

**Photography in tourism:
Vietnamese travellers' photographs and narrative-sharing
on the destination image of Northwest Vietnam.**

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Abstract

The internet and social media platforms have changed the way people search for travel information and share travel experiences after their journeys. As the world has become linked by a digital network, the practices of taking and sharing photographs and narratives have become a phenomenon that affects the tourism industry. However, there is little research exploring how photographs shared on online platforms represent the destination image of Vietnam. This study therefore sought an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of photography related practices performed by Vietnamese travellers in shaping the destination image of Northwest Vietnam. The study aimed to understand the formation process of the destination's image through the hermeneutic cycle of destination image representation, in which processes of forming the tourist gaze, social media-induced tourism, and constructing identities occur. The findings show that images of scenery and related indigenous culture present the destination image of Northwest Vietnam. Narratives accompanying the photographs also contributed to completing the circle of destination image representation. Mixed analysis methods were adopted to examine the collected data, including 12 travel threads and 1,543 photographs of Northwest Vietnam. Quantitative methods were used to calculate the code frequency of elements and themes in the photographs, and qualitative methods were used to analyse the qualitative contents accompanying photographs. The study contributes an example of the pictorial analysis technique and shows that photographs are effective for marketing a destination.

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List of Abbreviations

GDP	Gross Domestic Product
MMR	mixed-methods research
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
TPPs	Trip picture posters
WOM	Words of mouth
eWOM	Electronical words of mouth

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: ____

Mai Huong Dinh

Date: 04/12/20

1. Introduction

1.1. Research context

With the development of technology, taking photographs to preserve memories while travelling has become a prevalent and indispensable tourist activity. It is common to see tourists at destinations carrying smart devices such as cameras or smartphones for photo-taking. They capture photographs of the destination's landscapes or of themselves with the backdrops, which are mostly recognisable famous sites from their journeys. Thereafter, these photographs are shared widely with viewers who might become travellers.

As the world has become linked by a digital network, this behaviour has become a phenomenon that affects the tourism industry. Because of this, more and more researchers have noticed and studied this phenomenon (e.g. Chalfen, 1979; Dolan et al., 2019; Galí & Donaire, 2015; Herath et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2003; Jimura & Lee, 2020; Lim et al., 2012; Lo et al., 2011; McMullen, 2020; Urry & Larsen, 2011; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Osborne (2000) claimed that tourists exist to photograph and to be photographed, so everything in their sight would be transformed into images. The author also described that contemporary societies would be unimaginable and unrecognisable if there were no photographs and no tourists. At the start of the 20th century, Chalfen (1979) suggested that a camera was like a tourist's primary "identity badge"(p.436). Robinson and Picard (2009) stated that "to be a tourist, it would seem, it involves taking photographs" (p. 1). Konijn et al. (2016) described photographing as an indispensable activity making the travel journey of a tourist more enjoyable and the destination more recognisable.

With this interest in mind, this research aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of photographic related practices in the process of shaping a destination's image. This study does not focus on distinguishing the meaning of the two terms "traveller" and "tourist", but only considers them as general visitors to a destination.

The invention of the internet and social media platforms has changed the way people search for information for their journeys. Lo et al. (2011) stated that the internet has changed the process of searching for travel information and selecting destinations to

visit, hence, it could be seen as a core “info-structure” part of tourism in terms of travel information searches. Similarly, McMullen (2020) agreed that the way of searching and gathering travel information for tourists had shifted from collecting traditional material sources to surfing and searching for photographs and information on social networking sites. In the past, tourists mostly discovered information about new destinations through tour operators or traditional media resources such as television, newspapers, brochures, posters, and postcards. Now, it is easier for tourists to find this information on social media platforms, where photo-sharing practices of online users are prevalent. Similarly, Bordelon and Ferreira (2017) observed that with the rise of social media, contemporary tourists could easily access various unfiltered photographs archived in online photography-sharing websites. Thus, it is evident that online photograph-sharing practices play a significant role in discouraging or encouraging people to travel to specific destinations (McMullen, 2020).

There is a refining and development of social networking sites and increasing numbers of social media users. It was calculated that there were 1.5 billion social networking sites users in 2013 (Langaro et al., 2018). For inspiration or travel suggestions, social media plays an important role in providing information that people can find easily through their social networking sites (from friends or family) or online forums (reviews from peers). For example, a survey conducted in 2015 by the United States of America (US) Department of Commerce showed that approximately one-third of 25.4 million holiday travellers agreed that they became inspired to travel by social media, and more than 50% of travellers changed their plans after reading comments on social media (Sedera et al., 2017). It was also noted that the influence of social media on the decision-making processes of potential holidaymakers was an important means of adopting shared travel experiences from peers. For example, in a survey of Facebook users, more than 70% of participants agreed that they were inspired to travel by information on this social media platform, and specifically, 80% of travellers were motivated to visit Australia by seeing posts on Facebook (Sedera et al., 2017). Rather than just showing how people can become inspired to travel by a specific social platform such as Facebook, these examples emphasize the power of online connections in terms of influencing tourists’ behaviours. Besides, the growth of online travel forums, which are a type of social media platform of a particular interest, needs to be investigated (Jani et al., 2014). Jani et al. (2014) claimed that the significance of

travel forums was in the ability of the platform to provide an environment for electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in reviews from previous tourists or travellers about a destination, activity, or service.

It could be argued that one motivation for sharing travel experiences on social media platforms through photographs and related contents of tourists, is to seek attention from others. Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) described tourists or travellers who posted photographs on social media as “trip picture posters” (TPPs). Sedera et al. (2017) observed that the motivations of TPPs seemed to be linked with the urge to have fun, the satisfaction of sharing experiences with others, the proof of existence at a destination, and the hunger for fame. Hence, travel photographs posted on social media platforms tend to link to famous sites of a destination, which are easily recognisable and can prove TPPs were at a specific location. As a consequence, people tend to travel to specific locations which are considered must-visit travel spots shared by former travellers, in order to take photographs and share them on their social networking sites. Thus, the number of travel photographs on social media platforms that have pictures of famous tourist spots, seems to be more than those on less popular sites. For instance, Urry and Larsen (2011) studied travel photographs posted on the Flickr platform, and found that a large number of photographs of famous sites: 372,316 photographs of the Eiffel Tower, 170,966 of the Taj Mahal, 2,242,591 of Las Vegas, 364,841 of the Lake District, and 105,716 of the Bilbao Guggenheim museum.

As discussed, the relationship between taking and sharing travel photographs and destination image has been studied by many scholars (e.g. Chalfen, 1979; Dolan et al., 2019; Galí & Donaire, 2015; Garrod, 2009; Jenkins, 2003; Jimura & Lee, 2020; Lim et al., 2012; Lo et al., 2011; McMullen, 2020; Urry & Larsen, 2011; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). However, in terms of studying this relationship in the Vietnamese context, there is little significant research exploring how the photographs shared on online platforms represent the destination image of Vietnam. Furthermore, the Vietnamese tourism market has become a tourism consumption market in southeast Asia. However, there is still lack of attention to the influence of photography and the photography-related practices of Vietnamese tourists on social media platforms, specifically, on the destination image of Northwest Vietnam.

The World Travel and Tourism Council estimated that the tourism market of the regions of south-east Asia, east Asia and the Pacific, contributed 59 billion USD to the gross domestic product (GDP) of the region's economy and created 8.2 million jobs in 2010. Vietnam, specifically, has been seen as an emerging economy with rapid growth in the tourism market (Bui & Jolliffe, 2011). According to Bui and Jolliffe (2011), in a population of 89 million people, there are around 25 million potential domestic travellers. Hence, the domestic tourism market of Vietnam is considered a significant potential market; however, it has been neglected by the Vietnamese Government. In 2014, the Vietnamese tourism market generated USD 9,3 billion, representing 9.3% of the national GDP and contributing 7.7% of total employment. There was a record of 38.5 million domestic travellers and 7.9 million international travellers (Peyvel & Vo, 2016). In terms of famous tourist spots in the Northwest region of Vietnam, there are some significant attractions and resources that can represent the destination image: majestic mountains, rice terrace fields, and the indigenous people's culture.

1.2. Study location

The Northwest region of Vietnam is in a mountainous area, and shares borders with Laos and China (Image 1). There are six provinces in the region: Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Hoa Binh, Son La, Lao Cai and, Yen Bai.

Image 1

Northwest Vietnam



Note. From *Wikipedia*.

(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Northwestern_in_Vietnam.svg#filelinks).

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Rugged and high mountain and multi-layered terrain areas are significant features of the geography of the Northwest region. A large part of the region is occupied by the slopes running from the northwest to the southeast. Therefore, the climate of the region is quite variable and affected by the elevation. The Northwest region also has a diverse indigenous population of over 20 ethnic groups, of which the Thai people account for the majority. Due to the unique geographical landscapes and diversity of the indigenous groups, the Northwest region possesses significant tourism potential. The beautiful landscapes of terraced fields cultivated on majestic mountains and the unique cultures make this an attractive destination.

1.3. Study aims and research questions

The aim of this study was to understand how the photographs and text descriptions shared on travel forum represented the destination image of the Northwest area of Vietnam. This study provides information for destination marketers of the Northwest region by studying the behaviour of Vietnamese TPPs related to photography and destination image. It aimed to answer three research questions:

RQ1. What kinds of photographs do Vietnamese TPPs travelling to the Northwest region of Vietnam share on travel forums?

RQ2. What kinds of narratives (related to photograph description purposes) do Vietnamese TPPs use to describe their experiences of the Northwest region of Vietnam?

RQ3. How is the destination image of the Northwest region of Vietnam formed through the practices of taking and sharing photographs and writing narratives by Vietnamese TPPs who travel to the region?

1.4. Research methods

This study employed pictorial analysis and netnography as the research methods, using secondary data from a popular online travel forum in Vietnam. Ghauri (2005) pointed out that secondary data collection helped researchers save time and money by accessing data that are readily available. Netnography is also known as “online ethnography”, was formulated by Robert Kozinets in 1997 and is a useful research method for studying tourists’ behaviours in online environments (Mkono, 2013). Kozinets (2010) defined *netnography* as a participant-observational research method based on online fieldwork to gain an understanding of a phenomenon. In addition, the pictorial analysis methods of visual data analysis and narrative content analysis (Kuhzady & Ghasemi, 2019) were adopted to analyse data in form of images and their descriptions. According to Song and Kim (2016), the pictorial analysis method is suitable for analysing the projected image and perceived image of a destination based on picture data resources shared on social media sites by TPPs. All secondary data resources for this study were referenced from the posts and comments on the popular travel review website for Vietnamese tourists: Phuot.vn.

1.5. Dissertation structure

This dissertation comprises six chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion. This first chapter introduced and established the background to the study and provided the research questions. The second chapter reviews and discusses the literature related to the research aims, and the third chapter articulates the philosophical position and study methodology. The mixed-research methods used to analyse visual data and travel stories accompanying photographs are also explained in this chapter. The fourth chapter presents the findings from collecting and analysing data from 12 travel threads. The fifth chapter discusses the findings in comparison with the relevant literature, and the final chapter revisits the research questions, and presents the limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on the impact of tourism photography on destination image and shows that destination image formation is a closed and repetitive process between subjects with similar interests.

The process of forming a destination image is interpreted in a hermeneutic cycle model of destination image representation. With the advent of the internet, online social platforms now shape the destination image in travellers' minds through online sharing interactions (e.g. photographs and narratives), in which processes of perceiving and reproducing images of the destination take place continuously from person to person.

