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Cyber-physical traveler performances and Instagram travel photography as ideal impression management

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ABSTRACT

While there is significant existing research linking travel photography to self-presentation, it is the effects of 'Instagrammability' that mobilize significant shifts in the motivations and behaviours of tourists. This paper applies Goffman's (1956) notion of impression management unfolding as a performance, with both front- and backstage characteristics. This research finds that the frontstage in this context is identified as the cyber behaviour, while the backstage encapsulates the physical manifestations that occur 'behind the scenes' to 'get the shot'. By employing both content analysis and ethnography, new social norms of using travel images for impression management were identified in which there is a clear motive to match the 'Instagram aesthetic'. A refreshed code of choreographed movements as photographic practices has emerged that did not exist before the popularization of Instagram. Less than 2% of photos analyzed solely feature the landscape, reinforcing the shift to self-presentation strategies as the foremost importance.

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1. Introduction

Traveller performance is a well-researched topic, with self-presentation having been found to be significantly associated with travel photography (Balomenou & Garrod, 2019; Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013; Lo & McKercher, 2015; Lyu, 2016; Smith, 2018). In the past, self-presentation unfolded during face-to-face interaction, which imposed limits on the extent of such practices. However, the introduction of digital photography, followed by smartphones and social media, has significantly altered the boundaries of impression management. 'The presentation of the self' has taken on renewed importance as digital photography has provided people with the ability to control how they are presented visually (Lo & McKercher, 2015). Correspondingly, there has been a shift in personal photography such that photos are used to construct one's idealized identity, which is contrary to past photographic practices as a form of memory documentation (van Dijk, 2008). As such, users will look to ideals perpetuated by sociocultural norms to internally assess the level of manipulation that their travel images require (Lyu, 2016).

When a significant new form of technology arises, there is a resulting trend whereby social norms reorganize around the new technology, which has been true with television, the internet, and now smartphones and social networks (Drushel & German, 2011; Fernandez & Matt, 2019; Manovich, 2002). Anyone who owns a mobile phone with a camera is now a photographer, and more photos are being taken today than ever before (Bonnington, 2011), with an intention to post their photos

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on social networking sites like Instagram, Facebook or WeChat. As we become embedded within cultures of sharing and co-creation, travellers become ever more active agents in the visual production and consumption of destinations (Kang & Schuett, 2013; Leung et al., 2013; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Urry, 1990; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Images portraying destinations and travel experiences shared on social media by one's 'friends' or those whom one 'follows' have the potential to spark the imagination or even inspire new travelling and photo trends (Boley et al., 2018; Hajli et al., 2018; Siegel & Wang, 2019).

As Instagram is the most visual social networking site, it lends itself to self-presentation practices more so than other platforms (Siegel, 2019; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Photographs are much more effective than texts for impression management, as the myth of photographic truth lends credibility that is often missing in the text. Instagram consists primarily of photographs and therefore intensifies the importance of visual self-presentation. However, despite the potential for 'instant' image publication, most Instagram images are not mere 'point and shoot' style photos; rather, they tend to be highly curated (Zappavigna, 2016) and require the equivalent of a photo-shoot carried out in tourist settings.

In his seminal work, 'The Presentation of the Self in Everyday', Goffman (1956) refers to individuals participating in impression management as 'performers', each uses verbal and nonverbal communication to express their identity. Furthermore, Goffman (1956) considers the subject seeking self-presentation strategies as an actor conducting a performance that consists of both frontstage and backstage behaviours. Frontstage behaviour is a performance structured according to the characteristics of those observing the performance. On the other hand, backstage behaviour entails preparations for the frontstage. As social behaviours have significantly shifted online in the last decade, so have elements of the performance that include frontstage and backstage behaviours. Content posted on platforms like Instagram is intended for an online audience and is therefore considered frontstage behaviour, whereas the editing and curation processes facilitated to obtain the posted content can be considered backstage behaviour (Serpa & Ferreira, 2018). The seminal research on travel photography as performance was conducted before the exploding popularity of Instagram (e.g. Edensor, 2008; Haldrup, 2010; Larsen, 2005; Markwell, 1997); therefore, it is crucial to revisit the extant literature to expand on the current role of digital social ecosystems in travel experience, and whether these social ecosystems are fully represented.

The 'Instagram class' refers to a subgroup of millions of young people in many countries that closely follow the platform's visually sophisticated style in a way that presents an attractive lifestyle to one's followers (Caldeira et al., 2020; Manovich, 2017). To this end, this paper will explore the online, or cyber, behaviour of travellers within the 'Instagram class', and the physical, onsite manifestations of this behaviour as it unfolds 'behind the scenes.' Specifically, the objectives of the study are twofold: (1) to examine the relationship of the cyber-physical environments in the evolving photographic performances of travellers; and (2) to investigate the progressions of self-presentation through travel images on contemporary social media. This study addresses the calls for more research in this area, including calls for empirical evidence (Caldeira et al., 2020) involving the performative aspects of a user's impression management (Edensor, 2000; Lo & McKercher, 2015) in varying settings and contexts (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016; Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Smith, 2019). This research will thus contribute to advancing Goffman's (1956) theory in tourism literature by explicating the intricacy of travellers' frontstage and backstage performances across cyber-physical travel ecosystems through Instagram photography. Furthering research on the concept of 'circle of representation' in tourism (Jenkins, 2003), this study also elucidates the phenomenon of 'circle of self-representation' in Instagram – led travel experiences.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Physical traveller photographic performances and the 'circle of representation'

Like that of any other entity, the meaning of a photograph is shaped to a certain extent by predetermined norms and collective imagery (Urry, 2002). Those who are visitors to a location in part

produce that place through their performances. Places are not seen as authentic entities with clear boundaries that are merely there waiting to be visited, but rather are intertwined with people through various systems that generate and reproduce performances in and of that place (Bærenholdt et al., 2004).

The mass media creates the social need for visual consumption of foreign places through photography. Personal photographs provide proof that the tourist has indeed visited the destination (and perhaps done certain things while they are there) when vacation stories are later recounted (McCabe & Stokoe, 2010). While at a destination, tourists construct photographic images as compositions of the most salient destination attributes, and this practice is widespread on visual travel accounts (Day et al., 2002; Pearce & Wang, 2019). Therefore, the tourist gaze is a socially constructed desire for the difference of places and forms of life, which guides what tourists see and frame while travelling (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Larsen & Urry, 2011).

