Abstract

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Title:

Seeing – Feeling – Doing: Exploring Tourists' and Locals' Responses to Instagram Images of the Bregenzerwald

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Abstract:

This master's thesis explores how user-generated Instagram photographs shape the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of destination image among locals and pre-travel tourists. Focusing on the Austrian alpine region of the Bregenzerwald, the study applies Gartner's (1994) cognitive-affective-conative framework and uses a qualitative design combining researcher-driven photo elicitation and semi-structured interviews with twenty participants. Respondents selected and discussed images depicting landscapes, outdoor activities, cultural practices, architecture, and local cuisine.

The findings reveal that panoramic landscapes and scenes of outdoor activities consistently emerged as the most salient motifs for both groups, forming a shared visual anchor. However, the way participants related to these images differed notably: tourists expressed curiosity, fascination, and a longing for authentic experiences, while locals interpreted similar visuals through memories, cultural pride, and everyday familiarity. Cognitive interpretations provided a conceptual basis, but emotional responses were the primary driver of behavioural intentions. Among locals, feelings of nostalgia and belonging often shaped how images were internalised, while tourists experienced admiration and a desire for escape. Nearly all pre-travel tourists reported a clear intention to visit the Bregenzerwald after engaging with the visuals, whereas locals expressed strong willingness to recommend the region to others, especially for slow, mindful tourism.

Overall, the study demonstrates that user-generated imagery does more than convey factual information; it creates emotionally charged narratives that strongly influence expectations and motivate action even before any physical encounter with a destination. Comparing perspectives of locals and pre-travel tourists proved especially valuable, as it highlighted how prior familiarity and personal connection can deepen emotional engagement and produce more complex interpretations, while outsiders rely more on imagination and idealised associations. This dual perspective offers nuanced insights into how destination images are constructed differently depending on experience and background. For marketing practice, the results underline the value of authentic, relatable visuals that reflect cultural heritage and everyday life rather than polished promotional clichés. Such content can build emotional connections and trust among diverse audiences. The research shows that in the digital age, seeing shapes feeling, and feeling quietly guides doing.