

Tourist photographs: signs of self

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to investigate the reasons that tourists capture images of their trips on cameras or camcorders.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Over a period of approximately five years, the authors observed, photographed and interviewed tourists taking photos or videos in diverse international locations. Upon returning home, informants e-mailed their trip photos together with descriptions of what the images meant and what they had done with them when at home. These data were archived and interpreted in line with the central research questions.*

Findings – *Why does almost every tourist carry a camera or camcorder? What are they doing making these images? And what do they do with them once they return home? The accompanying video conveys most of the findings, while the manuscript elaborates on certain theoretical points and provides contextualizing and supportive evidence from the literatures dealing with tourism and photography.*

Originality/value – *The paper suggests that the images form part of an identity project, serving as a means of conveying internal tales to the self rather than as a means of, beyond the immediate family, communicating with others. The images act as tools for displacing meanings that are too fragile and tenuous to be contained in the fragile present as Grant McCracken describes more generally with regard to tying hopes and dreams to places and times of the past and future.*

Keywords *Tourism, Photography, Audio-visual ethnography, Individual behaviour, Self-actualization*

Paper type *Research paper*

Perhaps tourists existed before cameras. The elites of ancient cultures travelled to villas, baths, and sports contests, and the pilgrimages of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries involved pleasure seeking and cultural immersion in addition to the religious activity that was their avowed purpose (Belk and Costa, 1995; Urry, 1990). The European Grand Tour of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was still the province of the elites, but Towner (1995) argues that spas, seaside resorts, and Thomas Cook tours in the nineteenth century mark the start of recreational, scenic, and cultural mass tourism in the west. If so, since photography began in 1839 with the daguerreotype (Sontag, 1977) it is fair to say that there were not many tourists before there were cameras. For as Osborne (2000) notes:

As soon as there was photography there was travel photography (p. 3).

Indeed, the emergence of mass tourism and popular photography owe a great deal to one another (e.g. Crawshaw and Urry, 1997; Neumann, 1992; Stotesbury, 2001).

By the start of the twentieth century, photography and tourism were so thoroughly integrated that Chalfen (1987) calls the camera the identity badge of the tourist. Whether the tourist camera is cast positively as a status symbol (Schroeder, 2002) or negatively as a stigmatizing mark of the one who does not belong here (Löfgren, 1999), the camera demarcates the tourist from the local inhabitant who, at best, may have a camera cum mobile phone with him or her and at any rate would not photograph the same things as a tourist. In

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addition, by placing a camera between the self and the other, the tourist adopts a mask and gains a certain voyeuristic license. Just as we do not commonly step between a photographer and subject, neither do we question, for instance, the Japanese or Chinese tourist taking photos of all the dishes in a restaurant at which they are eating.

Not only does the camera mark us as a tourist, it may also be an instrument by which we seek to define at least a portion of our identity. By allowing us to collect evidence of where we have been and what we saw and did there, we may be attempting to claim these otherwise intangible and ephemeral experiences as a part of our extended self (Belk, 1988). This premise underpins the research on which our paper and the accompanying video are based. Beyond this point, the project considers the target of tourist photography – that is, what tourists choose to photograph or video record and what these images mean to them after they return home.

The data come from a diverse array of international tourist activities studied over a period of approximately five years. From the start of this inquiry we observed and photographed or videotaped tourists taking photos or videos. Because virtually everyone at tourist places has a camera or camcorder, we fitted in easily. The diverse sites for these observations included an air excursion over Antarctica, African photo safaris, hula performances, surfing, and a submarine excursion in Hawaii, the Lesbian and Gay Pride Day Parade in San Francisco, Buddhist temples in Taiwan, various spectacles on the Las Vegas strip, dance performances in Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Cambodia, whale watching, glacier viewing, and float plane trips in Alaska, Chinese theme parks, San Diego Sea World, a train tour in the Yukon, visits to Victoria Falls, a bus tour of Ankor Wat in Cambodia, Cu Chi tunnel tours in Vietnam, and palaces and a puppet theatre in Bangkok. At the last three sites, one of the authors also accompanied a group of 15 tourists (ages 18 to 64) on a weeklong excursion and conducted informal interviews en route. After we returned we had them e-mail us their photos from the trip along with a description of what these photos meant and what they had done with them once they were home. We also sent them a brief open-ended set of questions about the trip and their visual recordings. Belk also conducted telephone interviews with a subset of three of these participants, using selections from their photographs to visually elicit additional commentary. We transcribed the data and archived the photos along with the narratives describing these images and their meanings for the tourists we studied.

