Spring 4-28-2023

Tourism Marketing to Southeast Asian Countries via Social Media and its Ethical Implications

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COMM 460

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04/23/23

Introduction

The influence of digital media on the tourism marketing industry has grown substantially since the creation of popular social media platforms like FaceBook, Instagram, and YouTube. What could once be done only through magazines, paper brochures, and other analog methods, tactics used to market destinations have changed drastically and continue to do so as the market becomes more saturated with content. The exchange of information and creation of community on these social media sites– whether it be through images, videos, or text– has been found to have substantial power in marketing to and influencing users. This study will examine the role that social media plays in the creation of an image of a place as a tourist destination. It will analyze Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines, and will determine if their country's tourism marketing done via Instagram is ethical in its advertisement of a place and its people.

Literature Review

The marketing of tourist destinations and the rhetoric used in the advertisements of these places has been frequently studied and discussed, yet there is a gap in research when it comes to how this rhetoric is distributed via social media platforms. Though most social media allows for some form of visual and written text as a part of their posts, each platform has different goals, different audiences, and ultimately different tactics they use in order to influence, inform, or advertise users. Social media, which is defined as "a group of Internet based applications… that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61 as cited in Arora, et al., 2019, p. 477) is unique in its ability to allow for widespread communication while still fostering a sense of community.

Though relatively new, social media has emerged as a valuable tool to aid in marketing and advertising for several reasons. Research has shown that consumers often trust more

information from social media in regards to the advertisement of goods and services as compared to traditional advertising methods that are not done through social media (Foux, 2006 as cited in Arora, et al., 2019, p. 493). This is likely due to the relationships that users form with one another online; there is a personal aspect to being a part of an application and community within that app that encourages sharing photos and videos of your life. Even when a brand steps into the picture and creates an account that is not nearly as personal, users can still interact with these accounts in ways that create a much more personal connection between brand and consumer (Alfian & Nilowardono, 2019, p. 224). Users can "like" posts, leave comments, and share posts to their personal stories, which are all methods of interaction that are not possible on a brand's website or through other traditional advertising methods.

Tourism as a product to be consumed is a fairly ambiguous one, as the "nature of the tourism product is an experience of a place (location and people) at a particular time" (Wheeler, 1995, p. 39). It may seem obvious that tourism itself is not a clear cut item to be sold and consumed, as it is an experience that looks different for everyone– host and tourist alike. Several factors make up the tourism experience, and purchases do not all come from just one company; transportation, accommodation, and other materials are likely to come from multiple different places. However, Wheeler (1995) argues in her research that what is being advertised to consumers in tourism marketing is a performance of a place, and that the written and visual rhetoric used in the promotion of the place for tourism is done in a way to "make their facilities look "better", more attractive, or more interesting than those of their competitors" (Wheeler, 1995, p. 43).

In the effort to create a marketable image of a place as a tourist destination, destination marketing often "acts representationally for people and place[s]" (Campelo, et al., 2011, p. 1).

This can lead to several possible negative effects for both the host and the tourist. Tourism marketing materials can often lead tourists to believe they are being educated on a certain place and its people, culture, and history; however, research has shown that these materials often portray only images of clean, sunny, uncrowded locations that are occupied by happy natives, and never depict anyone who is "hungry, homeless, or resentful" (Wheeler, 1995, p. 43). This portrayal of the most ideal possible conditions in a certain place is done in order to appeal to as many people as possible, yet is problematic because there is a chance that it will create a false image in the eye of the consumer, who may feel lied to or disappointed upon a different experience than what was advertised to them. This image can also be harmful to the place itself and the people who live, work, and exist within it. Though Wheeler's (1995) research is in regards to physical paper brochures which were used in tourism advertising before digital marketing rose as an effective method, her research still gives context to the way that social media is used in tourism marketing today. Because of these frequent observations, I can further hypothesize that similar themes will be observed in social media marketing of tourism destinations.

Because of the impact that tourism has been found to have on host communities– economically, environmentally, and socially– the topic of ethics has been introduced in tourism at an international level as early as 1999 with the development of the United Nations World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) *Global Code of Ethics for Tourism* (Fennell & Malloy, 2007, p. 33). With the guide of existing literature on ethics in marketing and ethics in tourism, the definition of ethical tourism was developed as *an awareness of one's place as a visitor in a host's community, economy, and environment, and the responsibility of the tourist to cause no harm to these existing ecosystems.* The visual rhetoric being used as a part of tourism marketing materials

has the power to create ideas, awareness, and spread knowledge to consumers about a certain place and people, so it is necessary that the rhetoric is ethical and truthful, as it has the power to shape and enhance "our understanding of the world, the identities of people and places" (Schroeder & Borgerson 2005, p. 578 as cited in Campelo, et al., 2011, p. 2).

