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Does Social Media Help or Hurt Destinations? A Qualitative Case Study

Smartphone technology has changed the scope of onsite travel behaviors and photographing practices. This paper explores the destination response of the Tourist Board of Vienna with their “anti-hashtag” marketing campaign, aimed at encouraging visitors to go offline while traveling in the city. Through a series of interviews, the motivations for the campaign, along with the initial approaches and outcomes for the campaign are studied using narrative analysis. The results indicate a positive response to the campaign, and potential models for similar destinations to manage similar visitor social networking and photographic behaviors are considered. Additionally, there are both academic and industry implications discussed.

Key words: sustainable travel, social responsibility, social media, travel photography, social networking sites, Instagram

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Introduction

Smartphones and social network applications such as Instagram have changed travel in past decade (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2014) and, consequently, social media has come to inspire a new consumer journey for travelers (Hudson & Thal, 2013). With the rise of social media, individual tourists are more involved than ever in the promotion of destinations (Garrod, 2009) through their photographs. Consumers endeavor to pursue as many experiences as they can with the aim to post images of their experiences to their accounts on social networking sites (SNSs) (Siegel & Wang, 2018). In particular, among SNSs, Instagram has emerged as the preeminent platform for travel photography (Poulsen & Kvåle, 2018; Siegel, 2019). Furthermore, 'Instagrammability' is term that has emerged to describe a precondition that locations carry as consumers are increasingly choosing experiences that merely serve as pretexts for their Instagram posts. Moreover, despite the potential for 'instant' image publication, it is not the case that most Instagram images are simply rough 'point and shoot' style photos; rather, Instagram images are highly curated (Zappavigna, 2016), and require the equivalent of a photo-shoot carried out in tourist settings.

As travelers come in droves to Instagrammable places, it can create difficult scenarios for the destinations themselves. The practices that subsidize picture-taking behaviors in destinations to achieve 'the shot' have negatively morphed (Nikjoo & Bakhshi, 2019), which has strong implications for the travel and tourism industry. Potential issues include trash

(Wilson & Verlis, 2017), tensions with local communities (Andereck, Valentine, Vogt, & Knopf, 2007; Jacobsen, 2000; Yang, Ryan, & Zhang, 2013), and failure to authentically connect with the destination aside from taking photos (Tribe & Mkono, 2017).

Today's tourism industry is thus faced with the possibility that if not managed properly, social media might generate not only some positive impacts, but also some severe negative consequences (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). To this end, destinations are beginning to endeavor to counteract the detriments that social media exposure can bring (Gretzel, 2019). In particular, in a strong move to counteract the adverse effects of this behavior, the Vienna Tourist Board (VTB) has recently introduced an 'anti-hashtag' campaign in an effort to encourage visitors to stay offline and see the city without their smartphones or SNS (Buckley, 2018). As a part of the campaign, advertisements carrying the slogan, "See Vienna, not #Vienna", were placed around the Vienna airport, and London's Waterloo and Liverpool Street Stations, targeting the sizeable population of English tourists that commonly visit Vienna.

The lines are blurred on 'the chicken or the egg' debate over the motivations of modern travelers, which results in an ethical dilemma of responsible traveler behavior and the level of awareness travelers carry of the footprints they leave on the places they travel to for their Instagram snapshots. A case study approach is employed using the city of Vienna, Austria. As the motivations and effectiveness of the VTB anti-hashtag campaign was uncertain, this study will seek to explore these factors as well as the complicated relationship between travelers whose motivations are rooted in social media and the organizations responsible for managing them.

Undesirable Traveler Behaviors and the Role of Places

Jenkins (2003) argued that photographic presentations inspire a tourist's visit to a destination and taking photographs constitutes a major focus of activity for the tourist. Scarles (2012) analyzed the interplays of agency of tourist photography with handheld digital cameras, and found the emergence of the complication of relationships as a result. The inherent selectivity of visual practice creates a question of ethics as to who holds authority over what is and is not desirable to be photographed, creating a situation where photography becomes selfish with aims to satisfy ideological purpose (Scarles, 2009). Therefore, photographs and the practice of photography can cause a confusion of ethical responsibility.

