

# Tourism Informatics: Visual Travel Recommender Systems, Social Communities, and User Interface Design

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Information Science  
**REFERENCE**

**INFORMATION SCIENCE REFERENCE**

Hershey • New York

Director of Editorial Content: Kristin Klinger  
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Typesetter: Michael Brehm, Kurt Smith  
Cover Design: Lisa Tosheff  
Printed at: Yurchak Printing Inc.

Published in the United States of America by  
Information Science Reference (an imprint of IGI Global)  
701 E. Chocolate Avenue  
Hershey PA 17033  
Tel: 717-533-8845  
Fax: 717-533-8661  
E-mail: [cust@igi-global.com](mailto:cust@igi-global.com)  
Web site: <http://www.igi-global.com/reference>

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tourism informatics : visual travel recommender systems, social communities,  
and user interface design / Nalin Sharda, Editor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Summary: "This book presents innovative research being conducted into Travel  
Recommender Systems, travel related on-line communities, and their user  
interface design"--Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-1-60566-818-5 (hardcover) -- ISBN 978-1-60566-819-2 (ebook) 1.  
Tourism--Computer network resources. 2. Internet. 3. Online social networks.  
I. Sharda, Nalin, 1952-  
G156.5.I5.T68 2010  
910.285'5678--dc22

2009031089

#### British Cataloguing in Publication Data

A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book is available from the British Library.

All work contributed to this book is new, previously-unpublished material. The views expressed in this book are those of the authors, but not necessarily of the publisher.

## Chapter 7

# Facebook, Friends and Photos: A Snapshot into Social Networking for Generating Travel Ideas

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter undertakes a 'snapshot' or glimpse into social aspects of tourism informatics with specific reference to the travel photographs posted on the social networking site 'Facebook'. This analysis will focus on the travel images (photographs) generated by 10 individuals (five male and five female) from the Facebook community. It must be emphasised that the study is deliberately narrow in its focus and does not attempt to make generalisations about how photos are used by other Facebook users. The aim of the study is to begin a dialogue about the use of travel photos on this popular social networking site. Examined in this chapter are a selection of visual images and written messages surrounding the tourism encounters of the particular Facebook members between September 2007 and September 2008. As Urry (1995) has argued, "the consumption of tourist services is important yet by no means easy to understand and explain" (p. 139). Tourism is experienced in a highly visual manner and there is a need for further research in this area. This chapter explores how the photographs taken, displayed and recorded on Facebook reinforce the travel experience for the tourist; and furthermore, how these images might influence the travel decisions of those who view the photos. Wider implications resulting from this type of research for the future development for tourism informatics (e-tourism) is also explored.*

### INTRODUCTION

The popular site Facebook was launched in February 2004 as an online version of the hard-copy face-books which college students in the United States are

given at orientation to help in getting to know their fellow students (Dulworth, 2008, p. 135). Facebook boasts more than 100 million users (Moses, 2008) uploading around 500 million photos per month (Nash, 2008). In a relatively short time Facebook has become a critical form of social media. The exponential growth of the Facebook community

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-818-5.ch007

is so profound that when this book is published, it is quite possible that the number of Facebook users worldwide may have exceeded 500 million. A recent book on Social Networking sites discusses Facebook as “a site specifically for students” with around eight million members (Engdahl, 2007, p. 183) – information that was clearly inaccurate by the time the book was published.

Nine of the 10 Facebook users chosen for investigation in this study have more than 100 ‘friends’, and all have more than two photo albums displayed on their site. A highly focused analysis of one aspect of the Facebook phenomenon was undertaken with a small sample (10 participants) by examining the travel photographs circulated in the ‘electronic space’ of Facebook at a particular time. The photographs examined in this chapter were taken in a range of countries including: the United States, Canada, Mexico, Italy, Greece, France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Scotland, Ireland, China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Japan, and the Solomon Islands.

The chapter will undertake an analysis of the photographs by applying aspects of content analysis and (to a lesser extent) semiotics – key quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Combining different research methodologies is particularly pertinent to this chapter as content analysis can be used to substantiate semiotics. Semiotics (how signs generate meaning) might be considered by some to be a subjective form of analysis as it requires a rather personal view to begin the decoding process. However, the quantitative analysis – which is designed to be undertaken in much the same way by any researcher – works to further validate the results derived from the qualitative analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies have particular strengths and using both methods reinforces the final research outcome.