Research Question / Hypothesis

With the aid of this existing literature I created three research questions, which are as follows:

RQ1: What images of Southeast Asian countries are being portrayed to the consumer through their country's social media marketing materials?

RQ2: How is this being accomplished?

RQ3: Is it being done so in a way which is ethical to both the environment and the host communities?

This is an important topic to explore as there is minimal existing research on the topic of social media and its relationship with the marketing of destinations. As social media continues to expand its reach as a marketing tool and the tourism marketing industry continues to grow, it is to be expected that the two will continue to overlap. In a subject so closely bound to ethics, as the advertisement of a place and people often is, I believe it necessary to examine how social media is being used to do this, as well as determine if it is being done so ethically. In response to existing research on tourism marketing, I hypothesized that there will be a notable relationship between the visual and written rhetoric used in the creation of an image of Southeast Asian countries on social media. In addition to this, because of Wheeler's (1995) research which examines the portrayal of conditions used in the marketing of tourism destinations, I can assume that the country's official tourism accounts will use this rhetoric on social media to glorify the

image of their country as a tourist destination, and that they will make no note of the ethical implications of tourism on a host community or environment.

Methods

After the creation of my research questions, I began to search for countries apart of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that had some of the most popular and recent Instagram pages, of which I chose three to perform a qualitative content analysis on. As the data being collected were examples of visual and written rhetoric, it was determined that a qualitative content analysis would be the most effective method to reveal the existence of common themes and images present across the chosen social media accounts by taking into account the most frequent phrases, words, and visuals used in the selected posts.

The selection of Thailand (@tourismthailand), Vietnam (@vietnamtourismboard), and the Philippines (@tourism_phl) as my sample group was done so as each account has over 100,000 followers, a verification from Instagram which establishes them as the official tourism page for each country, and posts anywhere from four months to 24 hours from the time of analysis. A codebook for both open codes and axial codes was created to guide my content analysis; this was done in table format with three separate columns labeled as follows: Code, Description, Example (see Appendix A). Then, each row was filled with common phrases or visuals that appeared, followed by its description and a further example.

The most recent nine posts from each account were chosen and each post was given an open code for both the visual content and the accompanying copy. After this first round of coding, I open coded specifically for my first research question to define anything relating to the general image presented of each country in the chosen posts, taking into account both the visual and the accompanying text. For the second research question, I coded first to find commonalities

in the posts' verbiage, and next to find them in the visual content present in the posts. Finally, for my third research question I open coded both the text and the visual of each post to determine if any mention of ethical tourism was present. In order to determine whether or not a post was considered "ethical," I analyzed which words and phrases were used in attachment to the photo or video that was posted. If the post or its copy contained any mention of anything in regards to respect towards the advertised environment or host community or the role of the tourist as a visitor in these advertised places, the post was determined to be "ethical." If the post did not contain this, it was determined to be "unethical." This was then added to my codebook in a section for ethical posts versus unethical posts.

After open coding for each research question, I was left with multiple emerging themes. A round of axial coding was then performed to categorize the groups of open codes and begin to narrow down what exactly the image that is being created and advertised of these three countries by their Instagram pages, and determine whether it was key words used in the copy, key images in the visuals, or a combination of the both used to contribute to and market this image, and whether or not it was an image that aligned with one of ethical tourism. Once these categories were determined, I interpreted the way that each category interacted with the other across the twenty seven selected posts in order to answer my research questions.

Findings

After performing a qualitative content analysis through open and axial coding of the selected twenty seven Instagram posts, one dominant theme emerged for each research question.

RQ1: Idealized overall image

RQ2a: Use of compelling verbiage

RQ2b: Use of desirable visual content

RQ3: No mention of ethical tourism

Each post was categorized accordingly, and these results explain what exactly the overall image of each country as a tourist destination is on Instagram as well as what tactics are being used in order to create this image. Any theme that was determined present more than 50% of the time will be defined as a dominant theme; the frequency of these tactics being employed more than half the time across these pages shows them to be significant, and likely effective in their advertisement of each country. The advertisement of ethical tourism was not found to be a dominant theme across the three Instagram pages.