Tourism is uniquely visual, and pictures are vital to successfully create a destination image (MacKay & Couldwell, 2004). Travelers are cognizant of the types of photos that are popular at a destination and will most often have an intention of emulating the same photos (Nikjoo & Bakhshi, 2018). Tourists do not merely see a sight, nor even an array of sights, but rather bind them in a series that reconfigures their spatiotemporal order such that the 'inner durations of consciousness we know as time are, through motion, mapped out onto space and integrated into our experience of it' (Leed, 1991). This process creates a complicated relationship between tourists and the places they are photographing.

Smartphone use has resulted in a democratization of image production and circulation that has a growing impact on the way the world is seen, experienced, and remembered (Hunter, 2010; Lo & McKercher, 2015; Pocock, 2006). In the popular media, Instagram is acknowledged as a major contributor to changing the nature of travel (Glusac, 2018). The highly visual nature of Instagram photos is what contributes to the success of its use within the travel space (Siegel, 2019). The platform has been singled out as the SNS most responsible for contributing to the problem in all of the above-described examples. In many cases, millennials choose their holiday destinations based on Instagrammability (Hosie, 2017), and once they arrive in those destinations, they often tend see them solely through

their phones or cameras. Such behaviors have instigated a debate on whether travelers have any interest in the local culture, or if they are motivated to travel merely to take pictures to post to their SNS feeds and thus advertise that they were there (Orosz, 2018; Siegel & Wang, 2018).

Indeed, travel practitioners are concerned that many tourists are merely chasing ‘likes’ and do not actually engage with the places they are visiting, and it appears that many travelers are making the trek to these places largely in order to obtain emblematic photos (Williams, 2018). Such photographic representations are socially dangerous because they are an effective mechanism for reducing a place into a social media experience and standardized commodity—i.e., the ‘destination’ (Hunter, 2010). Many modern travelers hold little awareness of the cultures or communities they are visiting, but rather only focus on the self and how they can best benefit from the destination (Smith & Duffy, 2003).

With the emergence of the concept of “overtourism”, many places are beginning to re-evaluate the capabilities of their host facilities to accommodate large numbers of visitors, as well as investigate any deteriorations in the quality of life of their local communities as a result of tourism (Dodds & Butler, 2019). As a result, in places that see increased levels of tourism, negative attitudes towards tourists are becoming more common (Font & Lynes, 2018). As Butler (2019) describes, smaller, niche destinations can experience the detriments of overcrowding along with the more well-known cities like Venice and Barcelona that experience this occurrence on a large-scale. Social media is suggested as a contributing factor to overtourism and overcrowding (Gretzel, 2019). However, overcrowding strategies created to address overtourism do not always also apply to destinations popular for photography to social media. The onsite visitor behaviors of “selfie-seekers” and can vary (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016), as well as the infrastructure and capacity at the precise location.

There is a relativist nature to the ethics of tourism (Smith & Duffy, 2003). Santana-Jiménez & Hernández (2011) conducted a case study on the Canary Islands to determine the potential effects of overcrowding on the location's appeal as a destination. Their findings indicated that tourists of differing cultures present varying challenges upon destinations, and useful policies were outlined to protect the local communities in this context. Similar approaches would be beneficial for various destinations.

Despite the importance of this area, there is not yet a significant stream of research focusing on social media's negative effects on travel and promoting socially responsible tourism is an area that requires further exploration and research. Additionally, there is very little legislation regulating tourism, particularly in terms of outlining specific approaches for 'good tourism' (Jamal & Camargo, 2018).