Because of the visual nature of both the data and the consumer behavior being studied, the 23-minute film is the primary research output from this project. In the discussion that follows, theoretical points from the film are expanded upon and integrated into a small existing literature on tourist photography. This theoretical discussion offers the chance to advance arguments made in the film as well as to acknowledge prior relevant work.

The tourist

In an era of global mobility, faster transportation, and increasing affluence, more and more of the world's people are becoming tourists. International tourism is no longer considered to be an extravagant luxury as it once was (England, 1980). Keyfitz (1982) has suggested that leisure travel is now a part of the "standard package" desired by consumers throughout the world. Some have suggested that receiving international tourists may also be the best pathway to development for many poor nations (e.g. De Kadt, 1979). Until the rise of recent concerns with global warming and the carbon footprint left by international travel, tourism has been seen as a green pathway to economic growth, especially in the less affluent world. And a number of marketing and tourism scholars have offered advice and research on how to attract more tourists (e.g. Fisher and Price, 1991; Kotler *et al.*, 1993; Madrigal and Kahle, 1994; Ray and McCain, 2003).

This pro-tourism outlook has not been universal however. Because international tourists are likely to be from the more affluent world and travel to the less affluent world, some theorists view such tourism as a contemporary form of imperialism (e.g. Nash, 1989). The imposition of non-local preferences can be seen, for instance, when tourists travel in a "tourist bubble" in which a tour guide speaks their native language, takes them to branches of global hotels

that serve familiar foods and beverages, and effectively isolates them from any real contact with local inhabitants (Belk, 1993; Buck, 1976; Owen, 1968; Schmidt, 1979). Although there have been attempts to classify tourists in categories based on the “authenticity” of their experience (e.g. Cohen, 1979; Redfoot, 1984; Smith, 1977), the idea that some types of tourists (e.g. hostelling backpackers) have deeper experiences than others smacks of elitism. The likelihood of any individual touristic experience being a meaningful intercultural encounter is small, despite arguments to the contrary (e.g. Butler, 1992; Lanfant, 1980; Pearce, 1982; Riley, 1988). At the same time the cumulative effect of tourist encounters on local consumption patterns is likely to be significant (e.g. Costa, 1988, 1993). In addition, the greater relative affluence of global tourists in comparison to local inhabitants can make the tourist appear to spend extravagantly, consume recklessly, and engage in eating, drinking, and sexual behaviors that appear excessive, immoral, and exploitative (Belk, 1993; Culler, 1981). The subcategory of sexual tourism further highlights these problems (Belk *et al.*, 1998).

Another set of critiques of international tourism focuses on the performances that are produced for and consumed by these tourists. MacCannell (1989) decries the “staged authenticity” of encounters that present a stylized and stereotyped view of what tourists expect to see rather than showing a more accurate view of life at the tourist destination. Tourists themselves are prepared to see these stereotypes because that is what they have encountered in tour guidebooks, tourist brochures, *National Geographic*, on the internet and in television travel programs (e.g. Costa, 1998; Lutz and Collins, 1993; Osborne, 2000; Schroeder and Borgerson, 1990). Given the tourists’ stereotypical expectations as well as the production of stereotypical performances like those of the Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii, it is not surprising that the tourism has been charged with providing only a shallow “pseudo experience” through producing and consuming “pseudo events” (Boorstin, 1987). Urry (1990) describes the tourist gaze as being both shallow and voyeuristic in consuming tourist spectacles in much the same way as the same person might watch a television movie or wander in a shopping mall. And Eco (1983) charges that this has led to a pervasive hyperreality in which we prefer the Disney-like recreation of, say, Africa and other locales to the real thing. Although Eco was writing at a time when Caesar’s Palace was still the most spectacular of the Las Vegas strip themed casinos that he visited, Las Vegas continues to go farther over the top with each new mega-resort (e.g. Belk, 2000; Gottdiener *et al.*, 1999). And in their race to keep up with other tourist attractions, even zoos – which are already a perversion of animals in nature (Berger, 1980; Tuan, 1984; Davies, 2000) – become Disneyfied (Beardsworth and Bryman, 2001; Bettany and Belk, n.d.).

