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Seeing Old San Juan, PR through the Lenses of Tourists and Residents: An Analysis of User-Generated Photographs

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ABSTRACT

Vacationing is the event where most photographs are taken (Baerenholt et al. 2004) as taking pictures is an important way in which the tourist gaze is enacted. According to Urry (2002), the tourist gaze, or the ways of seeing, identifies what is the “extraordinary” and the “other” in the tourist experience. Therefore, residents and tourists may portray or perceive a tourism destination differently. Using social semiotics as a methodological framework, this paper analyzes the photographs posted by residents and tourists in the context of Old San Juan, an important historic destination in Puerto Rico, to identify commonalities and differences. A total of 1,064 photographs were analyzed for this study.

Keywords: *tourism experience, photography, residents, tourists, Flickr, Puerto Rico.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism and photography are considered to be modern twins (Baerenholt et al. 2004). Vacationing is the event where most photographs are taken (Baerenholt et al. 2004), and cameras are one of the most important objects that tourists take with them while on vacation. Indeed, the stereotypical image of the tourist pictures him or her with a camera. Taking pictures is an important part of vacations and is an important way in which the tourist gaze is enacted. According to Urry (2002), the tourist gaze, or the ways of seeing, identifies what is the “extraordinary” and the “other” in the tourist experience. Therefore, residents and tourists may portray or perceive a tourism destination differently. Using social semiotics as a methodological framework, this paper analyzes the photographs posted by residents and tourists in the context of Old San Juan, an important historic destination in Puerto Rico.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism and photography

Since its invention, photography has been associated with travelling. Photographers began to travel to different places. Photography soon became a ritual practice of tourists. According to Robinson and Picard (2009), photography is part of modernity’s travelling cultures. Contemporary tourism is intrinsically constructed culturally, socially and materially through images and performances of photography and vice versa. When people travel, they will take their camera on the trip and take photos that will help them remember great experiences and construct vivid memories. Vacations and holidays are the events where most significant images are made (Baerenholdt et al. 2004). Photographs are taken because “holidays are important periods in people’s lives” (Ryan 2002, p.2). Pictures help tourists bring the world and their experiences

home. There are other motivations for tourists taking photos. Taking pictures is an integral part of sightseeing. Almost all tourists combine the consuming “tourist gaze” with the camera. “Performing photography is not simply a way of documenting pre-existing experiences at an attraction, but part of producing them as concrete bodily performances and tangible memories” (Baerenholdt et al. 2004, p.101).

Tourists enjoy photography while they are visiting touristic attractions and places. When tourists are sightseeing, they engage in activities and take photos for themselves and for the family and friends that will see their photos when they return home (Baerenholdt et al. 2004). According to Sontag (2001, p. 183), tourism “is a strategy for the accumulation of photographs”. Photographs provide substantial evidence that the trip was made. It means that tourists spend time on the destination and had a good time. Tourists spend a significant time of their holidays accumulating memories. They are constructing memory-visions of their family vacations and holiday life. Photographs document sequences of consumption carried on outside the view of family, friends and neighbors (Sontag 2001).

Sontag (2001) further states that memorializing the achievements of individuals considered as family members is the earliest popular use of photography. Cameras are important parts of family life. Through photography, each family member constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself. What matters most is that photographs were taken and are cherished rather than what activities are photographed. Sontag (2001) also states that taking photos is a way of certifying experiences. Tourists limit experiences to search for the photogenic because they want to convert experiences into an image. These images are souvenirs that they will bring home when they have finished their vacations. Taking photos shapes their experiences. They stop, take a picture and move on. “Photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation” (Sontag 2001, p. 184). Also, photographs are considered visual inventories of objects, people and artifacts (Harper, 2002). Photographs “provide visual and evidentiary information to support reactions to, opinions about and assessment of visitors’ experiences in specific places or destinations” (Haywood, 1990, p. 27). Photographs depict events that are part of the people’s experiences. Photographs also portray intimate dimensions of the social-family, friends, other travel partners or oneself (Harper, 2002). The photographs taken by residents and tourists are representing the memory of their experiences, not their entire experience at the destination.