Textual analysis, in particular semiotics and content analysis (studying what is actually evident in one or many photographs), are useful method-

ologies for deconstructing mediated representations of travel images. A combination of primary and secondary research, semiotic analysis and content analysis will be undertaken to analyse the way in which particular travel images generated in this social networking medium were created, replicated and relayed to other Facebook users across the world.

Having introduced the chapter, some background information will be provided. The background material examines the popular social networking phenomenon known as Facebook, the role travel photos play in this online environment, and the role these images might play in the travel plans of those who view the photos. The research methodologies are then explained in further detail. The quantitative methodology of content analysis and the qualitative methodology of semiotics can be combined to strengthen the data analysis undertaken in this chapter. The ‘Issues and Analysis’ Problems’ section begins with discussing the two main types of travel photograph that Facebook members post in their photo albums. The close analysis of the five females and five males from the Facebook online community is then undertaken. This longer section of the chapter begins with a table summarising the data. The examination of the 10 Facebook members is then briefly summarised with significant similarities, differences and possible trends highlighted. Finally, the ‘Summary Analysis...’ section draws out the key qualitative and quantitative implications arising from the data, while the ‘Conclusion’ summarises the key points from the study and identifies further research that might be undertaken in this area.

## **BACKGROUND**

By April 2008 Facebook overtook News Corporation’s MySpace as the world’s most popular social networking site (ComScore, 2008). Social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Hi5, Friendster, Xanga, Bebo and Orkut allow



people to create profiles and share information and files including: photos, videos and messages with online friends. While English is the commonly used language on Facebook, other languages now used to communicate on the site include: Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian and Spanish. Indeed, there are currently 23 languages to choose from when one sets up his/her Facebook account. As McIntyre argues, technology is “helping media audiences swim in more ponds outside the mainstream – blogs, social networks, podcasting, vodcasting, video-sharing sites and the like” (McIntyre, 2008).

Facebook has a repository of 6.6 billion photos – more than any other photo web site. The straightforward interface of Facebook is one of the key reasons for its growing popularity – currently “the fourth most-trafficked site in the world” (Nash, 2008) and valued at \$15 billion (Hodgkinson, 2008). Aaron Sorkin, creator of the television drama *The West Wing* and a number of films including *A Few Good Men* is writing a screenplay about the origins of Facebook. The film will be an adaptation of Ben Mezrich’s book, *Face Off* which examines the contested and controversial origins of Facebook (Moses, 2008). The site was established by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 as an online yearbook for students at Harvard University. Needless to say, growth of the site over a period of just four years has been nothing less than phenomenal.

The issue of Facebook and the nature of ‘friendship’ is one of significant social, cultural and even legal interest. In January 2008, a British judge presiding over a case of Internet stalking ruled that befriending someone on Facebook was a fairly innocuous act and didn’t necessarily make them a friend in the true sense of the word (Emerson, 2008). Facebook user Garry Dean claimed that his Facebook friends were really “people I have come into contact with in my life”, while Geoff Dick agreed that friends on Facebook were more like ‘acquaintances’ – “and the more there were, the less friendly the profile owner” was likely to

be with them (Emerson, 2008). The true nature of friendship in this site was put to the test by writer Hal Niedzviecki who decided to invite his 700 Facebook friends to a party at a local hotel. While he was expecting up to 75 people (based on replies to the invitation), only one person eventually joined him (Niedzviecki, 2008, p. 3).

Like any technology, Facebook is simply a tool that can be equally used for good or evil. Hodgkinson argues that “Far from connecting us, Facebook actually isolates us at our workstations”, it “appeals to a kind of vanity and self-importance in us” and it “encourages a disturbing competitiveness around friendship” where “quality counts for nothing and quantity is king” (Hodgkinson, 2008). When Melbourne backpacker Britt Laphorne was reported missing in Croatia in September 2008, her family and distraught friends posted numerous items on her Facebook ‘wall’, and media outlets used many of Laphorne’s Facebook photos in their reports (Costa, Dobbin and Klisanin, 2008). In the case of Britt Laphorne, the Facebook community united around the missing student and posted messages on her site (which has since been taken down). Some of the Facebook groups that were established after her death included: R.I.P. Britt Laphorne (4,417 members); We will find justice for Britt Laphorne and her family (1,911 members); Our love and thoughts go out to Britt Laphorne’s family (771 members); Britt Laphorne Foundation (747 members); and at least five other groups with fewer members.

