

THE VISUAL TURN IN SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

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This paper describes recent changes in social media platforms and camera technologies that are ringing in a new era of social media practices. It specifically portrays the premises and promises of visual content sharing platforms such as Instagram, livecasting platforms like Periscope and the multi-media messaging app Snapchat. It argues that, as a result of shifts in the social media landscape, new social media marketing approaches are needed. It outlines opportunities and challenges for tourism marketers in taking advantage of new visual trends and calls for a better understanding of tourists' visual content creation and visual social media use behaviours to inform tourism marketing practice.

Keywords: *social media marketing; visual social media platforms; tourist photography and videography; Snapchat; Live-casting; Instagram.*

INTRODUCTION

Social media have never not been visual and tourism marketers have always understood the persuasive power of visually enticing contents. However, this paper argues that recent developments in technologies and changes in the social media landscape are ringing in a new era of social media marketing in which visuals take on a central rather than just supporting role in marketing communications. Bennett (2013) describes visual social media marketing as the practice of using images, video and other visual content (e.g.

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infographics) to more effectively reach social media audiences. Such a stronger emphasis or maybe exclusive focus on visual contents calls for a greater need to understand the practices of consumers regarding visual social media content creation and consumption, encourages new ways of engaging with potential and existing customers on social media, especially newly emerged platforms specifically dedicated to visual contents, and requires different approaches to social media monitoring.

The importance of visuals in the social media realm can be demonstrated easily through social media statistics. Social Media Today (2015) reports that in 2014, 1.8 billion images were shared every day on social media globally. YouTube has over a billion users who watch hundreds of millions of hours of YouTube videos, the number of hours people spend watching videos on YouTube has increased by 60% compared to the previous year, and the number of people watching YouTube each day has increased by 40% since March 2014 (YouTube, 2016). Zephoria Digital Marketing (2015) reports that photo uploads on Facebook total 300 million a day. Google+ users have uploaded 3.4 billion photos (Bennett, 2013). On Instagram, an average of 80 million photos are shared every day (Instagram, 2016) and Pinterest claims to have more than 100 million monthly active users curating visual pins (Beck, 2015a). Mark Zuckerberg predicts that in five years most Facebook content will be video and suggests that Facebook video contents were getting 3 billion views a day (Beck, 2015b). Many of these visuals posted to social media are travel related. A search on Flickr with the keyword “travel” results in over 14 million hits. TripAdvisor currently hosts over 53 million photos uploaded by travellers (TripAdvisor, 2016). The much smaller community VirtualTourist.com houses 3.7 million photos (VirtualTourist.com). Yet, it is not a continuation of this trend but a clear transformation of platforms and visual contents that forms the basis of the arguments presented in this paper.

To illustrate the need for a visual turn in social media marketing, the paper will first discuss changing visual consumer practices in light

of changing visual technologies. It will then portray changes in the visual social media landscape. Based on these elaborations, it will discuss implications for tourism marketing.

DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEOGRAPHY AND WEARABLE TECHNOLOGIES

Visual practices have always been an important aspect of tourism experiences and photography in particular has been extensively linked to the way tourists consume destinations and tourism products (Sontag, 1977; Scarles, 2013). There has also been recognition in the literature of how digital technologies and social media are changing tourist photography and tourists' resulting gazes (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Lo et al., 2011). The interplay between networked travel (encompassing a constant dialogue with real or imagined social media audiences) and networked cameras (either directly uploading or facilitating the upload to apps and social media) encourages the increasing production and sharing of visual contents. The role of the smartphone in facilitating the digital representation of tourism experiences, and specifically the quick uploading of visual materials to social media, has also been acknowledged (Wang, Park & Fesenmaier, 2012). Dinhopl and Gretzel (2016a) further name front-facing cameras on smartphones and selfie-sticks as important technological developments that have influenced tourists' propensity to take photos as the self alone or in combination with its surrounding destinations renders an unlimited array of motives to capture and share.

