

# How Instagram Influences Visual Destination Image – a Case Study of Jordan and Costa Rica

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## Abstract

The Social Web is increasingly taking up the daily time of consumers and is becoming a primary source of impressions about tourism destinations. The recent shift towards more visual content, as evidenced in the fast growing social network Instagram being largely a photo sharing site, means that DMOs need to consider how photos of their destinations can be influencing consumers' destination image. We present our study on how the selection of images from a social media site (Instagram) to promote a destination can be used to influence destination image. As a basis for our study, we have selected the DMO channels of Jordan and Costa Rica in Instagram. Through focus groups and a Likert-scale survey, we draw first conclusions on which types of photos are most effective to positively promote a destination and how the consumers' previous image of a destination could affect this.

**Keywords:** destination image, Visual Web, social media, visual destination image, Instagram, travel photography.

## 1 Introduction

Social Media is changing how consumers see destinations, particularly those they have yet to personally visit. Destination image is significant as a stronger positive destination image makes it more likely that a person will choose to visit that destination (Echtner, 2003; Frías, 2007). DMOs have long concerned themselves with destination image in the belief it can influence consumer behaviour and lead to more and repeated visits to their destination (Chen, 2013; Stepchenkova, 2014). The increased time spent by consumers in Social Media is leading to more of their 'beliefs, ideas and impressions' of destinations being mediated by the posts, images and videos they consume online (Xiang, 2010; Bizirgianni, 2013). Particularly, visual representations are seen as more communicative online than text since "processing pictures requires fewer cognitive resources and they sometimes say much more than words" (Frías, 2007). Driven by a shift to mobile devices and on-the-go consumption, the Visual Web refers to the increasingly image-centred nature of many online Websites and applications, including social networks (Flickr, Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram, not to mention the increased usage of photos in Twitter and Facebook). We term "Visual Destination Image" the image of a destination as formed through exposure to visual media. The "media of representation" plays an important role in destination image (Craik, 1971).

DMOs posting visual content on social networks can achieve greater reach at a much lower budget than traditional marketing and influence consumer behaviour in a more

effective way (Hanan, 2014). Thus it becomes significant to address what sort of visual media DMOs should focus on promoting in association with their destinations to potentially maximise the positive influence on destination image that can be achieved.

The goal of this study is to find out whether the perception of destination changes after seeing the photos and which type of photos can influence positively destination image.

## 2 Study Methodology

Combining what has been reported as working best in the past approaches, we chose a mixed methodology of focus groups, with pre-photo and post-photo Likert scale surveys on destination image as well as encouraging open expression of opinion during the photos to collect additional unstructured data. The surveys and questions focus on 2 different destinations (Jordan and Costa Rica) and for each we rate destination image along a small number of objective and subjective characteristics.

Jordan and Costa Rica are arguably less well known and have likely not been visited by our target group (students at a private university in Central Europe), have active DMOs using Instagram as a marketing channel, and together are quite distinctly different from one another (Jordan can be characterized as a Middle Eastern desert and ancient ruins destination, Costa Rica as a Central American nature and outdoor activities destination). The following cognitive and affective categories are used to measure destination image:

**Table 1.** Cognitive and affective dimensions for each destination image category

Category	Cognitive dimensions	Affective dimensions
Nature	Mountains, coastline, desert, jungle, fauna	Relaxing, adventurous, picturesque
Culture	Architecture, urbanity, cultural heritage (history), religious life, arts & crafts	Mystical, ancient, inspirational
Food & Drink	Fruits, vegetables, meats, seafood, beverages	Tasty, healthy, local speciality

Photos were selected randomly from each DMO account, up to 15 photos which could be placed into one of the categories, resulting in a 90 photo dataset for the tests. Three focus groups were formed, each of seven persons, and each focus group would be tested with the 30 photos of one category. Participants had to not have visited the destinations.

### 3 Results

Circa 62% of study participants were 21-24 yo, and the others were 18-20 yo (14%) or 25-27 yo (24%). There were slightly more females (52%) than males (48%).

We calculated the mean and median values between pre-test and post-test surveys for each category and each destination, where in each category participants were surveyed separately regarding cognitive and affective dimensions. To determine whether significant change has occurred between the pre-test and post-test, we use Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests. The hypothesis sets were identified as follows:

$H_1$  – There is significant difference between the pre-test and post-test in the perception of the *attribute* for the *destination*.

Significant change was detected in the nature category for Jordan with respect to the cognitive attributes of desert and mountains. Focus group unstructured feedback is useful for understanding possible reasons for this, in this case participants were quite surprised to see mountains. Regarding the other attributes, it is interesting to note that participants expressed equally positive feelings about the coast and the fauna, but were not surprised about the presence of this theme in the photos. With regard to Costa Rican nature, significant change was found for the cognitive attribute of jungle and the affective attributes of relaxing and picturesque. The focus group discussion actually showed very positive feeling towards the attribute of fauna, however this seems to have been already so strong in pre-test (already rating 5.0 in the survey) that there was no possibility for a more positive post-test image – we can postulate that the photos reinforcing this existing positive image may have strengthened the positive post-test image of the related attributes.

