Guest Editorial Preface

Special Issue of Images and Visual Strategies in Tourism Communication

Katharina Lobinger, Faculty of Communication Sciences, USI – Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland

Lorenzo Cantoni, Faculty of Communication Sciences, USI – Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland

The field of tourism has always produced fascinating visual worlds that have stimulated semiotic and rhetorical analyses. This is due to the fact that pictures have always played an important role in tourism. Not only are pictures of destinations relevant for creating imageries of the countries we hope to see once in our lives and of those we actually go visit. Visuals also play a role during the tourist experience itself. Already in the 1980s, Albers and James have argued that taking photographs during holidays was an important part of being a tourist (Albers & James, 1988). Historically, since the advent of amateur photography, among the main occasions and motifs for taking photographs were special events, such as family celebrations, travels and vacations. And hence, seen from another angle, carrying a camera "does tend to characterize a person as a tourist" (Haywood, 1990, p. 28). If you search for the keyword "tourist" on Google Images, you will probably get many research results that show people with a camera around their neck.

Against this background it is easily understandable that photographs are "natural" elements for tourism and communication. They play an important role for creating a particular destination image and are thus highly relevant for promoting destinations (Galí & Donaire, 2015; Laskey, Seaton, & Nicholls, 1994). Studies in the field of visual communication and in tourism research have shown that visual stimuli are also very effective (Brantner, Lobinger, & Wetzstein, 2011). They are more readily recalled, and they can affect attitudes in a particularly powerful way (Laskey et al., 1994). At the same time, the persuasion occurs in a more implicit form and people generally like to engage with and talk about photographs (Lobinger, 2016). Last but not least, photographs have the potential to persuade without appearing to do so (Albers & James, 1988).

Yet, particularly in the last decade, the images that circulate in tourism have undergone profound changes that still challenge analyses in the tourism domain. For example, with the digitalization and the emergence of the so-called "Web 2.0" (Cantoni & Tardini, 2010), we have witnessed a hybridization of visual styles and visual genres due to the fact that users are now also able to produce and share their own visual material with potentially large audiences. In fact, photography and sharing photographs are practices that have become seamlessly integrated the flow of everyday communication (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008; Weilenmann, Hillman, & Jungselius, 2013). These changes in amateur photography have an impact on what is photographed and how photographs are used for communication (Lobinger, 2016). For the tourism domain this has profound implications as the "visualization of tourism experiences through photographs is an important part of our increasingly digitized society" (Konijn, Sluimer, & Mitas, 2016, p. 525). Others have used the term "mediatized tourism" to refer to the fact that

mediated communication and communication technologies play an important role in all phases of the tourist experience, from planning a trip to taking and sharing photographs afterwards. Professionally produced images thus often occur in context with user-generated images, both mutually influencing each other in terms of aesthetics, contents, and styles. With the increasing production of user generated content, travelers themselves increasingly become part of destination marketing processes (Månsson, 2011), as photographs and sharing photographs are intrinsically linked to planning holidays (Donaire, Camprubí, & Galí, 2014; Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011). Urry (1990) refers to this as the hermeneutic circle of representation in tourism. Travelers and tourists are both consumers and (re)producers of the visuals they have previously seen and internalized.

As a result, professional destination images nowadays can hardly be examined without taking into account the user-generated messages on social media or the platform-specificity of communication strategies.

This special issue addresses current theoretical and methodological challenges with respect to visual communication in tourism communication. Analyses are challenged in many ways, for example as regards the complex interplay of online and offline communication, the role of platform conventions, platform specificities and their affordances for visual communication and – of course – the challenge of adapting methods of visual analysis to the hybrid genres of visual communication, the increasingly complex and multimodal online texts, and the ever-increasing number of circulating pictures. At the same time, images in offline contexts remain highly important and need to be examined with respect to current social and cultural trends.

In this special issue, four articles address these topics from different theoretical and empirical angles. Methodologically, this includes two studies with detailed in-depth qualitative analyses of visual materials, a study that combines and integrates qualitative and quantitative analysis with the aim of creating a framework for visual analysis as well as a quantitative analysis of a larger set of visual data. Regarding the context of the examined material, the articles in this issue represent a rich variety of visuals, including commercial signs in the physical space of a city center, highly visual social media message on a Chinese social media platform, website images as well as films uploaded to YouTube.

