修士論文要約

Travel Influencers' Projected Destination Image in Sri Lanka:

Photograph Analysis of User Generated Contents on Instagram

ジャヤマハ　アイェーシャー
JAYAMAHA Ayesha

Keywords : destination image, Instagram, user generated contents, travel influencer, Sri Lanka

1. Research Background and Objective

Social media has influenced the consumption habits of customers and changed tourism businesses communication with clients. The influence of social media has been high in holiday destinations through Instagram. Tourists have adopted Instagram for sharing photographs and videos of their travel experiences.

In the context of Sri Lanka, social media influencers have been given recognition through events of Sri Lanka as well. Every year Sri Lanka holds a television awards event as "Raigham Tele Awards" to appreciate celebrities on the television. In 2019 "Raigham SoMe (Social Media) Awards" was organized in order to appreciate and give recognition and prices for social media influencers. In the awarding categories of Instagram influencers there were: Best Food, Best IT, Best Lifestyle, Best Fashion, and Best Travel Influencer. Moreover, in addition to interview articles of celebrities and models in magazines, articles on interviews of travel influencers also have been seen. These influencers' contents shared online help to develop the destination image in Sri Lanka through visual User Generated Contents (UGC).

With this interest in mind, this study aimed to understand how the photographs shared on Instagram by travel influencers represent the visual destination image in Sri Lanka.

2. Methodology

In order to identify the popular Instagram travel influencer accounts in Sri Lanka, online observations on travel related contents on Instagram was conducted, without interfering with the Instagram page admins and contents creators. At the second stage photographic analysis of User Generated Contents was adopted. To conduct the study, 6 Instagram accounts focused on photographs from Sri Lanka was analyzed. Data relevant to photographs such as like counts, comment counts and engagement rate per post was extracted from popsters.com, an online tool that helps to understand and analyze social media contents. Photographs were coded into themes looking at the elements and what was photographed. They were categorized into Natural Landscapes, Cultivated Landscaped, Cultural Heritage and Tourism Products according to Hunter's (2008) module of photographic representation of visual contents. The data was then processed to understand patterns and differences.

3. Research Summery

This thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter one introduces the background of the study, containing a description about the study area and research objectives. Chapter two focuses on the previous literature relevant to this study and the methods used. Contents of this chapter is divided into the background of how social media is used in tourism, and how it created the phenomenon of social media induced tourism. This chapter further explains how photography in tourism contributes to the visual destination image. Methodology section explains the methodologies used. Chapter three is about the Instagram travel influencers visual content in Sri Lanka. The nature of their contents, themes projected, which locations and regions are widely showcased through photographs, are discussed in this chapter. Finally, Chapter four ends with the conclusion of this study.

Locations of Instagram Influencers' shared photographs were analyzed according to the regional division of Sri Lanka. It is understood that the locations, which the influencers showcase in Sri Lanka, are mainly centered around the central areas and the southern coastal area. Also, it is evident that they do not only travel to destinations that already have facilities to accommodate tourists and identified as holiday destinations but also travel to unknown or less identified locations. Moreover, it is also comprehended that Sri Lankan travel influencers tend to travel to same destinations to experience same experiences, and capture and share similar photographs

Photographs were also coded into themes as Natural Landscapes, Cultivated Landscaped, Cultural Heritage and Tourism Products. All the Influencers except for one had the projection of Natural

Landscapes in Sri Lanka compared to other themes. Secondly, Tourism Products and Cultivated Landscapes were given attention through the influencers visual content. Out of 1,683 photographs, 1056 photographs were related to Natural Landscapes accounting to 63% of total photographs. In the projection of Natural Landscapes, there were differences in locations and elements captured in photographs while 2 influencers focus on coastal areas, 3 influencers focus on mountain areas, and 1 on both areas. Similar type of projection is seen in the projection of Cultivated Landscapes with photographs of tea estates, paddy fields, lighthouses and railways. When it comes to Cultural Heritage, one influencer had given focus to Hindu temples and ruins while the rest focus on Buddhist temples. Tourism Products related photography was mainly based on the pool areas of the hotels. Further tourism activities such as kayaking and hot air balloon experiences were captured. Locations of these tourism facilities had a wide difference between each influencer. Another fact observed through one influencers content was wildlife captured up close without landscapes. Sri Lanka is home to different species animals, and offers jeep safaris at National Parks to enjoy wildlife. Tourists who come to enjoy those tend to capture wildlife up close. Therefore, the terminology of "Landscape" can be questioned.

Reactions of viewers according to themes were looked at with the photograph percentage of each influencer in each theme. Likes, Comments, and Engagement Rate per post have been noted. Through this analysis, it was comprehended that followers counts, photograph percentage in categories do not have an impact on followers' reactions to the posts.

Travel influencers tend to photograph themselves with the locations they travel to, and photographed tourist in almost all the photographs is the influencer herself/himself. One influencer photograph's location without himself evident in the photographs and he has photographed locals as human subjects present in his photographs. None of the photographs had hotel staff, or guides who are related to tourism industry photographed. The host photographed were locals who live their daily lives as farmers, tea leaf pickers, fisherman, snake dancers and other locals.

4. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to understand how the photographs shared on Instagram by travel influencers represent the visual destination image in Sri Lanka.

Looking at locations photographed and shared by the six influencers, we understand that Sri Lankan travel influencers showcase not only widely known holiday destinations, but also less travelled and less known locations by international tourists. Their photographs try to create awareness of prospective tourist destinations for prospective tourists in future.

These travel influencers who travels to locations and gain intangible experiences photographs their experience and makes it tangible evidence by sharing them through their platforms. While being the consumers, they also act as a producer of destination images by sharing their content on publicly accessible platforms. The circle of destination image representation can be identified within the six Sri Lankan travel influencers photographs shared on their platforms. All the six influencers are followers of each other and there were examples of taking similar looking photographs at mutual locations travelled by them.

This study did not focus on their followers' photographs captured on the similar locations captured and shared by travel influencers, future studies can be conducted on followers' photography in order to identify patterns further.

Thematic Representation of photographs shared is a major analysis of this study. With regards to themes, Natural Landscapes are widely photographed and shared by the influencers in general in Sri Lanka. Secondly, Tourism Products and Cultivated Landscapes were given attention.

Another major observation through analyzing the photographs into themes was the human subject presence in the photographs. On the destination, the influencer is a tourist photographed with the location. Yet once he/she shares his/her experience through online platforms as a travel influencer, he/she changes his/her role from being the consumer to producer of destination image. In other words, an influencer is a tourist on destination during his/her trip previously, and then becomes a host on online platforms after the trip later. Through thematic analyzing of the six travel influencers of Sri Lanka it is evident that only two types of human subject were present the influencer being the tourist and the stakeholder, the locals being the host. This nature again changes when it comes to sharing on online social media platforms. The influencer becomes the host while the tourist will be the followers who consume their online contents, who may become potential tourists of the destinations captured. It is understood that the Instagram travel influencers have dual roles and that their role changes according to their space, which is destination or social media platforms. Moreover, both stakeholders and the influencers who were subjects at the destination changes into objects viewed by third party when it comes to Social Media space. ■