Chapter 14
The Use of Photographs on Consumer Generated Content Websites: Practical Implications for Destination Image Analysis

Doris Schmallegger
James Cook University, Australia

Dean Carson
Charles Darwin University, Australia

Damien Jacobsen
Charles Darwin University, Australia

ABSTRACT

Word-of-mouth is an important source of information for tourists making decisions about what destinations to visit. Word-of-mouth has a strong influence on shaping the image of a destination, particularly for remote destinations which are in part characterised by limited market penetration in terms of more formal marketing communications. There has been some research situating consumer generated content in Web 2.0 applications as word-of-mouth that has the potential to influence destination images for some destinations and among some markets. Less attention has been paid to consumer generated photographs although photographs and other non-text media are becoming increasingly pervasive on Web 2.0 websites. This chapter argues that photographs make a substantial contribution to word-of-mouth exchange online, and that there is a need for tools to help destinations interpret photographic content. Mapping photographs to Echtner and Ritchie’s (1993) destination image framework is one approach that shows some promise as it allows for comparison between the images projected by marketing bodies and consumers.

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing popularity of the Internet, and particularly the emergence of Web 2.0 applications, has dramatically changed the way in which ‘word-of-mouth’ exchange occurs among tourism consumers. Most significantly, consumer generated content (CGC) such as blogs, wikis and consumer forums allows word-of-mouth to extend beyond limited networks of friends, family and fellow travellers met along the way. The sharing of opinions and the telling of experiences can now occur more readily between strangers, with limited mediation and few barriers beyond language and access to technology.

A growing body of literature has recognised the importance of tourism CGC for tourism businesses and destination marketing organisations (DMOs) (Puehringer & Taylor, 2008; Schegg et al., 2008; Pan, MacLaurin & Crotts, 2007). The existing literature has focused exclusively on the texts posted by consumers on blogs, in travel review sites and virtual communities, and in wikis. This chapter argues that photographs (and other media) are at least as important as texts in communication between travel consumers. The efforts underway to develop tools to analyse CGC texts for marketing research purposes, as for example proposed by Waldhoer and Rind (2008), need to be extended to include CGC photographs.

There have been two broad approaches proposed for the analysis of CGC texts, including structured and unstructured content analysis techniques. Several researchers in the past (Wenger, 2008; Carson, 2008; Pan et al., 2007) attempted to analyse the themes that emerged from texts without imposing any framework or model over their content analysis. Other researchers (Douglas & Mills, 2006; Schmallegger & Carson, 2009) analysed texts within particular frameworks, such as a brand personality framework or a destination image framework. Carson (2008) commented that the free form and diversity of information (not all of it related directly to the travel experience) in blog texts made it difficult to apply unstructured content analysis techniques. Structured techniques, while necessarily limiting what the analysis can be about (Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000), reduce ‘noise’ and provide outputs more directly related to the intent of the analysis. The issues addressed by this chapter include whether structured techniques are also of value when analysing CGC photographs.

The chapter progresses as follows. The following section looks at the ways in which consumer generated photographs are used in Web 2.0 applications. It then reviews the importance of CGC for tourism marketers, with a particular focus on how CGC can influence destination image. We then discuss the technologies and methodologies available for analysing photographic content, and propose that formal destination image frameworks may be of value for structured analysis. Finally, the chapter looks at what might happen in the future as non-text media becomes more pervasive and technologies for automatically analysing image content begin to emerge. An example of CGC photograph analysis, based around a destination in outback Australia, is used to illustrate the theory presented in the chapter.

CONSUMER GENERATED TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHS

Despite being mostly taken by ‘amateurs’, tourist photographs contain a wealth of meaning beyond the obvious appearances (la Grange 2005). Tourists take photographs out of a variety of motivations including reproducing existing place discourses (Jenkins, 2003), portraying personal accomplishments (Lemelin, 2006), actualising social roles (Larsen, 2006) and attempting to capture the un-photographable meaning and aura of special places (Garlick, 2002).

Researchers have found that tourists often tailor the nature of their photographs according to their desired future audience (Crang, 1999),