Methodology

This research takes a qualitative approach and aims to gain more insights on the complicated relationship between destinations and SNS-connected travelers by using the case of the Vienna Tourist Board's 'anti-hashtag' campaign. The researcher held a series of conversations with the head of brand strategy and consumer marketing at VTB to gain deep insight into their 'anti-hashtag' campaign, including the motivations and any incidents or historical data that contributed to the formation and launch of the campaign. Specific elements of the rollout of the campaign were also explored, along with the optimal outcomes and end goals of the initiative. The conversations took place over a period of several weeks in spring 2019 and were recorded by the researcher and later transcribed for analysis. A narrative analysis was used to analyse the interview transcriptions. This type of analysis was chosen because the background of the study, which aims to analyse the creation of a specified marketing campaign, is socially constructed within its various stages. Narrative analysis is an

approach taken with interview data that is concerned with how and why stories unfold. The interviewee's perceptions and background are considered as a source of meaning and contextualization (Earthy & Cronin, 2008).

Findings

It was indicated to the researcher that the destination image of Vienna is a “metropolis without stress”, and VTB felt that visitors were increasingly missing out on enjoyable experiences because they were on their phones. The campaign was launched to encourage visitors to consider a digital detox. Also, the campaign was not aimed to ultimately change behavior on a large scale, but to instead raise awareness. As Vienna is considered a more sophisticated city, attracting the “right” type of visitors was important. Overtourism was not cited as a prompt for Vienna to introduce this campaign, however encouraging expanded responsible visitor behavior was an earnest goal. It was noted that VTB intends to continue to aspire to attract more mature and socially aware visitors that align with their intended destination image of being a culturally rich center of Europe. The campaign was built on the rationale that social media is changing society, and proactively addressing behavioral advances due to social technology is a categorical marketing strategy intended to appeal to a ‘smart’ traveler.

Additionally, it was revealed during the interview that the Vienna Tourist Board had recently hosted a press trip for social media influencers (SMI) to experience Vienna without their smartphones. As SMIs have large followings on social networking sites, with Instagram as the central platform, it is assumed that their tourist movements appear to have strong swaying power in terms of motivating their followers to visit the same destinations they feature (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). It is for these reasons that destinations and tourism boards utilize the SNS presence of SMIs to facilitate their marketing campaigns. The outcome was much better than they'd anticipated, as the SMIs enjoyed disconnecting and

being able to be truly present to enjoy Vienna in ‘real-time’. The Tourist Board aims to market Vienna as ‘a metropolis without stress’, and to encourage travelers to disconnect because it was beginning to seem as if they were ‘stressed’ to spend time seeking specific photos while they were visiting. This suggests that while photo-taking is not discouraged, a limit to time spent taking photos is sincerely championed and VTB aims to continue to urge visitors to be more present and socially aware while traveling.

The researcher will continue to hold conversations with VTB as the campaign matures and as they roll out future versions of the campaign. More detailed outcomes of the campaign are yet to be seen, such as whether there were fluctuations in visitor numbers, a reduction in waste or other positive environmental impacts, or if there was meaningful success in attracting different types of visitors and encouraging them to stay offline. A guideline for responsible traveler behavior or ethical Instagramming practices for travelers has not yet been developed, but there is potential for future developments.

Conclusion

By exploring potential destination responses to the described behaviors, both industry practice and academic literature can be improved on this topic. There are many opportunities to build upon the literature in marketing and social networking in travel, as well as destination response to traveler visitor behaviors and management. Future research opportunities include evaluating the campaign from the visitor perspective and a longitudinal study on the outcomes of visitor behaviors in Vienna. A media analysis of the online virality of the campaign can also be explored.

The Vienna Tourist Board is the first to take this type of response, and there are implications for future initiatives for destinations facing similar scenarios. There is a delicate balance between recording one’s experiences or creating souvenirs in the form of

photographs (Morgan & Pritchard, 2005) and egocentric photographic and social networking behaviors as described in this study. Destinations that see receive numbers of visitors due to its photogenic qualities, or associations with Instagram/‘Instagrammability’, can and should inspire an enhanced connection to place without smartphones. The case of Vienna illustrates that using humor and using a candid approach to social sustainability and destination marketing can be an option, however the long-term outcomes are yet to be seen.

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