Another important shift in photographic technologies was the introduction of filters and software to easily and instantaneously enhance photos. Pioneered by Instagram, filters made it not only possible but fashionable and maybe even expected to edit photos to make them extraordinary. Beautification software for selfies is now often integrated into Smartphones and also makes sure that every

picture taken becomes “share-worthy”. Such technologies increasingly satisfy tourists’ need for careful impression management on social media platforms (Lo & McKercher, 2015). A similar addition to the visual social media world was the introduction of Hyperlapse, an app that allows for easy production of timelapse photography, making it possible for average users to create extremely compelling visual contents.

While photography remains important, digital videography is on the rise. This phenomenon is not only based on ever greater storage capacities of devices and faster Internet speeds that allow for better uploading and video consumption experiences but was also fuelled by important developments in video camera technologies. Smaller and more powerful cameras that are increasingly wearable and also networked are encouraging consumers to move away from still photography to the much more expressive medium of video. GoPro with its wearable or equipment-mounted video cameras deserves a lot of credit in spurring this trend as it not only provided the technology to easily film while on the move but also promoted its “cool factor” among highly innovative action sport communities that quickly adopted it. Video technology is constantly evolving with cameras becoming ever more wearable, turning themselves on when they sense motion or being supported by drones. As a result, video recording can be continuous and tourists can freely immerse themselves in the experience while resting assured that everything is filmed.

Dinhopl and Gretzel (2016b) argue that tourist videography is fundamentally different from tourist photography in that it 1) allows for visual continuity; 2) combines multiple experience moments; 3) communicates a multiplicity of visual and audio cues; 4) permits the portrayal of motion and movement while creating the visual material; and, 5) supports different perspectives (e.g. point-of-view, self-facing, equipment-mounted and aerial). They also argue that tourist videography involves distinct visual practices such as high profile editing before content is posted online, a greater emphasis on motion

and activity and a focus on storytelling due to the fact that narration can be easily integrated in the visual material. Chalfen (2014) proposes that the allure of wearable cameras for tourists lies in the ability “(1) to record ‘exciting’ even unexpected scenes of action [...] (2) to record what the camera user sees while undertaking a particular unusual, difficult, and dangerous activity and (3) to record what the camera user actually looks like or how the camera user appears while actually participating in [...] extreme sports” (p. 299). While the camera-related technologies facilitate the production of more and different visual contents, trends in social media provide important motivations for creating visuals and add interesting editing and communication/display options.

VISUAL SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM TRENDS

The social media landscape is constantly changing and recent additions in terms of platforms and apps have noticeably been in favour of visual platforms. The latest version of Brian Solis’s systematic map of the social media landscape (The Conversation Prism, 2016), divides visual social media platforms into three categories: 1) pictures; 2) video; and, 3) live-casting. These changes in the social media landscape are increasingly recognized and exploited by marketers. The 2015 Social Media Marketing Industry Report (Stelzner, 2015) indicates that video is increasingly becoming important to marketers, with 57% of the respondents indicating that they are using video in their marketing and 72% wanting to learn more about video marketing. The report further illustrates that while the traditional social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter remain the most important social media types on which marketers communicate, visual platforms such as Instagram are clearly on the rise. Importantly, over 50% of the surveyed marketers had plans to increase their Instagram and Pinterest marketing efforts. In addition, 71% use visuals and 57% use video contents in their social media

marketing efforts and about three quarters of marketers plan to increase the use of visual and video contents.

The increasing interest of marketers in visual social media marketing is likely also due to the fact that visual content drives social media exposure and engagement as well as traffic to company website. SociallySorted (2014) reports that Pinterest is the second largest driver of traffic from social media sites. In 2013, photos on Facebook got up to seven times more Likes and ten times more Shares than text-based posts and 81 comments were made by users on Instagram images every second (Bennett, 2013). Recent statistics indicate that video is becoming even more important, with video posts being favored by the Facebook news feed algorithm (Beck, 2015b). Achieving exposure and consumer engagement are becoming more and more critical as the social media space becomes increasingly crowded and general engagement levels with brands are dropping (Jarski, 2016).

