

# Chapter 22

## Social Media–Based Visual Strategies in Tourism Marketing

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### ABSTRACT

*Social media-based visual strategies are quintessential elements of tourism and social media marketing; yet, very little is known about how firms formulate and implement such strategies in a technologically advanced and consumer-driven communication context. Drawing on rhetorical structure theory, and marketing, tourism and social media marketing literature, this research examines and dissects the structure of social media-based visual strategies implemented by tourism marketers. 250 Weibo posts initiated by 5 Chinese provincial destination marketing organizations were collected and analyzed. The results show a diversity of social media-afforded visual modalities, a variety of visual content and marketing goals, and different rhetorical relations between visuals and their accompanying text. This research advances social media marketing and tourism literature by exploring essential structural aspects of social media-based visual rhetoric and offers firms a holistic overview of possible visual strategies.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Social media accentuate the significance of visual strategies, especially in tourism (Gretzel, 2017). As Burns, Palmer and Lester (2010 p.xv) argue, “tourism is an essentially visual experience”. The adoption of visual strategies helps firms effectively reach potential and existing customers, develop a highly engaged consumer base, perpetuate a desirable destination image, and stimulate value co-creation activities (Bennett, 2013; Leung et al., 2017; Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013; Swani et al., 2017). Yet, social media-based visual strategies are more complex and dynamic than those deployed in traditional media and therefore raise challenges for theoretical and practical understandings of their formulation and implementation. A recent report (Social Media Examiner, 2017) suggests that, although firms increasingly adopt visu-

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als in their attempts to achieve marketing success, they still struggle to create visual strategies that are engaging and rewarding to consumers.

Marketing and tourism studies conceptualize visual strategies along three dimensions, i.e. marketing goals, message content and format (Taylor, 1999), and ignore the multimodal message formats available in computer-mediated communication (CMC) (e.g. co-occurrence of text and video) (Herring, 2015). Moreover, social media marketing literature mainly focuses on the effectiveness of specific visual formats (e.g. video, photograph) in engaging consumers while neglecting other essential dimensions and their embeddedness in social media posts. Noteworthy is that the most typical format of tourism marketing materials is the combination of photographs and text (Decrop, 2007). Ge and Gretzel (2018b) confirm that social media posts by tourism firms commonly comprise images and text. This emphasizes the need to examine and conceptualize social media-based visual strategies in tourism by considering the logical and rhetorical relations between visuals and text because understanding such relations underlines the creation of persuasive multimodal message formats (Taboada & Habel, 2013). Yet, the structural dimensions of social media-based visual strategies remain underexplored.

Focusing on China, and in particular Sina Weibo, this paper systematically examines firm-formulated visual strategies by identifying their message content, message format, marketing goals, and the relations between image and text in these messages. Sina Weibo – the most prominent microblogging platform in China – has been identified as a platform where the adoption of visuals for marketing and communication purposes is a common practice (China Internet Watch, 2017). Further, a focus on China, a culture with an especially high use of visual communication, can advance the visual communication, tourism and social media marketing literatures and provide new insights for marketing practice by concentrating on lead users.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. Visual Communication**

Marketing and communication literatures focus on visual communication, i.e. the conveyance of information using a broad spectrum of images (Smith, 2005), primarily in the context of traditional media. The common consensus is that visual advertising can draw consumers' attention, motivate them to process the information, and influence their purchase intentions (Khachatryan, et al., 2018). This line of research examines the visual structure of print and TV advertising, focusing on complexity (i.e. visual details and variations such as color and luminance), design complexity (i.e. visual layout), format of presentation and meaning production (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006; Pilelienė & Grigaliūnaitė, 2016; Pieters, Wedel, & Batra, 2010). Specifically, identified visual modalities facilitated by print and TV include pictures, photographs, and video. They are adopted by firms to convey literal meanings (i.e. factual information) and assigned meanings (e.g. using a photo of a beach to signify freedom), or to represent abstract concepts (e.g. social status) (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006; Moriarty, 1987; Ritson & Elliott, 1999). Research on visual rhetoric in advertising mainly focuses on the relations of visuals with the products they represent or on the relations among visual elements (Maes & Shilperoord, 2008; Gkiouzepas & Hogg, 2011). The seminal work by Phillips and McQuarrie (2004) reveals three ways in which images relate to each other: juxtaposition (images are presented side-by-side), fusion (the images are combined) and replacement (the present image points to an absent one).

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