Recent studies in tourism have considered the role of tourist attractions in assisting with the creation of an identity. Pretes (2003) notes that tourists receive messages sent to them by the creators of the sites they visit, and these sites of significance, presented as aspects of a national heritage, help to shape a common identity, or ‘imagined community’ among a diverse population. Rojek (1997) argues that “most tourists feel they have not fully absorbed a sight until they stand before it, see it, and take a photograph to record the moment” (p. 58). If tourism sites can help create a common

identity or imagined community, can images of these destinations on the websites of family and friends represent aspects of a culture and help to develop a better understanding of a destination or even a possible desire to travel to that place?

Morgan, Pritchard and Pride (2004) argue that travel for the purpose of leisure is “a highly involving experience, extensively planned, excitedly anticipated and fondly remembered” (p. 4). The photographs that capture the highlights of the travel occasion constitute a vital element of both remembering the event and sharing the experience with others. Urry (1990) argues that visual images generated by travellers provide a strong basis for potential tourists to select places to visit. He argues that when tourists gaze they effectively become semioticians “reading the landscape for signifiers of certain pre-established notions or signs derived from various discourses of travel and tourism” (Urry, 1990, p. 12). Sheldon (1997) argues that the Internet in particular facilitates tourism. Photographs that are posted on websites become part of the visual culture that makes up our world. Rather than these memories being encased in photo albums and stored on bookshelves collecting dust, photos shared on the Internet have a vast potential audience. Pitchford (2008) further argues that tourism promotional materials “speak to tourists in a language that creates a set of expectations about a destination” (p. 98). Friends’ Facebook travel photos constitute another form of promotional material and have thus become a part of the overall marketing mix.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Content analysis is a research methodology that is concerned with the frequency of content contained in a particular data set. Berelson (1952) defined content analysis as “a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description” of communications (p. 15). Content analysis is used in this chapter as it is a useful tool for ex-

amining content that might assist in interpreting the ‘bigger picture’. Content analysis is effectively a counting strategy and is put forward as an objective method for counting content. It is a useful research tool for identifying and describing trends. Content analysis is primarily concerned with studying what is actually evident on the page or the screen.

An essential feature of content analysis is the use of categories. Quantitative content analysis of this kind does not concern itself with questions of quality or interpretation but can easily place data into categories and thus detect systematic patterns and structures. At its most basic level, “content analysis simply entails inspection of the data for recurrent instances of some kind” (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 184). It is concerned with “the denotative order of signification” (Fiske, 1990, p. 136).

Content analysis has been employed by researchers for nearly a century but became a popular form of analysis in the 1950s and is used in a variety of academic disciplines including media studies, tourism, literature, history and marketing. Gerbner used content analysis to illustrate particular patterns that existed across a range of media products. He examined how cultural values (such as violence) are transmitted through an entire message system and not just one particular television program (Fiske, 1990, p. 143). In quantitative content analysis, the researcher “uses objective and systematic counting and recording procedures to produce a numeric description” of what is contained in the text (Neuman, 2006, p. 323). Content is discovered through a more systematic analysis of the text – such as a photograph or an album of photographs – as opposed to a ‘normal’ reading of the text.

Semiotics is the study of signs, codes and culture, and a methodology for reading ‘soft’ data such as representations of travel adventures. Semiotics will be occasionally integrated into this chapter as it is a useful tool for examining the sometimes multi-layered images of the encounters and experiences that took place at a destination

(albeit as relayed via the photographer through the lens of a camera). Semiotics is the study of how signs operate in society or “the study of the social production of meaning” generated from sign systems (O’Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery and Fiske, 1994, p. 281).

Meaning in this context is the dynamic interaction between the ‘reader’ and the message. In any semiotic analysis, the reader is an active participant in the process, not simply a passive viewer. Visual images often leave a space within the text for the viewer to occupy and thus engage in the signifying process. The active processes at work in the text, combined with the act of decoding the image by the viewer, create meaning (Williamson, 1978, p. 41). Meaning is influenced by the reader’s socio-cultural experiences, and the reader plays a central role in any semiotic analysis. Assorted representations of travel and tourism imagery (as presented in the photo albums of five male and five female Facebook users) can be discovered through an examination of the symbols and images presented to friends on this popular social networking site.