This view of tourism practices as a circle of representation has been supported by quite a few studies: Haldrup and Larsen (2012) studied a circle of tourist photographs as a ritual of 'quotation', and they observed that tourists tend to produce a picture of idyllic, rural landscapes devoid of human interference. Stylianou-Lambert (2012) identified idiosyncratic photographic behaviours in photogenic destinations, including the likelihood for travellers to seek out the popular vantage points for photo-taking opportunities, avoiding the inclusion of other travellers in one's tourist photos and exaggerating remoteness of landscape. Albers and James (1983) suggest how picture postcards set up the expectations of frames of what will be seen and that the visited sites are measured against the prior expectations set up through their depictions. Garrod (2009) compared photos taken by visitors to commercially produced postcards and found that visitors mimic the circle of the destination image.

These studies were conducted based on tangible travel images, like postcards and physical photographs. In more recent years, smartphones have enabled new self-performances whereby people represent their own narratives in new ways and act to mediate new visual social conventions to reflect idealized impression management (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013; Lo & McKercher, 2015; Lüders et al., 2010; Lyu, 2016).

Self-presentation strategies may be engaged by performers as a way of constructing a self-image that pleases the audience (Bortree, 2005). Goffman (1956) expounds that performance takes place whenever there are social elements involved and the ideal self is seen as a 'socially desirable' image. As a conscious act, performance is carried out with a sense of 'calculative intentionality' (Edensor, 2000). Performance is directed by predetermined scripts, stage directors and managers, props, settings and social roles.

Extant literature describes tourist photography as a performance of tourism (Edensor, 2000; Haldrup & Larsen, 2009; Larsen, 2008) and of the self (Belk & Yeh, 2011; Urry & Larsen, 2011). The audience's expectations play an essential role in the formation of 'idealization', and a performer deduces what the audience expects based on social clues and cues along with previously viewed performances. The use of the concept of performance as an analytical lens to see our social life as fundamentally staged has become widespread in the study of tourism, and other terminology borrowed from the theatre, such as 'actor', 'stage' and 'choreography', is commonly used to describe the activity of the tourist (Edensor, 2000). Tourists spend significant time striking poses that will align with their self-image and indicate, according to Stylianou-Lambert (2012, p. 1818), 'how they want to be seen, with whom, and what they are proud to have seen'.

2.1.1. Front- and backstage behaviour

As elucidated in the Introduction, an actor engaging in touristic performance is called an actor, conducting a performance on stage; a stage which consists of both a front- and backstage. The front-stage performance is highly calculated and structured in advance according to the characteristics of the intended audience. Frontstage behaviour reflects behavioural expectations shaped by cultural norms and a learned social script. The backstage behaviour is where the preparations for the

frontstage unfold and will therefore be 'messier' and a place where one's 'true self' will be exhibited (Cole, 2019). The backstage area can store ceremonial equipment, such as different types of clothes, so that the audience will not be able to see them. Furthermore, costumes and other personal kits may be adjusted and scrutinized before the frontstage performance (Goffman, 1956). The two areas have a symbiotic relationship in that the activities engaged in the backstage allow the performers to maintain appropriate behaviours during the frontstage performance.

In the context of travel photography for self-presentation online, travellers-as-performers engage in preparations backstage that can include physical staging acts like personal grooming and editing (e.g. applying filters to photos), which ultimately result in the frontstage performance in the travel photography post to Instagram or a similar visual-centric social networking site (Whitty, 2008). The performativity of such photography, with its staging and posing of shots, means that tourists intend something more than simply experiential documentation (Belk & Yeh, 2011). Sometimes to achieve idealized impression management in the frontstage, the backstage behaviours that incorporate on-site production might be untidy – in other words, sacrifices must be made in the backstage (Lo & McKercher, 2015).

This research argues that the onsite implications of such practices have exponentially changed in many ways in the last decade, including motivation and preparation for travel, time spent photographing, number of photos taken, sites visited at a destination, props used, preferred travel apparel and extensive post-travel editing. Digital photography and social networking sites have had profound implications on the sociabilities of these performative practices in travel settings and, moreover, these processes have shifted to include cyber settings as the stage for the performance.

2.2. Self-presentation and impression management through social networking

Goffman's (1956) concept of strategic (or selective) self-presentation is defined as a purposeful process for packaging and editing the self to distribute positive impressions to others. The goal of self-presentation is to make others accept the images that individuals claim for themselves. To achieve this goal, individuals must present themselves in accordance with their social roles and make sure others positively evaluate their images. Thus, the individual must align their public images with audience expectations (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). The internet provides users with more control over their self-presentation by equipping them with tools to create an online image (Ferrous, 2014).

Smartphones also brought the front-facing camera, which is oriented towards the self, thus marking the onset of new era of self-fetishization (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Sorokowska et al., 2016; Weiser, 2015). Although having photos of oneself is not new, tourists are now able to obtain an unprecedented quantity of such pictures with previously unparalleled ease. Taking photos of oneself while travelling to share on social media is now a primary objective of self-presentation (Lyu, 2016). Dinhopl and Gretzel (2016) noted that through the processes of performing, styling and producing/consuming visual culture of the 'self', tourists now ascribe characteristics to themselves that were previously associated with the sights they encountered on their travels.

Social networking sites (SNSs) are web-based services that allow users to construct personal profiles and connect with other users (often strangers) and exchange context, with the nature of such varying widely from site to site (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Some of the most well-known present-day SNSs are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn. SNSs satisfy a need to attract the attention of a larger group of people (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001); the quantity of social media contacts is counted and displayed as an indicator of popularity (Sundar, 2008). Such interactions muddle the distinction between identity expression on- and offline, thus complicating our understanding of identity co-construction and performance (Marwick, 2013). SNS users tend to rely on highlighting positive aspects of themselves to convey superiority among peers and 'followers' alike (Kim & Lee, 2011).

While several studies (Ellison et al., 2006; Lo et al., 2011; Lyu, 2016; Siibak, 2009) have previously found that travel photographs posted to SNSs serve as a modernized form of impression management, with the post serving as a final curated product for the online audience to see, there is little research on the backstage behaviour of travellers who aim to enact idealized impression through their photographic behaviours.

2.3. 'Instagramism'

In congruence with Goffman's (1956) concept of strategic self-presentation and the more recent research on impression management since the popularization of online social networking (Chua & Chang, 2016; Ellison et al., 2006; Krämer & Winter, 2008; Lyu, 2016; Qiu et al., 2015; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Siibak, 2009), visual images are the primary mode to display oneself in an ideal light online. Instagram has come to be a dominant platform for self-presentation because its editing and filtering features allow users to manipulate their online image easily and effectively (Lee et al., 2015; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). The ability to apply these features specifically on Instagram allows one more control over their own impression management (Leary, 1995).

