

Image as Evidence: The Traveller's Need to Instagram

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The photographic image and its firm evolution has fashioned our experience of reality steadily from the time of its invention in 1839. From recording our changing world and its varied diversity, to enabling us to understand the science of emotion and anchoring us to consumer culture, the image has come a long way. However, along with the rapid rise of photography as a mass medium in this digital age, there has been a meteoric shift in the nature and perception of visual culture, a change in the very essence of the photographed image itself.

The increased use of mobile smartphones built in with social media applications like Facebook and Instagram has come to mean that “the everyday lives of individuals are being remediating into new contexts of social visibility and connection” (Vivienne and Burges 283). As smartphones are usually used by individuals, photographs taken on them “relate directly with that one user’s everyday point of view and experience” (Chesher 106). Smartphones and the photographic images they update on various photography applications become the spokesperson for the individual itself.

In her collection of essays, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag tries to understand why and how the image comes to seize us so powerfully:

...In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads — as an anthology of images.

Sontag contends that the photographic image is in many ways a control mechanism we employ on the world. The world as defined by our experience of the world and by others’ perception of our experience. “Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood. To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge — and, therefore, like power.” (Sontag 8) More than creating a divide among people using power hierarchies, photographs also succeed in letting users connect with communities and nuclear units like families, social circles, followers of a hobby or art form, people with common political interests and so on. Sontag writes, “Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself- a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness.”

The fact that Sontag arrived at this insight way before the age of social media photo-streaming makes it prognostic. As mass media today sets the trend by coaxing us to photostream in an, “ultimate attempt to control, frame and package our lives- our idealized lives- for presentation to others, and even to ourselves,” (Popova) we see how Sontag’s view reiterates itself as we practice an aggressive self-framing to portray ourselves on Instagram, Facebook and other social media platforms.

After roughly three decades of Sontag’s observation, we see that this aggression brings about a social media violence of self-assertion- “a forcible framing of our identity for presentation, for idealization, for currency in an economic envy.” (Sontag 14) Now enjoying a worldwide user quotient of 150 million from

80 million users, Instagram, for instance, has become a social phenomenon mainly as it offers a variety of built-in filters which allow people to alter photographs into magazine worthy images. One can effortlessly edit and enrich the photographs with a kind of digital nostalgia by aping the aura and look of old lenses and film stock. Photographs can be edited so as to make everyone a tad bit prettier, younger and cover worthy.

In the meanwhile, viewers are expected to chip in with regular heart shaped likes and positive comments after having seen the opulent images shared by the people they follow. These likes and comments serve the purpose of a social currency which reinforce and augment the idea that every capture is an applause worthy performance. The result of these practices is an online culture where the primary motive is to impress than just inform.

Instagram photo sharing enjoys the tag of being a niche mass art form, so much so that its use has become a utility in order to maintain our cultural power dynamics. Widely in vogue, people who use Instagram as a medium to have their photographs streamed, practice it more so as an art form. An exclusively image-driven application, Instagram has grown to enjoy such a profound level of use and power in socio-cultural circles that it acts “mainly as a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power.” (Sontag 8) Being a social media platform, Instagram takes on the role of a vehicle for photo distribution. Instagram images fulfil the definition of Jenkin et al.’s (2013) notion of ‘spreadable media’ as they are shared by the audience for individual purposes and within participatory cultures.

A significant pattern shift that has been noticed recently in the Instagramming domain is the trend of posting photographs of travel. The use of photography in sharing tourism escapades has heightened to a great extent. Images, in the scope of tourism, are thus used widely to validate experience. Over the months, the trend has burgeoned to witness the formation of online travel groups and communities, excessive and elaborate photograph sharing of places visited bringing to the fore the very valid question of whether we are engaging in a kind of ‘social media tourism’.