Semiotics is a particularly useful methodology for deconstructing our daily experiences and attempts to capture those experiences more permanently – with tools such as cameras. As Culler argues, “All over the world the unsung armies of semioticians, the tourists, are fanning out in search of the signs of Frenchness, typical Italian behaviour, exemplary Oriental scenes, typical American thruways, traditional English pubs” (Culler, 1981, p. 127). Equally, the search for preferred accounts of travel experiences can be discovered through a close examination of the photographs people choose to share in their Facebook albums.

According to Leiss, Kline and Jhally, the real strength of semiotics is “its capacity to dissect and examine closely a cultural code and its sensitivity to the nuances and oblique references in cultural systems” (Leiss, Kline and Jhally, 1990, p. 214). Leiss and his co-authors developed a

research methodology for advertisements which combined the strengths of qualitative semiotics and quantitative content analysis. Their combined research formula is sensitive to the multi-layered levels of meaning in visual texts but at the same time provides for the systematic rigours of quantitative analysis.

Leiss, Kline and Jhally (1990) also incorporate the notion of a cultural frame into their research. They argue that “a cultural frame is the predominant set of images, values, and forms of communication in a particular period that arises out of the interplay between marketing and advertising strategies, the mass media, and popular culture” (p. 62). This notion is important with regard to the primary object of examination in this chapter – the ‘cultural frame’ of a selection of travel photos on Facebook.

Barthes developed the related concept of ‘anchorage’, where the caption under a photograph provides crucial information for understanding the intended meaning. In the case of captions, the words “fix the floating chain of signifieds” (O’Sullivan et al., 1994, p. 13) and thus effectively anchor the preferred reading of a text by serving to eliminate other possible readings.

While semiotics is a valuable methodology for undertaking a close analysis of a particular text (such as a particular shot in a television program, an advertisement or a photograph), content analysis is able to perform analysis over a larger sample and thus detect similarities, differences and possible trends. When semiotics meets content analysis, we can interpret key features of a text and also measure the frequency of the specific phenomenon under investigation. These combined research tools (qualitative and quantitative) will be applied to the data examined in this chapter as they provide a rich base from which to undertake a close and thorough analysis of the travel images posted on Facebook.

*Figure 1. An example of a 'Type one' photograph. Close shot of human subject/s sometimes with landscape or landmark*



## ISSUES AND ANALYSIS

In examining the types of photographs that were displayed in the albums, two main types of photograph were identified.

- A 'Type one' photograph includes human subjects such as the individual, family, friends, other tourists, or a combination of these. The human subject/s might be photographed with a close shot or a long shot. These images sometimes might include a landmark or landscape in the background (Figures 1 and 2).
- A 'Type two' photograph is what might be referred to as traditional 'tourist photograph' – visual representations of landscape, landmarks or other images such as streetscapes revealing aspects of the destination (Figures 3 and 4). These images do not include human subjects at all.

The following analysis focuses on the travel photographs generated by 10 individuals (five male and five female) from the Facebook community. The Facebook members that comprise this snapshot sample are people that I know and have befriended. The selection was made by selecting from my friends (approximately 250 when the selection was made) those who had posted the most travel albums on their site. For the purposes of protecting the identity of the individuals, the females are identified (from youngest to oldest) as F1, F2, F3, F4 and F5, while the males – M1, M2, M3, M4 and M5 – are also re-named in order of age. For a summary of the 10 individuals examined, refer Table 1 below. The snapshot begins with a discussion of the females, then moves on to examining the males.



*Figure 2. Another example of a 'Type one' photograph. Long shot of human subject/s sometimes with landscape or landmark*



*Figure 3. An example of a 'Type two' photograph. Image of landscape with no human subject*



Figure 4. Another example of a 'Type two' photograph. Image of landmark with no human subject



## THE FIVE FEMALE FACEBOOK MEMBERS

### Female 1 (F1)

F1 is 23 years of age, has 187 friends and has posted 10 photo albums on her Facebook site. Of the 10 photo albums, five are of destinations she has visited and were posted on Facebook in late 2007. The countries visited were: Italy, Greece, Spain, Germany and the United States, and these albums contain a total of 73 photographs. The album of photographs taken in Italy contains 21 photographs. Greece exhibits 17 photographs, while Spain and Germany contain 16 and 11 images respectively. The single destination in the United States displayed on the site is Las Vegas which contains 8 photos.

