Digital Tourist Gaze and Mega Events

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Abstract

Tourism and photography have been always strongly interlinked. With the rise of smartphones and social network travellers' photography exit the boundaries of friends and family and is now available to a wider audience. This is challenging the tourism gaze theory, which postulate that tourists photography is industry-driven and socially constructed. This exploratory research studied a visual social network to understand travellers digital mediated gaze during a mega event. Particularly the study shades lights on iconic places/attractions portrayed and on the ideal self represented by the event goers highlighting the presence of iconic places and staged personal pictures.

Introduction

The symbiotic relationship between tourism and photography has been the topic of numerous research papers and books (e.g. starting from one of the seminal works from Berger, 1972). The classic modern theorization of this rapport was given by Urry (1990) with his book 'The Tourist Gaze'. Urry conceptualization of tourism lies in the paradigm by which tourism is a socially constructed phenomenon where the tourist gaze is elaborated as a particular way to see the world and is essentially conditioned by the imaginary and/or the representation created in the first instance by the destination (Garrod, 2008). Few years later Urry and Larsen (2011) noted that the tourist gaze is somehow challenged by the rise of digital cameras and online social networks. Travellers are not anymore keeping the picture for themselves but they are sharing them with small or large circles of 'friends': a representation of the destination, which may not be in line with the one 'socially created' by the destination can actually rise and impose itself. Travellers are actively contributing in reshaping the destinations imaginary with their way of seeing attractions and places in general. Additionally, thanks to the rise of visual social network travellers portray and stage their idealized self to maintain or augmenting their social capital within their network of virtual friends (e.g. Lo & McKercher, 2015). This research presents an exploratory case study to understand what kind of digital photos are shared online during a mega event, namely EXPO2015 in Milan.

Literature

Photography and travel are linked innately (Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011). Images, and in this case photography are seen as powerful means to stimulate memories and share experiences with others (Berger, 1972). However, what is clear is that photography plays different roles in tourism (Lo et al., 2011): on the one side photography is the proof that a given person physically visited a given place (Hillman, 2007) while on the other side photography helps in constructing travel memories and order these memories into narratives and/or stories. The tangibility of travel photography may be seen as a tool to ensure that a given destination is worth visiting; in other words travellers may seek indirect and virtual experience to support their travel decisions (Robinson, 2014). However, (Urry, 1990), acknowledged that tourists photography is to a certain extent shaped by predetermined norms and collective imaginary. In what is widely recognized as the modern theorization of the intimate relationship between tourism and photography (i.e. The Tourist Gaze), Urry (1990) proposed a paradigm to describe how tourism is produced and reproduced as a 'socially constructed meaning'. In other words, the tourist gaze is designed and deployed by destinations focusing on a series of iconic places and it is distributed via various media (e.g. broadcast media, print media and so on). The role of personal travellers photography taps into the discussion as a reinforcement of the tourist gaze with travellers showing their version of the images that they have seen before (Urry, 1990). There are now two main challenges to the tourist gaze: tourist photographs can violate existing imaginaries and representation and can contribute in creating new ones and the power of the tourist gaze is fading due to the blurring boundaries between tourism and everyday life (Urry and Larsen, 2011).

When it comes to digital photography, recent research acknowledges that digital photography and digital videography (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2015) may portray a different perception of the destination (Schmallegge, Carson, & Jacobsen, 2010) maybe not at all in line with the marketing efforts of the destination. With the travellers playing the double role of information consumer and information providers in social media digital photography must be carefully studied to better understand how advancement in digital media technology – and especially in digital image - impact on the tourism experience (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009) within the three phases of the tourism goods consumption.
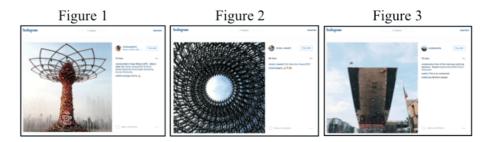
Research Design

Designed in the context of the mega event EXPO2015, this exploratory research has been planned to shade lights on the evolution of the tourist gaze as described by (Urry & Larsen, 2011) by investigating the power of digital photography to mediate both the perception of the destination (Robinson, 2014) and the change/creation of a new tourist gaze Urry & Larsen (2011). Besides the research will shade lights on the personal meanings related with digital photography by studying the concept of the ideal self in digitally shared images (Lo & McKercher, 2015). Therefore the objectives of the research are to understand: (i) what kind of digital photos are shared online during an hallmark event; (ii) what kind of places/attractions are represented by photos shared online during an hallmark event; (iii) how the ideal self is represented by photos shared online during an hallmark event. In order to tackle the above proposed research objectives, this study will use a qualitative approach based

