

Visual content along the tourist journey in small destinations

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Abstract

Background

Two main perspectives have been adopted to analyse the use of social media in the tourism (Leung et al., 2013): (1) the role and use of social media in tourists' decision making and (2) the role of social media for promotion and destination image reinforcement. Following the visual social media trends, research with visual content analyses are increasing.

Purpose

This research would like to adopt an innovative approach by analyzing the photos of small destinations uploaded on Instagram in order to understand how different image content impact on the different phases of the tourist journey.

The research design

The research is composed by 2 studies. Study 1 is based on the analysis of Instagram images, in order to study the purchase and post-purchase phase of the tourist journey. Study 2 is based on a survey which uses representative images from study 1 to understand the pre-purchase phase of the tourist journey.

Contribution

This research will contribute to explain the role of visual contents shared on Instagram, providing evidence of their relevance in understanding the different phases of the tourists' journey. Destination management organizations will obtain useful insights for better answering to tourists' needs and preferences.

1. Introduction

Today social media are becoming a relevant marketing and communication tool for many industries. Destination Management Organizations (DMO's) are aware of such ongoing trends and thus try to explore the opportunities to use tourist-generated contents for their territory (Kim et al., 2017). Many researches are focused on the use of social media, but just few studies focus on the effects of sharing pictures and they are mainly related to big cities or famous destinations.

Thus, the general objective of this research is to understand how different image contents impact on the different phases of the tourist journey of small cities, showing that what is shared by tourists on Instagram, can offer social, cultural and political insights.

In particular, several specific objectives are defined:

- to understand which visual contents on a small destination are shared online;
- to analyze if people share online content while visiting a destination or after;

- to understand tourists' lived experiences;
- to understand which experiences are perceived as highly engaging.

In order to do so, the following research questions are formulated:

RQ1: Are the photo categories previously used in literature to study big cities representative of smaller tourist destinations too?

RQ2: Which are the photo contents that impact the most on the different phases of the tourist journey?

RQ3: Are there any differences between the engagement created by photos posted in people's Instagram profile or by the destination official Instagram profile?

RQ4: The mostly appreciated picture online are also the ones that highly impact on the intention to visit a destination (pre-purchase phase)?

2. Literature review

2.1 Social media in digitalizing tourists' experience

One of the Internet most significant evolutions is the use of social media, which allow tourists to share online knowledge, emotions and experiences even through a real-time recording (Munar, 2011; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Social media contents influence people, especially on information search phase. Contents are created and shared from both tourists and DMOs. In previous studies, approaches are mostly based on two perspectives (Leung et al., 2013):

- in the consumer-centric perspective, the role of user generated content and social media in forming tourists' destination image is discussed (Li et al., 2015), mainly focusing on the research phase of the travel planning process (Kim et al., 2017);
- in supplier related studies, the focus has been the use and management of social media by tourism DMOs as promotional tools (Hays et al., 2013). Other authors have focused on tourism institutions and firms, possibility to exploit the interactive relationship with users in their online marketing strategy (Valls et al., 2012) and in building customers' loyalty (Senders et al., 2013).

2.2 The value of visual contents in tourism

Among the different forms of content such as textual, visual and audio-visual shared online, tourism is deeply related to visual media. Photos have several roles in documenting and shaping the tourist's experience by allowing to share online real life lived activities (Lo et al., 2011). Since photography can both build and transform an intangible experience into something tangible, photo-based social media use is constantly growing in tourism (Mukhina, et al., 2017). In analysing existing research, Park & Sangkyun (2018) have focused on visual research methods on tourism photography showing that three main approaches are adopted: (1) destination photography analysis to obtain a visual representation of a destination; (2) tourists photography analysis to understand tourist experience and destination images; (3) destination and tourist photography to compare the representation of a destination and the tourist experience.

In the last few years, different authors have evaluated the power of visual online contents considering Instagram and in some cases also Flickr platforms, but literature

examining the visual contents shared by tourists is still limited (Gali & Donaire, 2015; Mukhina, et al. 2017).

