Chapter 7
Facebook, Friends and Photos:
A Snapshot into Social Networking for Generating Travel Ideas

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ABSTRACT
This chapter undertakes a ‘snapshot’ or glimpse into social aspects of tourism informatics with specific reference to the travel photographs posted on the social networking site ‘Facebook’. This analysis will focus on the travel images (photographs) generated by 10 individuals (five male and five female) from the Facebook community. It must be emphasised that the study is deliberately narrow in its focus and does not attempt to make generalisations about how photos are used by other Facebook users. The aim of the study is to begin a dialogue about the use of travel photos on this popular social networking site.

Examined in this chapter are a selection of visual images and written messages surrounding the tourism encounters of the particular Facebook members between September 2007 and September 2008. As Urry (1995) has argued, “the consumption of tourist services is important yet by no means easy to understand and explain” (p. 139). Tourism is experienced in a highly visual manner and there is a need for further research in this area. This chapter explores how the photographs taken, displayed and recorded on Facebook reinforce the travel experience for the tourist; and furthermore, how these images might influence the travel decisions of those who view the photos. Wider implications resulting from this type of research for the future development for tourism informatics (e-tourism) is also explored.

INTRODUCTION
The popular site Facebook was launched in February 2004 as an online version of the hard-copy facebooks which college students in the United States are given at orientation to help in getting to know their fellow students (Dulworth, 2008, p. 135). Facebook boasts more than 100 million users (Moses, 2008) uploading around 500 million photos per month (Nash, 2008). In a relatively short time Facebook has become a critical form of social media. The exponential growth of the Facebook community
is so profound that when this book is published, it is quite possible that the number of Facebook users worldwide may have exceeded 500 million. A recent book on Social Networking sites discusses Facebook as “a site specifically for students” with around eight million members (Engdahl, 2007, p. 183) – information that was clearly inaccurate by the time the book was published.

Nine of the 10 Facebook users chosen for investigation in this study have more than 100 ‘friends’, and all have more than two photo albums displayed on their site. A highly focused analysis of one aspect of the Facebook phenomenon was undertaken with a small sample (10 participants) by examining the travel photographs circulated in the ‘electronic space’ of Facebook at a particular time. The photographs examined in this chapter were taken in a range of countries including: the United States, Canada, Mexico, Italy, Greece, France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Scotland, Ireland, China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Japan, and the Solomon Islands.

The chapter will undertake an analysis of the photographs by applying aspects of content analysis and (to a lesser extent) semiotics – key quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Combining different research methodologies is particularly pertinent to this chapter as content analysis can be used to substantiate semiotics. Semiotics (how signs generate meaning) might be considered by some to be a subjective form of analysis as it requires a rather personal view to begin the decoding process. However, the quantitative analysis – which is designed to be undertaken in much the same way by any researcher – works to further validate the results derived from the qualitative analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies have particular strengths and using both methods reinforces the final research outcome.

Textual analysis, in particular semiotics and content analysis (studying what is actually evident in one or many photographs), are useful methodologies for deconstructing mediated representations of travel images. A combination of primary and secondary research, semiotic analysis and content analysis will be undertaken to analyse the way in which particular travel images generated in this social networking medium were created, replicated and relayed to other Facebook users across the world.

Having introduced the chapter, some background information will be provided. The background material examines the popular social networking phenomenon known as Facebook, the role travel photos play in this online environment, and the role these images might play in the travel plans of those who view the photos. The research methodologies are then explained in further detail. The quantitative methodology of content analysis and the qualitative methodology of semiotics can be combined to strengthen the data analysis undertaken in this chapter. The ‘Issues and Analysis’ Problems’ section begins with discussing the two main types of travel photograph that Facebook members post in their photo albums. The close analysis of the five females and five males from the Facebook online community is then undertaken. This longer section of the chapter begins with a table summarising the data. The examination of the 10 Facebook members is then briefly summarised with significant similarities, differences and possible trends highlighted. Finally, the ‘Summary Analysis…’ section draws out the key qualitative and quantitative implications arising from the data, while the ‘Conclusion’ summarises the key points from the study and identifies further research that might be undertaken in this area.

**BACKGROUND**

By April 2008 Facebook overtook News Corporation’s MySpace as the world’s most popular social networking site (ComScore, 2008). Social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Hi5, Friendster, Xanga, Bebo and Orkut allow