The process occurs in social (external factors) and individual (internal factors) environments. In terms of the influence of external impacts, the advent of the internet has provided convenient tools for travellers to easily access information for their future trips. In this, the practice of sharing travel photographs on social media platforms of experienced travellers is believed to be part of creating the first images of the destination in new travellers' perceptions and creating the phenomenon of social media-induced tourism. The processes of constructing identities and self-determination also play an important role in influencing travel decisions and the process of reproducing the destination image later.

2.2. Photography and travellers.

The invention of photography in 1839 by Louis Daguerre has changed the way to enjoy journeys (Jimura & Lee, 2020). Photographic practices allow travellers to document and preserve memories of their trip through visual images such as photographs. Therefore, the links between photography and tourism have been studied by many researchers (e.g. Belk & Hsiu-yen, 2011; Chalfen, 1979; Herath et al., 2020; Lo et al., 2011; McMullen, 2020). In the historic flow of studying the connection between photography and tourism, Chalfen (1979) recognized that there was a lack of up to date systematic research about this relationship, so he examined the limitations and restrictions around tourists' motives for taking photographs. Following this, in 1988, Albers and James introduced a visual methodology for studying tourist photography, and in 1990, Urry presented the concept of the tourist gaze (McMullen, 2020). These

studies have contributed to forming the foundation for later research in tourism photography.

Tourism photography is seen as a must-do activity while travelling, to record and transform intangible experiences into tangible evidence of the presence of travellers at a destination. Similarly, Pan et al. (2014) described *photography* as an art, and a record made by freezing time to reflect the photographer's own mental images about physical elements they encountered, to give form to a memory of places. Belk and Hsiu-yen (2011) suggested that a traveller's camera is a positive symbol representing a curious traveller or a negative stigmatizing mark of one who did not belong to the destination. Although local people may carry cameras or smart phones with them, the photographs they take might not be similar to those captured by tourists. Thus, a camera can be considered as a mask worn by travellers separating the self from the locals (Belk & Hsiu-yen, 2011). This difference leads to a need to interpreting the meaning of travel photography. Nikjoo and Bakhshi (2019) defined *travel photography* as a genre of photography, in which tourists use their cameras to capture people, cultural and historical architecture, or particular sites in a destination, to create their travel stories and provide evidence of their presence at destinations.

Photographs seem to take a role in motivating people to travel to specific places or similar locations. Constantly perceiving repeated and similar images forms a travellers' perception of the destination image. Similarly, Jimura and Lee (2020), who studied the impacts of photographs on motivating people to visit Japanese-style inns, agreed that great photographs inspired and motivated customers to travel to specific places. By way of explanation, while tourism provides opportunities for people to escape their daily life and encounter different authentic experiences (Osborne, 2000), taking and sharing photographs helps to keep memories and prove their existence at a specific location. This practice helps to shape the destination image in tourists' minds. As a result, each destination tries to promote its own unique and various attractions, which can create the destination's identity or image that can attract tourists for photography-related practices.

The concept of a destination image was first proposed by Gunn (1972), who wrote that the image of a destination is formed by travellers' impressions through experiences and word of mouth (WOM). Similarly, Crompton (1979) described this concept as a

sum of impressions, ideas, or beliefs of an individual about a destination. In general, the destination image of a place is formed in a person's mind from prior knowledge and impressions.

The cognitive evaluation of a destination image not only requires internal reflection of the process of acquiring knowledge from the practice of searching the source of information but is also affected by variables such as motivations, needs, prior knowledge from others (e.g. WOM), age, education, and psychological and socio-cultural characteristics (Donaire et al., 2014). Galí and Donaire (2015) distinguished research on a destination image as having two different forms: projected images and perceived images. A *projected image* which can be seen as the ideas or impressions of a person about a destination, created by the hosts of the destination with the aim of promoting it to attract tourists. To the contrary, a *perceived image* is a product of the interactions between the projected images and prospective tourists as a set of values, ideas or ideologies about a destination, built in the tourist's mind through experience and knowledge (Ferrer-Rosell & Marine-Roig, 2020; Galí & Donaire, 2015). The sources of projected images are newspapers, magazines or guidebooks published by the hosts of the destinations, whereas perceived images are created from tourists' own experiences or others' experiences based on their previous trips or current one, and can be spread by WOM or eWOM via social platforms in which travel photographs are widely shared.

2.3. The internet, social media and social media-induced tourism

Social media platforms are internet-based applications or services built on the technological foundations of the social web that allow individuals to connect with each other to generate, share, and exchange content about their stories, opinions, reviews, and interests (Dolan et al., 2019; Langaro et al., 2018; Lim et al., 2012; Sedera et al., 2017). In terms of destination information searching, the development of modern technology has provided many tools and platforms for contemporary tourists. Among them, social media platforms are seen as the most prevalent and effective searching methods.

Many researchers have agreed that consumers tend to use social media platforms as primary tools for searching for information about future destinations, planning for upcoming travel plans, memorising past travel events and sharing real travel

experiences with others (Dolan et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2012; McMullen, 2020). Thus, travellers tend to use social media platforms regularly before, during, and after their trips. One of the important features of social media is that it facilitates an environment for interactions between users, generating information, influencing tourists' consumption choices, and fostering social and cultural capital (Dolan et al., 2019).

In the digital era, eWOM has changed the way of interactions between travellers. Sedera et al. (2017) argued that in terms of the relationship between sharing practices and travelling, the influence of social media was strong in two primary positions: through eWOM, and when individuals were in unfamiliar circumstances. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) defined *WOM* as a communication method between consumers sharing personal experiences about products or services. While *WOM* tends to be a personal, usually face to face communication, eWOM is conducted on social networking sites with less personal and more ubiquitous conversations. Particularly of the acquaintances connecting on the social networking sites of an individual, researchers suggested that the influence of family and friends seemed to be stronger in terms of making leisure travel decisions (Sedera et al., 2017). Likewise, Sedera et al. (2017), Kim and Stepchenkova (2015) and Gretzel and Yoo (2008) agreed that opinions or tourism-product reviews on social networking sites could shape consumers' travel expectations before, and satisfaction after, their trips.

The influence of social networking sites can even change an individual's mindset after deciding on travel. People tend to check reviews posted by others (e.g. destinations, scenic areas, and the quality of a hotel or services) on social media platforms before making travel decisions. For that reason, eWOM is influential in promoting destination or travel services. Lim et al. (2012) pointed out that reviews found on online social media and visual images had empowered destination marketers to exploit the effectiveness of eWOM. This means eWOM is seen as an effective tool influencing purchasing decisions of consumers at no cost to the hosts and faster than traditional marketing tools. Similarly, Ryan and Deci (2017) observed that in the increasingly global market economies, mass media and well-crafted imaging have become productive tools for influencing people's lives. These tools shape and encourage people to define themselves in personal environments according to the perfectly promoted widely images such as fashion styles, idolising celebrities, and commodity-

based identities. Thus, in terms of destination images, visual advertisements such as photographs with textual information (e.g. eWOM) shared through social media platforms, have an important role in creating and projecting particular travel destination images in users' minds and encouraging them to travel to such destinations (Jimura & Lee, 2020).

Given the globalisation of social media platforms, these arguments suggest a different aspect of tourism related to social media: the concept of "social media-induced tourism." Shin and Xiang (2019) explained this concept as a phenomenon in which many people travel to a destination or attraction as a result of being exposed to content posted on social media platforms. For instance, the Delta Lake in Grand Teton National Park (US) became a popular attraction after a few posts were uploaded by social media influencers on Instagram. As a consequence, the lake now welcomes more than 145 visitors a day compared to only one or two visitors in the past (Shin & Xiang, 2019). Hence, Shin and Xiang (2019) suggested four major aspects to studying this phenomenon: users' (e.g. internal motivations, content consumers and creators), technical features on social media platforms (e.g. threads, views, likes, and comments), attractions in content (e.g. photographs of destinations), and online communication. These aspects are discussed in this study.

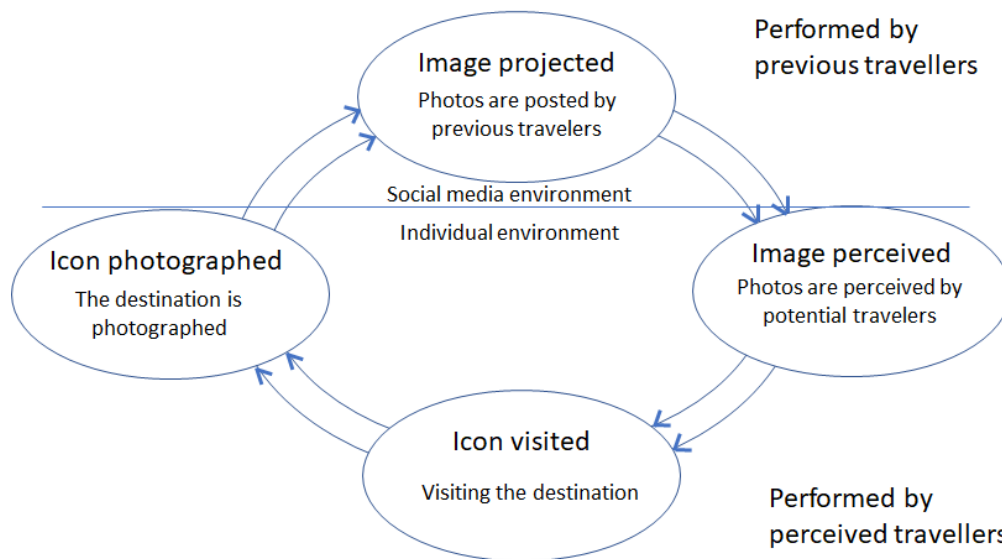
2.4. The hermeneutic circles of destination image representation

Destination image is an important factor contributing to decision-making of tourists and shaping their perceptions of a tourist destination. This phenomenon can be explained by the concept of "the hermeneutic circle of representation", which was suggested by Jenkins (Jenkins, 2003, p. 307). This concept is based on the notion of "culture as shared meanings" (Hall, 1997, p. 3), visual images are important elements in the circles of culture, sharing through many different practices and processes (Jenkins, 2003). The decision-making of tourists is influenced by destination imageries, encouraging them to photograph and reinforce their destination imageries. Butler and Hall (1998) observed that individuals have their own image of a place, which is affected by the image promotion of a place circulating in their culture and the process of acquiring new information from external sources. The relationship between mass tourism and photography was therefore considered by Urry and Larsen (2011), who

suggested that photography altered ways of searching and perceiving information about new destinations.

Figure 1

Hermeneutic circles of destination image representation



Note. This figure presented 4 stages of circles of destination image representation. Adapted from “Photography and travel brochures: The circle of representation”, by O. Jenkins, 2003, *Tourism Geographies*, 5(3), p. 308 (<https://doi-org.ezproxy.aut.ac.nz/10.1080/14616680309715>). Copyright 2003 by Taylor & Francis.

Jenkins (2003) explained the impact of photographs on prospective tourists using the circle of representation of tourist destination images, starting from the top of the circle (Figure 1). At first, mass media such as reviews or travel threads posted by travellers on social networking sites take a part in creating the initial projected images that influence the desire to travel for others. When tourists visit the destination previously desired, projected images which they had perceived through mass media can motivate them to visit tourist icons or famous attractions and record the experiences with cameras, to prove their visit. Park and Kim (2018) noted that tourists tend to choose places or activities which they have seen on travel photographs, so take photographs

or pose in similar settings to prove their presence at the location. Stylianou-Lambert (2012) found similarities between these photographs, and those of landscapes previously produced by tourists, and of postcards. Similarly, McMullen (2020) agreed that the motivations and experiences of individuals in a location are affected by the images or photographs which they have seen previously. Donaire et al. (2014) explained that the images tourists had, were perceived images *in situ*, and photographs were seen as a way of recalling memories and summarising the tourists' perceived images. These photographs are later shown to their family, friends, or acquaintances via social media platforms as posts or even as physical photographs. After returning from a trip, memories and experiences from the destination create complex perceived images (Donaire et al. (2014). Therefore, the tourists' photographs can be considered as another form of projected images and begin another similar cycle of representation which will influence other prospective tourists' perceived images.