2.3 Tourists' journey and social media: a bottom-up perspective

A customer journey is defined as the process the customer goes through, across all stages and touchpoints, comprising the customer experience. Only some of the touchpoints are controlled by the firm, and firms need to deepen their understanding of both the ones they control and the ones they don't (Lemon and Verhoef; 2016). This highlights the need to understand how people move across the customer journey (Hamilton, and Price, 2019). Through the web, tourists co-create their tourism experiences deeply involving emotional aspects during all the journey phases requiring to focus on cognitive, affective and conative dimensions (Veríssimo and Menezes, 2015). Due to this situation, the tourist journey can now be seen as a bottom-up approach which illustrates the service process from a customer perspective, rather than a top-down one (Stickdorn and Zehrer, 2009). Considering customers through their social media use is becoming a differential element in planning marketing experience in the tourism industry, personalizing the marketing offering and anticipating the needs of individual consumers (Veríssimo and Menezes, 2015). In this context, the present research tries to understand how photos of a destination posted on Instagram can be used to understand the different phases of the tourist journey.

3 Design and methodology

The research is divided in 2 studies:

Study 1 is based on Instagram photos analysis. It will be carried out in four main phases

- *Phase 1 – Context selection:* According to the Association “*I Borghi più Belli d’Italia*” a *borgo* represents a prestigious assembly of territories which: (1) has a population with less than 2.000 inhabitants in the historic centre (and less than 15.000 in the entire municipality); (2) has remarkable urban and architectural heritage, certified by the Superintendence of Fine Arts. Thus they represent a context of small destinations.
- *Phase 2 - Data collection:* photos, likes, comments and geographic coordinates on Instagram about a sample of Italian *Borghi* based on their name hashtag will be downloaded.
- *Phase 3 - Content Analysis:* content analysis is an unobtrusive and nonreactive method commonly used by social researchers and applied to all types of media content (Krippendorff, 2004). Specifically, content analysis is selected for the analysis of the photographs since it has produced reliable results in previous research (Gali & Donaire, 2015). We combine a deductive content analysis using categories adopted in previous research and an inductive one based on the image analysis. First, the items selected for content analysis are classified into categories, in accordance with suggestions by Bernkopf and Nixon (2019). Then, since these existing categories are mainly devoted to big cities, some subcategories are associated to the previously identified categories in order to better fit our territorial context. A final list of categories and subcategories will be then defined.

- *Phase 4 - Experience Definition according to the Tourist Journey*: by classifying visual contents, it is possible to outline the experience lived by tourists and to see which photos are highly engaging. Furthermore, by identifying if the photo is posted in the assessed location or once the person is somewhere else, it is possible to study the power of visual image in the “consumption” and “post-consumption” phase of the tourist journey.

Study 2 is a survey, based on a questionnaire distributed to Italian citizens. Representative images from each category identified in study 1 are selected in order to test their cognitive, affective and conative effects (Molinillo et al., 2018; Papadimitriou et al., 2018) on respondents.

4 Preliminary results: categories and sub-categories definition

The sample

The first analyses are made on a limited sample of Italian *borghi* in order to test and define the image categories and sub-categories which can be adopted in the further phases of the research. The preliminary sample is made of five *borghi* located in the northern part of Italy which have an official Instagram profile too. Images are downloaded from Instagram using the hashtag of the *borgo* name. In this preliminary research phases the photos posted between 15 and 18 of August 2019 are considered. Sample is composed by 341 pictures (Table 1).

Table 1: Preliminary analysis sample

Destination name	Number of photos
#Bienno	60
#Etroubles	34
#Sabbioneta	86
#Venzone	156
#Volpedo	5

Preliminary findings

Starting from the existing literature (Sonne and Erickson, 2018, Ferwerda et al., 2016, Bernkopf and Nixon, 2019), main photos features and content categories are identified and tested in the *Borghi* territories. Preliminary findings are summarized in table 2.

