Chapter 19
Performing “The Tourist” on Social Networking Media:
An Analysis of Tourists’ Travel Posts on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of social networking sites has significantly influenced human behavior. On social networking platforms that transcend barriers of time and geographical distance, people are now engaged 24/7 in an obsessive-compulsive behavior of crafting and projecting a favorable identity of themselves in the virtual world. Social attention and admiration is continuously being sought by making ‘public’, ‘any and every’ attractive dimension of one’s private life. An individual’s travel for leisure is one such personal dimension that has become a part of ‘public broadcast’ on social networking platforms in order to seek attention, through playing ‘The Tourist’. This paper explores the manner in which people try to project their performance of ‘the tourist’ on the popular social networking site ‘Facebook’. Through deconstruction of the ‘touristy’ photographs and travel ‘status updates’ posted by people on Facebook, the present study aims to identify the characteristic elements that symbolize a ‘typical tourist’. The study also elaborates upon the nature in which travel is being used for ‘status enhancement’ through social networking platforms.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of social networking sites has transcended the barriers of time and distance, shrinking the world into a common social interactive space available 24/7. In the virtual world, social networking sites are making a significant contribution towards fulfillment of an individual’s social needs (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Through creation of a rich virtual interactive environment, these virtual social platforms facilitate building of social circles, that in turn, are used for communication, exchange of ideas and sharing of events of one’s life with others. Nowadays, the increasing presence of the global DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0708-6.ch019

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population on such online media has given rise to a distinct phenomenon, wherein, people are constantly engaged in creating an attractive self-image for online impression management (Buffardi, & Campbell, 2008; Kramer & Winter, 2008; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Hence, to an extent, the creation of the virtual online worlds has been instrumental in making people inclined to lead a ‘dual life’. i.e. a life of the virtual world and life of the ‘real world’. In the virtual world the virtual identity is consciously and impressively designed to gain ‘visibility’ of a wide audience, while, in the real world life, the actual personal ‘genuine’ identity usually goes unnoticed by others in the daily mundane existence. In an attempt of one’s public impression management, usually people superimpose the ‘virtual identity’ on the ‘real identity’. This continuing ongoing pendulum shift of one’s existence, between the ‘real’ and ‘virtual’, makes social networking sites an interesting platform to study and understand human behavior. Therefore, online human behavior has become a new field of research across several disciplines viz. psychology, cyber psychology, mass media and consumer behavior (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Koskela, 2004; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Raacke, & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Wang & Stefanone, 2013; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008).

With respect to travel and tourism, the online consumer behavior of tourists has started attracting research interest (Bærenholdt, Haldrup, Larsen, & Urry, 2004; Larsen, 2005). The ‘public broadcasting’ of one’s holiday travel, through display of ‘tourist photographs’ and ‘travel status updates’ on social networking sites has become quite intriguing for researchers. Such behavior is believed to be ‘subconsciously’ motivated by the desire to gain ‘prestige’ through flaunting ones holiday travel and enhance one’s status in one’s earmarked virtual social circle that compromises of ‘relevant others’. The desire to ‘show off’ holiday travel engagement/s, can also be encompassed in the broader concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’ (Belk, 1995; Trigg, 2001; Veblen, 1899; Wattanasuwan, 2005), the display of which, is easily facilitated through social networking platforms. As both leisure travel and technology continue to become widely available and affordable, the ‘conspicuous consumption of tourism’, calls for investigation. In the direction of such an investigation this paper makes an attempt to understand the pattern in which the present day techno-savvy tourists are engaged in ‘staging the tourist act’ and symbolically broadcasting the same, with the aid of ‘touristy’ photographs and location based and other travel updates, on the popular social networking website of Facebook.

**FACEBOOK: A PLATFORM FOR ONLINE SELF-BROADCASTING**

Online social platforms have become an ideal mode for ‘self-presentation’ and ‘social visibility’ (Gosling et al. 2011; Seidman, 2013). Facebook, one of the most popular social networking site (Bicen and Cavus, 2010; Ross et al. 2009) is a sought after vehicle for enabling social visibility and impression creation and management (Collins & Stukas, 2008; Dominick, 1999; Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006; Goffman, 1959; Kim & Lee, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008). The ‘Facebook community’ provides an ideal example of the desire of people to mark their unique presence in the virtual world and encourages people to continuously engages in attending to their ‘self-presentation’ and ‘impression management’, that is carried out through upload of visual content (Wong, 2012) in the form of attractive photographs and information that boost their ‘self –concept’. However, this disturbing tendency of people to become ‘overly consumed’ in continuous and carefully choreographed self-presentation, for impression management, is often equated with ‘narcissism’ (Buffardi, & Campbell, 2008; Carpenter, 2012; Marshall et al. 2015; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Poon &