As discussed, taking photographs has become an indispensable practice of tourists, and a travel photograph is seen as proof of the presence of tourists at a particular destination. In the last stage of the circle (see Figure 1), tourists are not only seen as consumers of places by being influenced by previous images, but also reproducers of later images which are likely to become new re-projected images for other prospective tourists. Chalfen (1979) suggested that different individuals tend to employ different practices in taking photographs and document their authentic experiences in different ways due to the differences in motivations and expectations. Many studies have showed that the majority of travel photographs taken by tourists are similar to each other, and replicate the commercially projected images advertised by the destinations' hosts (e.g. Chalfen, 1979; McMullen, 2020; Park & Kim, 2018; Stylianou-Lambert, 2012; Urry & Larsen, 2011). McMullen (2020) observed that most travel photographs documenting personal experiences perpetuated the same must-see sites that tourists had seen in commercial travel imagery. Thus, McMullen (2020) described tourists as passive and active consumers of places as "they are shaped by these photographs just as much as the photographs are shaped by them" (p. 378).

2.5. Travellers as leisure photographic tourists

Most people travel to different locations to escape their working routines or refresh the self. For example, those living in urban areas are likely to have their holidays in the countryside, or even travel to countries that are not familiar to them. Therefore, these types of travellers who tend to look for destinations where the environments are different from their regular habitat, can be called “leisure travellers”. Chan et al. (2012) described *leisure* as a way people enjoy time when they are not committed to obligatory work. Tourism-related activities can be considered as leisure, because they aim to make people feel relaxed, regain energy, become creative, or overcome physical or mental problems.

Travelling as leisure helps to release stress and contribute to balancing human life. Leisure travellers tend to seek positive emotions and psychological well-being through extraordinary experiences while travelling. Lee et al. (2008) suggested that positive emotions such as joy, arousal, and pleasure, are generated by taking leisure trips or going to festivals, and influence intentions to revisit. Likewise, Huang et al. (2020) suggested that positive emotions and extraordinary experiences from engaging with leisure tourism, satisfied three psychological needs (see section 2.7, self-determination theory), which may increase positive intentions to revisit the destinations.

Travellers as *leisure photography tourists* can be described as those who undertake trips with the intention of performing photographic practices. They tend to visit particular sites or destinations they have seen on social media, to photograph the iconic uniqueness of the destinations. Taking and sharing photographs are seen as leisure activities while travelling, and these photographers visit specific locations in the expectation of seeking a view they have previously seen in images. Garrod (2009) pointed out that the similarity between these travellers’ photographs and previously constructed images, showed the existence of a closed circle of destination image representation.

2.6. The tourist gaze and the practice of taking and sharing photographs of leisure travellers

Urry and Larsen (2011) defined the *tourist gaze* as the phenomenon in which tourists see and perceive destinations, in which images and performances of photography contributed to constructing the gazes of tourists, and vice versa. A gaze can be a snap,

a blink, or a glance. However, each person has a different way of employing their gaze on a place according to the occasion, which means that they tend to gaze and photograph in different ways in different places (Höckert et al., 2018; Jenkins, 2003). With their own tourist's gaze, photographs help create the first gaze for travellers who have not been to destinations or document what was there for tourists who were already there. Photographs can be seen as a "block of space-time," and a "clock of seeing," by freezing time, conserving objects, and making a moment permanent (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 129). Furthermore, the development of technology and the internet has made photography mobile. When there are photograph opportunities, it seems almost compulsory for tourists to take and share photographs (Urry & Larsen, 2011), to turn intangible experiences into tangible evidence. Thus, when travelling, everything seems to be completed in a photograph.

During a trip, taking and sharing photographs is seen as a leisurely and ritualised activity. Tourists take an active role when they proactively frame and explore destinations, and assume a passive role when they are framed and fixed in their photographs themselves (Urry & Larsen, 2011), which later affects the process of reproducing the tourist gaze for prospective travellers. Therefore, through the practice of constructing and organizing photographs, Cederholm (2004) found that travel photography was a tool for framing extraordinary experiences of travelling and influencing the process of forming and reproducing the tourist gaze.

2.7. Constructing identities through sharing photographs and narratives

The concept of self-identity has been debated and studied by many researchers; however, the explanations of this remain vague in the literature. Michael et al. (2020) argued that concepts of self and identity influence people's motivations and decision-making processes such as what to do, how to think and behave, and how to make sense of themselves. Many researchers have agreed that an individual has two identities: individual identities and social identities (e.g. Michael et al., 2020; Oyserman et al., 2012; Yan & Halpenny, 2019). *Personal identity* is what makes one different or similar to others and aware of their own being, whereas *social identity* is how an individual's behaviour or status is viewed in social groups (Michael et al., 2020). This study discusses the practice of taking and sharing photographs and narratives from the perspective of the social identities of travellers in their social community.

It is common to see photographs shared on travel forums with the owners' descriptions; by sharing narratives, travellers perform their social identities. Michael et al. (2020) suggested that the practice of participating in social groups helps bond different individuals and re-shape their social identities. People will commit to and behave consistently with a specific role, if they want to be seen in that role by society (Bond & Falk, 2013). For example, Hibbert et al. (2013) found that one of their participants admitted that her motivation for travelling was inspired by listening to her daughter's travel stories from when she was a backpacker. Also, Noy (2004) found that inexperienced backpackers tended to be influenced by stories told by experienced ones through the practice of sharing, and this become a cycle of sharing between backpackers. Similarly, Bond and Falk (2013) agreed that encountering more experienced people in specific interesting fields might lead to the process of re-imagining or reconstructing the existing social identities of people. In this case, photographs with narratives on social media platforms contribute to constructing tourists' social identities as leisure photography tourists in terms of sharing knowledge and emotions after each trip.

The more individuals feel connected to a community, the more they tend to engage with that community and become enthusiastic about sharing experiences and knowledge. In the case of taking and sharing photographs, individuals act as content creators or reproducers of destination images, which plays an important role in leading potential travellers to the destination. This indicates that the more individuals feel connected, the more they tend to share detailed travel experiences such as photographs and narratives.

Briefly, this phenomenon can be explained by self-determination theory (SDT), introduced by Ryan and Deci (2017). Self-determination theory encompasses six mini theories (cognitive evaluation, organismic integration, causality orientations, basic psychological needs, goal contents, and relationships motivation) and concerns how social context factors affect the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which are considered driving forces for motivations and behaviours. Aicher and Brenner (2015), based on SDT, summarized three basic needs: (1) *autonomy* is the state of endorsement feelings of people in an activity chosen by themselves, (2) *competence* is the state of feeling

capable, self-confident and efficacious in an activity, and (3) *relatedness* is the state of desire to connect with others through social interactions. Ryan and Deci (2017) observed that people with similar interests associated with those having similar activities, values, and relationships, as these tended to attract people to each other, so their practices become the centre of people's lives. This keeps them performing well in their community by satisfying their relatedness needs through practices of (for example) sharing information and photographs. In terms of the practice of taking and sharing photographs and narratives, based on the concept of SDT, Nov et al. (2010) divided factors influencing human motivations such as self-development (e.g. in upskilling in photography), enjoyment (e.g. taking and sharing their own experiences with pleasure), building a reputation within the community (e.g. being known and noticed by others) and commitment to the community (e.g. willingness to answer other members' questions related to the topic).

2.8. Conclusion

Taking and sharing photographs is a tourism phenomenon that is believed to create an impact in shaping destination image. Together with photographs, narratives shared by experienced travellers on social media platforms also play an important role in guiding future travellers, contributing to the circle of destination representation. While photographs form a part of creating the first impression, accompanying narratives tend to provide more information about these photographs such as with travel guides or stories of the owner's thoughts. This phenomenon is the result of processes of perceiving and reproducing images occurring in individual and social environments. The internet and social media platforms nurture a richly interactive environment for interpersonal communications to occur, making these communications easy and mobile, so experienced travellers can share their stories with a click on their smart technology (e.g. laptops, smartphones). Also, information can be spread to others with similar interests in less than a minute. Cognisant of this, the present study aims to gain an understanding of the phenomenon based on the concept of the hermeneutic cycle of destination image representation, social media-induced tourism, and the process of constructing identities and self-determination.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This study views the phenomenon of taking and sharing online photographs and narratives from the stance of an interpretive researcher, in which the subject is studied from the philosophical position of a relativist ontology (see Ling, 2017; Scotland, 2012) and a subjective epistemology (see Marsh & Furlong, 2002). This chapter explains how the mixed-methodology research approaches (MMR) (e.g. the visual method and netnography) were applied. Data analysis methods of pictorial analysis and content analysis were employed as suitable MMR approaches. A thematic framework resulting from the pictorial analysis was used to illustrate and interpret the main themes and subthemes of the study.

3.2. Research philosophy

3.2.1. *Research paradigm*

This study based on the interpretive paradigm, studied the phenomenon of taking and sharing online photographs and narratives on a Vietnamese travel forum by Vietnamese TPPs, and how these practices influence the destination image of Northwest Vietnam. Interpretive researchers believe that reality is socially constructed and can only be studied through observation and interpretation. According to Ling (2017), the interpretive paradigm is a process in which the researchers base their understanding on related literature and theory, start investigating, collect logical evidence, and produce their own knowledge about the studied phenomenon. However, the outcome is always personal and subjective because it is based on an individual's understanding (Ling, 2017). To clarify, studying the same phenomenon, different individuals will have their own and different explanations based on their own and different interpretations (Scotland, 2012).

Adopting the interpretive view, by studying relevant literature, I generated a set of assumptions and point of view on the research subject, the practices of Vietnamese TPPs and their influences on the destination image of Northwest Vietnam. From the stance of interpretivism, I see the photographic related practices as a phenomenon in which the experiences of individuals of the external world are subjective. Observing

and examining social constructions in-depth, such as online sharing practices (e.g. photographs, reviews) was required to gain a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. Data were collected from 12 topics posted on a well-known travel forum. Each topic with its pictures and contents generated by Vietnamese TPPs, contributed to answering my research questions.

3.2.2. *Ontological and epistemological positions*

The concepts of *ontology* and *epistemology* are philosophical aspects which are a set of assumptions about a person's perceptions of reality, such as the nature of existence and knowledge, respectively (Ling, 2017; Marsh and Furlong, 2002; Scotland, 2012).

According to Scotland (2012), the ontological position of interpretivism is relativism, which holds that reality is subjective and different between individuals. Reality is constructed personally by one sense and emerges when one consciousness engages with a meaning object that had not yet been discovered (Ling, 2017; Scotland, 2012). In this study, the practice of taking and sharing online photographs was believed to link with individuals' identities and contribute to forming the destination image of the Northwest region of Vietnam.

Epistemology, from the stance of interpretivism, refers to how knowledge is acquired subjectively, based on a real phenomenon (Scotland, 2012). The meaning of objects exists and waits to be discovered through the interaction of a human's consciousness with the world. Marsh and Furlong (2002) wrote that an epistemological view reflects on how individuals can know about the world, and how they can know it. In applying a subjective epistemology in this study, I believe that each phenomenon has a meaning, and by reviewing the literature, I could combine the findings from the literature with the findings from my research, to explain and support inferences about the phenomenon studied.

