



Online destination image: Comparing national tourism organisation's and tourists' perspectives



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Visual content analysis and *mise en scène* analysis were conducted on TGC and NTO photographic data.
- Content analysis and perceptual mapping analysis were performed on TGC and NTO textual data.
- Several important perceived online DI dimensions were under-represented in the NTO contents.
- TGC textual content outperformed NTO textual content in reflecting affective DI dimensions.
- Photographic content in general was more effective compared with textual content in conveying affective DI attributes.

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This study examines the perceived and projected online destination images (DI) manifested in tourist-generated content (TGC) and national tourism organisation (NTO) generated content. Through visual content analysis and *mise en scène* analysis of photographic data as well as content analysis and perceptual mapping analysis of textual data, the differences between perceived and projected online DI of Eastern Taiwan were explored. TGC and NTO contents were both found to have similarly represented Eastern Taiwan as a destination abounds with “natural environment”, “infrastructure”, “specific activities”, and “tourist attractions”. However, several important DI dimensions were under-represented in the NTO content, for example, “food and beverages”, “transportation”, “information” and “accommodation”. The findings further reveal that the TGC textual content tended to outperform NTO textual content in reflecting affective DI; and photographic content, in general, was more effective in conveying affective attributes. The findings provide useful insights for practice and future research in DI management.

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1. Introduction

The advent of Web 2.0 technology has catalysed the “Travel 2.0” phenomenon, which is characterised by a high level of social interaction and exchange of travel-related content between tourists on the Internet (Leung, Lee, & Law, 2012). Travel-related content created and uploaded by tourists on the Internet is termed “tourist-generated content” (TGC) and has attracted an increasing attention in the discourse of tourism (e.g., Sun, Ryan, & Pan, 2015; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

TGC is generally produced by tourists who are unpaid, and thus, is more likely to be perceived as impartial. In this light, TGC can be regarded as “organic” image formation agent in Gartner's (1993)

term, and it has a higher credibility as compared with other “induced” agents, such as information provided by national tourism organisations (NTOs) and destination marketing organisations (DMOs). Recent research shows that TGC facilitates the spread of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008), which can affect tourists' intention to visit a destination. Furthermore, TGC can be shared and consumed anytime, anywhere by geographically dispersed tourists. The combination of credibility and accessibility renders TGC a powerful medium in shaping the online image of a destination (Banyai & Glover, 2012; Pan, MacLaurin, & Crofts, 2007).

Despite the significance of TGC in influencing tourist behaviour and destination choice, there is a lack of understanding of this new form of “organic” image formation agent, particularly in the following ways. First, TGC shared via different social media comes

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in various forms. Although it is recognised that TGC provides unsolicited, unfiltered and rich information about tourist experiences and perceived online destination image (hereinafter abbreviated as DI) (e.g., Pan et al., 2007), it is still unknown whether there are different manifestations among different forms of TGC. For example, Pan et al. (2007) demonstrate that textual data in travel blogs are capable of revealing tourists' kaleidoscopic perception of a destination. In contrast, Pan, Lee and Tsai's (2014) study reveals photo's ability to reflect the affective images of places from tourists' perspectives. Accordingly, it is likely that different forms of TGC reflects destination image in different manners. This calls for a systematic study of the different effects various forms of TGC have on online DI.

Second, while many NTOs strive to project desirable DI attributes online (projected online DI), for example, via official websites, TGC may reflect different "realities" perceived by tourists (perceived online DI), resulting in image incongruity. This incongruity may hinder the effective communication of a desirable DI. As Young (1999) cogently contends, the success of a destination depends on the level of consensus on meanings negotiated between the systems of place production and place consumption. Xiang and Gretzel (2010) also highlight the potential tension between online travel-related contents created by the tourism industry and tourists. These underscore the need to examine the level of alignment between the projected and perceived online DI manifested in TGC and NTO-generated contents.

To address the above issues, this study has used Eastern Taiwan as the tourist destination to fulfil the following objectives: (1) to examine international tourists' perceived online DI of Eastern Taiwan manifested in TGC, (2) to analyse the projected online DI of Eastern Taiwan manifested on the NTO official website, (3) to compare the differences in online image representations between different forms of content (i.e., photographic and textual contents), and (4) to examine any incongruities between perceived and projected online DI manifested in TGC and NTO-generated contents. Extending Milman and Pizam's (1995) definition of perceived DI a step further, this paper defines the term "perceived online DI" as the sum of the individual image attributes that make up the tourist experience that are manifested in TGC online. On the other hand, the term "projected online DI" is defined as the totality of all individual image attributes that are communicated by the NTO on the Internet.

