

Travel photos: Motivations, image dimensions, and affective qualities of places



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Travel photos feature natural resources are frequently associated with arousing and pleasant feelings toward a destination.
- Travel photos feature culture, history and art are frequently associated with pleasant quality of a place.
- Photos inducing arousing and pleasant feelings are often taken in long shot and at eye-level angle.
- Photos inducing arousing and pleasant feelings are often with stark density level and with single-person composition.

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ABSTRACT

Travel photos can be symbols reflecting inner feelings of the photographers. They also serve as records that store travel experience of the photographers. By content analyzing 145 travel photos submitted to *The New York Times*, this paper aims to explore the relationships among motivations, image dimensions, and affective qualities of places. Findings indicate image dimension of natural resources such as “wealth of countryside”, “flora and fauna” and “beaches” are frequently associated with “arousing” and “pleasant” feelings toward a destination. On the other hand, image dimension of culture, history and art is frequently associated with “pleasant” quality of a place. These three association rules are in turn frequently linked to “intellectual” travel motivation. Photos that induce “arousing” and “pleasant” feelings are often taken in long shot, at eye-level angle, with stark density level and with single-person composition.

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“The supreme moments of travel are born of beauty and strangeness in equal parts: the first panders to the senses, the second to the mind...” (Byron, 2011, p. 17).

1. Introduction

This quotation from British travel writer Robert Byron's (1905–1941) book *First Russia, Then Tibet* concisely highlights the emotional climax experienced during traveling. It is therefore informative and useful for destination marketing/management organizations (DMOs) to better manage visitors' experience if one can identify the image dimensions of a destination that create these “supreme” emotional moments and peruse them in tourism promotion.

According to Saayman (2000) a positive destination image should be magical, unique and pleasing, among others. This again indicates the importance of identifying which image attributes are associated with these affective feelings. It is noted that travel destinations conventionally are promoted through photographic representations (Jacobsen, 2007) because tourism is a uniquely visual experience (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997) about ‘consuming places’ (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003, p. 24). Tourists use photography to capture relationships with other people, places and cultures (Edensor, 2000) to narrate a story. With this narrative attribute, tourist photographs both reflect and inform destination images (Urry, 1990). Travel photos are thus lenses through which visitors' affective feelings and images for a destination can be studied and identified.

Destination image is an extensively studied topic in tourism; however, most of the researches are related to measuring visitors' affective images of a destination (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Son & Pearce, 2005), and only a few studies is devoted to the understanding of what images/photos will stimulate what type of affective feelings (Olsen, Alexander, & Roberts, 1986; Zube & Pitt, 1981) toward a destination. Symbolic meanings of

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tourist places are produced by place producers (destination promoters) and by place consumers (visitors) (Tasci, 2009). Just as the destination manager needs to know what message will create what image in the minds of possible tourists (Croy, 2010), it is equally important to understand visitors' experience and their acquired tourist destination image through analyzing their post-visit narratives. The narratives are the personal memories of places "structured through photographic images and the mainly verbal text we weave around images..." (Urry, 1990, p. 140). In the current study, these narratives are those accounts (photos and captions) published in *The New York Times*' Travel Section, "Why We Travel: Submit Your Photo". Through the analysis of these narratives, it is believed that the relationships between image dimensions and affective feelings could be better understood. To achieve this aim, the present study integrated conceptual foundations and methodological approaches from tourism, films and landscape aesthetic to contribute to the understanding of pictorial elements in forming affective destination image.

2. Literature review

2.1. Affections, photos and places

When one experiences the environment, the first level of response is affective and this affective quality attributed to a place governs subsequent directions and actions toward that place (Ittelson, 1973). Therefore, it is important to understand the affective feelings visitors attributed to a place and what image dimensions of a place stimulate these feelings. Affection attributed to a place, according to Russell and Pratt (1980), is defined as the emotion induced by a place and is expressed by a person in language. The categories of affective feelings include arousing, exciting, relaxing, pleasant, distressing, gloomy, sleepy and unpleasant (Russell & Pratt, 1980). By the same token, affective image deals with the emotional response of an individual to a place (O'Neill & Jasper, 1992) expressed in mental pictures. Based on the affection-then-action argument, the current study works backward from behaviors to rules, using a process of induction because tourists' real motives may be revealed through observation and reading their travel stories (Dann, 1981). Behavior in this study is represented by the travel taken and the outcome is the photos taken and stories told by the photo suppliers. Through identifying those image dimensions of a place that stimulate affective feelings of visitors (photographers) as revealed in their travel photos and stories, it is believed that the links can be established among image dimensions, affection and motivation. Fig. 1 depicts these relationships.

