone & Geldens, 2008; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008; Rodriguez Gonzalez, Bustillo Mesanza, & Mariel, 2011; Rodríguez, Martínez-Roget, & Pawlowska, 2012). Length of stay was an important consideration. Whereas the “average” tourist visits Hong Kong for about three nights, the extended duration of stay for exchange students (a semester) qualifies them as longer stay tourists or “sojourners”. Exchange students are active travelers during their time at the destination and as “digital natives” they remain connected through social media (Goldman Sachs, 2018; UNWTO, 2016). These characteristics allowed the authors to address the connectedness and immediacy of technology-enabled social media communications that are intertwined with visual cultures and everyday lives (Pink, 2013), and to observe how the visuals advanced through this behaviour change over an extended period of time. Student exchanges have also been characterized as transformative experiences. Hence, the exchange student experience can capture the experience of travellers over an extended period with variable emphases on education and tourism. Finally, by selecting international students in Hong Kong, the authors could interpret visual narratives describing an equivalent experience in a single place.

The authors adopted purposive sampling and recruited a modest number of participants, consistent with the practicalities of collecting longitudinal data and an acceptance of the merits of acquiring a thorough understanding of each respondent (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011, p. 84). The sample consisted of 11 exchange students who were enrolled at a large Hong Kong university during the spring of 2015-2016 academic year. The participants were from: Mainland China (four), South Korea, the USA and Finland (two each) and the Netherlands (one). Respondents were purposefully selected from both Asian and non-Asian source countries to avoid the potential risk that overreliance on a single cultural background might produce uniformity in visual communication habits.

A thorough and non-automated data analysis process is outlined below, with the authors collecting a manageable quantity of data. They opted not to follow the respondents' social networks, nor to analyse all photographs that had been posted. The authors were also concerned that respondents would post differing quantities of photographs, thereby leading to potential inconsistencies. Hence, photographs were collected during a series of informal face-to-face encounters where participants were encouraged to pick those that they had taken up to that moment and had prioritized for sharing with their networks. The meetings occurred longitudinally over a semester, amounting to three times every four weeks. Similarly to the data collection timeline outlined in Thelen, Kim & Scherer (2020), the authors opted for data collection divided into phases reflective of how the observed phenomenon was unfolding. Consistent with the Thelen, Kim & Scherer (2020) approach, there were three phases of data collection to capture production, broadcast and post-broadcast filming respectively. Three relevant phases of the international students experience in Hong Kong are covered, reflective of the complex dynamics of acculturation by respondents to the destination.

The assembled photographs were those deemed most likely to be viewed by others and as representative of the online image on social media (Hunter, 2016). In practice, most participants had already uploaded the selected photos on different social media platforms prior to meeting the interviewer (via Instagram, Facebook, QQ and WeChat). For the less media-active, the author provided the option of including photos that had been shared on social media OR that they deemed as essential viewing for their families and/or friends. The ultimate assembly of photographs amounted to 209 items.

Data analysis

The data analysis assumed a disjuncture between the contexts within which destination images are produced and received. This prompted the authors to unearth the “subjective feel” of each photograph [...] that is “ineliminable in our seeing something” (Rose, 2012, p. 29). To understand Hong Kong visual narratives, the authors examined photographs as stand-alone and at face value. Two visual analysis techniques were combined: compositional interpretation (Rose, 2012), and visual grammar (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Both methods provided the authors with schemes to identify and describe so-called *communicative resources*. Some belong to visual narratives, just as words belong to a language. They may be interpreted differently from their original intention. Using communicative resources to describe the impact of visual narratives of Hong Kong is akin to discussing the structure of a language and the evoked feelings. In the present study, the authors view online photographs for their communicative potential, rather than their meanings. Previous tourism studies have deployed a compositional approach to undertake analyses of visual narratives (e.g., Haldrup & Larsen, 2012; Hao, Wu, Morrison, & Wang, 2016). The approach benefits from a clear structure. The authors analyse formal components, compositional structures, and communicative resources that articulate the photographic message (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006), thereby capturing the embodied and sensorial aspects for viewers.