3.3. Research methodology

3.3.1. *Mixed-methods research approaches strategy*

Truong et al. (2020) examined social research approaches in eight tourism and hospitality journals and found that MMR had become common in social research disciplines. Mixed methods research combines qualitative and quantitative

approaches in its methodologies (Truong et al., 2020). Depending on researchers, both quantitative and qualitative research methods are used, contain strengths and weaknesses. Researchers use qualitative methods to understand social issues such as the process of generating or interpreting, while quantitative methods are more appropriate to collecting and measuring data, and explaining a phenomenon with numbers (Truong et al., 2020). Truong et al. (2020) claimed that adopting MMR could provide deeper insights and a better understanding of a phenomenon or a research problem than if one approach alone were used.

Based on the study's aims, and previous studies that adopted the pictorial analysis technique (e.g. Herath et al., 2020; Kuhzady & Ghasemi, 2019; Song & Kim, 2016), the MMR strategy was considered appropriate to this study. According to Herath et al. (2020), the MMR strategy provided reliable outcomes for their case study of the photographic representation of the tourism industry in Sri Lanka, in which the meaning represented by photographs, themes or patterns was explained with a qualitative method, while the number of photographic samples was calculated quantitatively.

The present research adopted MMR to study the travel photographic related phenomenon and the process of forming the destination image of Northwest Vietnam. A visual research method was employed to examine the representational readings of photographs (see Hunter, 2012), and netnography was used for analysing and interpreting the textual contents accompanying the photographs. Thus, the visual research method is considered as the quantitative approach and netnography as the qualitative one.

3.3.2. *The visual research method*

According to Rakić and Chambers (2012), "much of tourism is about images" (p. 4). Travelling can be a process of searching for photogenic images, and collecting and accumulating photographs (Jenkins, 2003) of iconic visual representations of a destination. Hunter (2008) described the concept of photographic representations in tourism in which the original characteristics of a destination were transformed and conveyed to become a promotion for a destination. Thus, visual methods were considered as effective means for studying this tourism phenomenon, which is difficult to explore using traditional non-visual methods. Moreover, in terms of online social networks, visual methods work effectively to help researchers understand tourists'

experiences and perceptions about a destination through user-created visual contents on social media platforms (Hunter, 2012; 2016).

In tourism research, there are various different methods relating to visual study. These can be divided into three types: 1) visual data collected as secondary data; 2) visual data created for the purpose of the research project, and 3) using techniques of elicitation to create visual data (Jokela & Raento, 2012). The first type of visual methods was adopted in this study, in which the data were analysed based on the pictorial analysis technique and a thematic framework (see section 3.5).

3.3.3. Netnography

Conti and Lexhagen (2020) argued that using netnography to analyse content posted with photographs could provide valuable data to study reflecting travellers' experiences. Netnography is a commonly-used tool for studying cultures and communities in online environments (Conti & Lexhagen, 2020; Mkono, 2013), and how topic-generated content such as photographs and text on an online travel forum influences others' travel behaviours. Kozinets (2010) defined *netnography* as participant-observational research based on online fieldwork to gain an understanding of a phenomenon. In this study, I employed the lurker form of four types (lurker, spy, observer, and participant) (Mkono, 2013) in netnographic research. Mkono (2013) described a researcher as a passive observer in the lurker form. As a lurker, a researcher does not communicate or interact with other members on social media communities. Mkono (2013) found that combining netnography with one or more different methods could ensure the rigour of research methods and provide different insights into a phenomenon. However, the qualitative method in MMR is dependent on the researchers' purposes and the research topic to be applied appropriately.

3.4. Data collection

Since the invention of the internet, people have surfed online to look for information. Online forums are platforms where people can easily find information and communicate with each other, generating and sharing opinions, experiences, reviews, and feelings. Law (2009) described online forums as having a less formal structure and aiming to promote an environment where users can obtain advice from fellow travellers or on travel-related threads.

This study considered online materials as the main source for collecting data. The challenge in collecting online materials is to decide where to collect data and determine which or whom the data will represent. According to Rakić and Chambers (2012), because the internet provides an open and democratic environment for people to comment on or post reviews or opinions, these information resources can be either useful or a burden to a researcher. The instability of data storage on the internet is also considered a difficulty in the research process.

In this study, data such as photographs and textual contents such as descriptions, narratives, comments, and reviews were collected as secondary data. Data were collected from a popular Vietnamese travel forum, Phuot.vn. Taking the aforementioned concerns into account, the study focused only on the Northwest region of Vietnam. Twelve threads in the northern Vietnam category were selected (Table 1). Because this forum was an online forum for local people, the main language used was Vietnamese. However, because Vietnamese is my native language and English is my second one, hence, there was no difficulty or language barrier preventing the reading, comprehending, and translating data for researching.

Table1

List of Threads Selected for this Study

Number	Topic name	Creator code name	Link
1	Thương nhớ Đồng Văn (Dong Van nostalgia)	TPP 1	https://www.phuot.vn/threads/thuong-nho-dong-van.28476/
2	Mùa Hè Tây Bắc (Summer in the Northwest)	TPP 2	https://www.phuot.vn/threads/mua-he-tay-bac.113541/
3	Mùa vàng trên thung lũng Bắc Sơn (ripe season in Bac Son valley)	TPP 3	https://www.phuot.vn/threads/mua-vang-tren-thung-lung-bac-son.119435/

4	Hà Giang Độc Hành - Ký sự qua ảnh (Full 135 Pic) (Alone in Ha Giang – a photographic chronicle)	TPP 4	https://www.phuot.vn/threads/ha-giang-doc-hanh-ky-su-qua-anh-full-135-pic.175815/
5	Hà Giang: mùa hoa Tam Giác Mạch về (Ha Giang: Buckwheat flowers season)	TPP 5	https://www.phuot.vn/threads/ha-giang-mua-hoa-tam-giac-mach-ve.171587/
6	Sapa, Ô Quy Hồ, Sa Pả, Mường Hoa,... Những Ngày Đông Rực Rỡ T11/2014 (Sapa, O Quy Ho, Sa Pa, Muong Hoa ... wonderful winter days)	TPP 6	https://www.phuot.vn/threads/sapa-o-quy-ho-sa-pa-muong-hoa-nhung-ngay-dong-ruc-ro-t11-2014.176335/
7	5 ngày, 6 đêm 1528 km (5 days, 6 nights, 1528 kilometres)	TPP 7	https://www.phuot.vn/threads/5-ngay-6-dem-1528-km.200820/
8	Tây Bắc mùa lúa chín (Ripe season in the Northwest)	TPP 8	https://www.phuot.vn/threads/tay-bac-mua-lua-chin-hinh-anh-lich-lua-chin.226588/
9	Đường lên Tây Bắc của Ngổ (phần I) - Tiếng gọi của núi rừng, của những cơn mưa nguồn (Ngo's diary: to the Northwest (part 1) – the echo of mountains, forests, and rains)	TPP 9	https://www.phuot.vn/threads/duong-len-tay-bac-cua-ngo-phan-i-tieng-goi-cua-nui-rung-cua-nhung-con-mua-nguon.286663/
10	Một lần đến Lào Cai - Yên Bái ngắm mùa lúa chín (Watching ripe season in Lao Cai – Yen Bai)	TPP 10	https://www.phuot.vn/threads/mot-lan-den-lao-cai-yen-bai-ngam-mua-lua-chin.366572/
11	Độc hành Lạng Sơn - Cao Bằng - Hà Giang (Alone in Lang Son – Cao Bang – Ha Giang)	TPP 11	https://www.phuot.vn/threads/doc-hanh-lang-son-cao-bang-ha-giang.360807/
12	Nhật ký Hà Giang - Quản Bạ - Đồng	TPP 12	https://www.phuot.vn/threads

	Văn - Mèo Vạc - Du Già (07/2019) (The journey diary: Ha Giang – Quan Ba – Dong Van – Meo Vac – Du Già)		ds/nhat-ky-ha-giang-quan-ba-dong-van-meo-vac-du-gia-07-2019.365355/
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3.5. Data analysis

3.5.1. Pictorial analysis

The purpose of the study was to understand the influence of tourists' photographs shared online on the destination's image, and on other tourists' perceived images. Hence, the process of analysing visual data used a direct analysis approach. Collier (2011) explained that this analysis approach sought to examine the content and character of images, or the perspectives of makers of the data, to extract understandings.

I focused on analysing photographs as products of tourists under the influence of the hermeneutic circle of destination image representation (see Urry & Larsen, 2011). I understood that the analysis process might reflect my bias and how I viewed the visual data based on my understandings gained from the literature. The process I used followed the basic model, including the four steps introduced by Collier and Collier in 1986 (Collier, 2011) (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Four steps in analysing visual data



Note. The figure summarised four steps in analysing visual data.

First stage: Observe the data as a whole and look at detail to discover the connection between contrasting patterns. This stage involves the subjective perception of the researcher.

Second stage: Depending on the purpose of the study, visual data are categorised according to the researcher's designed list to reflect and assist the research goals. Therefore, the categories of visual content must be explicit and relevant variables need to be defined in order to observe and quantify. Then, each variable contains different values which yield different categories to be observed and quantified (Bell, 2011)

Third stage: Analyse the data according to specific questions and with specific methods (measuring, counting, or comparing, etc). Statistical data can be presented in graphs or tables or entered into a spreadsheet or software for statistical analysis.

Fourth stage: From the results of the third stage, the researcher returns to the complete visual record, searches for significant meanings, re-establishes the context, lays out the data (i.e. photographs) and reviews them in their entirety to write conclusions.

The main aim of the research was to study photographs representing the destination image of Northwest Vietnam. Hence, the study focused on travel threads posted about the area of the northern Vietnam. Only travel threads whose contents related to Northwest Vietnam containing interactions from fellow users were selected. In the second step, photographs from all the selected threads were collected and categorised into particular themes, which are presented in the next chapter. Each theme contained more than one coded element. Following this, each coded element presented in a photograph was counted as one for each corresponding appearance. Therefore, a photograph would have more than one code counted. The data were processed in a Microsoft Excel file, using pivot tables, and presented in charts.

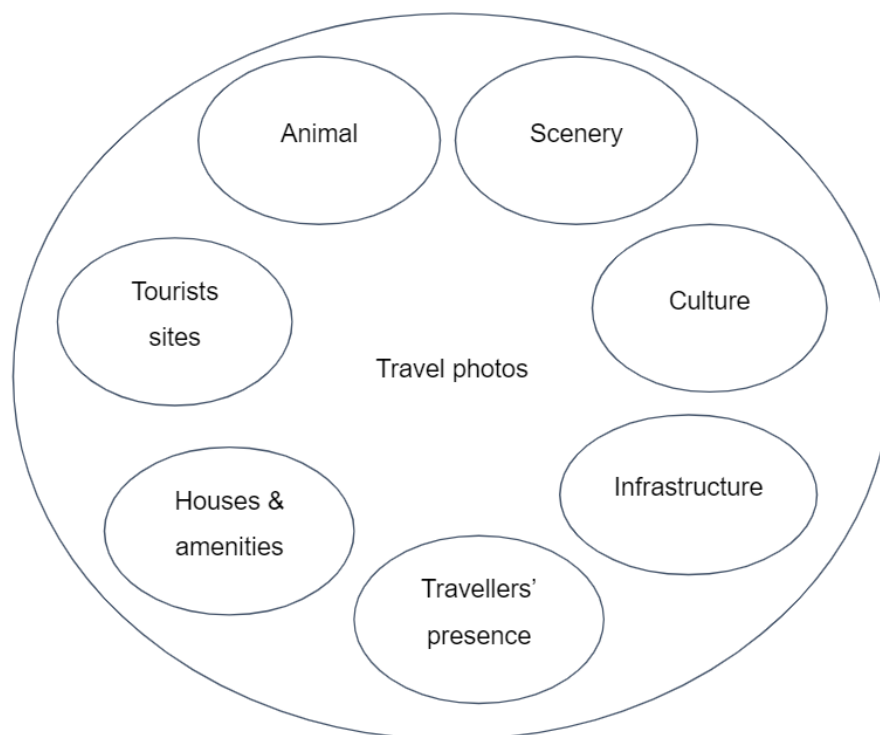
3.5.2. Thematic framework

Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined *thematic analysis* as the foundation method of qualitative approaches for identifying, conducting, organising, describing, and reporting themes within a data set. Nowell et al. (2017) claimed that thematic analysis was flexible and useful for examining different perspectives, generating in-depth and unanticipated insights,

summarising key features from a large set of data and helping to produce a clear and well-structured report. However, in this study, thematic analysis was only employed to provide an overview of the thematic framework resulting from the pictorial analysis. The coded elements were categorised into specific themes based on the subjective interpretation of the researcher. At stage two (Figure 2), there were 22 identified codes grouped into seven main themes, as presented in Figure 3, of the thematic model.