The majority of photographs in F1's albums are of people and in most cases, of herself often with other females. Of the 73 photographs in the five albums, 56 images or 77% fall into this

category. The remaining images presented are what might be referred to as traditional 'tourist' photographs—visual representations of landscape, landmarks or other images such as streetscapes revealing aspects of the destination (type two photos). The food and drink consumed at the various locations are also displayed in F1's travel albums. Such images included pasta consumed in Italy, glasses of Amaretto in Greece, and Paella and Churros in Spain.

Six of the 73 photographs in the albums attracted comments from four of F1's Facebook friends. All of the photographs which attracted comments included human subjects as opposed to images of landmark or landscape devoid of human subjects. The comments were generally of a positive nature. One friend commented that they had sat on the very same beach chair at the same beach – Black Beach in Santorini. The photograph portrays F1 lying on a deck chair while eating a bagel with one hand. F1 is positioned in the centre of the photo and at the base of it. She

*Table 1. Summary of the 10 Facebook Members.*

Facebook member	Age	Number of friends	Number of travel albums	Number of photos	Photos with human subjects	Photos of landscape/ landmark and surrounds	Number of comments on photos
F1	23	187	5	73	56	17	6
F2	28	141	5	143	110	33	18
F3	30	159	5	107	47	60	2
F4	33	145	4	177	23	154	2
F5	53	30	2	41	14	27	4
M1	22	562	1	47	34	13	2
M2	27	310	4	214	188	26	14
M3	29	206	2	89	49	50	0
M4	32	193	10	204	0	204	2
M5	40	186	4	56	37	19	14

is dressed in bathers, shorts, sunglasses and a hat. The beach scene includes 10 large umbrellas carefully positioned around F1, while the water and other tourists can be seen on one side of the image. The further information that has been added to this photo (by virtue of her friend's comment) provides further meaning to the visual image. The underlying message is that the world is such a small place that two individual tourists can experience much the same location in similar ways at separate times and places.

## F2

F2 is 28 years of age, has 141 friends and has posted nine photo albums on her Facebook site. Of the nine albums, five are of destinations she has visited since September 2007. The countries visited were: Italy, France, the Netherlands, Mexico and The Solomon Islands. These five albums contain a total of 143 photographs. The album on Italy presents 40 photographs, France displays 39, while the Netherlands, Mexico and The Solomon Islands displays 11, 22 and 31 photos respectively.

Similarly to F1, the majority of photographs in F2's albums are of people and in most cases,

of herself – often with friends and family. Of the 143 photographs in the five albums, 110 images or 76% fall into this category – a surprisingly similar figure to F1's 77%. Type two photographs in the five albums totalled 33 photos. F2's travel albums displayed objects such as food, drink and bicycles as two of the albums presented photographs taken while on cycling tours while in Europe.

Eighteen of the 143 photographs in the albums attracted comments from many of F2's friends. The photograph that received the most comments (four posts) was of the subject and her sisters in a car in Mexico. The comments made by the sisters generally centred around how good/bad each other looked in the particular photograph.

## F3

F3 is 30 years of age, has 159 friends and has posted 17 photo albums on her Facebook site. Of the 17 albums, five are of destinations she has visited since September 2007. The countries visited were: Italy, France, Scotland, Ireland and the United States. All albums are given the name of the city or region visited (rather than the country) – in this case Tuscany, Paris, Edinburgh, Dublin and New York. The five travel albums house a total of



107 photographs. The album on Italy presents 26 photographs, France displays 36, while Scotland, Ireland and the United States present 30, 4 and 11 photos respectively.

Unlike F1 and F2, the photographs taken by F3 include more type two photos. Of the 107 photographs in the five albums, 60 images or 56% are travel photos of scenery such as landmarks or landscape including the Eiffel Tower, Edinburgh Castle and the Statue of Liberty. The remaining 47 photographs in the five albums display human subjects. Thus, 44% of the images show the subject alone, with friends or include images of locals or tourists as part of the photograph.