Although Instagram was only created a decade ago in 2010, the platform has had an immense societal impact. Just as technology has made travel more accessible across socioeconomic classes (Buhalis & O'Connor, 2005), Instagram has subsequently engendered the democratization of photography (Serafinelli, 2017). The creators of Instagram photographs aim for attractive design aesthetics, and many users devote time and effort to produce more 'professional' looking images, which Manovich (2017) classified as 'designed photos'. Designed photos differ from casual shots, for which users do not put a great deal of time or thought into editing/applying filters because they do not seek idealized self-presentation. The concept and associated practices of the construction and sharing of designed photos predominantly found genesis through Instagram as techniques for editing and digitally manipulating images that were previously solely available to professional photographers or computer graphic designers became widely available through smartphones and associated editing applications. Thus, as delineated by Manovich (2017), *Instagramism* is the aesthetic of the new global digital youth class, also referred to as the *Instagram class*. These social media tribes emerge and sustain themselves through the creation of visually sophisticated feeds.

To gain a significant understanding of the travel performances of modern travellers who aim to achieve idealized impression management on SNSs like Instagram, considerations of how travel processes have morphed and self-presentation practices through travel photography is essential. Therefore, utilizing Goffman's (1956) model of impression management, this research will seek to study the roles of travellers-as-actors and the 'settings' that these performances unfold on, both cyber (online) and physical (offline).

3. Study methods

The objectives of the study consider photo-seeking behaviour of travellers from both the front- and backstage, therefore, two research methods were employed to analyze this behaviour. First, a content analysis of images posted on the platform was conducted to investigate impression management as it appears in the frontstage. Then to observe the 'backstage' behaviours of travellers seeking photography for self-presentation, a period of micro-ethnography was conducted in a destination noteworthy for '*Instagrammability*'. Both of these forms of inquiry are commonly used in behavioural research as observational techniques; content analysis is used to elicit meaning from existing data (Krippendorff, 2013; Pink, 2016), while ethnographic participant observation is used to gain direct access to the group or culture being studied in their naturally occurring settings to capture their social meanings and representations (Brewer, 2000; Tedlock, 2000).

3.1. Visual content analysis

Travel-focused images shared on Instagram were analyzed to understand the behaviour of utilizing Instagram and travel experiences as a tool for self-presentation through content analysis. Content analysis is an explorative and systematic way of analyzing visual images (Krippendorff, 2013) and is noted as especially appropriate for addressing phenomena in mass media (Rose, 2016). Content analysis can be used as both a quantitative and qualitative technique, and, in this study, it is used in a qualitative manner because of the descriptive and multifaceted phenomena being analyzed (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 1980; McKenna et al., 2017; Neuedorf, 2002).

To first determine the geotagged locations from which photos would be extracted for the content analysis, an exploration was conducted whereby 'top' travel influencers' (whom all has more than 100,000 followers, maintained highly designed accounts and consistently posted travel-related content) profiles were examined to identify the destinations from which they most often posted, and a quantified tally of their geotagged locations was taken (Appendix C). The results informed the selection of 11 geotagged places (Figure 1), along with two considerations: (1) various industry publications have designated them as popular solely for the means of personal photography, and most often for self-presentation (Dickinson, 2019; Farnsworth, 2019; Glusac, 2018; Ramani, 2018; Williams, 2018); and (2) they had easily identifiable corresponding geotags, which best facilitated the analysis to be conducted.

After identifying the 11 geotagged places, the 100 'top' geotagged images were acquired for each site, creating a total sample of 1,100 photos. The 'top' photos are generated by the current Instagram algorithms, which are configured with the most likes in the shortest amount of time (Leibowitz,

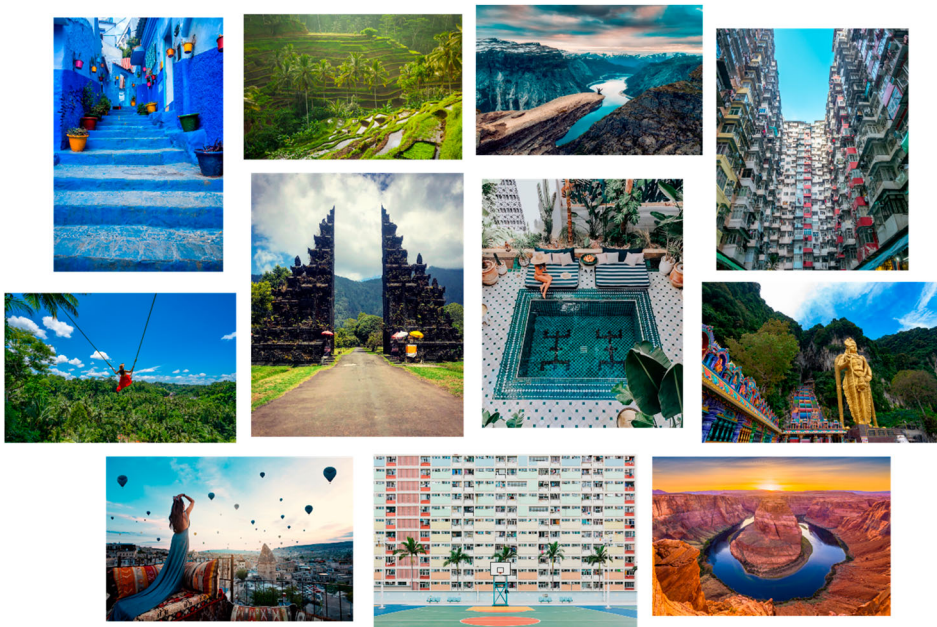


Figure 1. Eleven microdestinations chosen for content analysis in first research stage. Clockwise from top left: (1) Chefchaouen, Morocco, (2) Tegalalang Rice Terraces, Bali, Indonesia, (3) Trolltunga, Norway, (4) Monster Mansion, Hong Kong, (5) Batu Caves, Malaysia, (6) Horseshoe Bend, Wyoming, (7) Choi Hung Estate, Hong Kong, (8) Cappadocia, Turkey, (9) Bali Swing, (10) Handara Gate, Bali, Indonesia (left centre) and (11) Le Riad Yasmine, Marrakesh, Morocco (right centre). Sources: Shutterstock images (except for two centre images), researcher's personal collection (left centre) and @cheyennebeuker (right centre, with permission).

2017). Due to the number of destinations, 100 images per site was deemed an appropriate amount for the type of detailed, manual qualitative content analysis to be conducted in this study.