Figure 3

Thematic model resulting from the pictorial analysis



Note. The figure summarised seven themes resulting from the pictorial analysis method.

3.5.3. Qualitative content analysis

Content analysis was defined by Krippendorff in 1980 as an empirically grounded method with an explorative process and a predictive intent (Haldrup & Larsen, 2012).

By adopting this analysis method, this present study aimed to interpret and classify types of textual patterns posted, along with photographs, to give an overview of the contexts of the photographs, and provide more convincing readings by allowing a systematic process of picturing places, objects, people, and events through words (see Bell, 2011; Haldrup & Larsen, 2012). Haldrup and Larsen (2012) claimed that this analysis method was suitable for exploring studies related to simple counts of simple variables or unequivocal criteria.

After having an overview of all the threads in terms of textual narratives, all contents accompanying photographs were divided into three main types of narratives. Netnography was used to analyse the content and provide evidence for the researcher's conclusions. In this stage, categorising these types of textual data was according to my subjective views.

Contents posted to describe objects, events, phenomena, or a background contained in a photograph were classified as the first type (photograph description). In the first type, photographs were the main subjects.

Contents such as shared actual travel experiences that travel posters encountered when travelling (e.g. travel itineraries, travel guides, and tips) were grouped as the second type (travel experience description). Photographs posted along with this type are often used as supplementary visual information.

Finally, contents which were only used to express Vietnamese TPPs' feelings were considered as the last type of narratives (emotional description), in which photographs and contents were not related to each other in terms of the correspondence between visual and provided information in written words.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Anonymity is one of the major ethical considerations in visual research. It is considered as a barrier in terms of using people's names or photographs of people or places in a study, if the study is intended to be published (Tresidder, 2012). With this concern in mind, usernames of thread creators were all changed into alphanumeric code names (see Table 1). That is, this study does not disclose personal information of posters. Besides, with the advent of internet search engines and online photographs, copyright protection is also needed to protect ownership of materials (Tresidder, 2012). This

study used secondary data collected from a published travel forum; all data collected were publicly accessible. In order to abide by the copyright protections and due to the inability to reach thread posters to seek copyright permission (some users had not been active for a long time), the study also used alternative photographs similar to the thread posters' photographs for presenting examples. These alternative photographs are under the Creative Commons (CC) licence.

I took these ethical issues into consideration in collecting and processing the data.

3.7. Conclusion

This study adopted MMR to examine in-depth, a photographic phenomenon in tourism, using a large set of data collected from 12 travel threads. Based on the interpretive paradigm and understandings gained from the literature (Chapter 2), I considered MMR an appropriate methodology for gaining insights into the phenomenon studied, and comprehend more deeply, the practice of taking and sharing photographs and narratives by Vietnamese TPPs. The findings chapter presents the results of the data analysis undertaken in accordance with the three analysis techniques of pictorial analysis, thematical analysis and content analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the results of collecting and analysing 1,543 photographs from 12 travel threads in the forum Phuot.vn posted between 2011 and 2019. The study employed the pictorial analysis technique and a thematic model to analyse visual data, and the content analysis method to interpret travel narratives. Photographs were categorised into seven themes: “scenery,” “culture,” “vehicles and infrastructure,” “travellers’ presence,” “houses and amenities,” “tourist sites,” and “animals.” These themes were extrapolated from coded elements in Vietnamese TPPs’ photographs related to Northwest Vietnam, after examining the coding frequency in detail. Narratives accompanying photographs were grouped into three types: photograph descriptions, travel experience descriptions, and emotional descriptions.

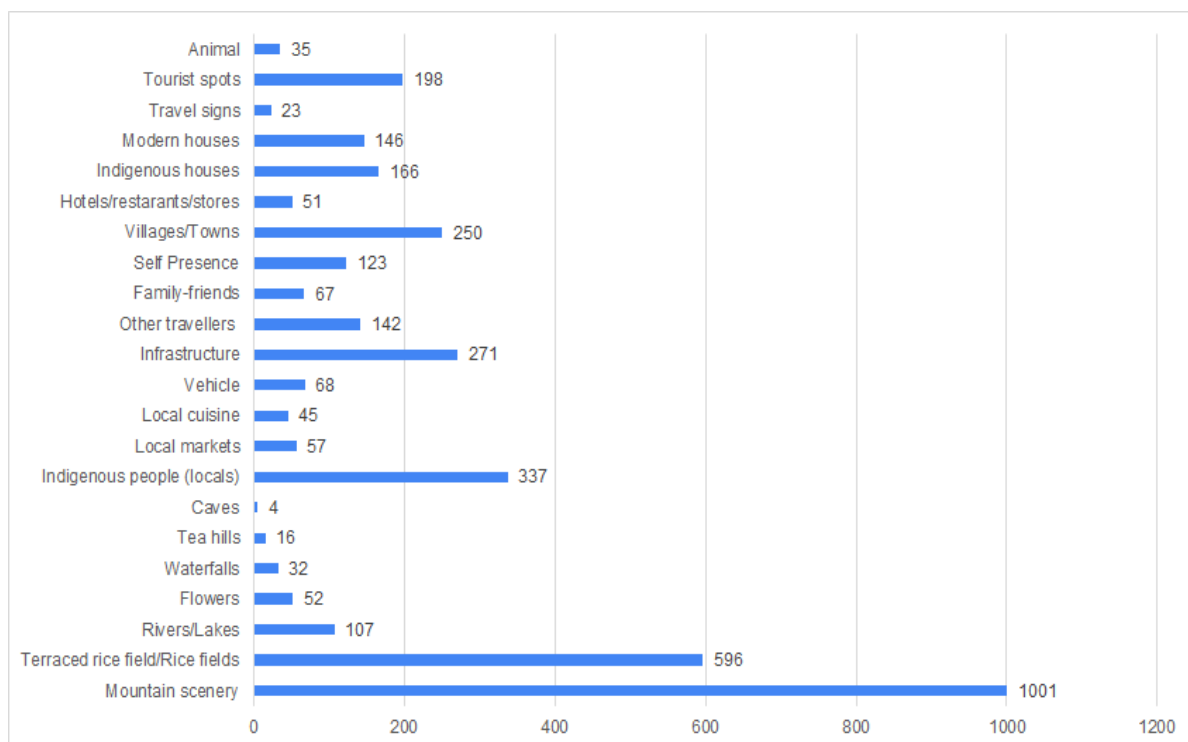
4.2. Photographs and coding frequency of elements

4.2.1 Coding frequency of elements

As presented in Figure 4, five elements appeared the most in the 1,543 photographs: mountain scenery, terraced rice fields, local people, infrastructure, and villages (1001, 596, 337, 271 and 250 times respectively).

Figure 4

Coding Frequency of Elements

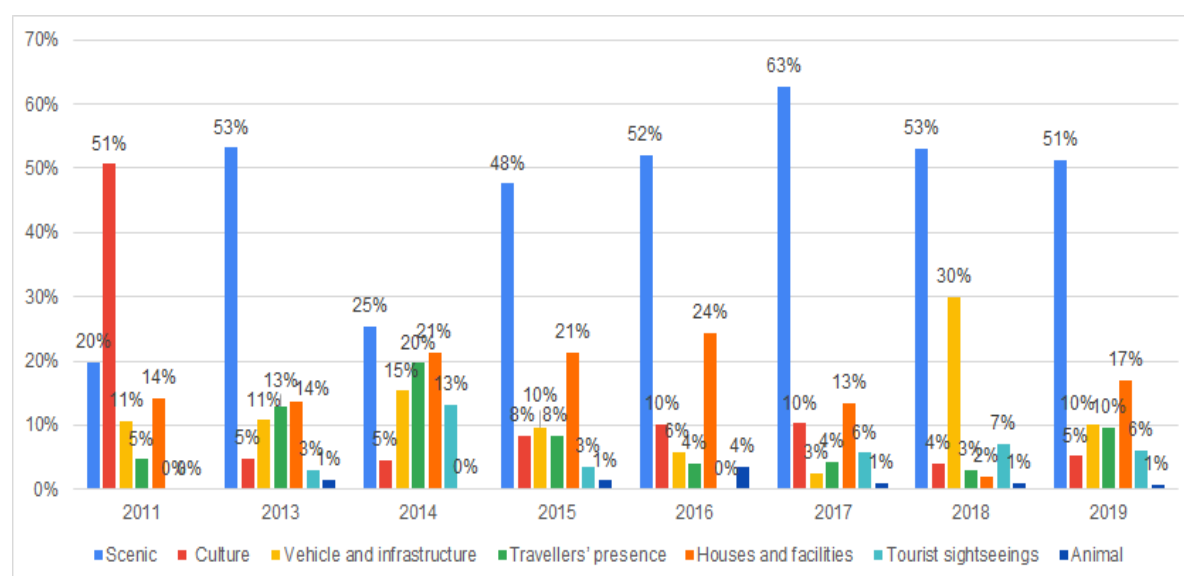


4.2.2 Coding frequency of themes based on time

Twelve threads were collected from 2011 to 2019 and analysed into seven themes (i.e. “scenery”, “culture”, “vehicle” and “infrastructure”, “travellers’ presence”, “houses and amenities”, “tourist sites” and “animals”). As presented in Figure 5, two themes were particularly prominent. Vietnamese TPPs seemed to take photographs of the Northwest region scenery more than they did of the other six themes, and the “scenery” theme accounted for the largest percentage of the appearing frequency from 2011 to 2019. The second theme appearing most was that of the “houses and amenities” theme.