on visual content analysis (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2000). Visual content analysis has been used in previous studies in tourism (e.g. MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997) and other disciplines (e.g. health studies). As defined by Bell, (2000 p.14) visual content analysis is a systematic observational method used for testing hypotheses about the ways in which the media represent people, events, situation and so on." Visual content analysis allows quantification of sample of observable content to be classified thanks to pre-defined variables and categories. A codebook was designed containing six variables with a series of pre-defined values. The variables were related to: (i) place where the photo was taken, (ii) element(s) in the foreground, (iii) element(s) in the background, (iv) self representation – group or single person, (v) type of self representation – posing or natural and (vi) majority of hashtags used to describe the photo. Two coders engaged in the analysis. . Intercoder reliability was ensured thanks to extensive training and calculated using the Fleiss Kappa method (Fleiss, 1971) resulting in 0.85. The social media chosen for the analysis was Instagram.

Thanks to a commercial partner (www.blogmeter.it) it was possible to isolate 213'754 photos posted by 71'926 authors for the period from 01/06/2015 to 31/07/2015. Photos were filtered thanks by hashtags #Expo2015, #Expo2015Milano and #Expo2015Milan. Among the 213'754 photos retrieved during the considered period, 213 pictures were randomly chosen to be analysed by means of the described codebook/code sheet. The next section provides the main results from the analysis based on the three research objectives above presented. Discussions and conclusions will follow.

Results

Findings demonstrate that the majority of the photos analysed were taken on the actual exposition site (56.8%). Few of the analysed pictures were taken in Milan (10.8%) and fewer in other parts of the country (4.2%) such as a seaside resorts (e.g. Sardinia). This reveals the event-centric nature of the analysed photos and the poor connection among the event and the city of Milan. When it comes to representation of the tourist gaze, the pictures posted by expo visitors were related mainly with attractions and building (42.7%) and people (28.2%). Travellers' were attracted by the 'Tree of Life' (Figure 1), the main pyrotechnic attraction within the exposition centre (n=38) and pavilions' architecture (n=28).

Figure 1   Figure 2   Figure 3

The Tree of Life is often represented without any persons in the foreground (only three times in the sample it is represented with some one or more person) and is

represented both with daylight (figure 1 – that means without lights) or night time (that means with the pyrotechnic show/display). Expo pavilions are represented in different ways. 19 pavilions were represented in the sample. The most popular were the one of Italy, Austria, Korea, Russia, United Kingdome, Holland and Ireland. The dominant way of representing pavilions is related to the architecture (figure 3 and figure 4) with users representing particulars of each and every pavilion. The representation of self was not as expected and as described by literature (Lo and McKercher, 2015). 63% of the photo analysed portrayed a group of people rather than a single person. Only in fourteen cases the hashtag #selfie was used in the photos with only one person which makes anyway the majority of the photos representing one single person (56%). In the majority of the pictures representing single persons, the background – where present – is related with attractions and building.

Discussion

Findings demonstrated what is the digital mediated representation of Expo2015 with respect to the digital photos uploaded on Instagram. In our sample, the 'Tree of Life' seems to be the iconic element of the exposition, which attracts the attention of the event goers. An ex-post research (Expo2015, 2014) confirmed that this attraction was built, indeed, to be have a synecdochtal meaning for of Expo2015: the 'Tree of Life' was conceived and designed " […] from the beginning as an interactive icon able to capture visitors' attention and imaginary and able to create a virtual connection among pavilions […]".Therefore, in this case, online photography reinforces and confirms what organizers planned in the first instance, thus confirming the original theory of the tourist gaze by Urry (1990). Photos portraying people have a tendency to be taken in group (63%). Among the rest of the pictures representing single persons, more than a half are hashtagged as #selfie. Thus supporting the importance of this growing phenomenon (e.g. Lo and McKerker, 2015). Interestingly the majority of the picture representing persons (in group or single) are staged therefore event goers took these pictures with a given audience in mind. Hashtags in the case of self-representation are used to make explicit the place (building or attraction) and the person you are with. In other words these pictures do explain where the subject is and with whom as in most of the cases there is no possibility of guessing the background.

Conclusion

From the analysis of 213 pictures posted on Instagram about the mega event Expo2015 this exploratory research shade light on the event goers digitally mediate gaze. The synecdochtal meaning of the 'Tree of Life' in our sample has been confirmed by ex-post research as an attraction built for the purpose of capturing attendee gaze (Urry, 1990). What also seems of interests of Expo goers is the architecture of pavilions, which makes the pavilions somehow unique. The dimension of the self-representation is present in the sample and plays a key role: Expo2015 seems to be a 'group of friend' event, as – for example - there are no families' representation.

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