Idealized overall image – RQ1

Of the 27 analyzed posts, 100% fit into one of these categories, with 29% of posts falling under the category of peaceful due to the post presenting its country as a place to relax and unwind. For the category of "must-see," which was defined as the post portraying its country as a place that is unique and has things that must be tried or viewed by the visitor, 18% of posts fell under this. These posts were determined as those which contained phrases like "is what you need," "a must-see," and "come experience." Finally, 62% of posts fit into the category of wild, due to visuals of forests, oceans, outdoor activities and the post presenting its country as a wild place to adventure or explore. These posts were determined through visuals as well as copy that contained phrases such as, "discover," "journey," and "explore." Though the majority of posts fell under the wild category, it is important to note that several posts fell under more than one category. These three recurring themes were merged into one theme of an idealized overall image, which is defined as the post presenting its country as an idealized and glorified portrayal of the place for the tourists' benefit. One hundred percent of posts were found to be portraying an

idealized overall image of each country as a tourist destination, and this was therefore considered a dominant theme due to its frequency.

Compelling verbiage – RQ2a

In order to determine the tactics used on social media to create this image, open coding was completed on the verbiage used in the posts' copy; the open codes that emerged from this analysis were stimulating and tranquil. One hundred percent of the 27 posts fit into one or both of these categories, with 67% containing stimulating verbiage, which was defined as the majority of the verbs present in the copy motivate the consumer to visit their country in order to experience an adventure or unique event. Posts that contained words and phrases like "trekking," "experience exciting adventures," and "gems will lure you" were put into this category. Contrarily, 33% of the posts contained tranquil verbiage, which was defined as the majority of the verbs present in the copy motivate the consumer to visit in order to relax, unwind, and find a sense of peace in their respective country. Words like "relaxation," "retreat," and "therapeutic" fell into this category. These two recurring themes were then axially coded to convey powerful and compelling verbiage, of which 100% of the 27 posts were found to have.

Desirable visual content – RQ2b

Finally, the open codes that emerged during an analysis of the visual content being posted to each Instagram page were nature (77%), urban (.07%), activity (11%), food (18%), color (100%), and high quality image or video (100%) (see Appendix A). The three most dominant themes that emerged were visuals that included nature, color, and high quality visuals. However, multiple posts included more than one, and all of these open codes together were categorized into an axial code of desirable visual content. The one thing that emerged from all six open codes was

the use of color, high quality, and what can be described as standardly beautiful visuals used with the intention of creating desirable images.

Ethical or unethical? – RQ3

In regards to the acknowledgement of ethical tourism throughout the twenty seven posts, only one post was found to mention and encourage awareness towards the host environment. This was done by Thailand's Instagram account, "@tourismthailand: Maya Bay is a… gem of the Andaman Sea. Thread [sic] carefully during your visit. This is an oasis for sea animals and coral reef ecosystems." Though short, the caption does raise awareness to the fact that the natural location they are promoting visitation to on their social media is an area with an abundance of animals and other flourishing natural ecosystems. It also warns visitors to act with respect while there. Although 77% of the Instagram posts contain at least one visual of nature, only .03% of posts contain any information regarding conservation efforts or awareness towards the nature being advertised.

Discussion

The most dominant themes, which were mentioned or surveyed more than 50% of the time in either the copy or visual of each selected Instagram post, emerged as an idealized generalized image of each country, compelling verbiage used in the post copy, and desirable visuals used in the post content. These findings can be interpreted in a myriad of ways, but ultimately do answer my first two research questions: What image of these countries is being portrayed to the consumer through their country's social media marketing materials, and how it is being done. Additionally, it was determined by examining the number of posts that included mentions of ethical tourism– any acknowledgement of the tourist's responsibilities as a visitor to

these advertised areas– that there is very little discussion pertaining to ethical tourism present on the official tourism Instagram accounts of Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines.