A “grammar of visual design” is the authors’ second visual analysis technique. This discusses how components of photographs are assembled in order to deconstruct the structure (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). The visual grammar concept derives from social semiotics and points to the forms (communicative resources) that sign-makers use to express meanings and felt subjectivities. While previous researchers focused on the expressed meanings and subjectivities, the current paper examines the forms and immediately elicited viewer responses. This gives insights into the potential visual impacts of the differently arranged forms and communicative resources. While the choice and combination of communicative resources display “regularities of social occasions”, their identification and description does not uncover social meanings behind the photographs per se. In this context, grammar concerns how semiotic resources are *prompts* for viewers’ sensorial experience of the photograph. This resembles the use of form and language by a narrator to achieve certain emotional impacts through verbal narrative (Riessman, 2008). The authors have sought to characterise the images in order to investigate viewer interpretations, rather than substituting for the viewer. No attempt is made to investigate meaning through a viewer’s interpretation, but rather the authors apply a structure to images, characterise them and isolate what is presented to viewers.

The authors used a combination of methods to ensure coverage of all relevant communicative resources and examined the sensoriality and onflow of Hong Kong imagery through a thorough examination. The scheme contained the following elements (see Table 1):

- (1) *Content*. Contains both subjects (humans portrayed) and objects (physical and material elements) (Gallarza, Saura, & García, 2002; Hsu & Song, 2014). The content is taken at “face-value” and as “stand-alone” (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013, p. 592). It may acquire more or less salience, based on size, sharpness of focus, tonal and colour contrasts, placement, perspective and cultural factors that determine of all the former. There may be

a connection with a particular location at a particular moment (full contextualization) or isolated against a plain background (low contextualization) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

- (2) *Colour*. Colour combinations permeate photographs with a greater or lesser harmony; stress certain depicted elements; or even suggest distance. They may suggest whether the photograph will be perceived as realistic. For the latter reason, it is often sufficient to consider whether photographs rely on contrasts or on the blending of similar saturation hues.
- (3) *Spatial organization*. This represents the interrelationships between the elements of a photograph, and between a photograph and its viewer and attitudes towards the subject of the photograph on the part of the viewer.
- (4) *Expressive content* refers to the mood, atmosphere and *feel* of a photograph. It is particularly relevant for scholars who are interested in the non-representational, embodied and sensory experiencing of photographs. The expressive content of a destination's visual narrative summarizes how viewers perceive the destination. The author strives to describe sensory engagement with an image by assuming the role of the viewer.

Insert Table 1 here

The authors used the proposed visual scheme to analyse photographs from each participant and the chronology of the three data collection episodes. Comments applicable to the individual photographs were documented across each element of the scheme, using content, colour, spatial organization and expressive content. This resulted in the assembly of summary tables, one per participant consisting of a total in excess of 36,000 words of notes. Each code represents a

destination feature or attribute as it appears in the photographs (Hao et al., 2016; Hunter, 2016; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Most photographs contained multiple codes. In presenting the results, the “content” notes for each photograph were selected and then compared per participant across data collection episodes. Content analysis was then aggregated across participants. These subsequent steps of aggregating information generated a thematic framework of content, resulting in the following categories: Hong Kong cityscapes; objects; buildings and installations; natural landscapes; details of urban space; people; and other destinations.

A thematic framework was applied to the data in order to index and sort the photographs, consistent with Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, and Ormston (2014). The thematic approach involved arranging printed photographs by the category of content that they portrayed. The authors also sorted these photographs into columns corresponding with the data collection episode to examine content longitudinally and hence acknowledge the onflow of the experience. Compositional patterns were then identified that did not emerge when analysing photographs one-by-one at a computer screen, but appeared by virtue of being eye-catching when viewed in aggregate.

Results

The following results draw upon themes emerging from the photographic content. Categories of content are identified, and within these, the authors describe how commonly depicted features undergo change through the course of the tourist experience. Finally, they discuss changing photographic compositions over time.

Content

Participants predominantly featured photographs of the Hong Kong cityscape during the earlier stages of their exchange: these included night skylines, street views and daylight views of the city’s densely built high-rise areas. Photographs gave more salience during the initial stages

to particular buildings or urban installations which subsequently appeared as background for the tourist and his/her companions. When observing the changes in photographic content over time, the authors observe that the sociality of the experience grows with length of stay. There is less interest with the city itself and more with relationships.