The categories devised for the coding scheme were developed based on a combination of the research questions and several key concepts derived from the relevant past literature (see Appendix A). The 1,100 images were manually coded and then analyzed for micro-level variables whereby any kind of meaningful visual information is a unit (Bell, 2001). After the initial coding, a peer review was conducted wherein images were cross-compared among the researchers for reliability within the coding scheme.

During the initial analysis of the most frequent destinations from which the top Instagram travel influencers post, it was understood that there are indeed some locations that are so specific that they entail obtaining an exact longitude/latitude of the superlative photographic spot for those that are explicitly seeking photography for self-presentation on Instagram. Examples include positions on a shed at the Monster Mansion in Hong Kong where it must be inferred that the best photographs can be obtained of a subject, and on the blue-domed roof of the Aghioi Theodoroi Church of the Greek isle of Santorini. Thus, the term *microdestination* is used throughout this paper as a moniker for these very specific sites. This term has not been used before in this context and is therefore unique to this research.

3. 2. *Micro-ethnography*

The second analysis consisted of a period of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bali, Indonesia in November 2019 and aimed to explore 'backstage' performative travel practices. In recent years, the Indonesian island destination of Bali has become a mecca for Instagrammers. Big Seven Media (2019, 2020) rated Indonesia as the fourth most Instagrammable country in the world in 2019 and Bali as the eighth-most Instagrammable place in 2020. Onsite ethnography is the best way to observe 'actors' performing in their natural setting rather than the terms of the observer (Brewer, 2000; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1992; Tedlock, 2000). Haldrup and Larsen (2009) proposed that ethnography is well suited for studying tourism performances because it enables sustained observations and accounts of how activities and behaviours take place corporeally, materially and socially within their specific contexts. The approach taken in this study involves a number of sites within the main location in Bali, thereby enabling the researcher to glean tourist behaviours across multiple contexts (Haldrup & Larsen, 2009).

Field notes were kept throughout the site visits to record observations for later analysis. Voice notes were also recorded, and hundreds of photographs and videos were taken for use as data, as photography and other media forms are increasingly integral element of the work of ethnographers (Pink, 2013).

After the period of onsite fieldwork in Bali, all data was uploaded into the data management tool, NVivo, for analysis and the same coding scheme from the content analysis was used (see Appendix A). After the codes were generated and the data was organized accordingly, then the data was built upon with reflections that mirrored the patterns found within the coding schema. In the following findings and discussion sections, excerpts from the field notes and photographs were taken while onsite in Bali will be used to support the findings. Additionally, it is important to note that the images that are used throughout the Findings and Discussion sections are not exclusively derived from the content analysis or the onsite fieldwork but were chosen because of the pertinence in demonstrating the behaviour described.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. *Frontstage performance of the self (Cyber)*

One of the most prevalent findings to emerge from the content analysis was that most of the photos feature a single subject; such images comprise 84% of the photos produced at the Bali Swing, 83% at

the Handara Gate, 76% at Le Riad Yasmine and 76% at Batu Caves. Furthermore, 86.5% of the analyzed photos were taken by another party, and therefore are not what is considered the classic idea of a 'selfie', i.e. a photo taken of the self by the self. Of the 1,100 photos analyzed, a mere 1.65% were taken by a subject featured in the photo. Thus, an overwhelming amount of 'photos of the self' are actually not taken by the self. At Horseshoe Bend, 69% of the images featured a single subject, among which 79% were taken by a third party. Similarly, 67% of images produced at the Tegalalang Rice Terraces featured a single subject and only 3% included more than two subjects.

These findings indicate that the trendiest way to portray an idealized representation of oneself through online travel photography is to be featured alone while another individual takes the photos. Notably, this photographic 'style' more closely mirrors a professional modeling photoshoot than documentation of travel memory. These findings corroborate perceptions of the shift of focus to the 'self' in travel photography, and that selfies can be taken by another party.

As elucidated in the following subsections, along with featuring a sole subject and having another party take your photo, the analysis uncovered other characteristics that contribute to an understanding of ideal self-representation among the *Instagram class*, including subject gaze and gesticulation, pose, and costume.

4.1.1 . Gaze and gesticulation

Certain elements of travellers' poses appear to be standardized regardless of location, and they therefore can be considered social norms for the Instagram class. Most notable of these are the off-camera gaze and gesticulations of being 'in-motion'. Another prominent theme to emerge from the content analysis was a facial expression wherein the subject's visual gaze was focused somewhere out of the camera's view (see Figure 2). Only 35.3% of the photos in the content analysis featured subjects looking directly at or into the camera lens. The onsite ethnographic observations in Bali were consistent with the findings of the content analysis; many of the observed tourists fixed their gaze off-camera while posing for photographs. Such behaviour indicates a clear motivation for the subject to appear as if they were caught off-guard or in the midst of having an enjoyable experience rather than staging a curated photo. Photos in which the subject apparently lacks an awareness that they are being photographed are known in popular media as 'plandids', i.e. planned candids (Molina, 2019). Plandids can also be considered a reinvention of Urry's (1990) concept of the 'romantic gaze' with the purpose of conveying an idealized lifestyle and the nonchalance of an intended and performed ignorance to the presence of the camera and/or documentation of the experience.

Many of the photo subjects in content analysis were also observed to be 'in motion' and seemingly involved in an active performance, as evinced by their feet or legs moving such that they

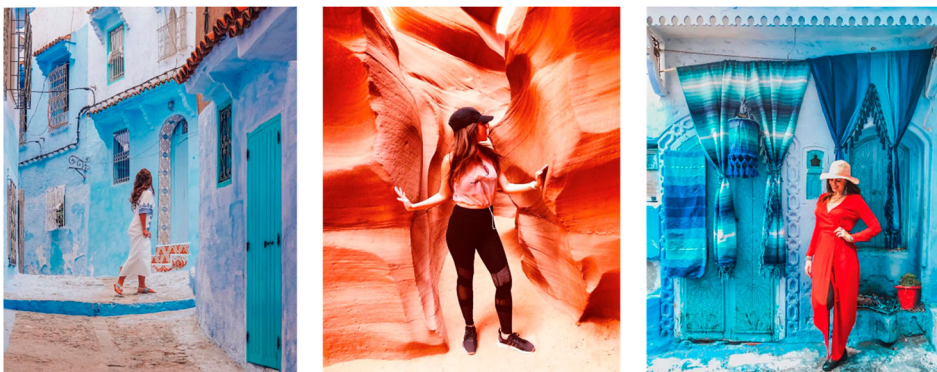


Figure 2. Examples of photo subjects looking away from the camera. Source: Instagram users (1) @flavialatina.travels, (2) @the-modernqueenexplorer and (3) @travelthelife (all with permissions).