Figure 5

Coding Frequency of Themes Based on Time

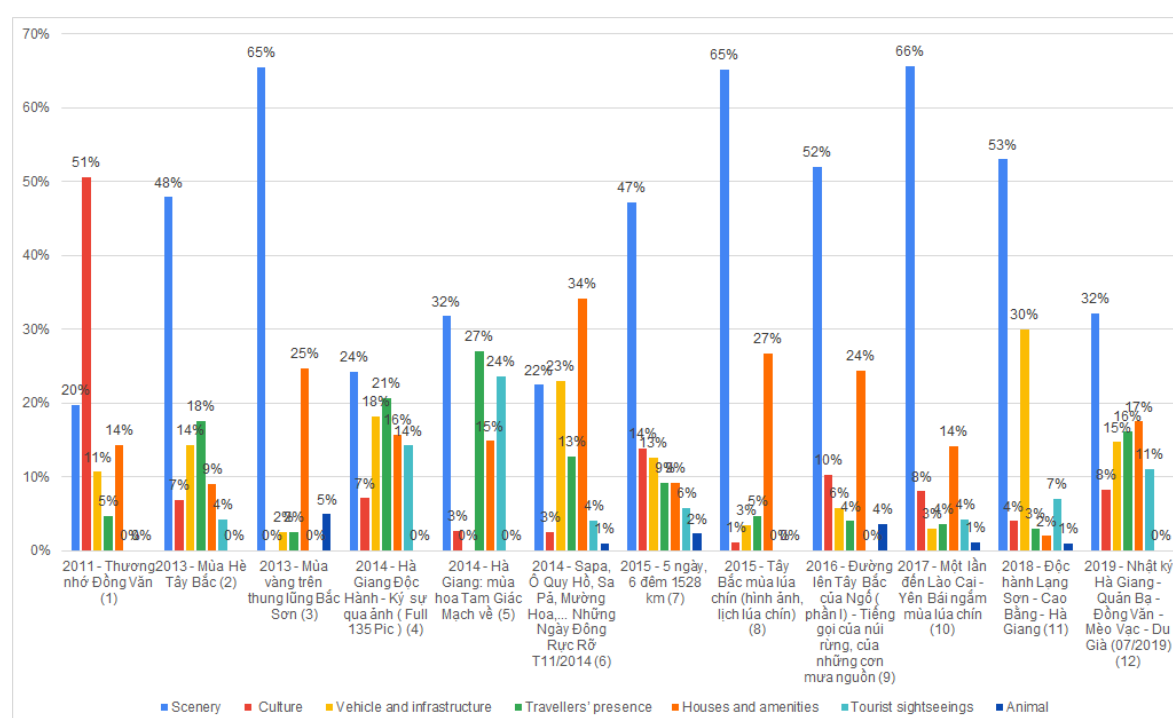


4.2.3 Coding frequency of themes based on threads

Figure 6 illustrates that the “scenery” theme appeared in all the threads. This theme had percentages of more than 50% in Threads numbers 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11. Thread 1 mainly featured by the “culture” and the “scenery” themes with 51% and 20% respectively. The “house and amenities” theme also appeared the most in Thread 6, with 34% and second most frequently in Thread numbers 3, 8, 9, and 12. Thread numbers 2, 4, and 5, besides the “scenery” theme, many thread creators also included travellers in their pictures.

Figure 6

Coding Frequency of Themes Based on Threads

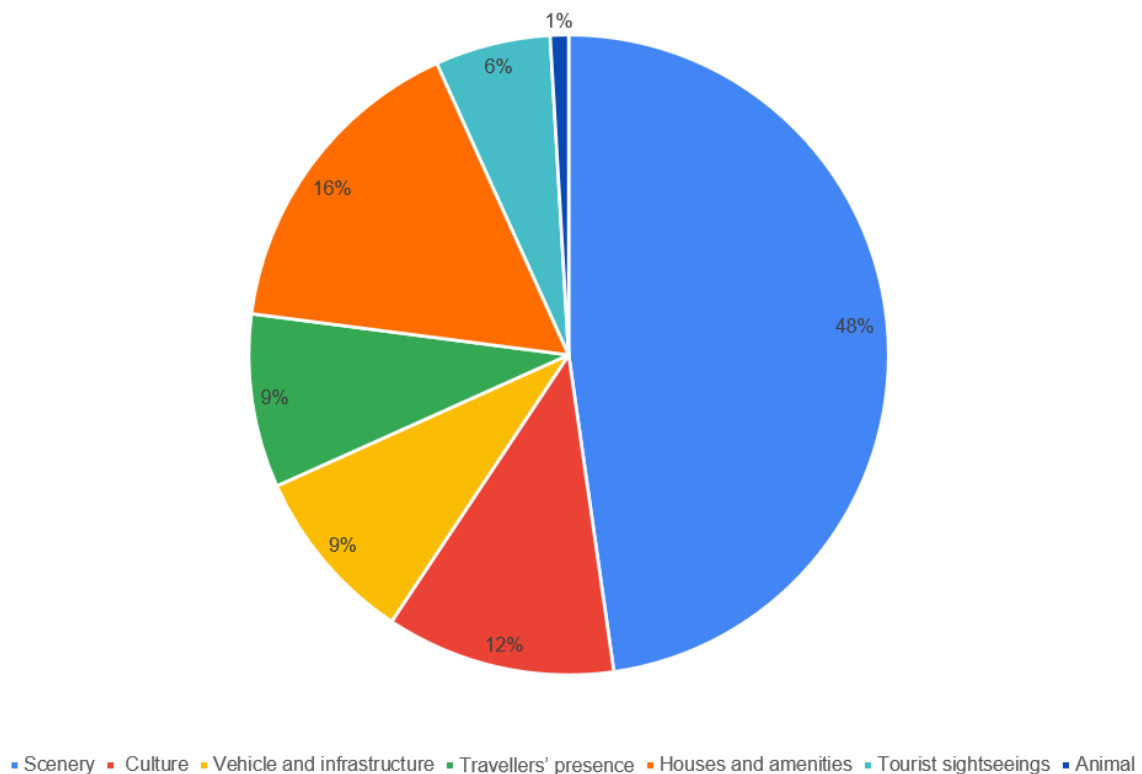


4.2.4 Coding frequency of themes and elements

Of the sampled photographs, the number of the coding frequency of all elements was 3,787 times. The “scenery” theme was that appearing most frequently in the photographs, at 1,808 times, and accounting for nearly 50% of all codes. The second most frequently coded theme was that of “house and amenities,” and the third was the “culture” theme, with 16% and 12% respectively (613 and 439 times, respectively). However, the “tourist sites” theme and the “animal” theme appeared the least with 6% and 1% respectively (221 times and 35 times). The “travellers’ presence” and “vehicles and infrastructure” themes have the same appearing frequency of 9%.

Figure 7

Coding Frequency of Themes

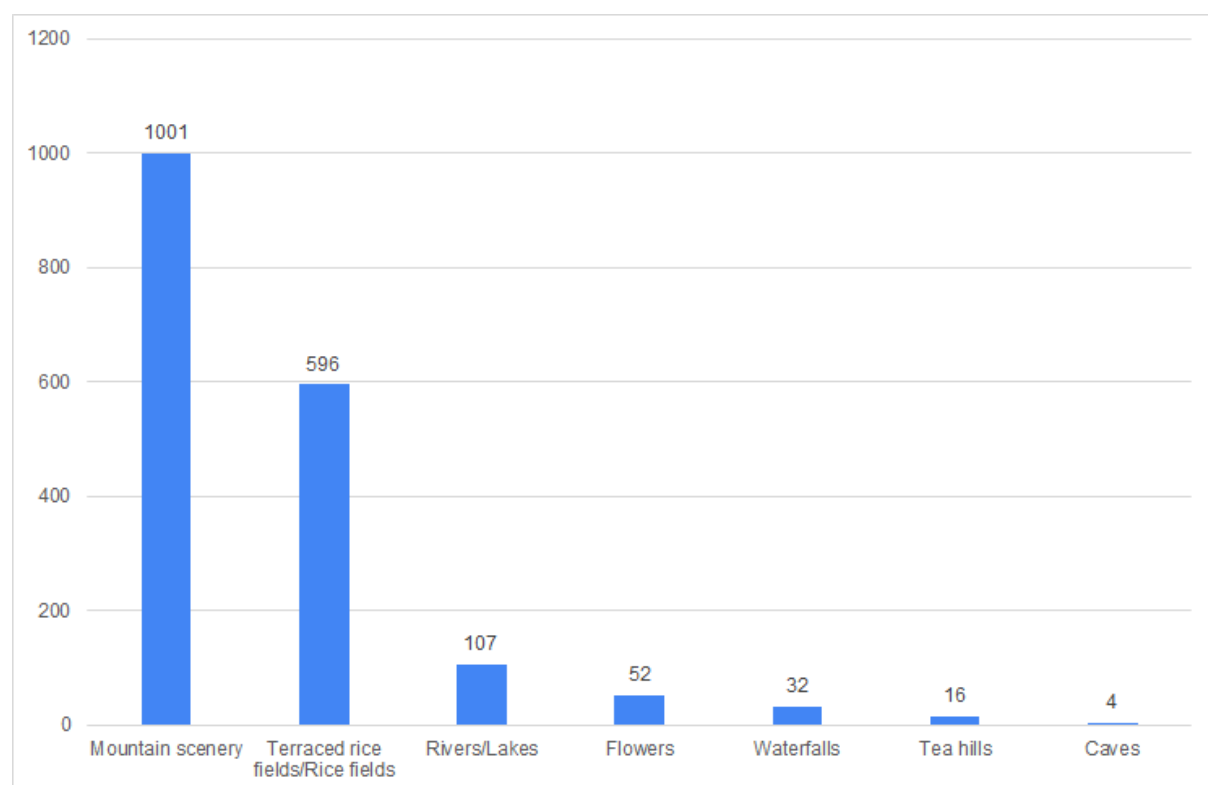


In the “scenery” theme, all elements that contribute to the theme, such as including mountain scenery, terraced paddy fields (rice fields), rivers, lakes, flowers, waterfalls, tea hills, and caves, were counted.

Figure 8 illustrates the coding frequency of the seven determining elements contributing to the theme of “scenery.” The total number of the coding frequency of all elements counted was 1,808 times for the scenery theme specifically, in which, two elements stood out: mountainous scenery and rice fields. The scenery of mountains appeared the most among the sampled photographs, at 1,001 times, accounting for 56% of the total. Following this was the frequency of photographs of terraced paddy fields, which appeared 596 times (32%). Other elements only accounted for 12% in the theme of “scenery,” 211 times in the coded photographs.

Figure 8

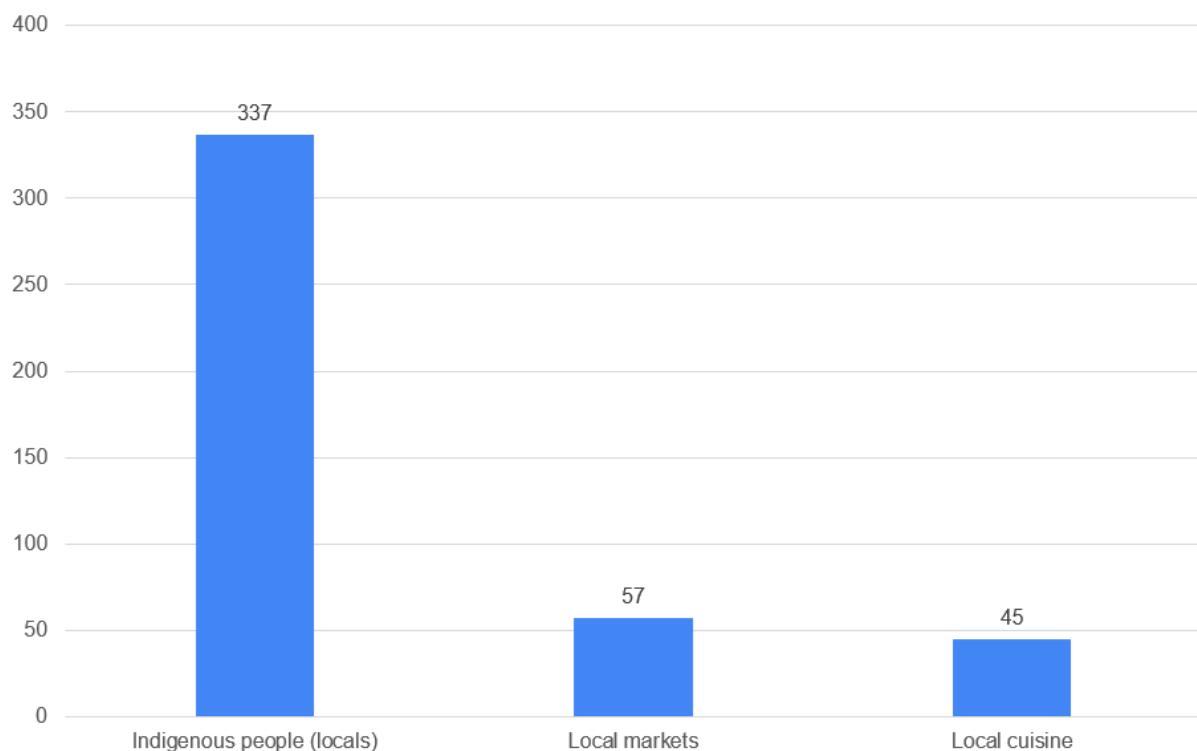
Coding Frequency of Elements in the “Scenery” Theme



The “culture” theme appeared 439 times in the photographs. Figure 9 shows that in 439 appearances, images of indigenous people accounted for the most, at 337 times (77%). Local markets and local cuisine appeared 57 times (13%) and 45 times (10%) respectively.