RQ1 – The image of Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines that is being portrayed through social media marketing materials on Instagram

Through open coding I discovered three main ways that these countries presented themselves– as a place to adventure and explore, a place to relax and unwind, and a place that was unique and had events or areas that needed to be seen or experienced by visitors. This was done by posting photographs of people standing under towering waterfalls, wakeboarders flying across a lake, and beautiful and empty white sand beaches, as well as through using phrases like "what you need" and "must-see." These collected themes can further be interpreted to establish that the overall image being advertised of Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines through their Instagram accounts is that of a glorified, picturesque, and exceptional destination. As discussed in *Visual Rhetoric and Ethics in Marketing of Destinations,* the marketing of a tourist destination often "acts representationally for people and place" (Campelo, et al., 2011, p. 1); based on this claim, we can determine that these Instagram pages act representationally for the host zone's people and places. Based on my own study and pre-existing literature on the topic, it can be determined that the creation of this representational and glamorized image is being used to market the country to consumers as an ideal tourist destination because it will bring the highest amount of traffic, and help them reach their objective of influencing tourists to travel to their countries.

RQ2a + RQ2b – How this image is being created

Now that it is clear what exactly is being used in order to create this image of a country– a combination of the text and visual content that Instagram allows for– we can further interpret

this collected data to understand *how* it is being used. As opposed to other social media platforms which use primarily text to share information, Instagram is unique in that it is relatively "visually-centric" (Li, et al., 2019) and allows for a way to share content that is twofold. A huge advantage of this is the ability to appeal to much larger audiences than if only text was involved. As discussed in pre-existing literature, social media fosters community; the accessibility that is achieved by using visual rhetoric alongside written text gives this platform the chance to broaden its reach to a larger group of consumers. One user does not have to speak or understand the same language as the next to see a beautiful photograph of a sunset, a blue verification check mark next to Vietnam, Thailand, or the Philippines' username, and understand the point that is being made: come visit our country, and you can experience this too.

I discovered that 100% of the 27 analyzed captions contained verbs that motivated the reader to take action or proposed a possible action that they could be taking if they were visiting the country; some of the most popular were "adventure," "relax," and "experience." The use of compelling verbs in the post's copy were used to motivate the user to do *something*– whether that be visiting their country to relax, adventure, or just to experience something new.

It was then discovered in my analysis that the two attributes noted in 100% of the 27 analyzed posts were color and high quality visuals. If we are to refer back to prior research on the topic of social media marketing, some studies propose that "when images on social network sites are of high quality, they are more likely to produce positive affective experiences for members (Colliander and Marder, 2018; Jeong *et al.*, 2009 as cited in Li, et al., 2019). We can assume that the depictions of nature, urban settings, and other unique opportunities in these countries through colorful and high quality visuals work to establish a feeling of desire in the viewers. If we assume that users are more likely to interact with content that they find visually

desirable, we can further assume that these types of images are effective in marketing their respective countries as tourist destinations because they are visually desirable.

RQ3– Ethical or unethical?

With this in mind, it is important to note that with the exception of one post, there were no collected visuals or copy that aligned with the presented definition of ethical tourism. I can determine that there is a lack of reporting on any of these concerns on these official tourism accounts because these types of visuals and copy would not fit in with the dominant themes of every other post. Discussing these matters does not glorify or create such a picturesque image of these zones as a spot for tourists to flock to, and this would be going against the objective of their social media accounts, which is to make their countries seem as appealing as possible as a tourist destination. Even in the one post that brought up practicing ethical tourism in its caption ("@tourismthailand: Maya Bay… is a gem of the Andaman Sea. Thread [sic] carefully during your visit. This is an oasis for sea animals and coral reef ecosystems"), the visual attached was a high quality photograph of luscious green cliffs and bright blue water. While the copy mentioned taking caution and showing respect for the natural ecosystem, which does not fit in with any of the three dominant themes discovered across the content but *does* fit the definition of ethical tourism, the visual still falls under "nature," "color," "high quality," and fits perfectly into the dominant theme of a desirable visual image.