Figure 3. Examples of photo subjects being ‘in motion’. Source: Instagram user @mao.amore (with permission).

are captured in an apparent state of being ‘mid-walk’ (Figure 3). This aspect of bodily movement carries an embedded social meaning for the actor’s intended audience in the form of nonverbal cues. As Adler (1989) proposed, walking can be interpreted as a ‘search for a vantage point from which to grasp and understand life’. Thus, the actor is conveying to their audience that they are in active pursuit of an exploration in which to obtain a greater meaning of life. As travel has been considered a means to enhance social status among younger generations (Siegel & Wang, 2019), physically engaging in travel in a manner that is visually performed for the intended online audience conveys a globetrotting lifestyle that elevates the travelling performer’s status among their peer group and the greater Instagram class.

4.1.2 . Costume

In the Instagram theatre, an actor’s costume is an essential part of their travel performance, and similar to certain poses, various locations were frequently associated with distinctive types of fashion. Locations that portray a sense of adventures, such as Horseshoe Bend in Arizona, USA and Trolltunga in Norway, more commonly featured subjects wearing athletic or ‘outdoor’ apparel, whereas the decorative pool at Le Riad Yasmine was more commonly associated with swimwear. Such examples were expected and are not unusual; in order to adequately perform in a destination, an actor must accurately perform that destination in accordance with an elevated sense of that activity.

Alternatively, there were many cases when the attire significantly contrasted with the setting, and it was clear that the subject’s outfit was chosen for the purpose of self-presentation. In the examples provided in Figure 4, there is clearly no utility for the outfits chosen in those destinations, as they are not conducive to typical travel activities like walking or exploring. Rather, the actors’ costumes are consistent with the Instagram aesthetic to express a highly curated and idealized lifestyle. Hence, these are key examples of sacrificing to ‘get the shot’ or framing events for the future perfect (Crang, 1997).

There is a confluence between the ways people record their experiences and how they represent their lives (Crang, 1997), and clothing completes the total structure of personal appearance and conveys the status of the wearer. As such, it is a critically important element of an individual’s social identity, and it is no wonder that a person would view their clothing almost as an extension



Figure 4. Examples of planned fashion for Instagram posts. Source: Instagram users for images (1 & 2), @voyagefox, (3) @mao.more and 4) @jovi_travel (reposted with permissions).

of themselves (Kuper, 1973). Thus, the appearance of an elaborate costume reinforces the agency of a subject's use of clothing to convey idealized impression management within the modern zeitgeist.

4.1.3 . Editing and filters

It has been agreed upon that the success of the Instagram platform over similar SNSs that emerged around the same time is due to the ability to apply filters directly in the application when uploading and posting a photo (Raz, 2019). Thus, filters can be considered a primary reason for Instagram's success. Likewise, this research found that 82% of the images analyzed were highly designed to meet the *Instagram aesthetic* as described by Manovich (2017), with obviously enhanced contrast, colours and composition. Highly designed photos have a distinct stylized look and are connected to Instagram as a SNS and the 'networked camera' (p. 41); they are a departure from earlier periods of photographic history, which held differing aesthetic conventions with much less contrast, saturation and filters. Instagram's editing and filtering features allow users to manipulate their online image easily and effectively (Serafinelli, 2018); therefore, through attempts to match the designed Instagram aesthetic, there is a demonstration among users to attain the impression management attributes associated with the Instagram class.

4.2. Backstage performance of the self (Physical)

After analyzing travellers' cyber/online behaviours, attention was shifted to the enacted backstage actions necessary to achieve the results exhibited in their frontstage online performances. Some of the observed behaviours were unique to backstage practices; however, others corresponded with findings obtained from the content analysis and are therefore further developed according to the backstage practices that underpin these.

4.2.1 . Photography equipment

Staging photos for online impression management includes using photographic equipment as well as the time and effort spent framing the shot (Lo & McKercher, 2015). Although many of the leisure travellers observed onsite in Bali took photographs with smartphones, there was a significant population using more specialized equipment such as tripods, high-end DSLR (digital single-lens reflex) cameras, GoPros, drones, etc. (Figure 5). Such equipment has previously only been required for truly professional photographers. However, as travellers increasingly aspire to imitate the aesthetic styles of professional photographers as viewed on Instagram, more complicated equipment is required and therefore has become increasingly common in touristic settings, much more than in the past.

Additionally, due to the hypermobilized practices of sharing images to SNSs, shared images must meet higher standards than those taken for private memorialization. The Instagram aesthetic represents a sense of visual conformity to the images that dominate the platform (Manovich, 2016),

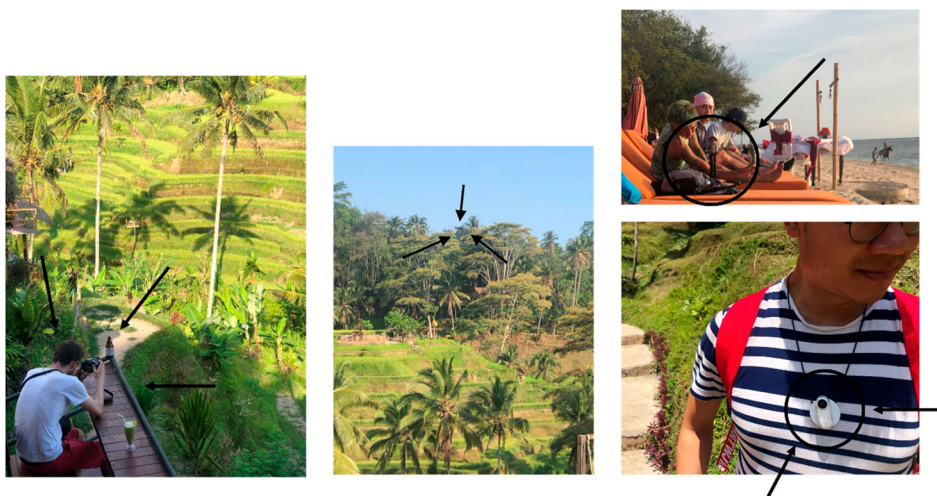


Figure 5. Use of professionalized equipment in backstage photographic practices. Clockwise from left: DSLR camera, drone, GoPro and wearable camera necklace.

which requires the deployment of more sophisticated and professionalized equipment. This phenomenon was frequently observed onsite in Bali, and a particularly egregious example was documented in the field notes taken at Gili Trawangan:

Beginning at around 4 pm, there was much activity in preparation for the sunset. This applied especially to equipment setup for photography, with multiple people setting up camera tripods in the sand to capture the sunset. Others were flying drones and some were photographing people within their group (alone) with very expensive and sophisticated-looking cameras. [11.15.2019]

4.2.2. Props

Goffman (1956) described props as an essential part of an actor's performance, including moveable and temporary aspects of the environment. The preparation of props is maintained backstage. In the context of impression management, virtually any object can be used as a prop so long as the user believes that its possession or display will affect others' impressions of him or her.