F3 appears to have tried to capture the essence of the city she has visited and also humorously indulges in the anticipated cliché of the location such as drinking Guinness in Ireland, mimicking the pose of sculptures in Italy, or looking up in awe at the Eiffel Tower when in Paris. Despite the generally good quality of the images taken and the deliberate humour injected into some of the imagery, only one of the 107 photographs in the albums attracted comments from F3's friends. It may be that F3's friends are not particularly interested in her photos or do not feel particularly motivated to comment on them. The photograph which attracted comments shows F3 standing in front of a New York skyline. She is positioned in the bottom right-hand corner of the photograph with the backdrop of the skyline to the left. The image is framed in such a way that the blue sky takes up the top half of the photo, while F3 and the skyline take up the bottom half. Of the two comments posted about this photo, one friend remarked on the attractiveness of the backdrop while the other made mention of a suspected Unidentified Flying Object (UFO) – actually an airship or blimp – in the background.

#### **F4**

F4 is 33 years of age, has 145 friends and has posted eight photo albums on her Facebook site.

Of the eight albums, four are of destinations she has visited since September 2007. The countries visited were: Italy (spread over three albums) and the Czech Republic. The four travel albums house a total of 177 photographs. F4 puts more photos in her albums than the other Facebook users examined and two of these albums hold the maximum number of photos able to be stored in an album – 60. The albums on Italy present 135 photographs, while the Czech Republic album displays 42 images.

Similarly to F3, the photographs taken by F4 mainly represent landscape, landmarks and other images of the destination as opposed to including human subjects. Of the 177 photographs in the four albums, a staggering 154 images or 87% are type two. The remaining 23 photographs (13%) in the four albums display human subjects. Almost all of these subjects are of fellow travellers who happened to find themselves in the photograph because they were simply at the same destination at the same time as opposed to friends or relatives known to F4. As only three of the 177 photographs display F4, one gains the impression that she is a lone traveller. It can also be seen that in two of these photographs (the Trevi Fountain in Rome and eating a gelato at an outdoor café), F4 took a self-portrait. One can only hazard a guess but she may have felt that travel photographs without herself in them might not properly contextualise her album, or that her friends and family might not believe she had actually taken the trip.

Again like F3, despite the excellent quality of the images, only two of the 177 photographs in the albums attracted comments from F4's friends. It may also be the case that younger people are more likely to comment on their friends photos, or even that the nature of these photos (often with human subjects) are such that they generate an increased likelihood that a comment will follow. The two photographs that received comments from two friends were of Cinque Terre in Italy. Both friends remarked on the stunning nature of the landscape and the photographs were composed particularly



well. One image was of a five boats on a marina at sunset; while the other showed the coastline and sea of Cinque Terre in equal proportions to the left and right of the striking image.

## **F5**

The final female Facebook member selected was F5. She is 53 years of age, has 30 friends and has posted four photo albums on her Facebook site. Of the four albums, two are of destinations that F5 has visited since September 2007. The country visited was the United States (with albums covering Colorado, and a visit to the Grand Canyon). The two travel albums house a total of 41 photographs.

In a similar fashion to F3 and F4, the photographs taken by F5 mainly represent landscape, landmarks and other images of the destination as opposed to a focus on human subjects. Of the 41 photographs in the two albums, 27 images or 66% are type two photos. The remaining 14 photographs or 34% in the two albums display human subjects. Seven of the 41 photographs (17%) reveal F5.

Four of the 41 photographs in the albums attracted comments from F5's friends. Three of the photographs that received comments were of the Grand Canyon (F5 labelled that album 'Third Wonder of the World'). Her friends remarked on the incredible nature of the scenery.

## **THE FIVE MALE FACEBOOK MEMBERS**

### **Male 1 (M1)**

M1 is first of the five male Facebook members selected and is 22 years of age. He has a larger than usual amount of friends (562) and has posted two photo albums on his Facebook site. Of the two photo albums, one is of a destination he visited in late 2007 - Egypt. This album contains 47 photo-

graphs. As one might expect from a 22 year-old, the majority of photographs in M1's albums are of himself and other friends and relatives. Of the 47 photographs in the album (which was given the title 'Trip to Egypt'), 34 images or 72% are type one photos. The remaining 13 images in the album (28%) are representations of landscape, landmarks or other photos revealing aspects of the destination with no human subjects displayed.

Two of the 47 photographs in the album attracted comments from two of M1's Facebook friends. Both photographs commented upon were of M1 in front of Egypt's major tourist attraction – the pyramids. In one of the photos M1 was photographed sitting on a horse – an image which one of M1's friends apparently found hilarious. The image is perfectly framed and displays M1 on a horse before three pyramids of descending size from the foreground to the background. In the distance other tourists on horses can be seen. When I asked M1 about the comment made by his friend in relation to this photo, he explained that the friend's expectation was that camel rides were more appropriate for a desert tourism experience.