VIDEO AND IMAGE SHARING PLATFORMS/APPS

Instagram only emerged in 2010 but has since become a dominant player in the visual social media arena. Due to its 300 million active monthly users and its capability to run ads, it is currently used by 85% of top brands (Hootsuite.com, 2015). It now also has video capability and because of its acquisition by Facebook provides important cross-platform marketing opportunities. YouTube remains the most important player in terms of video sharing but Vimeo is also important, with 170 million monthly viewers (Smith, 2016a). Twitter's Vine is another video sharing platform that visual social media marketers have to consider. It has over 40 million members and five vines are tweeted every second (Richter, 2014). Smith (2016b) reports that 100 million people watch Vine videos each month and that the number of vine loops played daily amounts to 1.5 billion. SherpaSoftware (2013) suggests that visual social media marketers are increasingly embracing the short vine video format to

communicate important information but also to distribute interesting and fun contents.

LIVE-STREAMING/LIVE-CASTING

2015 was the year live-casting became mainstream, with applications such as Periscope, Facebook Live, Blab and Meerkat appearing on the social media map. Urban Dictionary defines live-casting as the act of broadcasting a live video stream directly from a mobile phone's camera to another source, for instance an app or a website. Periscope (2016) boasts having achieved a record 200 million broadcasts and 110 years of live video watched every day in its first year. Omnicore (2015a) indicates that there were 10 million Periscope users in 2015 and that Periscope is available in 25 languages. Meerkat is much less prominent with 2 million users in 2015 and only one language version but Omnicore (2015b) states that marketers find Meerkat engagement to be higher than on Periscope. Jenkins (2016) reports that low-cost 360 degree cameras combined with easy and cheap devices such as Google Cardboard will further push this live-streaming/casting trend, making the streaming experiences ever more immersive. Experts also expect that live-streaming video will allow marketers to be much more immediate and personal with their contents and connect with their audiences in new ways. Ultimately, these developments will allow marketers to humanize their brands and to deliver much more immediate and authentic content.

SNAPCHAT

Snapchat is a messaging app that was created in 2011 and has experienced incredible growth in the last few years, especially among very young social media users. It permits the creation of short multimedia messages which can contain photos or short video. Solis

(The Conversation Prism, 2016) currently classifies it under “Picture”-focused platforms but one could argue that it deserves its own category as it not only combines the functions of many other platforms but also has distinctive characteristics. The unique feature of snapchat is that messages can only be displayed for a very short time (1 to 10 seconds) and then become inaccessible. Only very limited replays are possible and users are notified if someone takes a screenshot of their message. The messages (snaps) can be sent privately or posted to the semi-public My Story feature, which chronologically displays posts to those users that were granted access to the story. Snapchat also offers a video chat function. While initially mostly used for sexting, it has now become a widely popular platform used for general communication and entertainment purposes.

Wikipedia (2016) provides a timeline of important steps in the development of the platform. In 2014, Snapchat added a Live Stories function, which allows users to post when they are at a specific event or location. Snapchat then curates the snaps and makes them available for about 24 hours. Snapchat has featured music and cultural events as well as different cities around the world through its Live Stories function, which makes it especially important for tourism marketers. It was also in 2014 that it added so-called geofilters, which are graphical overlays that can be added to images if the user is within a certain geographical area. This feature is also of significance to tourism marketers who can create destination or property-specific, branded content for users to apply to their snaps. In 2015, Snapchat added so-called “selfie lenses”. Using sophisticated image-recognition technology, lenses allow users to enhance their photo and video messages with fun animations that are overlayed onto their faces. Snapchat further allows its users to add short text captions to their snaps.

Snapchat usage statistics are astonishing. Snapchat (2016) reports that it currently has over 100 million daily active users, of which over 60% create content every day. It further indicates that the platform has over 8 billion video views every day. Mediakix.com

(2016) describes the incredible growth of the platform, stating that Snapchat's daily video views grew 350 percent within the last year. It further claims that Snapchatters send 700 million snaps each day.