Photographs of cityscapes and the night skyline almost disappeared during the second phase. Attention shifted progressively towards natural landscapes, particularly beaches and seaside areas. Portrayals of details of the urban landscape also assumed greater prominence, notably depictions of staircases on the hilly side of Hong Kong's Central district, or shabby residential buildings in Causeway Bay district. Respondents progressively introduced images of the self and of friends, often as travel companions. There was a continued predominance of objects, while their co-occurrence with subjects increased. In this second phase the content changes reflective of a shift of tourist attention towards elements of the destination that contrast with the mainstream areas and aspects of the destination.

The third episode of visual data collection represents the phase immediately prior to departure from Hong Kong. Pictures that portray personal items are most prevalent: memorabilia such as old tickets, cards and receipts from their Hong Kong experience arranged purposely on a desk display; a Hong Kong flag signed by all the exchange friends. The representation of self and of friends dominates this phase, supplemented by the portrayal of new off-the-beaten-track Hong Kong attractions. The previously ubiquitous cityscapes are almost absent and provide scarcely discernible backgrounds to photographs portraying the participants and their companions. These final photographs evidently mark the end of an emotional journey on the part of the tourist photographers. They advance a nostalgic and romanticised idea of Hong Kong as a life changing experience.

Photographic composition

The Hong Kong cityscape

The first identifiable category refers to Hong Kong cityscapes. These city views depict high-rise buildings, street views and architectural clusters. Night skyline photographs commonly have high saturation and rich hues, emphasising the city lights and hence their general colorfulness. Most photographs adopt a frontal angle, taken at ground level, and display strong contrast with the night sky, emphasising the reflection of the buildings on the water, which is a typical view of the Hong Kong harbour. The water of the harbour that separates the Hong Kong peninsula from the island gives a sense of distance and separates the viewer from big city realities. The cityscapes that are portrayed in daytime photographs of the Hong Kong skyline are less prevalent, yet there are notable compositional similarities. Colours are less vivid, brighter, more modulated and the dominant hues are grey, white and blue. They are taken from higher viewpoints, via long shots, with a downward glance to the buildings, hence achieving a more dramatic effect. The expressive content of cityscape photographs relates to the perception of depth and emphasise the altitudes and the vastness of the city. It also emphasises the perception of Hong Kong as a bustling city, advanced economy and big metropolis.

Objects

Photographs portraying objects are images that zoom towards a single material item, such as a Hong-Kong-style French toast, the lockers of the famous gate at Cheung Chau Island, and a tray of panda-shaped buns. Saliency is achieved through strong framing which reduces the space that is dedicated to the context, making the object occupy most of the frame and disconnecting it from others in the image (the space in a picture filled with an object or figure will subsequently be referred to as *volume*). The use of close-up shots and of vertical angles provides greater saliency for the portrayed item. The prevalent compositional strategy in these photos is in the organization of the gazes. The photographed objects were singled out during the initial data collection. Later,

there was more frequent portrayal of engagement with objects that being , such as while being held or used. It is typical to see the appearance of the student-photographer's hand in the frame, holding the portrayed object in a specific desired position, for example being held against a specific background such as the beach or the entrance of Hong Kong Disneyland.

Prior to departing from Hong Kong, participants shared photos of objects such as collections of tickets that were used over the course of their experience; the Hong Kong flag signed by friends; a polaroid portraying the respondent and their friends, the henna tattoo imprinted on their hand and that of their travel companion. Colors contribute strongly to the expressive content of such photographs. They are low in saturation and in contrast and sometimes make use of black and white. Colours are milder and smoother. The viewer is shown memorabilia and souvenirs of the experience. The evolution of these images throughout the exchange experience is interesting, because the first photographs with their top-down, no-engagement composition, evoke observation rather than interaction, which is natural in a phase of the experience where potentially things encountered at the destination are still new and unknown. Towards the end of the experience, instead, the photographic composition is affective, emotional and nostalgic, almost marking the end of an era by portraying more personal items and asking for more identification on the part of the viewer.