According to Berger (1972), the tourist gaze is not a matter of individual psychology but of socially patterned and learned “ways of seeing”. The tourist gaze suggests that tourist places are produced and consumed through images and gazing is constructed through and involves the collection of signs (Robinson and Picard, 2009). Robinson and Picard (2009) also state that gazing is not merely seeing. It involves the work of interpreting, evaluating, drawing comparisons and making mental connections between signs and their meanings, and capturing representative signs photographically. Urry (2002) makes the argument that it is the tourist gaze that identifies what is out of the ordinary and what is the “other”. There is a difference between people being at home (residents) and being away from home (tourists). When people are at home, they are looking at the “ordinary”, everyday events in their lives. When people travel, they want to witness the extraordinary, “the other”. They are looking for locations or tourist attractions that have extraordinary qualities and they will want to visit them at least once in their lifetime (Rojek 1997). Hom-Cary (2004) states that “tourist moments” are brief instances during which tourists connect to the “other”. Tourists have moments in which they feel a difference and/or confrontation with people, spaces, stories and themselves. In encountering the “other”, tourists

are provided with opportunities to recognize and confront the persons that they are themselves (Robinson and Picard, 2009).

Social semiotics

Prosser (2006, p.3) defined semiotics as “the study of the social production of meanings through signs”. According to Prosser (2006, p.3), sign is “the basic unit of language and is central to semiotics”. It consists of the signified which is the concept it represents and a signifier which is the form the sign takes. Prosser provides the example of a “closed” sign on a shop door. The signifier is the word “closed” and the signified concept is the shop is not open for business. A sign needs a signifier and a signified.

Semiotics provides a framework for the study of signs. “Semiotics offer the promise of a systematic, comprehensive and coherent study of communications phenomena as a whole, not just instances of it” (Hodge and Kress, 1988, p.1). Hodge and Kress also state that communication is a process, not a disembodied set of meanings and texts. Meaning is produced and reproduced under specific social conditions. Texts and contexts, agents and objects of meaning, social structures and forces and their complex interrelationships together constitute the minimal object of semiotic analysis (Hodge and Kress, 1988). Social semiotics focuses on social meaning-making practices of all types, whether visual, verbal or aural in nature (Thibault, 1991). “The structures of message systems are linked to the structures of referents via codes which organize signifieds and signifiers through compatible paradigmatic structures” (Hodge and Kress, 1988). Structures are built by two acts of joining and separating, producing a play of unities and differences. Semiotic structures can be described in terms of relations of cohesion (fusion/separation) and order involving degrees of complexity and subordination. This study assumes that there is a difference in the semiotic systems of tourists and residents and that this difference is evident in the images they take and post online.

When researchers use photographs as a research method, the analysis of pictures requires two types of analysis, content analysis and semiotic analysis (Albers and James 1988). Content analysis consists of a descriptive analysis that reports frequencies of pictorial elements. As a methodological approach, it is concerned primarily with appearances, their distribution, frequency and clustering (Albers and James, 1988). Content analysis provides the opportunity for contrasting and comparing appearances. Pictures can be organized in focal themes. A focal theme includes what kind of subject is at the center of a picture as well as identifying essential properties within. Semiotic analysis consists of treating pictures as a totality. It looks at the structure of the picture content, patterned relationships in its content, connecting these to parallel and contrasting structures in other pictures (Albers and James, 1988).

Role of new media

New media such as photo and video sharing sites, blogs, social networking sites, and micro-blogs like Twitter are increasingly used by consumers to publish and share contents. This is especially important in tourism, where storytelling forms an integral part of the experience (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier, 2009). Ever more user-generated content related to travel is available online and reflects various experiences tourists have when they are on vacation (Gretzel et al., 2009). Photos play an especially important role in this context (Tussyadiah and Tjostheim, 2007; Lin and Huang, 2007). Gretzel et al. (2009) report that 56% of travelers who post contents online post photos.

Travelers post their photos on popular photo sharing sites such as Flickr, Photobucket.com and ImageShack.us (Syed-Ahmad, Pengiran-Kahar, Lahadzir and Murphy, 2010). These photo sharing sites were ranked as the most popular sites in the top 80 of all sites (Alexa, 2010). Flickr is ranked 31st in the top 500 global sites (Alexa, 2010). Photobucket and Image Shack.us are ranked 56st and 77st respectively (Alexa, 2010). Flickr was established in 2004. According to the Flickr website (<http://flickr.com>), Flickr is an online photo management and sharing application. Users share photos as well as network and socialize with family, friends, contacts and the public (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). "Users can upload images to Flickr or view and comment on the users' images" (Lerman and Jones, 2006, p. 1). Users can annotate their images with tags. Users can also submit images to existing special interests groups, or create a new one.