Figure 9

Coding Frequency of Elements in the “Culture” Theme



Indigenous culture was seen as a factor contributing to the cultural image of the Northwest region, and was represented with photographs of indigenous people, indigenous markets, and cuisine. In the photographs, indigenous people appeared as the local inhabitants of the Northwest region, and could be identified by their specific clothing, which made them different from the travellers. An example of indigenous people living in the Northwest region of Vietnam is presented in Image 2.

Image 2

Indigenous People Living in the Northwest Region



Note. Nguyen, P. (2017). *Indigenous people in Western Vietnam*. From Flickr.com. (<https://flic.kr/p/Sb8pQX>). CC by 2.0.

As presented in Figure 10, images of roads appeared the most in the “vehicle and infrastructure” theme as 264 times, accounting for the largest percentage (80%). Images of vehicles appeared only 68 times, accounting for 20% of the theme.

Figure 10

Coding Frequency of Elements in the “Vehicle and Infrastructure” Theme

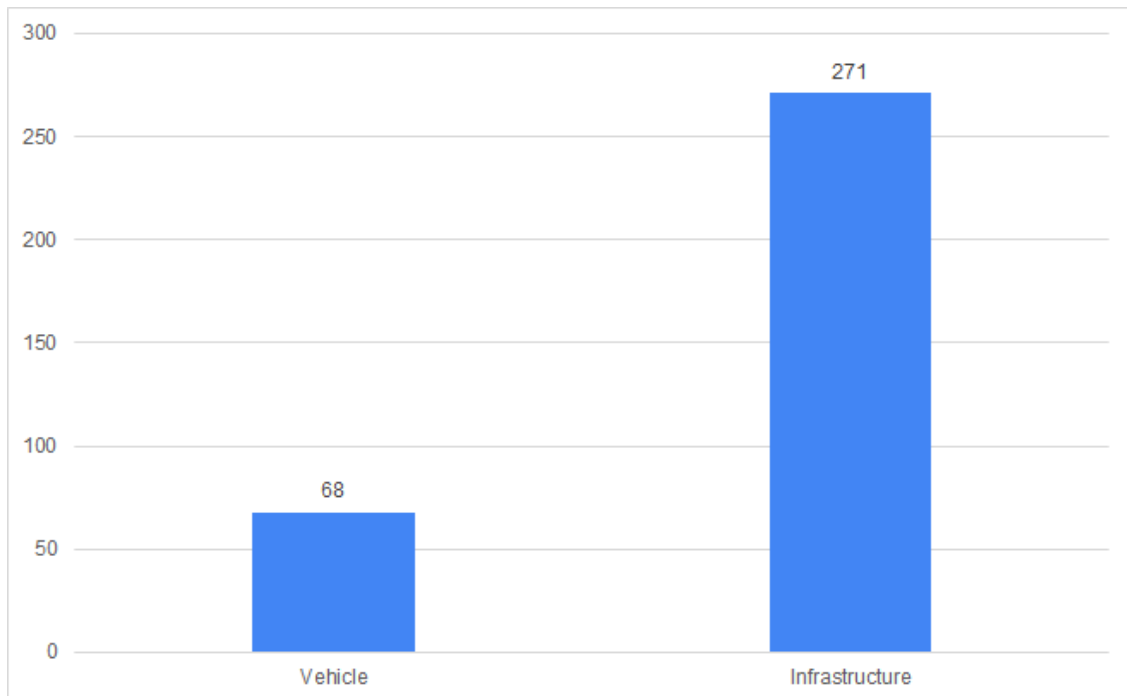


Figure 11 presents data on the “presence of travellers,” such as the presence of self, family, and friends, and the presence of other travellers. As shown in the bar chart, other travellers appeared in the photographs more than did those of the other three elements (self, family, and friends) with 142 times, 123 times and 67 times respectively. In the “travellers’ presence” theme, the coding frequency of other travellers accounted for 43%, followed by self with 37% then family and friends with 20%.

Figure 11

Coding Frequency of Elements in the “Presence of Travellers” Theme

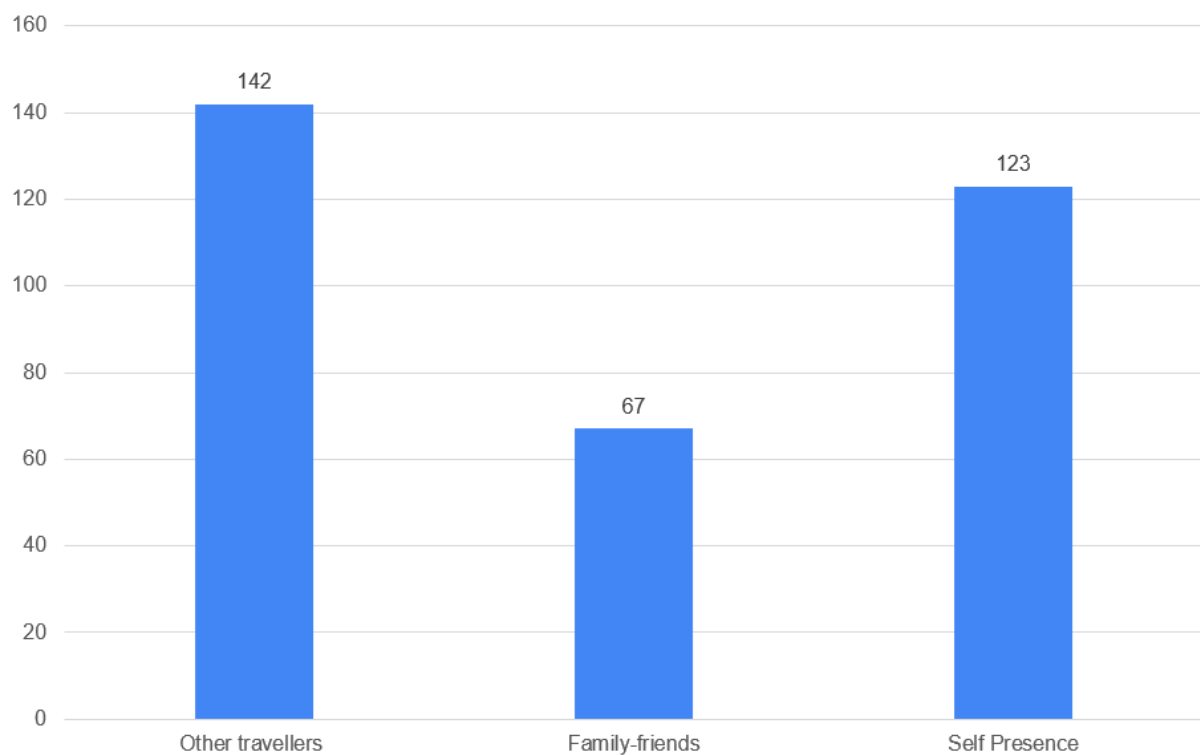
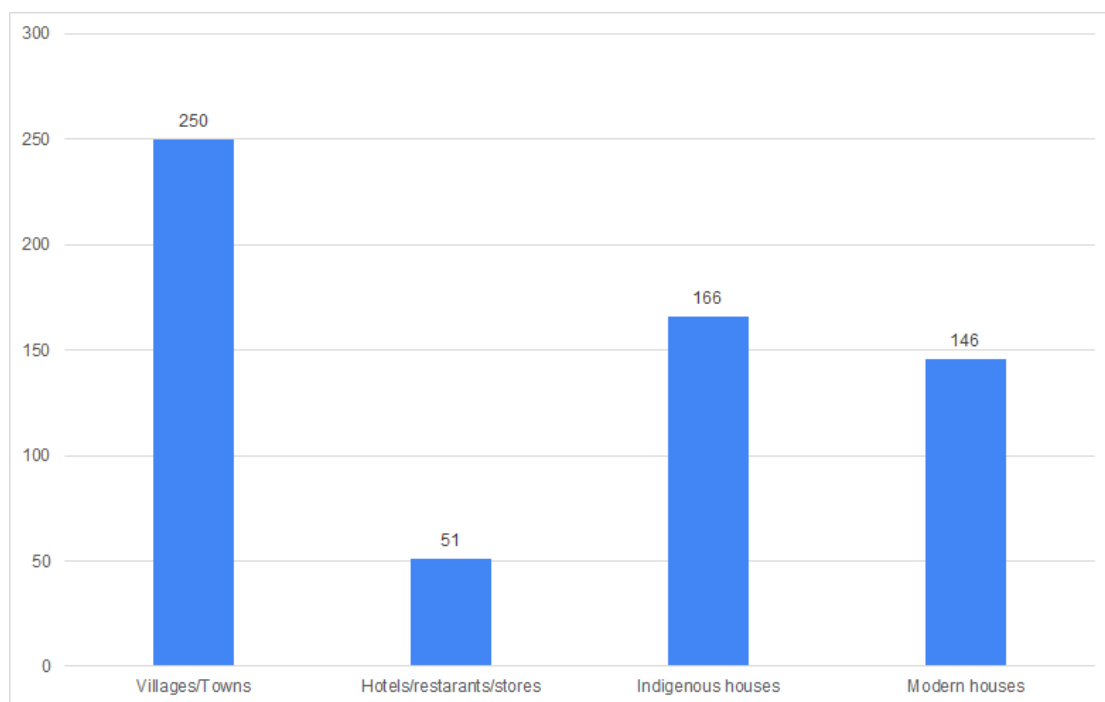


Figure 12 illustrates that villages and towns appeared 250 times in 1543 photographs, accounting for more than 40% in the “houses and amenities” theme. The presence of hotels, restaurants, and shops accounted the least among the four elements, presenting 51 times, and accounting for 8% of the total. Photographs of indigenous houses and modern houses accounted for approximately 25% (166 and 146 times respectively).