Buildings and installations

The authors defined photographs that isolate architectural elements of Hong Kong featuring buildings and installations. During the initial phase such photographs display strong framing and contextualisation. The portrayed buildings and installations are located at the centre of the frame and are the focus. The surrounding elements are portrayed as ancillary, only partially in the frame and often out of focus. The vertical angle is a common choice in this category, prompting the viewer to look up at the elements (low angle) mostly at a medium distance, as

opposed to the long distance cityscape and short distance objects photographs discussed before. Notable examples in this category include photographs of temples gates, the LED roses installation in Admiralty, and the Bruce Lee statue at Tsim Sha Tsui Garden of Stars. The angle contributes to a sense of awe and contemplation on the part of the viewer. Additionally, these images are mostly of the offer type, hence do not demand direct engagement by viewers, rather emphasise the eye-catching nature of the portrayed buildings and installation. As the experience advances, the portrayal of buildings and installations that was initially central to the visual effect of photographs, proceed to serve as a backdrop for other subjects, mainly people. Examples include selfies at the Big Buddha, and the group photo in front of the Art Central installation.

Natural landscapes

Photographs of natural landscapes become prominent somewhat later in the exchange experience. As depicted in Figure 1, there is a predominance of green and blue hues. Most are bright, shot at long distance and portray Hong Kong's nature on clear, sunlit days. They are also centered and balanced, with the horizon line generally falling at the centre of the frame. This commonplace compositional trait allows for a symmetrical distribution of natural elements across the frame: as the horizon line corresponds to "where sky meets water" equal salience is given to both, while the actual centre of the frame is usually pinpointed by an element such as a hilly strip of land, or an island or a boat in the distance.

Insert Figure 1 here

The appearance of environmental elements in the foreground provides context. Such compositional structures place the viewer in the position of the photographer, thereby stimulating identification. Finally, there is a varying degree of saturation, typically based on the choice of

filtering by the student-photographer. Such elements contribute collectively to the expressive content. Overall, these images communicate a sense of balance and stillness. This contrasts with depictions of Hong Kong as a busy and bustling city, and instead portrays experiencing the destination through its lesser known areas, with an emphasis on the pristine and lush natural environment.

Details of urban space

Towards the middle and the end of the experience, photographs increasingly portray specific and less mainstream urban elements and architectural details. As the experience progresses, the photographers zoom progressively towards Hong Kong's architecture. The main compositional feature that these photographs share is the arrangement of objects within the image. Photographs portray Hong Kong's architectural structure as a system of *layered volumes and intersected lines*, which dramatizes the sense of depth. Hong Kong's unique topography is emphasised through sharp contrasts between openness and "residency" (a trending hashtag on visual media, such as Instagram, that collects images portraying housing conglomerates in Hong Kong). Examples presented below include low-rise buildings against the backdrop of distant higher buildings and behind the foreground of the flyway from which the photograph is taken. The fountain at Tai Po Waterfront Park, with its perspective lines projecting towards the openness of the sea, provides a glimpse into a less "touristy" Hong Kong area and emphasises "openness".

Insert Figure 2 here

People

Most participants submitted photographs of or with other people only during or after the second data collection episode. The photographers previously focused on the acts or roles of other

individuals portrayed. Examples include an elderly man writing his wishes on a wall at the Wong Tai Sin Temple, and a seller on Cheung Chau Island resting under the shadow of a rock. Saliency is given to people by centring them or, in cases with landscape backgrounds, by arranging them at the bottom centre of the frame. The angle is mostly frontal, at eye-level and at medium distance or close-up. Interestingly, photographs portraying people rely more on the arrangement of gazes. Most photographs may be described as “demand type” - subjects connect with the viewer by looking directly at the camera. There may be a connection between the main subjects and other elements in other cases: the photograph guides the viewer’s gaze through framing, gestures and gazes. This occurs in cases where tourists portray only themselves and gaze towards the landscape or an installation and away from the camera. Finally, there were group photos in this category, suggestive of intimacy, joyous occasions and socialization. Self-portraits, on the other hand, seem to invite contemplation through the eyes of the subjects.