### **M2**

M2 is 27 years of age, has 310 friends and has posted 14 photo albums on his Facebook site. Of the 14 albums, four are dedicated to a destination he visited in late 2007 – the United States. The four albums contain a total of 214 photographs. Similarly to M1, the vast majority of photographs in M2's four USA albums are of himself, family and friends. Of the 214 photographs, 188 images or 88% fall into this category. Traditional 'tourist' scenes in the four albums such as images of landscape totalled 26 photos (representing just 12%).

Fourteen of the 214 photographs in the four albums attracted comments from three of M2's family and friends. The comments generally revolved around how enjoyable the trip was or

how M2 and his wife looked in particular photographs. While comments such as these may appear somewhat flippant, the all-important affirmations provide crucial anchorage as they reinforce the concept that the experience shared on the holiday was a pleasurable one.

### **M3**

M3 is 29 years of age, has 206 friends and has posted 17 photo albums on his Facebook site. Of the 17 albums, two are of destinations M3 has visited since September 2007. The countries visited were Malaysia and China. The two travel photo albums house a total of 89 photographs. The album on Malaysia presents 29 photographs, while the album on China contains 60 photos.

Unlike M1 and M2, the photographs taken by M3 include more than half of landscape, landmarks and other images of the destination without the inclusion of human subjects. Of the 89 photographs in the two albums, 50 images or 56% are type two photos including the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, the Great Wall of China and the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games stadium colloquially referred to as 'The Birds' Nest'. The remaining 49 photographs in the five albums display human subjects. Thus, 44% of the images show the subject alone or with friends or include images of locals or tourists as part of the photograph. The percentage breakdown of these two categories of photographs is identical to F3 who is just one year older than M3.

Also like F3, M3 tries to capture the essence of the city he has visited and also humorously indulges in the experience. For instance, M3's album on China is given the somewhat postmodern name 'China - Where is the Sky?' (alluding to the air pollution) and in a number of the photos he appears to be looking for the apparently absent sky. Despite the good quality of the photographs and the interesting subject matter, not one of the 89 photographs in the two albums attracted a comment.

### **M4**

M4 is 32 years of age, has 193 friends and has posted 17 photo albums on his Facebook site. Of the 17 albums, 10 are of a destination he has visited since September 2007 – Japan. The 10 albums on Japan house a total of 204 photographs.

Surprisingly, all 204 photographs taken by M4 are of landscape, landmarks and other images of the destination (with many internal locations photographed). Despite the excellent quality and composition of the images, only one of the 204 photographs in the 10 albums attracted comments from M4's friends. The photograph that received comments from two friends was of a seagull swooping down to eat a potato chip while in mid flight. One friend commented, "Nice picture! I hope I can put it in my painting someday", while another said, "You feed the seagull using your left hand, while taking this picture with your right hand? Stunning!" The reply to this second comment from M4 was simply but humorously, "Oh, that's not my hand..." (with a smiley face emoticon). The comments focus on how the image was constructed and both M4 and the friends share in a dialogue about the creation of his craft.

### **M5**

Finally, M5 is 40 years of age, has 186 friends and has posted four photo albums on his Facebook site. All four albums are of destinations he has visited since September 2007. The countries visited were: Canada, France, Italy and Hong Kong. The four travel albums house a total of 56 photographs. The majority of photographs in M5's albums are of himself and other family members. Of the 56 photographs in the albums, 37 images or 66% include people. The remaining 19 images in the album (34%) are type two photos.

Fourteen of the 56 photographs attracted comments from 10 of M5's friends. The photograph that received the most comments was of a hamburger and a bowl of hot chips smothered

in tomato sauce. The photo caption by M5 was, “Typical morning after the night before French Canadian breakfast”. In this comment M5 is both making a statement about the partying that took place the night before, while expanding upon the culturally appropriate way to recover the next morning. The message provides a glimpse into the travel experience undertaken by M5 and also provides something of a culinary lesson for those not familiar with a ‘typical’ French Canadian breakfast.

## **SUMMARY ANALYSIS OF THE 10 FACEBOOK MEMBERS**

Having examined the 10 Facebook members, some concluding comments on the analysis are also warranted. While it is obviously extremely difficult to gauge how influential the travel photos of one are on the travel plans of another, it would appear that F2, M2 and M5 (with 18, 14 and 14 comments respectively) certainly generated interest from friends as a result of the photos posted.