Table 2: Preliminary findings of the photo categories testing phase

IMAGE FEATURES	%	DESCRIPTION
Human presence <i>(adapted from Sonne and Erickson, 2018)</i>		
	80.35%	No human in the photo
	9.68%	Humans as the main element of the photo
	5.28%	With people posing (not selfie)
	4.70%	With people taking a selfie

	7.03%	With humans not posing
Effects (Adapted from Ferwerda et al., 2016)		
	98.53%	No effect on the photo
	2.93%	Colour or light effect
	0.96%	Black/white photo
	0.88%	Collage
IMAGE CATEGORY (Bernkopf and Nixon, 2019)	%	MOST RECURRING SUB-CATEGORIES
Culture history and art	52.79%	Most photos in this category represent quarters of the <i>borgo</i> (29.61%), its buildings (13.97%), churches (5.59%) or parts of a building (1.17%) while details such as frescos count for 6.70%. Furthermore, sculptures and monuments are also portrayed (7.63%). Food (both dishes or typical products such as fruit or mushrooms) count for 14.53%.
Additional	14.37%	This category includes urban details for 42.86%, most of them are architectural ones framing especially windows and doors. Furthermore it considers all the photos which represent a specific object as it could be a bike wheel, a GPS device etc.
Natural resources	11.14%	Most photos are landscapes (89.47%) while a small percentage represents partial views (1.47%).
Tourist infrastructure	5.28%	Most images (77.78%) refer to store windows or store products, while 22.22% represents restaurants, bars and ice-cream shops.
Leisure and recreation	2.64%	Photos represent people doing sport most of them hiking, riding a motorbike or a bike.
General infrastructure	2.35%	Photos in this category represent street views, most of them of the urban center only in a few cases a naturalistic perspective is adopted.

Table 2 shows the main results in applying Bernkopf and Nixon (2019) categories to the *borghi* territorial realities. Two out of eight categories do not appear in our sample (“political and economic factors” and “natural environment”). The same for the sub-categories: some are not applicable while others need to be added in an inductive way. In general, looking at these preliminary results, the most relevant sub-categories (higher number of recurrences) are part of “culture, history and art”. In this category, some adjustments were needed. For example, we found that a sub-category considering only “historical buildings” was not enough in order to explain the photo contents and we added the “houses/contemporary buildings” dimension. The same happened for the “landscapes” sub-category, since a lot of shots did not show a full landscape, the “partial views or quarters” sub-category was introduced. Also in the “additional” category, we included a new sub-category which considers the photos that focus on any “urban detail”. Moving to “natural resources” the “sky” is added since in different cases

it is the main element of a photo. Furthermore, elements such as “fruit” and “other local products” are selected for the “food” sub-category. While, by evaluating photos about stores, we realized that “food shops” could represent a separated sub-category.

Conclusions and managerial implications

This research focuses on images shared on Instagram about Italian *borghi*, beginning to shed light on how to usefully exploit user generated images to provide both an economic and a social contribution to the tourism industry.

In this first phase of the research, the obtained results demonstrate that the existing visual content categories proposed in literature in order to represent a territory do not perfectly fit the *borghi* realities. Since a *borgo* is a small territory made of high cultural values and ancient traditions, several elements representing big cities cannot be applied. We found that the most portrayed elements of a *borgo* are the ones that deal with architecture moving from photos of entire buildings, to photos of small architectural details. Instead, due to the nature of the considered territories, where normally there are no hospitals, airports or other similar facilities, there is almost a total absence of portrayed infrastructures.

In the following phases of the analysis we will adopt an innovative perspective by looking at the role that these different photo contents have on the phases of the tourist journey. This kind of data interpretation will be useful to the public sector, to companies involved in the tourism industry and to academic researchers, bringing new opportunities in destination management in order to better face the actual increasing competition.

Reference list upon request