

Chapter 13

A Framework to Analyze Cultural Values in Online Tourism Visuals of European Destinations

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ABSTRACT

Images play a crucial role in inspiring and informing travelers throughout the tourism experience. Due to this, destination management/marketing organizations (DMOs) do their best to provide visually rich websites and mobile applications. Among the factors guiding online communication choices, cultural values influence the selection and use of website design and multimedia contents. While several strategies are available to measure cultural values offline and online, so far, no consistent framework has accounted for the visual style of cultural categories in the tourism domain, especially within the European context. Addressing this research gap, the aim of this article is to propose a framework for the visual analysis of cultural values in the context of European destinations, also discussing the relation among values, visual content and visual style. The final model results from the combination of existing theories of visual semiotics and cross-cultural communication with bottom-up data from the semiotic analysis of 95 pictures from UK and Portuguese DMO websites.

1. INTRODUCTION

Photography and tourism have always been intrinsically connected (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Since its origins, photography has influenced travelers' imaginary and expectations, also influencing their willingness to travel (Garrod, 2008). With the shift to the web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2009), websites allow for greater

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interactivity (Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015) and the possibility of integrating multimedia contents including pictures and videos (Wirtz, Schilke, & Ullrich, 2010).

In addition to being extremely useful to travelers, who get inspiration and information, visual communication also helps tourism marketers promote and shape the identity of the destination online (Hallett & Kaplan-Weinger, 2010). As for offline promotional material, such as commercials and tourism guides, cultural values are also conveyed in online communication (Tigre Moura, Gnoth, & Deans, 2014). These represent the core of any culture and consists of “broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others” (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 9). In terms of visual communication, for instance, cultural values can be expressed by the choice of a certain location in tourism pictures (Stepchenkova, Kim, & Kirilenko, 2014) or by the type of portrayed activities (Mele & Cantoni, 2017a). Studies in the tourism domain highlight the importance of examining culture-bound preferences in messages directed to international and local visitors (for example, Mele, De Ascaniis, & Cantoni, 2016; Cho & Sung, 2012). Providing an important contribution, Singh et al. (2003) propose a model for the analysis of cultural values in international companies’ websites, which was later adapted to the tourism domain by Tigre Moura et al. (2014). However, more research is needed to acknowledge specifically the cultural values in tourism photography (Stepchenkova, Kim, & Kirilenko, 2014) and to account for the underlying meanings held by different visual styles (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015; Harrison, 2003; Bell & Milic, 2002; Cho, Kwon, Gentry, Jun, & Kropp, 1999). The analysis of cultural practices and values is especially relevant in European countries (Hornikx & de Groot, 2017; Kolman, Noorderhaven, Hofstede, & Dienes, 2003), as they are connected by strong cultural, economic and political ties to one overarching European identity, while preserving their national cultures and traditions (Gursoy & Umbreit, 2004).

Contributing to this body of research, the present study proposes a framework for the visual analysis of cultural values in the context of European destinations, including a discussion on the relation among values, visual contents (the “what”) and visual styles (the “how”). The model is developed from an extensive review of visual semiotics and cross-cultural communication research, combined with bottom-up data from the semiotic analysis of 95 pictures of two UK and four Portuguese DMO websites. Using Hofstede’s et al. (2010) and Hall’s (1976) dimensions, the resulting framework provides not only information related to what pictorial contents contribute to conveying certain cultural values, but also how chosen visual styles contribute to the process. As such, the model lays the basis to future research investigating and measuring the expression of cultural values in the tourism domain, within the European context. Theoretical implications for future research and limitations are discussed at the end.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Visual Semiotics and Visual Communication in Tourism

The symbolic and representational role of photographs, along with their influence on memory, are among the most important aspects that connect photography to tourism (Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011). Chalfen (1979) argues that the camera allows tourists to document their experiences and to filter the connection with the unusual and exotic. Thus, photographers impose their preferences on what and on how something should be captured, making photographs the result of an active signifying practice that affects the visual construction and representation of destinations (Urry & Larsen, 2011). In this way, travelers become the “unsung armies of semiotics” (Culler, 1990, p. 2) that constitute tour-

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