2. Literature review

2.1. Tourist-generated content

User-generated content (UGC) refers to media content that is produced by the general public rather than by paid professionals and is primarily distributed via Web 2.0 technologies online (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008). This study focuses on examining a special form of UGC – "tourist-generated content" (TGC) – which has increasingly been recognised as an indispensable source of online travel information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010) and a critical component of perceived online DI (Sun et al., 2015). In this study, TGC is defined as travel-related content created and uploaded by tourists on the Internet. TGC fulfils the UGC characteristics described by Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent (2007): it is often published on publicly accessible travel blog sites (e.g., www.travelpod.com, www.travelblog.org); it is commonly presented in textual and photographic formats which entail a great deal of creative effort; and it is generally created by tourists who are unpaid, and who play the dual role of producers and consumers of the travel-related content.

One of the most popular forms of TGC is "travel blog" (Pan et al.,

2007). Travel blogs is a special genre of text which is "native to the web" (Myers, 2010) and is written with travel as a central theme. Pühringer and Taylor (2008) describe travel blogs as "online diaries" consisting of individual entries on travel-related themes, hosted on "provider sites" that are tourism specific. Yet, in recent years, travel blogs have evolved from initial "online diaries" to encompass many different forms. For example, Schmallegger and Carson (2008) suggest that travel blogs can be classified on the basis of author or type of provider sites: travel blog hosting sites, commercial websites of guidebook publishers, travel agencies, tourism organisation websites, and personal websites by a single blogger. Volo (2012) further suggests that travel/tourism blogs can be differentiated into the following four main types: (1) consumer-to-consumer (C2C), (2) business-to-business (B2B), (3) business-to-consumer (B2C), and (4) government-to-consumer (G2C). Table 1 describes the differences between these main categories.

Since this study attempts to understand perceived online DI, the focus of investigation was on C2C travel blogs. C2C blogs allows for an "emic" understanding of the travel experience and what are perceived as important DI attributes from tourists' perspective. C2C blogs are commonly presented in textual and photographic formats (Bingley, Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, & Buultjens, 2010). The ensuing section elaborates further on each of these formats of TGC.

2.2. Textual and photographic TGC

Textual TGC refers to textual contents written and shared by tourists online, often in the form of diary-style travel stories, documenting travel activities or expressing feelings or attitudes toward a specific destination (Li & Wang, 2011). Textual TGC is capable of providing rich, authentic and unsolicited information to reflect perceived DI as well as tourist experiences (Pan et al., 2007). Accordingly, travel blogs have the potential to be valuable source of market intelligence for they enable a new approach to understanding perceived DI and tourist experience from an "emic" perspective (Banyai & Glover, 2012; Pühringer & Taylor, 2008). For example, by using content analysis to analyse the textual content of 40 travel blogs for Charleston, South Carolina, Pan et al. (2007) identified 17 DI categories. Positive and negative sentences were classified based on these categories in order to identify the major strengths and weaknesses of Charleston as a tourist destination. A total of 134 positive sentences and 43 negative sentences were articulated about Charleston in the textual content, indicating that three out of four sentences made about Charleston were positive (75.5%). More recently, Sun et al. (2015) employed content analysis to explore the perceived DI of New Zealand manifested in 409 travel blogs created by Chinese tourists. They have identified six DI dimensions, namely, urban and rural resources, natural resources, tourist and general infrastructure, tourist activities, culture, and politics and economy.

Photographic TGC refers to static visual contents created and shared by tourists on the Internet, usually in the form of travel photos. Travel photos have been recognised as a crucial medium in reflecting tourists' perceptions of a destination (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Hence, researchers have paid increasing attention to travel photos as a source to understand perceived online DI. For example, MacKay and Couldwell (2004) illustrated that photos obtained by visitors can be a good source to understand the perceived image of a destination. Other than reflecting perceived DI, Pan, et al.'s (2014) study demonstrated that travel photos are also capable of revealing tourists' affective qualities of places, for example, "pleasant" and "arousing" feelings toward a destination. In a recent study, Hunter (2016) employed content and semiotic analysis to explore the perceived online DI of Seoul represented in photographic TGC. The perceived online DI of Seoul was found to

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