In the culture category, no significant change was detected for Jordan. For Costa Rica, significant positive change was detected only for the cognitive attribute of arts & crafts. Participants expressed surprise about the presence of photos showing artisanal handicrafts, but generally debated the importance of the cultural attribute for Costa Rica as a destination.

Regarding food and drink, significant change was detected for Jordan in the affective attribute of tasty. The discussion generated by the photos indicated a lack of prior knowledge about Jordanian cuisine and led to debates about the healthiness of the food shown and whether something was a fruit or a vegetable. It seemed that there was a generally positive prior impression of Arabic / Middle Eastern food but that participants had not mentally associated this impression before with the country of Jordan. With respect to Costa Rica, there were no significant changes found.

Since we want in this research to determine which categories appear to be most effective in positively influencing perception towards a destination, we also applied the Wilcoxon test on the computed mean values of the pre-test and post-test in each destination-category. Our hypothesis sets in this case are:

$H_2$  – There is significant difference between the pre-test and post-test in the perception of the *category* for the *destination*.

For Jordan, all categories demonstrate significance in this case, so H1 is accepted for Jordan. For Costa Rica, only the category of nature demonstrates significance, while culture and food & drink did not, hence overall H0 is accepted for Costa Rica. The next question we must ask given the collected and analysed results from our focus groups is principally: why could Jordan achieve an overall more positive destination image among people following their viewing of DMO Instagram photos while Costa Rica did not achieve any significant overall improvement?

#### **4 Discussion and Recommendations**

This research has been concerned with the question of how Instagram photos, a popular DMO marketing instrument at present, could significantly and positively influence destination image, and furthermore which photos appear to be most contributive to these changes. From the focus groups, it could be clearly observed that participants shared some prior destination image for both destinations considered by this work. Even though none of them had yet visited either country, they agreed that they had some stereotype of the country already as a mental image, suggesting the correctness of (Reynolds, 1965) assertion that image is more about what people think it is than the actual characteristics. Participants also tended to draw comparisons with destinations they already knew and clearly supposed must be related to the (personally) unknown destination, e.g. *“Jordan looked a bit like the Mediterranean”*, *“it will show many religious things, because it is somewhere next to Saudi Arabia”*, *“This looks like Greek ruins”*, *“It reminds me of Turkey”*. Image formation for prior destination image also has drawn on associations with their own experiences as well as previous interaction with secondary information sources, e.g. *“Oh I saw this bridge before.... on Discovery or something”*.

The results show that Costa Rica already has a very strong positive prior destination image in nature and food & drink and a significantly lower impression regarding culture. Jordan on the other hand lacks the same high rankings in its categories and whereas culture does rank highest, the distribution of values is much more similar. Already high rankings for attributes in the prior destination image also prevents a significantly higher ranking in the post-test. We consider this relevant when interpreting the variation in change between attributes' ranking.

Another aspect we observed from the selection of photos from the DMOs channels was the tendency to feature principally the aspects of destinations which DMOs already consider positively seen by travellers. This has been previously noted (Urry, 1990) and was also observed by the participants in the focus groups. Jordan heavily features the site of Petra while Costa Rica promotes its jungles and exotic fruit. These seem to already act as “icons” of the destination, even prior to viewing the photos as participants were asked what they would expect:

*(Costa Rica) “It’s full of jungles, so maybe I will see a lot of this”*

Testing the hypothesis that the photos can positively influence the image of the destination's nature, culture or food & drink, we found that for Jordan there was an overall improvement in the participant's destination image, with attributes of nature and food & drink significantly improved. For Costa Rica we rejected the hypothesis

that there was an overall improvement, with only the image of Costa Rica's nature showing a positive change. It is interesting to observe that the respective changes are diametrically opposed: Jordan's strongest pre-test characteristic (culture) experienced the least positive change post-test while its weaker pre-test characteristics (nature, food & drink) observably experienced significant change. On the other hand, Costa Rica's strongest pre-test characteristics (nature, food & drink) maintained strong post-test values (though only nature could be observed as significantly improving, we have acknowledged the more limited opportunity for already high pre-test rankings to significantly improve post-test) whereas the weakest pre-test characteristic (culture) failed to demonstrate positive change.

For DMOs, we believe this shows that an overall tourism marketing strategy should not focus on singular characteristics of the destination because it endangers the effectiveness of future promotion of other characteristics of that destination. Our findings suggest that a well-managed Instagram channel, achieving good reach through the appropriate use of hashtags and re-posting of user provided media, can indeed positively influence destination image in these cases, and should above all be part of a marketing strategy for destinations targeting the under 35 digital natives.

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