Members F1 to F5 ranged from 23 to 53 years of age, with the average age being 33 years. M1 to M5 ranged from 22 to 40 years, with an average age of 30 years. Thus, the male sample was slightly younger than the females examined. Along with being slightly younger, the males also had significantly more friends. The total number of friends for M1 to M5 was 1457, with an average of 291 friends each. For F1 to F5 the total number of friends was 662, thus averaging 132 friends each.

Surprisingly, both sample sets displayed 21 albums amongst the group, with an average of 4.2 albums per person. It should be pointed out however that the data for the males was significantly influenced by the large number of travel albums (10) that M4 displayed on his Facebook site. The average number of travel photographs in these albums was also relatively similar across the two sample sets. While the females displayed

a total of 541 photos (averaging 108 each), the males displayed a total of 610 photos – a slightly higher average of 122 each. Amongst the group of five males the data was more varied as M2 and M4 had a total of 214 and 204 travel photos respectively.

Both sample groups also took more photos collectively of type two photographs (images of landscape, landmark and surrounds) as opposed to type one photos. Collectively, the females displayed 291 type two photos, while the males displayed 312. The females displayed 250 type one images (with human subjects), while the males collectively presented 308 of this type of photo. As explained in the above analysis dealing with each Facebook member, F2 displayed 110 type one photos and only 33 type two photos. Her photos also attracted the most number of comments from friends. The male Facebook member who attracted the most comments on photos was M2, and like F2, the majority of his photos (188) displayed human subjects. While this sample size is far too small to draw any substantial conclusions, it would appear that type one images with human subjects (often known to the viewer of the photograph) are more likely to attract a comment from a friend as opposed to images devoid of human subjects. Humans ultimately need to communicate with other humans, and social networking sites such as Facebook trade on this basic human need.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The significance and potential motivator of this form of promotion cannot be overlooked when it comes to visual Travel Recommender Systems (TRS) or Destination Recommendation Systems (DRS) – a topic which although commands a “high level of interest” from both the academic and commercial sectors remains “rather young” (Stock, Werthner and Zancanaro, 2006, p. 297).

This study seeks to examine just one of the ways in which some travel photographs might be analysed and further extend the body of literature in this area. This chapter also aims to commence a dialogue about the types of images people choose to post on the Internet, and how these images may begin to possibly influence others. How these visual images work to reinforce the memory of the travel experience for the photographer might be explored in further studies. Future studies in Tourism Informatics and the visual culture of Tourism might examine the images generated in the world of Facebook or other social networks on a much larger and more in-depth scale. This study seeks to open the door to that further research by shedding some light on possible forms of analysis.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter reflected on social aspects of Tourism Informatics with specific reference to the travel photographs posted on Facebook of 10 people over a one year period. The analysis provided a microscopic glimpse into the types of travel photographs that individuals post and how these images might be received and perceived by other Facebook users.

F2 and M2 (with 18 and 14 comments on their photos respectively) generated the most interest from friends as a result of the photos posted. F2 (who is 28 years of age) had 143 photographs in her five albums. A staggering 76% of these photos included human subjects. It is not surprisingly then that F2's photos also generated more comments than the others in the sample set. Of M2's 214 photographs, 188 images (an even more staggering 88%) included human subjects. M2 is 27 years of age. Comments such as these provide crucial anchorage as they reinforce the concept that the experience shared on the holiday was a pleasurable one, and thus are more likely to influence the viewer of the photograph. This small study also found that younger people generally

take more photographs with human subjects while older people take a higher percentage of photos of scenery and landscape.

As outlined, this sample is clearly not representative of all (or possibly even some) Facebook users. However, it seems clear that the images and words projected may have played a role in the way a particular destination is perceived by others. New impressions of a destination may have been gained by those who viewed the photographs. These perceptions will obviously vary depending on whether or not the viewer of the photograph has also travelled to that destination.

Images communicated via social media play a part in the overall promotional package that can work to either reinforce or revise the travel experiences of the viewer. In the highly democratised world of the Internet, one person's travel snapshots can very easily become part of another person's travel plans. As 500 million photos are uploaded to this most popular social networking site each month, the significance of one's Facebook travel photos as a form of TRS should not be underestimated.

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