Photographs are the product of selecting, shaping and structuring elements of the physical elements to reflect the photographer's own mental images (Crawshaw & Urry, 1997). They are a way of congealing time when the encounters took place in order to give form to visitors' memory of places (Bruno, 2003, pp. 231–260). Photography is historically viewed as an art or a record, with the former serving as a metaphor (symbol) and the latter as a metonym (sign) (Barthes, 1981). As an art, the photographer is the "source" from which the inner emotions from him/her are expressed (Byers, 1964; Schwartz, 1989; Sekula, 1974) through organizing the authentic content. It is through symbols, physical objects and

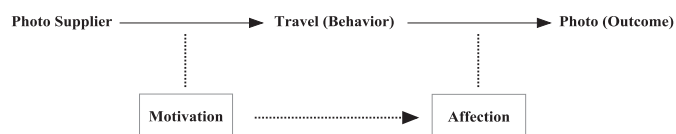


Fig. 1. Research framework for photo, affection and motivation.

places that people give meaning and form to their experiences (Bandura, 2001; Reijnders, 2011). A single photo is therefore a combination of metaphoric and metonymic qualities (Albers & James, 1988). *Mise en scène* analysis, a study of the arrangement of all the visual elements within a frame, is pertinent for the analysis of photos which involves the arrangement of signs to create symbols (Giannetti, 2008). Signs, images and symbols assembled in novels, plays, movies and television confer meaning upon actual sights. Cinematic events, or pre-framed images, are dragged on to the physical landscape which in turn is reinterpreted in terms of cinematic events (Rojek, 1997). This dragging process depends on a well-defined indexing procedure, and advertising plays a crucial role in gluing (indexing and dragging) those signs, images and symbols we chanced upon in our daily life (Tourism New Zealand, 2009). Therefore, photos record the moment (the reality) and/or reflect photographers' inner motions. The moment recorded and the organizing of image components is subject to media influence to a large extent as places over the years have been mediated for imagination (Reijnders, 2011; Urry, 1990).

Photos, or photo taking, then are closely related to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001). According to Bandura, human behaviors, environmental influences, and internal dispositions shape and affect one another bidirectionally. Photos, the product of human behaviors, are not independent from this triadic reciprocal causation. This causal loop, therefore, constantly makes the representation of a place fall into a circle (Jenkins, 2003), and media usually maintain and sustain stereotypes (Browne, Firestone, & Mickiewicz, 1994; Gandy, 1998). Photos, on the other hand, are the condensation of destination images. Image can be defined as "the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudices, imaginations, and emotional thoughts with which a person or a group judges a particular object or place" (Lawson & Baud-Bovy, 1977, p. 10). In tourism destination image (TDI) research, it is commonly agreed that TDI comprises cognitive and affective images. Cognitive image is usually related to tangible attributes such as nature, culture and adventure (leisure and recreation activities). Affective image involves emotions such as arousing, exciting, pleasant, and relaxing (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martin, 2004; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Kim & Yoon, 2003; Son & Pearce, 2005) and is related to travel motives (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997; Gartner, 1993).

Gaze and shoot are both verbs involving hegemonic power projection as manifested in tourist gaze and photo shooting. Tourist gazes can be differentiated by "romantic" and "collective" ones. The romantic gaze is gazing in solitude at undisturbed natural beauty (Urry, 1995), and in travel photos this gaze is usually posed as facing away from camera as a comment on the other-worldly beauty of nature (Messaris, 1997). The "collective" gaze, on the other hand, involves conviviality. Other people need to be there in order to create an atmosphere of the place for visual consumption (Urry, 1990). Just as directors using landscape to carry meaning of the characters' psychological states (Elsaesser & Buckland, 2002), visitors may peruse the landscape to reflect their affective feelings. Therefore, emotions can transform landscape and vice versa. This is similar to two basic approaches in landscape-related studies in social science: one that presupposes landscape quality is inherent in the actual setting, and the other that assumes landscape quality is in the eyes of the beholder (Jacobsen, 2007). This paper aims to identify the landscape quality in the eyes of the beholders and through aggregation of the findings to understand what emotions are generally associated with which landscape such as mountains, water bodies, deserts, etc.

2.2. Motivation and tourism destination image

Motivation leads to behaviors and discourse which, when systematically analyzed, will shed some lights on the correlation

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