While consumers are increasingly flocking to Snapchat, social media marketers remain somewhat reluctant to adopt it (Stelzner, 2015 reports that only 2% currently use it) as questions regarding the rules of engagement and return on investment are not yet answered. However, Live Stories has been praised as an incredible advertising opportunity as the 10 second ads integrated in Live Stories can attract as many as 20 million viewers in a 24 hour period (Business Insider Australia, 2015). Mediakix.com (2016) suggests that marketers can use the platform not only for targeted videos but also coupons, contests, behind the scene reports, employee introductions and new product sneak peeks.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TOURISM MARKETING

These developments regarding visual social media add more complexity to the already complicated social media landscape that tourism marketers have to navigate. Yet, given the multi-sensory nature of tourism experiences tied to distinct geographical areas, these trends also create incredible opportunities specifically for tourism marketers. However, in order to seize the potential of visual social media marketing, tourism marketers need to better understand tourists' visual practices, rethink their content creation strategies and develop new ways of measuring advertising effectiveness suitable for the newly emerging visual social media platforms.

UNDERSTANDING USER BEHAVIOURS

Photos and videos were mementos of tourism experiences and their physical manifestations (album, videotape, framed photo print) were important keepsakes. Now they are communication media and

in the case of Snapchat they are ephemeral messages. New technologies and platforms thus fundamentally change the photographic practices of tourists. Charteris, Gregory and Masters (2014) point out that they are fundamental to identity creation as individuals are deeply shaped by the opportunities for discourse available to them. At a more pragmatic level, they also change social media habits, expectations regarding visual contents and relationships with brands/marketing messages. These changes are extremely dynamic and therefore require marketers to constantly monitor shifts in consumer trends. Behaviours and practices are becoming increasingly specific and therefore require more equipment- as well as platform-focused research. The success of visual social media marketing critically depends on such intricate knowledge of the visual sharing and consumption of travel-related contents across the ever growing number of platforms available. Once the needs and behaviours are understood, they can be managed and maybe even influenced to the advantage of the tourism operator or destination. Many tourism marketers were able to swiftly move their traditional visual practices based on print and TV advertising to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. Yet, developments such as Snapchat and Livecasting demand completely new approaches. In many ways, users (and especially young users) are way ahead of marketers in their abilities to take advantage of the possibilities these new platforms offer. It is crucial for tourism marketers to catch up with such user trends in order to stay relevant in the crowded social media advertising space.

(CO-)CONSTRUCTING VISUAL CONTENTS

Literature on tourism photography has traditionally assumed that tourists' photographic practices are highly choreographed by the industry and very much influenced by the images communicated by tourism marketers (Chalfen, 1979). Social media and digital camera technologies have changed this notion tremendously. Consumers are

now driven by what is shareable and helps them portray desirable selves (Lo & McKercher, 2015). This leaves tourism marketers with the question of what their role is in these consumer-driven social media conversations and how to still manage brand images.

The good news is that while these technologies give consumers ever greater opportunities to produce and share a diverse array of visual contents, they also provide marketers with new avenues for content (co-)creation. This not only involves the curation and reposting of consumer-generated contents but also the active co-construction of visuals with consumers. As far as curation is concerned, Ashley and Tuten (2015) find that the success of social media marketing campaigns correlates with the presence of incentives for sharing contents. Dinhopl and Gretzel (2016a; 2016b) report on destinations involved in true co-construction efforts encompassing the redefinition of the “photo spot” by offering tourists maps of selfie-spots around the property or destination, planting props to encourage engagement with destination logos/mascots while filming videos, and even creating attractions focused on encouraging the creation of compelling visual social media marketing materials.