Travel has nevertheless become an excuse to accumulate photographs. Sontag writes, For the first time in history, large numbers of people regularly travel out of their habitual environments for short periods of time. It seems positively unnatural to travel for pleasure without taking a camera along. Photographs will offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had... A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it — by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir. It is out of these souvenirs that we users build a fantasy, one that projects details about our own lives and one from which we surmise about that of others. Thus, though the photographic images themselves cannot explain anything, they invite the users to deduce, speculate and fantasize. We see how the camera works its way into being an indelible part of our reality and the reality of other users. In Sontag’s words, “The camera makes everyone a tourist in other people’s reality, and eventually in one’s own.”

Each image tells us a fantastic story while we without questioning, listen intently to its manipulated version of the tale. Every moment in travel is manipulated, filtered, edited and cropped to show a reality that the user wishes to portray. Most tourists feel obliged to place the camera between them and whatever striking it is that they encounter. The first instinct when they stumble upon something memorable to the sight is to take a picture. This behaviour has changed the face of the travel experience. Rather than revelling in the pursuit of the travel experience, travellers get caught up in clicking photographs. They see, stop, and taking a photograph, move on.

A recent Instagram update has included the option of adding multiple ‘My Story’-ies to one’s daily newsfeed homepage. With a screen presence of 24 hours, this option has boosted the users urge to share more photographs which will tell their day to day ‘stories’, thus leading to an escalation in the number of images being posted daily. This addition has also gifted a further role to Instagram, that of a close friend

who shares gossip stories of people we know or follow, a mate who spends time with us in our free-time sharing stories. This sort of dialogue between the application and the user eases any essence of decorum between them, always giving the user a reason to look forward to what news Instagram has to share, on a daily basis.

Instagram has succeeded in generating a novel form of social voyeurism, one which enables us to look into cautiously curated windows of the stylish, rich and the famous. Instagram and its frequent use has conveniently turned us all into voyeurs and peeping toms. This results in a virtual form of lifestyle envy. Travel, now aestheticized as an elite and niche pursuit then becomes another reason for lifestyle envy among social and virtual peers. One wouldn't insta-share a snapshot of the local market one visits every week or even of daily and usual encounters or experiences. They aren't aesthetically pleasing. Instagram envy may sound like the most first-world of issues but it is a genuine and frequent response seen among Instagram users. This envy goes a long way to help us understand the politics of social media aestheticization and hierarchization.

Susan Sontag opines that photography is an attempted countermeasure to a deepening awareness of our mortality. "All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." (Sontag 32) This viewpoint does make sense as it is seen that we usually opt to load our social media timelines with photographic snapshots of images which we hope prove that our timelines and our lives are packed with significant moments. This can be read as a self-reminder to users that they are nearing the end of their timelines, mortality itself. Hence, we can also remark that the image thus becomes an assertion of our existence, one whose potential is invariably addictive for users. This urge then to travel, capture memories and virtually publish photo evidences to affirm its execution are all testaments to spread the idea of a happening life, a life being lived to its fullest.

"A photo can very powerfully provoke immediate social comparison, and that can trigger feelings of inferiority. You don't envy a news story", (Winter) says Hanna Krasnova, on the basis of her study on Facebook and envy. Krasnova's study has brought her to define what she prefers to call an "envy spiral" peculiar to social media sharing. She claims that if users see wonderful photographs of a friend on Instagram, one way they resort to compensate is to post way better snapshots, a response to which the friend posts even better photographs and so on. "Self-promotion triggers more self-promotion, and the world on social media gets further and further away from reality." (Winter) An envy spiral of this sort can unwind on any media platform like Facebook or Twitter. But Instagram being the photographs exclusive domain of social media, it serves as the rightful theatre for these Insta-photo-battles.