In the first article entitled "Semiotic Landscape in Cyprus: Verbo-cultural Palimpsests as Visual Communication Strategy in Private (Shop) Signs in Limassol", Aspasia Papadima and Evangelos Kourdis examine commercial signs in the city of Limassol, Cyprus. In doing so the authors closely examine language dimensions as well as color, typography and space of the commercial signs. They find that many signs found in the city of Limassol use the local Greek-Cypriotic dialect together with English, often even together within the same sign. Depending on location and type of promotion, the signs use Cypriot language in Greek characters while others rather use Roman characters. The analysis of the verbal level already allows to show that the examined businesses in Limassol use an original way including different linguistic codes to speak to locals as well as to tourists. On the other hand, the signs are also a reflection of the cultural wealth and the various linguistic influences in Cypriot history. As the authors show, these findings are co-created by the visual level of the message, including color, typography and space. These non-verbal semiotic systems are thus examined in detail. Overall, the study shows that addressing different target audiences, including locals and tourists, requires creative communication strategies that go beyond the purely verbal level.

The role of visual communication in tourism communication is also at the core of the next article. In "Social Media-based Visual Strategies in Tourism Marketing" Jing Ge and Ulrike Gretzel examine the visual strategies used by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) in Chinese Social Media. The authors argue that there is still a lack of systematic literature on visual communication in social-media-based marketing strategies. In the context of Social Media, for example, the fact that messages are visible to general audiences as well as to the targeted audiences needs to be considered. Moreover, it is still unclear which message formats yield user engagement and how this relates to platform-specificity. For advancing this research field, Ge and Gretzel examine 250 post of Chinese DMOs posted to the Chinese microblogging platform Sina Weibo. The authors are interested in the

marketing goals that are communicated, in the types of visual content, in the types of visual format and in how the accompanying text relates to the visuals. Among the many results of their systematic quantitative approach, the authors also found non-destination-related visuals to be important for the social media strategies of Chinese DMOs. Particularly, the DMOs used engagement-based messages, which underlines the importance of relational capital for social media strategies. In other words, that study reveals that visuals always need to be examined in relation to the context in which they circulate, in this case on social media platforms with their genuine affordances.

In the subsequent article, Emanuele Mele and Katharina Lobinger propose "A Framework to Analyze Cultural Values in Online Tourism Visuals of European Destinations". The authors propose a framework for examining cultural values in visual messages, with a particular focus on the visual messages of European DMOs. The proposed framework is created based on existing theories on visual semiotics and cross-cultural communication, which is then refined by the bottom-up qualitative analysis of 95 pictures taken from UK and Portuguese DMOs' websites. It is underscored that cultural values are not only conveyed by the visual contents but also by the visual style and its visual representation techniques including, e.g., angle, density, scale and distance or viewer interaction. However, the theoretical and empirical work on the framework also highlights the complexity of visual communication. Photographs and visual messages in general are highly complex sign systems in which different cultural values coexist. This makes them fascinating but also challenging elements for both research and practices in the tourism domain. This is again complicated by the online communication context of websites.

The last article of the issue is entitled "Microanalysis of an advertisement through semiotic interpretation: A study presenting an Ad Heptameter schema and its resourcefulness to practitioners". Vasupradha Srikrishna proposes the Ad Heptameter scheme to analyze online videos and the visual signs they use in frame by frame analysis. This means breaking moving images down to their single parts to reveal the meaning-making process. This approach helps to reveal and understand the structure of the message and can thus be used by practitioners to examine and improve their communication efforts. In fact, approaches like these are highly relevant as nowadays strategic communication dedicates much attention to understand and evaluate the success of communication efforts after they have been published, e.g., by measuring user engagement and response. However, Vasupradha Srikrishna detailed analysis of Airtel's 'Dil Ki Baat' (speak from your heart) campaign, reminds us that this should not replace close and detailed analyses of the visual signifying processes in advertising messages before and during the creation of campaigns.

Katharina Lobinger
Lorenzo Cantoni
Guest Editors
IJSVR

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