Some of the tourism marketer efforts are especially innovative. Tourism New Zealand was the first tourism marketing team to take advantage of drone-mounted video. Tourists were filmed while enjoying the ski slopes of New Zealand and could request their dronie (a drone-based selfie) video to be emailed to them. Tourism New Zealand encouraged the sharing of these videos on social media platforms with the hashtag #NZDronie, ensuring that the campaign led to considerable social media buzz (International Business Times, 2014). Tourism Australia in late 2015 equipped several social media influencers with GoPro cameras and selfie-sticks to film Sydney from the tourist point of view. The videos were then projected onto the pillars of the iconic Sydney Harbour Bridge during the New Year’s Eve celebrations, confirming that the content was of such high quality and so compelling that it could be shown in such large formats and to

a worldwide audience. Skift (2016) reports that this allowed Tourism Australia to quickly produce content and successfully shift its photography-based user-generated content strategies on Facebook and Instagram to a new medium. Tourism Australia also used mounted cameras in tourism hot spots in 2015 to help Japanese travellers take “GIGA Selfies” (News.com.au, 2015). This included developing an app that allows tourists to trigger mounted cameras that zoom in and out while standing in marked selfie spots, capturing the tourists as well as the surrounding destination. Such strategies make it possible for destinations to remain a relevant and identifiable component of tourist-created visuals, counter-acting the selfie-trend identified by Dinhopf and Gretzel (2016a) of destinations becoming increasingly unidentifiable and moved to the background in tourist photographs. Similarly, producing relevant geofilters for Snapchat allows tourism marketers to put themselves back into the user-generated contents and to create value for the consumers by enhancing their photos.

The visual technologies and platforms further allow tourism marketers themselves to quickly and cheaply produce ever more and more engaging visual content and to share such contents in different ways. Photo stories on Snapchat, livestreaming at events, compelling Pinterest boards and exciting videos allow tourism marketers to experiment with different media and platforms in order to tell their story in different ways and to different audiences.

MONITORING VISUAL SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Marketers have traditionally relied on hashtags, picture captions and @mentions to integrate visual contents into their traditional social media listening and monitoring efforts. However, more and more visual content is posted without text-based explanations, making it ever harder for brands to track their reputation online. This has spurred technological developments in the form of social media monitoring software that can track and analyse visuals. For instance,

the social media listening platform Sysomos has recently introduced Sysomos Gaze, a tool that uses advanced machine learning techniques to recognize logos, products and people. Similarly, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) developed a visual search engine called Ditto, which is able to scrutinize user-generated contents such as selfies for marketer-relevant cues like logos, scenes, and sentiment (e.g. detecting whether the person smiles in the picture) (Wall Street Journal, 2014).

Video and visual platforms are also changing who the influencers are. While tourism marketers have focused on bloggers as opinion leaders that can effectively spread contents to a wider audience, they now need to consider vloggers and Instagrammers. Mashable (2015) publishes lists of instagrammers to follow for travel related inspiration. Social Media Week (2015) explains that the extremely high engagement rates on Instagram have made its most prolific users high earning professionals of great interest to marketers. Destinations are now staging Instameets (gatherings inviting Instagrammers to explore destinations) to encourage those with high numbers of devoted followers to produce compelling images of the destination. For tourism marketers, this means constantly monitoring who the influencers are on the various trending visual platforms. Various sources now post statistics on the “top users” of visual platforms to help marketers identify relevant influencers.

A specific challenge lies in monitoring visual contents produced and shared in private on Facebook or via private platforms/messaging apps such as Snapchat. Jenkins (2016) forecasts that marketers will have to earn permission from users to become part of their private social media conversations and will have to learn how to engage with users in such settings.

CONCLUSION

The Social Media Examiner predicts that visual marketing will continue to grow and that it will become increasingly critical for marketers to customize visual content for each social media platform and to use visual content as the anchor that drives cross-platform engagement (Jenkins, 2016). Visual social media marketing therefore goes beyond including images in social media posts; instead, it requires developing a comprehensive visual strategy that takes into account where and how their target consumers want to engage with visual contents. Ultimately, the push towards visual social media marketing is a matter of needing to find better ways to engage consumers, which is something a large majority (91%) of social media marketers struggle with (Stelzner, 2015).

While there are best practice case studies and limited engagement statistics, there is a dearth of reliable information on what visual social media marketing strategies are most persuasive on which of the many existing platforms. There is also a lack of conceptual work that classifies visual contents, visual content creation behaviours and visual social media marketing initiatives. This paper only provided a first glimpse at the phenomenon, aimed at underlining the importance of visual trends in the social media field.

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