A phenomenon which can be read on similar lines is that of Vacation envy which has paved way for the current age of Instagram travel with Instagram playing the role of a digital age travel agent. With the craving over other people's travel photographs, Instagram has heralded our entry into a new age of virtual travel. The eventual goal of every trip is to seek out and capture Instagram-worthy moments. Our social travel community members with whom we have so many shared staged moments feel like friends. We have a common aesthetic inspiring us. An untold rule of photo sharing and travel- if you haven't posted with a picture, you haven't been there.

The application has a tremendous influence over members and their travel habits. Instagram recently added a 'Shop Now' option to their advertisements which enables users to act quickly on their travel plans. As informed users of Instagram, we are to a great extent aware that no matter how enticing a picture may seem on our smartphone screens, they have been posed for, heavily edited, and shared for a number of socio-cultural reasons which may surpass the want to just share a particular personal moment. These images most certainly represent a partial truth, a reality which the user wants us to believe in. Ann Mack, director of Trend-spotting at JWT worldwide claims, "Traditional advertising is losing some of its power over consumers who instead look to one another for trends and opinions." (Taylor) The instant you give

someone something to aspire to, it is an immediate sell. This is exactly what Instagram users who are travellers are doing today with their travel posts, selling the idea of their perfect getaway to viewers. Instagram allows users to choose from a set of post processing edit options like filtering, blurring, cropping which allow the manipulation of photographic images within the application. These options can also be seen to entail a complex interplay of what Bakhtin (1981) referred to as artistic genres which serve aesthetic functions.

We can almost wholly curate our travel experience based on the images we perceive online, and this somewhere, is an unnatural approach to travel. The whole idea of exploration is lost in this entire virtual scheme of redefining travel. Another significant shift seen in popular travel behaviour is the group with which people choose to travel nowadays. Family trips and couple outings to faraway places, though still practiced are not in vogue today. Travellers choose to travel in smaller groups with friends who share their travel interests, be it colleagues at work or college friends. The idea of solo travelling too is trending with more and more teenagers opting for solo weekend escapades. Travel is no longer seen as a celebration of time and happiness or as an excuse to bond and relax with close ones. But rather, it is perceived as a solitary pursuit. This considerable switch in the motive of travelling has brought about a degree of aestheticization to the travel experience on the whole. Travel, thence, relocates itself within a more elite and niche domain of social practices. "Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted." (Sontag 22) Travel as read along these lines becomes a leisure and luxurious pursuit.

Selfies are without doubt the new scourge of travel pursuits. It has become very common for travellers to take selfies from every nook and corner of any place they visit. It is almost like they are desperately trying to collect proof to make social media users believe in the truth of their travel. The user has to be present in the picture. Only then will his/her leisure pursuit be believed and validated. Travel photography is a rich addition to the travel aesthetic, no doubt. But the lines between the real and the edited are blurred and one can easily fall prey to the elite and aesthetically affluent portrayal of these images. More and more Instagram users are being inspired and lured to travel to these lush locales and places far away from the maddening crowds by these travel captures.

Chris Burkard, a famous photographer with over 2 million followers says, "Now you are less than ten clicks away from seeing an image on Instagram to purchasing a ticket to go there. I've met people who have traveled to places because of my photographs, and I don't mean that in an egotistical way... This wasn't happening 10 years ago." (Miller) The proof of this Instagram-caused travel is evident in the figures. For instance, the tourism board of New Zealand witnessed the fastest tourism growth in the country in 2015 after they invited their tourists with large number of social media followers to post about their experiences virtually along with their travel photographs. (Miller)

Instagram's tourism outreach is giving travel agencies major 'up-the-game' goals. More and more travel enthusiasts are turning to Instagram for advice and feedback. Though a make-believe version of reality, the finesse with which Instagram has been going about feeding its users manipulated editions of reality leaves a lot for popular culture critics to ponder upon. Along with various other areas in which Instagram photo streaming has progressed, travel photography has metamorphosed into a world of its own. A picturized collection of travel anthology of sorts, Instagram has slowly evolved into a virtual travel story-teller, providing images as documentations of those travel stories.

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