Discussion

The authors have investigated the visual impact of photographs disseminated through online visual narratives using compositional analysis and its evolution in the context of long stay tourists. Photographs with common content have been grouped into categories and then described, based on patterns of composition and form. Categories of photograph have been regarded as constituting typologies of visual discourse about Hong Kong, suggestive of commonalities of expressive effect (Riessman, 2008). The prominence of certain categories at different stages of the exchange experience captures the onflow of the tourist experience and its changes. It also demonstrates the potential to leverage different types of tourist generated photography over successive stages. The photographs shared at the beginning of the experience confirm anticipations of Hong Kong’s Asia World City’s projected brand. This confirms the applicability

of the hermeneutic cycle to the tourist gaze (Jenkins, 2003; Michaelidou et al., 2013). Their colourfulness and strong contrasts evoke affective responses suited to the glossy and eventful city destination image. The idea of a “big city” is also advanced through photographs taken from high viewpoints, consistent with the *Our Tall Story* Brand Hong Kong campaign (Brand Hong Kong, 2017). These various choices of composition evoke identifications with being a new tourist to the city, attracted by synecdochical sights and hallmarks.

The portrayal and sharing of cityscapes loses ground as the experience progressively favours representations of less mainstream and more off-the-beaten-path locations. Common compositional choices evolve along with the portrayed objects. While there is more emphasis on portraying natural sites in Hong Kong, the characteristic compositional aspects induce a sensory engagement with these images, suggestive of peacefulness and remoteness. They also contrast with the initial images portraying a bustling city, replacing this with images evocative of calm, thereby balancing the initially shared photographs. These images will resonate more with viewers who can envision themselves on hikes, excursions or natural walks, and can potentially extend the commonly held image of Hong Kong amongst tourists as a city destination.

Evolving tourist visual narratives also feature urban details. The tourist develops a progressively keener eye for architectural details, hilly topography and for the contrast between “residency” and open spaces, representative of a deeper and more expert experiencing of Hong Kong. Such photographs provide viewers with a sensorial experience focusing on the “mysterious and unknowable urban life, often encountered by practices of walking and wandering amongst the city, purposefully drifting” (Xiao et al., 2013, p. 376). The portrayed elements are more likely to catch the eye of the tourist who is familiar with the city’s mainstream attractions and icons or who is attracted by non-mainstream and more authentic ways of experiencing Hong Kong to learn and

appreciate the destination on a deeper level (Jansson, 2018). The composition of such images may appeal to niche tourism markets such as urban explorers, urban photographers or even rooftoppers.

The experience evolves naturally towards sociality, and compositional changes reflect the desire to record such relationships against the embellished background of synecdochical elements of the destination (Bærenholdt et al., 2004; Haldrup & Larsen, 2003). Saliency is transferred to the activities being undertaken and to those involved. Visual statements shift from the *I-have-seen* to the *I-was-there-(with)*. Photographs of personal objects undergo interesting compositional changes leading up to departure from Hong Kong. The arrangement of the displayed objects, the use of low saturation and of black and white and finally the layout of selected items emphasize romanticized projected memory, a sense of closure and nostalgia. The compositional choices suggest intimacy and/or ownership on the viewer's part (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). These photographs can provide the viewer with a more personal and intimate experience of Hong Kong, and with a sense of nostalgia and the romantic, thereby engaging more actively. Tourism marketers could leverage such compositional choices and appeal to young tourists who are seeking to share memorable objects and engagements. They may also consider the objects and places of the tourist experience that represent good photographic opportunities to record desired memories and to generate social media rumour (Prideaux, Lee, & Tsang, 2016; Tung et al., 2017).

The current study offers important insights for destination marketers by focusing on the aesthetic register of tourist photographs and to its emotional appeal. Destination authorities can understand the visual compositions that most resonate with those who follow tourists online. It is implied that destinations may advance images that engender emotional connections and also create "*Instagrammable*" moments. Another important aspect of the present research is its focus on the onflow. The study reflects how new technologies and media allow the instant dissemination of destination photographs, making it possible for "characteristics of one place to be present and

active in another” (Kress, 2010). It has been found that what tourists find photo-worthy changes towards the end of the trip, along with the aesthetic register of their tourist photography. The current results show photographs emphasizing distinct emotions and motivations during different stages of the Hong Kong travel experience, reflective of important aspects of the exchange experience, consistent with the pursuit of self-actualization and self-enhancement that featured in Pearce’s theory of travel career patterns (Pearce & Lee, 2005).