In Bali, many travellers were observed making use of objects to manipulate their settings. For example, in Gili Trawangan, horses were easily and plentifully available to rent for the purpose of sitting on them for photos usually taken at sunset. Rides were not included among the offerings, thus evincing that the sole purpose of horse rentals was for photo opportunities, as observed in an excerpt from the research field notes:

Around the time tourists started arriving to take photos on the ocean swings at sunset, local vendors suddenly appeared on horses, approaching the photo seekers to sit on the horse for a price to take a photo. Some of the tourists who opted in then wanted to take the horses in the water while they sat on them for more interactive or exotic looking photos. One subject spent lengthy time taking photos in various interactions with the horse – i.e. brushing the horse, wetting her hair while on the horse, leading the horse by its tether down the beach. The horse did not seem to enjoy this experience and the horse's handler asked for more money for the additional time spent taking photos. [11.15.2019]

4.2.3. Posing

While the poses of travellers were examined as frontstage/online facets of impression management, the backstage/physical practices and performances required to obtain the final images were observed onsite in Bali, wheressss travellers were engaging in extensive posing rituals. The

posing rituals were physically rigorous and told a much different story than the audience might imagine solely from viewing the eventually-produced image in the frontstage.

The findings indicate that tourists have certain audiences in mind when they pose for the camera and that instructions on how to pose can be resisted if they are deemed to be destructive to the subject's image (Larsen & Urry, 2011). Furthermore, like the digital camera before it, smartphone technology affords users the ability to check photos immediately after they are taken in order to evaluate the need for more complex poses and fashions (Larsen, 2008). This behaviour was observed multiple times onsite at Bali, as travellers would take numerous photos and consistently check them to determine whether they were satisfied or needed continuous shooting. Oftentimes, these *sessions* would last for lengthy stretches of time (upwards of an hour and beyond), and enjoyment of place or taking pleasure in experiences did not appear to accompany the practices. Additionally, long queues often formed in spaces that were deemed the most aesthetically pleasing or photogenic.

Grooming was also prevalent in photograph preparations. On numerous occasions, subjects were observed grooming themselves by combing out and styling their hair and checking or applying their makeup for several minutes as part of their photo preparations. People have always been interested in looking their best in photos (Sontag, 1977); however, this trend has been dramatically intensified by the bar being raised on a widespread level throughout social networking sites such that images of the 'self' become advertisements of the self that are published to boost a curated personal brand (Khamis et al., 2017; Marwick, 2015).

4.3. Function of place

The coherence of most tourist performances depends on their being performed in specific 'theaters'. Just as directors use landscapes to carry meaning of characters' psychological states in theatrical or film productions, visitors may utilize landscapes to reflect their affective feelings. Landscape quality can be inherent not only in the actual setting but also in the eyes of the beholder (Pan et al., 2014). Having proposed that spaces and places constitute stages, it is suggested that the form of space, its organization, materiality, aesthetic and sensual qualities can influence the kinds of performances that tourists undertake, although not in any predictable and deterministic fashion (Edensor, 2000).

As Stylianou-Lambert (2012) noted, different stages invite different performances. For instance, the subject poses observed at Trolltunga, which is a mountainous site associated with adventure and nature, were quite different from those observed at the Handara Temple Gate, which has been assigned spiritual contextualizations from the travellers who post photos there. Thus, the performances at these sites will differ according to the conveyed meanings that the subjects seek to express.

4.3.1. Geotags

The act of geotagging in and of itself is representative of the behaviour of associating oneself with a specific location. It was noted during the content analysis that geotags are meant to be kept vague when presenting a truly exotic or romanticized picture, which conveys a sense of the site being so far off the map that it defies any attempt to provide a specific location beyond the country name. Examples include a geotag that simply reads, 'Bali' or 'Malaysia'. However, this is not always the case, as the phenomenon can also work in reverse to show the effort of reaching a specific destination such that the geotag is used to fortify this achievement. Additionally, the geotag can aid in conveying that the subject is 'far from home' (Culler, 2012). This behaviour is not born out of a desire to share experiences with intimate friends and loved ones, but rather is part of a much larger set of social conduct.

Furthermore, the geotag serves as a cyber-physical marker, as meaning is assigned only once an image has been uploaded to the online platform. It is through the social significance accorded to a site that meaning is assigned that makes it distinctive (Culler, 2012). Whereas traditional tourist markers took the form of sites that represent historical or socio-cultural significance, such as the

Statue of Liberty or a place that has been assigned meaning because of something that happened there, like the Anne Frank House, the geotag serves much the same purpose but in a virtual setting.

Leary (1995) identified the importance of place as part of impression management – a subject’s physical surroundings play a role in their personal portrayal. This research confirms the importance of place in a cyber setting and further extends the ideas of Goffman (1956) and Leary. Places are portrayed through actors’ frontstage performance through geotagging and through the imagery surrounding the photo subject, which sets the stage for the performance.

4.4. Cyber–Physical consociation

Considering these findings through Goffman’s (1956) original concept of frontstage and backstage performances, this research offers a conceptual contribution through empirical evidence. A symbiotic relationship was found to occur between the cyber and physical behaviours; frontstage cyber behaviour cannot exist without the systematic efforts undergone in the physical backstage, and the physical backstage would not be necessary without a user’s motivation to represent their idealized lifestyle through Instagram posts. This relationship expands Goffman’s frontstage/backstage conceptualization to travel photographs for social networks, and because of these factors, the cyber–physical system was found to hold mutual causality where one is dependent upon the other. In Figure 6, the specific behaviours associated with both the cyber frontstage and the physical backstage are denoted. Additionally, ‘selfie’ culture and aesthetic Instagram norms contribute to the theoretical generation of the findings of this study and subsequent framework, as described throughout Section 4.1.