Nor are the effects of tourism on host locales always positive. In addition to the potential for neocolonial economic dominance by tourists over exploitable locals as already noted, an additional problem is that often the financial benefits of tourism go more to global hotels, airlines, and travel companies rather than local firms (Belk, 1993; Belk and Costa, 1995). For example, it was estimated that the sixteen largest hotel chains owned more than a third of the hotels in developing countries and a greater proportion of the rooms (Crick, 1989). While some local jobs are provided by such companies, they are likely to be low-level service jobs rather than technical and managerial positions. International tourism has also been charged with spreading consumer culture, disrupting local cultural practices, and creating vulnerability for the locals who have come to depend upon it until natural disasters, political events, or boredom cause tourists to move on to the next hot spot.

In the light of such criticisms of the tourist, touristic spectacles, and the negative effects of tourism on local populations, we may well ask why people continue to travel in ever-increasing numbers, even as the financial and environmental cost of doing so continues to climb. Although tourist motives are diverse, one characterization has been that of seeking a sacred transformative experience in which the time and place are regarded as wholly different from ordinary times and places and the tour is mystical, mysterious, and mythical (e.g. Belk *et al.*, 1989; Grayburn, 1989; Sears, 1989). The result is that the liminal sacred experience ideally transforms the participant into an entirely different person. However, as international travel has become increasingly common and in view of the

frequently shallow and superficial nature of the tourist experience, it is questionable whether this characterization can aptly be applied. And although some have characterized tourism as an educational experience with visits to museums and historical and cultural sights (e.g. Horne, 1992; Jager, 1975), it is also questionable whether it is common for tourists to expect to be educated rather than merely entertained (Dunbar, 1977; Yeh, 2003). A more common tourist motivation these days may be that of play. Touristic liminality may release travelers from their quotidian lives less for a sacred experience than for a playful ludic experience. This attitude characterizes Urry's (1990) "post-tourist," gazing playfully on whatever the trip may offer while casting an acquisitive gaze on all that is seen. Both shopping and photography are implicated in this perspective. But the playful post-tourist may not be precluded from expecting to be changed by the experience. Self-definition requires an other from whom we can distinguish ourselves and international tourism can help to frame this other (e.g. Cohen, 1990; MacCannell, 1989; Rossel, 1988; Yeh, n.d.). This focus is one of the emphasers of the accompanying film. But the question yet to be addressed in this paper concerns the role that tourist photography plays in all of this.

Photography

Clearly one function of tourist photography is to provide a souvenir of the trip (Belk, 1990, 1991; Benson and Silberman, 1987; Evans, 1999, 2000; Hutnyk, 2004; Love and Sheldon, 1998; Yeh, 2003, 2009). But this begs the question if we are unclear about what a souvenir is for or what kind of a phenomenon photography is. We know that the term souvenir comes from the French for "to remember," and most photographs and video recordings made by tourists no doubt have this purpose in mind. Still, it is not clear what we remember based on such cues. Roland Barthes (1981) sought to recall his dead mother from her photograph and found that this image indeed brought back the details of her appearance at the time the photo was taken. But it was as much his mother's former possessions at the photograph that helped him to get a feeling for who she was. And like Proust's lime blossom tea and *petit Madelines*, it was the flood of associations that all these things brought back that constituted his memories of her and their relationship. Similarly, Alain De Botton (2002) distinguishes between the mere facticity of a scenic photograph and the embodied experience of actually being in the place depicted:

A momentous but until then overlooked fact was making its first appearance: that I had inadvertently brought myself with me to the island. It is easy to forget ourselves when we contemplate pictorial and verbal descriptions of places. At home, as my eyes had panned over photographs of Barbados, there were no reminders that those eyes were intimately tied to a body and mind which would travel with me wherever I went and that might, over time, assert their presence in ways that would threaten or even negate the purpose of what the eyes had come there to see. At home, I could concentrate on pictures of a hotel room, a beach or a sky and ignore the complex creature in which this observation was taking place and for whom this was only a small part of a larger, more multifaceted task of living (p. 20).

Thus, although photographic and video-graphic evidences may be cues to call forth memories, they do not perform the work of recollection themselves and cannot reproduce all of the actual experience. Moreover, because we selectively take, select, and preserve these images, they present a distorted, more polished, and more positive set of evidences than does the experience itself (Belk, 1986, 1998; Schroeder, 1998, 2002). In this sense they may be imagined to create cultural capital for the tourist by connecting him or her to another time and place that implies self-importance and accomplishment. Such photographic and videographic evidences thus serve as an attempted capitalization of experience (Bourdieu, 1990; Crang, 1999).

