**Abstract title**

Between “untouched nature” and “mass tourism” - tourist perceptions of outdoor recreation pictures in South Tyrol

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**Keywords**

Tourist Gaze, landscape preference, crowding, perception photographs

**Background of the study**

Photographs are an essential tool in the creation and management of destination image (MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). They create a strong emotional response (Björk, 2010) and the desire to share the pictured experiences in potential visitors (Neumann, 2008). However, most destinations lack communication strategies regarding the use of pictures (Míguez-González & Huertas, 2015). Based on the conceptual foundation of *The Tourist Gaze* (Urry, 1990), this study examines potential tourists’ perceptions advertisement, as well as more realistic pictures of outdoor activities in South Tyrol and the implicated expectations towards the destination. Literature suggests that differences caused by gender and cultural background are to be expected in the perception of the landscape (Schirpke et al., 2019; Yang & Brown, 2016), especially regarding crowding (Stone & Nyaupane, 2019; Zehrer & Raich, 2016)

**Purpose of the study**

The study focuses on the following research questions:

1. Which elements of photographs evoke strong emotional responses?
2. Which expectations towards the destination are implicated by photographs?
3. Do sociodemographic factors (nationality/gender) influence perception of photographs?
4. What are the practical implications for the use of pictures in promotion and communication in destination marketing?

**Methodology**

Data gathering was conducted using a web-based qualitative data collection tool (QDC Studio) in December 2019 with 155 participants from Germany and Italy. Respondents were shown 10 pictures presenting outdoor activities in an Alpine environment. The selection of pictures contained typical advertisement motives (professional photography and image editing, staged situations), as well as more realistic photos (amateur snapshots of real situations). Respondents were asked to mark elements in the picture they perceive as positive and negative and to comment on them. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis supplemented by basic quantitative analysis. Furthermore, the placements of pins were visualized for comparison between groups and presentation of results.

**Results**

The results reveal that most respondents share strong emotional responses (positively and negatively) towards certain picture elements. Disturbing elements could be identified even in the promotional-type pictures. Clear tendencies can be shown in the perception of landscape and crowding.

Qualitative analysis shows that the respondents often imagine themselves being a tourist within the pictured situation as a basis for their assessment and hold unrealistic expectations towards the destination, which concur largely with the typical advertisement pictures.

No substantial differences could be found between gender or nationality groups concerning the main findings, but the commenting on some specific picture elements seems to be culturally affected.

Concrete consequences for the use of photography in destination marketing could be found: The findings show which elements can be used and avoided to stimulate positive emotional responses in potential tourist for an Alpine destination. However, the results also indicate that photographs picturing unrealistic situations have an influence on tourist expectations.

The study is presented as work-in-progress to discuss further possibilities of analysis and research implications.

**Conclusions**

This study provides new results that are relevant for the strategic selection of pictures for marketing and communication purposes, leading to a dilemma: while the results provide guidelines to optimize the use of destination photography to achieve positive emotional responses in potential tourists, they ground doubts if this is a reasonable approach for marketing, since staged picture-perfect photographs create unrealistic expectations. This raises the question if, and under which circumstances these augmented expectations lead to disappointment and dissatisfaction upon visitation, or rather to a biased and selective perception and memorization, conforming the experience to the expectations.

**Research implications and limitations**

The explorative study shows a need of further research on the relationship of pre-visit destination image, tourist expectations and their perception of the destination upon visitation. Especially the role of photographs idealizing the destination image have not been analyzed so far. Results obtained reflect the perception of German and Italian Tourists of South Tyrol and transferability to other destinations and cultures is limited.

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