4.5. Circle of self-representation

Beyond the cyber–physical behaviour, a circular system of self-focused behaviour was found that supports the concept of the circle of representation in travel images but has instead shifted to a circle of *self*-representation. The traditional ‘circle of representation’ in tourism literature was conceptualized as images of a destination collectively projected by the mass media, which are then perceived by individuals and may inspire travel to the destination (Jenkins, 2003). Once at the

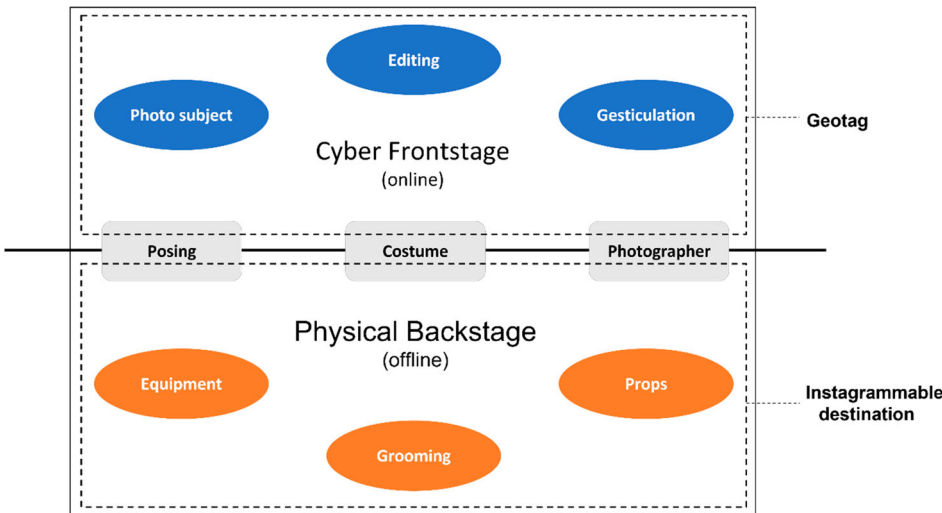


Figure 6. Proposed framework of front- and backstage traveller behaviours of the Instagram class as it unfolds in cyber–physical environments.

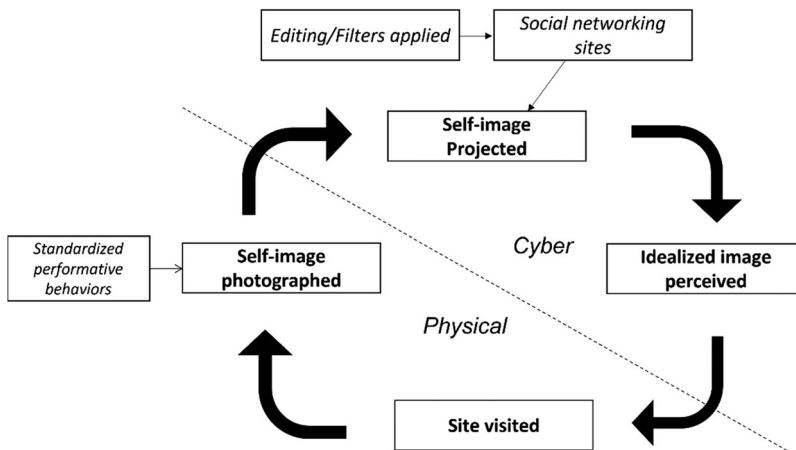


Figure 7. The circle of *self*-representation.

destination, the tourist will likely visit the main attractions or tourist icons seen in the projected images and record his or her experience using a traditional camera. These personal photographs were then physically shared with friends and relatives back home, partly as proof of the visit (McCabe & Stokoe, 2010). This research has identified the next iteration of this circle of behaviour, in which the image that is projected, perceived, sought and photographed is a *self-image* – the landscape or site has become secondary, and the self is the primary focus within the photos. Sites, landscapes or general imagery is sought for how they will serve as useful backgrounds to the self, which is consistent with the shift to a focus on the ‘self’ in travel photography as described in existing literature (Belk & Yeh, 2011; Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016; Iqani & Schroeder, 2016; Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013; Lyu, 2016; Mostafanezhad & Norum, 2018; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Sorokowska et al., 2016).

In this galvanized circle of self-representation, the self-image is first projected and then perceived on social networking sites, among which this research shows that Instagram is an especially prominent platform for this cyber behaviour. Following its presentation in the online environment, the micro destination is visited with the aim to photograph oneself in the same idealized manner that was previously seen and perceived by the user/traveller, which is carried out physically (Figure 7). As such, using the standardized Instagram aesthetics has become repeatable and ritualized to the point of mimicry. There are templatable versions of the ‘self’ available through the aesthetic decisions made by the user, creating a reality where posts can be almost identical, from the posing and framing to the filtered colouration.

4.6. Instagram’s visual language as adapted by travellers

Because of the standardization of the Instagram platform in the modern zeitgeist, there is a visual language that has developed among travellers within the Instagram class that includes editing, compositions, lighting, sequencing and other characteristics within the stipulated image culture (Berger, 1980). The *Instagram aesthetic* (Manovich, 2017) reflects these social norms and contrasts with norms that were popular prior to smartphone and SNS standardization. This research found that there was a clearly defined visual language among travellers within the Instagram class.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the use of Instagram travel photography as a tool for modern self-presentation by the relationship of the cyber–physical environments in the evolving photographic performances of travellers. In an update to Goffman’s (1956) theory of performance unfolding in

both a frontstage and a backstage, this research identifies the cyber part of the behaviour serving as the frontstage as the intended performance for the audience to see, and the physical aspect happening backstage in preparation for the frontstage. Travellers were found to engage in a complex range of 'hidden' performances of image creation and associated practices as they choreographed and captured their desired images in backstage.

This study is the first to consider the cyber–physical aspects of the performativity of the 'ideal self'. Thus, there are increasingly blurred lines between the cyber and physical realms – we increasingly socialize and develop our identities through both environments. The mutual causality found between the cyber (online) and physical (offline) behaviours of the Instagram class is significant because it is reflective of new media technologies, like Instagram, bleeding into our societal behaviours and cultural zeitgeist. This classification represents a shift of the performance of the ideal self in the digital age and will be important to research into impression management in the future.

This research also contributed to the production of photos and backstage behaviours, which is not commonly researched in travel and tourism literature. Milgram (1976) commented that photography has created a new choreography of gestures and movements that did not exist before the creation of photography. Likewise, in this research, it was found that a refreshed choreography of gestures and movements has emerged that did not exist before the creation of Instagram. Furthermore, Larsen (2008) points out that much research jumps directly to the representative world of photographs while skipping over their production. Findings on the nature of the travel selfie and idiosyncrasies of the travelling Instagram class provided in-depth insight into which hospitality, tourism and travel practitioners can utilize to provide an optimized customer experience in a variety of areas.