Although Hutnyk (2004) refers to both the travel photograph and the souvenir as means of "trinketizing" touristic experience, he recognizes that there are differences between the two. Trinketization also implies trivialization and seeing the world not so much as a museum of living cultures as a combination theme park and shopping mall (e.g. Kirschenblatt-Bimblett, 1998). While the souvenirs of today's market economy are likely to be commodities taken from a set of identical memorializing objects, each photograph seems to be unique, even if

thousands of other tourists have stood on the same spot taking what is essentially the same photograph. Nevertheless, the photo remains more connected to the tourist-photographer because he or she made it. The act is incrementally more personal than selecting a travel postcard with a similar (and likely superior) image, because the photographer, consciously or unconsciously, has an intent in taking the photo (Nguyen and Belk, 2007). We will not find images of our family and friends on a postcard, but we can make images of them in the same touristic locations. These photographs represent, in Hutnyk's (2004) words, congealed social relations. One framing sought is labeled the "family gaze" by Baerenholdt *et al.* (2004). The frame seeks to construct the idealized image of family intimacy just as the "romantic gaze" in photography seeks to construct an idealized view of a place. When the images are of local people and places encountered in travel, they may be more akin to plunder (Hutnyk, 2004). As Sontag (1977) points out, it is with reason that we say we "take" a photo. In addition to being possessive, taking a photograph is acquisitive. As Urry (1990) emphasizes, taking photos gives structure to a trip – we stop, take a photo, and then move on. For men, the task is especially important; arguably we feel more "productive" on our vacation trip.

In taking these photos, we also engage in an act intended for self-fashioning (Osborne, 2000). On one hand, tourist photography might be thought of as a reflexive project in which "we have become the permanent reviewers of our own experience" (Osborne, 2000, p. 75). But the performativity of such photography with its staging and posing of shots means that tourists intend something more than simply experiential documentation. Along with the act of naming or labeling things we encounter, either before or after photographing them, in taking tourist photos we are potentially collecting illustrations and titles for a self-narrative. In describing ethnographic narratives, John Van Maanen (1988) suggests several genres. Of these genres, personal travel photos are likely most similar to dramatic tales and tales about self. That is, rather than just crafting a reportorial format, we are scripting a future travel tale in which we are the dramatic hero or heroine. Nevertheless, while photography may be a form of language (Scott, 1999), it still requires a narrator. Otherwise, the images are as confusing as the family photo album of an unknown family. In taking photos or videos for an imagined self narrative, the tourist is apt to think in terms not only of dramatic heroism, but also in related genres such as tragedy, comedy, pilgrim's tales, adventure tales, and quest tales. We are also apt to draw upon Orientalizing discourse (Said, 1979) and make the Other our antithesis. This approach can take several forms ranging from romanticism to abjection (see Crawshaw and Urry, 1997). The traveler becomes the author/playwright/director/cinematographer/photographer in crafting these imagined narratives of self. Thus, it is not so much the people and places that tourist photography seeks to understand as it is his or her self as a tourist.

Conclusion

As the accompanying film reveals, the tourist photographer may attempt to say various flattering things about themselves. For example, "I had fun," "I am rich," "I am important" and "I had a transformative experience," are all among the imagined narrative possibilities. In Grant McCracken's (1988) terms, photos can be a tool for displacing meanings that are too fragile and tenuous to be contained in the here and now. By instead claiming these identity statements in the there and then of the tourist's travels, they become less subject to interrogation and less demanding of verification. After all, there is the evidence, no longer just in black and white, but in living color and susceptible to PhotoShopping and video editing. But we also find that, despite the narrative that the tourist photographer-cinematographer imagines delivering at some future time, these tales wind up being more internal tales told to the self than ever finding an audience outside of the immediate family. Our tourist photos are nevertheless selectively taken and retained with an intended audience in mind and are a conscious attempt to manipulate our self-image (Crang, 1999). E-mailed photos as well as photo sharing sites like Flickr and social networking sites, blogs, and web pages may have some greater success in reaching an audience (Schau and Gilly, 2003), and a few of us may also bring selected images to our workplace (Tian and Belk, 2005). But

the fact remains that with the ease of taking photos and the sense of purpose that it gives us to photograph our touristic sights, not to mention the escalating proliferation of photos that result, most of the world will little note, long remember, nor even encounter the self productions we have in mind when we record these images. And as these images become more numerous and more ephemeral in their digital forms, it may well be that we ourselves will never see them again either.

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