Conclusion

Social media is being used as an effective distributor of marketing materials which provide positive and powerful visual and written rhetoric in order to market these three Southeast Asian countries as the ideal tourist destination. Instagram specifically is effective in its utilization of both visual content and written copy to create a post, and the official tourism Instagram

accounts for Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines all use both aspects of this to their advantage. In the creation of an overall idealized representation of their countries as tourist destinations, this image is being driven home by powerful and compelling social media captions and visuals. It can be concluded that while one post out of twenty seven selected did acknowledge a portion of ethical tourism, it does not entirely fit into the dominant themes displayed in every other post, and thus disputes the ideal image being created on social media of these places as tourist destinations. *Limitations*

There were several limitations discovered during my study, the most significant of which was the selected sample size for my content analysis. Despite each official tourism account comprising over 1,000 posts each, only the nine most recent posts were selected for analysis; it is unlikely that only these posts is a large enough sample size to come to such a conclusion. However, I do believe that this same conclusion would still be reflected if further research was completed and more posts were analyzed. Another limitation is the possible subjectivity of some of the aforementioned claims, like which images are desirable or what verbiage is motivating. This could be addressed with a survey that includes questions such as "Which of these images would you describe as "desirable"?" and a collection of the data for a quantitative data analysis in order to prove the assumption that these types of photos are in fact interpreted as desirable. Further research could be done in regards to the social media marketing materials of other countries that are a part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and whether or not these materials achieve the same purpose as those discussed in this study.

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Appendix A

RQ #1 Open Codes:

Code	Description	Example
Wild	The post presents its country as a wild and unexplored place to adventure or explore	"@vietnamtourismboard: "...its mountain views, hidden corners and seasonal variations offer plenty of surprises for travelers who want something different." - Three photos of huge mountains, lakes, and winding roads through green trees. "@tourismthailand: An unexpected gift while trekking into the unknown, perhaps?" - Photo of large waterfall
Peaceful	The post presents its country as a place to relax and unwind	"@tourism_phl:…can find relaxation and retreat from their weekday schedule with diverse activities…" - Five photos of food and landscapes
A "must see"	The post presents its country as a place that is unique and has things that must be tried or seen by visitors	"@tourismthailand: The best way to get the best view of this enormous Buddha image, the new must-see at…" - Photo of large Buddha statue taken from boat in a canal; another small boat a few feet ahead of them in the water.

RQ #1 Axial Codes:

Axial Code	Description	Example
Idealized	The post presents its country as an idealized portrayal of the place for tourists	

RQ #2a Social Media Copy Open Codes:

Code	Description	Example
Verbiage		
Stimulating	Majority of the verbs present in the copy are stimulating and motivate the consumer to visit to experience an adventure or event	"@tourism_phl: Experience exciting adventures one can find south of the Philippine islands - CARAGA region. Its gems will simply lure you to frolic with its pristine beauty." "@vietnamtourismboard: Come from January to August, for days that are sunny, dry and ready for adventure." "@tourismthailand: An unexpected gift while trekking into the unknown, perhaps?"
Tranquil	Majority of the verbs present in the copy are tranquil and motivate the consumer to visit to experience a sense of peace and relaxation	"@tourism_phl: Tourists in the metro or even in the nearby provinces of CALABARZON can find relaxation and retreat from their weekday schedule." "@vietnamtourismboard: Nha Trang is one such place, famous in Vietnam for its relaxing, therapeutic mud baths." "@tourismthailand: Can this be your summer dream? @jooobjang, her feet up, at the Hat Wanakon National Park Campsite."

RQ #2a Axial Codes:

Axial Code	Description	Example
Powerful, compelling verbs	The post's copy has multiple compelling and influential verbs present that influence the reader to take action [by traveling to their country].	

RQ #2b Social Media Visual Content Open Codes:

Code	Description	Example
Nature	The content contains image or video of nature	
Urban	The content contains image or video of an urban setting	
Activity	The content contains image or video of an activity being done	
Food	The content contains image or video of food or drink	
Color	The content contains image or video that has bright colors	

RQ #2b Axial Codes:

Axial Code	Description	Example
Desirable visual content	The post's visual content presents its country as a desirable place to visit	

RQ #3 Open Codes:

Code	Description	Example
Ethical tourism	The post mentions anything relating to ethical tourism, which is keeping in mind ecosystems, native people, cultures, history and religions of a specific area while visiting a specific zone.	"@vietnamtourismboard: Slow down and walk amid history in Hanoi. Our capital is also the heart of our culture, where artifacts and architecture coexist with a bustling city. - Temple of Literature: This Confucian landmark is home to ancient statues, including our culture's four animal totems: dragon, unicorn, turtle, and phoenix." "@tourismthailand: Maya Bay… is a gem of the Andaman Sea. Thread [sic] carefully during your visit. This is an oasis for sea animals and coral reef ecosystems."
No ethical tourism	The post does not mention anything relating to ethical tourism.	