METHODOLOGY

The fundamental research question underlying this study is: Do locals experience a place differently from tourists? The assumption is that there is a difference between how locals and tourists portray a place because of their difference in motivation and thus their difference in meaning-making practices. Motivation is defined as "a need that drives an individual to act in a certain way to achieve to the desired satisfaction" (Beerli and Martin, 2003, p. 626). When people travel for leisure, they do so for different reasons or motives (Beerli and Martin, 2003). The differences in motivation shape the experiences that locals and tourists may have at a destination. Motivation is influenced by a person's travel needs, motives, previous travel experiences, demographics, personal characteristics and lifestyle (Pearce and Lee, 2005). Locals and tourists may experience and portray a place differently based on personal factors and motivations. Residents experience a place differently because of the familiarity with the place and their knowledge of the issues and problems of their city or destination (Jutla, 2000). When tourists are new at the destination, they may perceive the destination differently from a resident that lives and works there. Tourists perceive the destination as "the other" because of the unfamiliarity with the place visited.

The methodology of this study consists of analyzing photos of locals and tourists collected from a photo sharing website. Flickr was selected as the photo sharing website for this study. According to the Flickr website (<http://flickr.com>), Flickr is "almost certainly the best online photo management and sharing application in the world". It is "the coolest and friendliest website among numerous photo sharing websites" (Lin and Huang 2007, p.74). It is certainly prominently mentioned in discussions of new Web 2.0 media (Cox, Cough and Marlow, 2008).

Old San Juan was selected as the destination for this study. It is one of the top tourist districts and/or attractions in Puerto Rico. It is the historic area of San Juan where the cruise ships dock all year round. This district consists of forts, museums, restaurants, shops, beautiful sidewalks and unique architecture. The data collection process included examining keywords such as Old San Juan, travel and tourism prior to sampling in terms of their ability to lead to useful samples. The keywords used for this study are Old San Juan and travel. Sixty Flickr users were selected randomly. Thirty locals and thirty tourists were selected. To distinguish between locals and tourists, each user's profile information was used. The profile information includes the user's hometown and/or current town and country where they live. Every 2nd user was selected until the sample selection was completed. If the users did not have information about the hometown and/or current town or country, they were not selected for the sample. The following second user was selected if the user had information about the place of precedence. This process was repeated until the thirty locals and thirty tourists were found.

The data collection occurred in December 2009. The elements used for analyzing the photos are buildings, statue, bridge, stairs, signs, flag, cloud, sky, tree, grass, streets, car, street floor, lights, water, food, drinks, animals, objects, and other structures. The photos elements were chosen based on the elements that tourist destinations usually have. Tourist destinations such as Old San Juan and other Latin American “old cities” have iconic buildings, government agencies in the area, different street floors, iconic restaurants and statues of important characters. The element of other structures was chosen to include other types of architectural structures beside buildings. Food and drinks were chosen to represent the restaurants and the culinary experiences of the residents and tourists. Signs were chosen to represent any signs of the buildings, restaurants and other structures. Trees and grass were chosen to represent the landscape around the elements in the images. Sky and clouds were chosen to represent the sky and other elements that images of the residents and tourists may have. Streets were chosen to represent the everyday life and the built environment. Flags were chosen to represent a symbol that the government agencies and historic buildings usually have. When people are in the photos, the researchers observed if they were in the foreground or background of the image. People in the photos are distinguished between residents, travel partners of the Flickr users and employees in the tourism industry.

RESULTS

A total of 1,604 photos were analyzed for this study. The thirty locals had posted a total of 1,061 photos while the thirty tourists had posted a total of 543 photos (Table 1). Thus, the first thing to notice is that the residents actually posted more pictures than the tourists, with the average being 35.4 photos compared to 18.1 for tourists per Flickr user. The majority of the pictures included structures of some sort for both residents (60.4% of resident photos) and tourists (66.7% of tourist photos). In this category, buildings are the predominant elements in both groups. In the resident sample, 50.4% of the photos included buildings. In the tourist sample, 53.4% of the photos included buildings. Examples of the buildings included in the photos are the forts of San Felipe Del Morro and San Cristobal, La Fortaleza (Governor’s house), hotels, restaurants and other iconic buildings. For example, photos # 1, 2, 3 and 4 taken by residents and tourists feature buildings in the foreground of the photos (Figure 1). In Photo # 3 and Photo #4, La Fortaleza and Fort San Cristobal are depicted respectively.

Photo # 1
Resident Photo



Photo # 2
Tourist Photo



Photo # 3
Resident Photo



Photo # 4
Tourist Photo



Figure 1
Photos of Buildings by Residents and Tourists

People also play an important role in the pictures for both groups, but are significantly more frequent for tourists. In the resident sample, 7.6% of the photos include people in the foreground. Most of these pictures include friends or other residents while only one photo depicted a tourist. In the tourist sample, over 10% of the pictures show people in the foreground, with the majority of the photos showing members of the user's travel party. There are some pictures with residents and only two pictures in the sample depicted other tourists. A total of 4 photos showed employees of the tourism and hospitality industries. Interestingly, resident photos are more likely to depict objects and trees, while tourists are more likely to take photographs of signs and streets. No differences were found for the other elements.