Tourists become progressively more interested in portraying active engagements as the experience evolves, whether with objects, environment or people. Social interactions become the major focus towards the conclusion of the experience, as well as romanticized representations and depictions of memorable objects.

Finally, photographs of urban details successfully convey the perspective of tourists as destination insiders. Their aesthetic reflects the post-tourist ideal of originality and authenticity as diverging from images intoxicated by the tourist gaze (Jansson, 2018). These photographs go beyond portraying the spectacular and exotic aspects of the destination (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012). They register the sociality and banality of tourist practices and representations of the more mundane. This is consistent with the trend to bring ordinary daily activities and private practices online (Emmison et al., 2012).

Conclusions, limitations and future research

This paper has provided an expressive reading of visual narratives applicable to Hong Kong. It has shown the moment-to-moment changes in the composition and expressive content of visual narratives. Photographs progressively elicit a sense of engagement and sociality, concluding with a sense of anticipated nostalgia. Overall, the photographs transition from portraying the eye-catching and detectable, to the unique and off-the-beaten-path, to the experienced and owned. In

an era where educational experiences are increasingly globalized, exchange students are potentially significant “traffickers” of destination images. They disseminate their reflections and observations instantaneously over an extended period and are likely to become lifelong ambassadors. Destinations can leverage the visual impact of exchange student photographs, regardless of the original intentions, and advance their preferred image to manage impressions and convey authenticity.

The paper contributes to knowledge by providing insights into the image disseminated by a tourist cohort who have an unusually extended opportunity for immersion in new environments. The student exchange framework invites them to make ongoing comparisons with their home settings. Meanwhile, adopting a longitudinal research method has allowed the authors to capture how changing perceptions over time are communicated through images on social networks. The preceding analysis of social media has enabled more insight into sharing practices, with potential impacts for different parties. The study provides particularly useful insights for DMOs to advance their desired destination image through social networks. Previous researchers have noted that tourists are making extensive use of social media consistently during their daily lives and that such channels are becoming more influential throughout the destination choice process (Tham, Mair & Croy, 2020). Previous researchers also concluded that social media can influence tourist behaviours within destinations (Tussyadiah, Kausar & Soesilo, 2018). A better understanding of the images advanced by tourists who enjoy less mainstream destination elements, offers greater capacity to encourage exploration of lesser known Hong Kong attractions.

The types of exchange student photograph presented in this research offer appeal for Millennials in two ways. Firstly, they portray non-mainstream, unique and different experiences that offer potential “bragging rights” (Nisbett & Strzelecka, 2017). The word “tourist” has negative connotations for the younger generation (Leask, Fyall, & Barron, 2013). Millennials respond

favourably to images which portray scenarios akin to the experience of residents, hence distancing themselves from mainstream mass tourists. Secondly, exchange student photographs are generally alluring images that speak to social media-savvy tourists seeking idealised tourism experiences. Finally, the romanticization of Hong Kong as a life-changing experience and the nostalgic photographs may attract future tourists and contribute to a revival of Hong Kong's tarnished image, following recent social unrest and disturbances which have undermined its reputation for safety. Hence, destinations may capitalize on potent travel memories by encouraging longer term tourists to share images online and to re-share or feature those that most enhance the destination image (Tung, Cheung, & Law, 2018).

Applying a defined interpretive technique has obvious limitations. Since reality exists in "the eye of the beholder", the descriptions of expressive photographic content accords with the authors' cultural and social interpretive norms (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Pink, 2013). Another limitation is the authors' emphasis on the message, rather than photographer motivations or viewer interpretations. Future researchers might conduct longitudinal research in the locations where the image is received, in order to incorporate the receiver perspective and the contexts and ways in which viewer interpretations are prompted by photographic elements. Finally, the current researchers have not analysed the expressive content of images in relation to the context of reading. According to recent scholarly contributions, contextual variables during the destination decision-making process may reinforce or diminish social media effects (Tham, et al., 2020). The focus of the current investigation has been on building destination image, and the researchers did not consider the context within which this happens. Finally, this non-representational study contributes to the literature on destination image by addressing the integrated impressions that contribute to its construction, rather than examining specific attributes individually.

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