Despite the contribution, there are several limitations to this study. First, Instagram is the most popular platform for travel photos in many nations, but there are still places where it is not. Although this research can still be applied when considering similar travel-posting behaviour, it may not be totally applicable in those places. Future research could evaluate the similarities/differences in posting behaviours on these various platforms and in varying regions.

Significantly, this research was conducted in the months before the COVID-19 pandemic all but halted global travel in 2020. Therefore, it is extremely important to consider the applicability of the findings of this research post-pandemic as once travel proceeds to resume, this research may contribute to the expectations of visitors for destinations that are considered Instagrammable. Furthermore, the same type of research can be recreated in a post-pandemic scenario.

Instagram use has particularly grown over the course of the lockdown (Orozco, 2020; Southern, 2020). There is evidence that people are still seeking ideal impression management through Instagram using self-portraiture, however, the circumstances have somewhat changed (Mahan, 2020). Thus, the desires and motivations of self-portraiture explored in this study remain prevalent, and visitors will most likely still seek to create idealized self-presentation through travel photography as soon as they are able to do so again.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A. Code Book (all images with permissions).

Level 1 Code	Level 2 Code	Code Name	Definition	Example Image
A		Cyber/Frontstage	Image characteristics of behaviour that are meant for an intended audience	
	A1	Subject	How many people are in the photo	
				
A2	Photographer	Whether the photo is taken by the subject, by holding camera at arm's length, or by a third party		
				

(Continued)

Continued.

Level 1 Code	Level 2 Code	Code Name	Definition	Example Image
	A3	Subject Gaze	Indicates whether the subject is looking into the camera or not	
				
A4	Planned fashion	This discerns whether the subject's clothing choices are high fashion, and not necessarily functional, and therefore intentionally worn for means of self-presentation		 

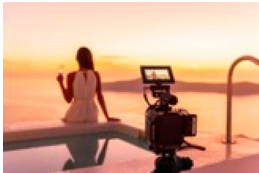
(Continued)

Continued.

Level 1 Code	Level 2 Code	Code Name	Definition	Example Image
	A5	Designed photo	If the photo is curated to fit the Instagram aesthetic as described by Manovich (2017)	
	A6	Circle of representation	Circle of representation signifies the emblematic image of that sight and whether it is depicted in the archetypal way	 
	A7	Pose	The bodily position in which the subject is photographed	 

(Continued)

Continued.

Level 1 Code	Level 2 Code	Code Name	Definition	Example Image
B	A8	Gesticulation	Whether the subject is in a static position or in-motion	
	A9	Gender	Whether the subject is visibly male or female (n/a in some cases)	
		Physical/ Backstage	'Behind the scenes' activities required to successfully perform for frontstage audience	
	B1	Equipment	This indicates the level of professional photography equipment the observed travellers utilized	
				
	B2	Props	Use of accessories in photo taking	
	B3	Circle of representation	This indicates travellers seeking traditional representations onsite from previously seen photos	
	B4	Posing	The act of posing for photographs onsite	
	B5	Planned fashion	This discerns whether the subject's clothing choices are high fashion, and not necessarily functional, and therefore intentionally worn for means of self-presentation	
	B6	Gender	This differentiates between male/female onsite (physical) behaviours	

Appendix B. Full Findings of the Visual Content Analysis of Instagram Images

	Monster Mansion	Choi Hung Estate	Bali Swing	Tegalalang Rice Terrace	Handara Temple Gate	Horseshoe Bend	Cappadocia	Le Riad Yasmine	Trolltunga	Chefchauoen	Batu Caves	Totals	Average
CofR	95	86	84	89	92	81	63	69	88	69	86	902	82.00
Photo Taken by Another?	96	97	99	69	97	79	68	81	92	91	83	952	86.55
Selfie?	1	0	0	6	1	4	0	2	3	0	1	18	1.64
No subject?	5	3	1	25	2	16	29	16	4	8	16	125	11.36
Looking at camera?	60	54	29	35	38	35	13	20	21	58	25	388	35.27
Planned fashion?	11	24	39	13	40	5	35	40	1	36	35	279	25.36
Designed photo?	72	92	86	75	93	82	98	97	89	62	66	912	82.91
Male	32	24	8	16	24	10	3	14	29	23	18	201	18.27
Female	32	71	81	54	60	63	49	68	24	62	59	623	56.64
1 person	90	88	84	67	83	69	48	75	66	80	76	826	75.09
2 people	3	6	11	7	14	12	18	4	26	10	6	117	10.64
2+ people	2	3	4	3	1	3	1	4	4	2	1	28	2.55
IGV1	78	22	50	84	91	58	59	29	66	59	50	646	58.73
IGV2	16	24	38	9	3	35	26	47	26	22	24	270	24.55
IGV3	n/a	53	n/a	n/a	2	n/a	n/a	5	4	8	13	85	14.17
No IGV	6	1	12	7	4	7	15	19	4	11	6	92	8.36

Appendix C. Top travel influencers' most geotagged places.

No	Microdestination	# of Influencers	% of Influencers	No	Microdestination	# of Influencers	% of Influencers
1	Tegalalang Rice Terraces	24	68.6%	20	Antelope Canyon	12	43.3%
2	Bali Infinity Pool	24	68.5%	21	Monster Mansion	12	34.3%
3	Positano	22	62.9%	22	Gili Trawangan Swing	11	31.4%
4	Cappadocia	21	60.0%	23	Hong Kong Hotel Breakfast Window	11	31.4%
5	Bali Swing	20	57.1%	24	Horseshoe Bend	10	28.6%
6	Bali Floating Breakfast	20	57.1%	25	Choi Hung Estate	10	28.6%
7	Thai Beach	20	57.1%	26	Burano	10	28.6%
8	Santorini	19	54.3%	27	Le Riad Yasmine	9	25.7%
9	Singapore Supertrees	19	54.3%	28	Hoi An	9	25.7%
10	Mykonos	17	48.6%	29	Batu Caves	9	25.7%
11	Wat Pho	17	48.6%	30	Lempuyang	8	22.8%
12	Maldives	17	48.6%	31	Bagan	8	22.9%
13	Chefchaouen	16	45.7%	32	Arashiyama Bamboo Grove	7	20.0%
14	Nusa Penida	15	42.9%	33	Thean Hou Temple	7	20.0%
15	Chiang Rai – White Temple	15	42.9%	34	Banff Canada	6	17.1%
16	Handara	14	40.0%	35	Lake Bled	6	17.1%
17	Palawan	14	40.0%	36	Blue Lagoon Iceland	5	14.3%
18	Cuba vintage car	14	40.0%	37	Inle Lake	4	11.4%
19	Sheikh Zayed Mosque	13	37.1%	38	Trolltunga	3	8.6%