Table 1
Elements of Photographs posted by Residents and Tourists in Flickr

<i>Residents</i>			<i>Tourists</i>		
People	81	7.63%	People	57	10.50%
people background	0	0.00%	people background	1	0.18%
people foreground	81	7.63%	people foreground	56	10.31%
Structure	641	60.41%	Structure	362	66.67%
buildings	535	50.42%	buildings	290	53.41%
statue	63	5.94%	statue	35	6.45%
bridge	0	0.00%	bridge	0	0.00%
stairs	20	1.89%	stairs	6	1.10%
sign	20	1.89%	sign	27	4.97%
flag	3	0.28%	flag	4	0.74%
Sky	11	1.04%	Sky	4	0.74%
cloud	1	0.09%	cloud	1	0.18%
sky	10	0.94%	sky	3	0.55%
Plant	34	3.20%	Plant	8	1.47%
tree	26	2.45%	tree	6	1.10%
grass	8	0.75%	grass	2	0.37%
Streets	62	5.84%	Streets	53	9.76%
streets	53	5.00%	streets	50	9.21%
car	5	0.47%	car	2	0.37%
street floor	4	0.38%	street floor	1	0.18%
Night life	22	2.07%	Night life	7	1.29%
lights	22	2.07%	lights	7	1.29%
Water	36	3.39%	Water	14	2.58%
Water	36	3.39%	Water	14	2.58%
Food & Drinks	3	0.28%	Food & Drinks	3	0.55%
food	2	0.19%	food	3	0.55%
drinks	1	0.09%	drinks	0	0.00%
Animals	31	2.92%	Animals	12	2.21%
animals	31	2.92%	animals	12	2.21%
Other structures	56	5.28%	Other structures	20	3.68%
Objects	84	7.92%	Objects	3	0.55%
	1061	100.00%		543	100.00%

Within structures, pictures of statues were often depicted by both groups, whereas signs were more often included in tourist photos. Streets as another element of the built environment were found depicted in both resident and tourist photos but seem to play a more important role in tourist pictures. On the other hand, other objects were more often found in resident pictures. Natural elements such as water, plants, and animals played a less important role in both resident and tourist pictures, which is certainly a function of the destination.

Looking at the semiotic level, both groups sought out iconic elements of the destination. The photos generally depicted the “unique” and “worthy” rather than the “everyday”. Also, the fact that tourists often included themselves or members of their travel party in the photos confirms their need to document their presence at the destination.

CONCLUSION

The study results confirm differences regarding some picture elements but also striking commonalities regarding others. Iconic buildings such as Forts San Felipe del Morro and San Cristobal as well as La Fortaleza are predominant elements for both groups. The three structures/buildings are top tourism attractions to visit in Old San Juan. Residents and tourists will visit these places as an integral part of their experience in Old San Juan. People also play a significant role in both groups, but can be even more prominently found in photos posted by tourists. For tourists, it is more important to depict themselves and their travel party, which confirms the important role of photographs for tourists in providing evidence that the experience was indeed consumed. Also, pictures of signs as important signifiers of place were more prominent in the pictures of tourists. Last, the tourist gaze is more focused, directed at the most obvious targets, and thus the tourist photos are reminiscent of the “beaten path” that tourists often prefer to take.

These findings are important as they illustrate that user-generated content posted online can provide significant insights into how tourists experience a destination. The photos show what tourists think is iconic about the destination. They are also suggesting that tourism marketers need to see a destination through the lens of a tourist in order to identify appealing pictures to be used in marketing communication materials. Further, some tourism destinations encourage locals to upload photos on their Website. This could inspire tourists to see a destination through the eyes of a local and might provide opportunities for a closer experience of the “other”.

This study contributes to the tourist gaze literature. It provides the perspective of how locals portray and experience their own destination. The study also contributes to literature on user-generated contents. It shows significant contributions by locals. Locals provide the perspective of what is authentic in the destination. The study also provides information to the tourism industry and marketers about what aspects are part of the tourists’ experiences when they are visiting the destination. Through their photographs, tourism providers and marketers learn more about which attractions the tourists are visiting and how are their experiences in them. This provides essential information to improve the tourists’ experiences in the destinations. Future research should of course expand this study to other destinations to obtain more generalizable results.

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