Figure 12

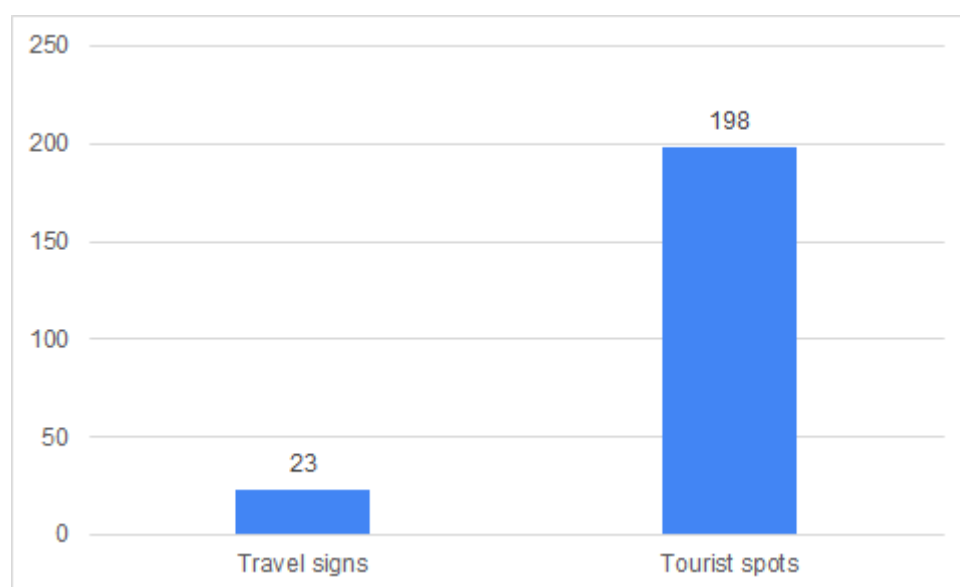
Coding Frequency of Elements in the “Houses and Amenities” Theme



The *tourist sites* theme was one of the least frequently appearing of the seven themes. In this theme (the "animal" theme accounted for 1% of the total), photographs of tourist sites (e.g. the house of Pao, Lung Cu tower, Stone church, and Muong Hoa Valley) accounted for the largest percentage (90%) and appeared nearly 200 times. Travel signs appeared just 23 times - 10% of the "tourist sites" theme.

Figure 13

Coding Frequency of Elements in the "Tourist Sites" Theme



4.3. Qualitative content accompanying the photographs

The second research question of the study inquired into the narratives shared with photographs. There were three types of qualitative content posted by Vietnamese TPPs with photographs: photograph descriptions, travel experiences descriptions, and emotional descriptions. However, not every photograph posted had qualitative content, and some photographs had more than one type of qualitative content. To gain a deeper understanding of contents posted with photographs, the narratives were coded, as discussed next.

4.3.1. Photograph descriptions

Photograph descriptions were a significant element in the narratives accompanying selected photographs.

Along with shared photographs on the travel forum, the descriptions also helped to provide more information about photographs to audiences, such as on the locations, times to visit and the backgrounds in the photographs. These descriptions contributed to creating an impression to receivers and proved the presence of the poster at specific locations. Most descriptions seemed to be not just a journey diary of the creator, but also a presentation of how well the creator knew the destination visited. Most were divided into short paragraphs or sometimes just a sentence, and were posted with the photograph the poster wanted to describe.

For example, TPP 3 created a thread named “*Mùa vàng trên thung lũng Bắc Sơn*” (Ripe season in Bac Son Valley). The purpose of the thread was to share his travel memories to other forum members about his experience travelling to Bac Son Valley, which is one of the popular locations in the Northwest region. In the thread, he posted several photographs of a scene of blooming paddy fields in Bac Son Valley taken by himself, with short paragraphs describing the images in detail. The photographs were taken from above, giving the receivers a bird’s eye view of the valley in the season of ripe paddy fields (Image 3, 4). Trip picture poster 3 not only provided visual evidence, but also described the image in words. As evident in the following quote, this act created the link between the images and descriptions.

Bac Son Valley, though this place is not as noisy or famous as Mu Cang Chai, is peaceful and has its own unique beauty which nowhere else has ... The valley is surrounded by limestone mountains with a green river weaving through the middle, which divides the paddy fields into two halves; one is in full bloom and ready to be harvested and another part is still unripe. (TPP 3, 30 September 2013, p. 2)

Image 3

Paddy Fields in Bac Son Valley



Note. Nguyen, Q. V. (2019). *Paddy fields in Bac Son Valley*. From Pixabay.com. (<https://pixabay.com/images/id-4108956/>). Copyright 2019 by Pixabay.

Image 4

Bac Son Valley



Note. Nguyen, A. (2017). *ANT_3062*. From Flickr.com. (<https://flic.kr/p/WBSh3w>). CC by-NC-ND 2.0.

In the same text box but with different photographs (Image 5, 6), in order to emphasize the highlights of the destination, TPP 3 portrayed the unique architecture of houses in the valley in words, because it is difficult to understand this from just photographs.

The village in Bac Son Valley has a special architecture, in which the rooves are similar to each other, covered by some kind of tile which can only be found there. (TPP 3, 30 September 2013, p. 2)

Image 5

The Village in Bac Son Valley 1



Note. Nguyen, Q. V. (2019). *The village in Bac Son Valley*. From Pixabay.com. (<https://pixabay.com/images/id-4108957/>). Copyright 2019 by Pixabay.

Image 6

The Village in Bac Son Valley 2



Note. Nguyen, A. (2017). ANT_3029. From Flickr.com. (<https://flic.kr/p/VANekw>). CC by-NC-ND 2.0.

These descriptions not only provided the shooting location of the photographs, which was Bac Son Valley, but also described elements in the photographs, such as limestone mountains, rivers, the colour of the rice fields, the architecture, and the tiles. Although attractive photographs can catch people's eyes, it might be difficult for others to know a place or know when the season of ripe rice fields is, or the other attractions of Bac Son Valley without descriptions by the posters. Through images and descriptions, receivers could have a different view of the valley through the lens of this thread poster.

One forum participant, TPP 9, mentioned the location, the background of the photograph, and the colour, in his own phraseology to describe his own photographs (Image 7).

On the way to Thu Cuc, passing by Khe pass, I stopped by Thanh Son and Tan Son lands. There were green tea fields and hills on either side of the road. The green colour of tea fields looks great in the early morning dew and clouds, as the sun has not risen yet ... it makes the air cool and fresh. (TPP 9, 15 May 2016, p. 1)

Image 7

Tea Hills in the Morning Dew.



Note. Nguyen, Q. V. (2019). From Pixabay.com. (<https://pixabay.com/images/id-3356519/>). Copyright 2019 by Pixabay.

In the same thread, TPP 9 posted a photograph showing local women working on green tea hills in the Thanh Son tea fields in the morning (Image 8). He described his picture thus:

In the morning when the sun had risen quite high [...] It was already 7:30 a.m., however, clouds were still in the valley, on the tea fields, on the cliffs and hills, and the sunlight was soft and misty. On the hillsides of tea, the women had been there for a while. They were picking tea buds after the spring season (to make light tea) while the tea buds and tea leaves were still wet with night dew. I stopped for a while to have a cigarette and enjoyed the view of this hillside, very calm and peaceful. Suddenly, I felt the sweet, acrid taste of green tea in my mouth, which made the cigarette taste better. (TPP 9, 15 May 2016, p. 2)

Image 8

Local Women Working on the Thanh Son Tea Fields



Note. The photograph was posted in 2017. From Pxhere.com. (<https://pxhere.com/vi/photo/1285572>). CC by CC0 1.0.

Alongside his beautiful photographs, TPP 9 also shared his knowledge of the destination through pictures (Image 9) and descriptions:

On higher cliffs, they plant some trees among the tea hills to get wood for industrial plywood when they are about five to seven years old, to make paper or burn coal. Cinnamon and anise are also intercropped in the tea hills. Of course, this is impossible if there are no species of trees. This was in the literature and poems from the 1980s and 1990s: palm trees. (TPP 9, 15 May 2016, p. 2)

Image 9

Tea Hills in the Morning, Moc Chau.



Note. Nguyen, Q. V. (2019). From Pixabay.com. (<https://pixabay.com/images/id-4136345/>). Copyright 2019 by Pixabay.

Similar to the descriptions of the previous posters, the content in TPP 9's thread was based on his photographs to describe the background, location, and his knowledge of the destination. In this kind of description, photographs are the main element, and descriptions are seen as additional elements used to make the photographs more attractive, clearer and provide more information about Vietnam's Northwest destination.

4.3.2. Travel experiences descriptions

Travel itineraries, travel guides or travel memories from a thread's creator were considered as shared travel experiences content. Most of the travel itinerary content was usually shared at the beginning of a thread, whereas travel tips and travel memories were shared in random text boxes with the related photographs. After analysing the 12 travel threads, it was apparent that the travel itineraries were

presented in long and detailed paragraphs based on the journey of the creator, whereas travel tips and travel memories were shorter.

In this type of content, the creators did not focus on describing the photographs as did the photograph descriptions. Instead, the posters focused on sharing their travel experiences and photographs used to explain what the experiences looked like. Therefore, the content took the main role, and photographs played an accompanying one.

4.3.2.1. Travel itineraries

The travel itinerary contents were a kind of travel diary of the thread creators, and include travel schedules, destinations, points of interest, and/or means of transport. This was also a way to prove the creator's presence in the destination, along with the photographs. People find more enjoyment and achievement in sharing their experiences with others and expect recognition in return. Hence, they shared their travel experiences with passion and detail. For instance, TPP 11 shared his travel itinerary in the first text box, which comprehensively described his six-day journey to the Northwest region of Vietnam. In this itinerary, he mentioned the specific routes he took from the capital, Hanoi, to northwest destinations, such as Langson, Caobang and Hagiang provinces. Additionally, the highlights of Northwest Vietnam were also mentioned in his travel schedule, such as Ban Gioc waterfall, Meo Vac district, Ma Pi Leng pass, and Mu Cang Chai valley. The following short paragraph explains the specific routes which TPP 11 took on the second day.

Day 2: From That Khe to Doi Can street, I rode from Tuan Bien street to the Duc Long border gate, then took a shortcut from the Border Campaign Memorial House to the Ta Lung border gate. From the Ta Lung border gate, I took an unnamed but shortest road to Thanh Nhat commune, passing Cach Ling commune, Trieu Au commune, and Vinh Quy commune. (TPP 11, 30 October 2018, p. 1)

By posting travel itineraries, the TPPs provided information about specific routes they took, which could be helpful to prospective travellers.

4.3.2.2. Travel memories

In the same text box as the travel itinerary content, TPP 11 also summarised his memorable experiences. This qualitative content was considered as travel memory content. For example, TPP 11 described the difficulty he had on the second day.

The second day was the hardest day because of the northeast monsoon. The weather made the road so muddy that I had to walk with the motorbike until I reached a better road. However, being alone on Tuan Bien street made me very happy and satisfied from just seeing the foggy clouds, passing rough slopes through the forest mountain in pouring rain on a freezing night, and being invited to stay over by a local family. In my entire solo traveling life, I have never had such a wonderful experience, even though I had been to Truong Son Tay mountains. (TPP 11, 30 October 2018, p. 1)

Later, he mentioned again in different sections, and described in detail the experiences of the second day, with a photograph of the shortcut that he took. He continued the story of the second day in text box number 17:

Wandering on Tuan Bien street for a while, I was looking at the map to find the road to The Ta Lung border gate and got tired of the uncertainty. Luckily, a local guy passed by and told me to return to the Border Campaign Memorial House where I would find a shortcut to Ta Lung. Although I saw a dead end on the map, I decided to take a gamble and followed his advice. (TPP 11, 30 October 2018, p.2)

In this type of content, the poster did not describe the photograph, but the photograph was posted to prove the presence of the creator at a specific location, and to increase the credibility of his story.

4.3.2.3. Travel tips or travel guides

The third type of shared travel experience content tended to emphasize significant routes or attractions that travellers should not miss. A characteristic of this type of content is usually that it is short, and photographs are usually attached to explain the content itself. For example, TPP 5 introduced one of the popular attractions that many people visit on the way to Ha Giang province, which is the house of Pao (Image 10). The house became famous after being filmed in a Vietnamese movie, and is one of the cultural houses of the Hmong indigenous people in Sung La commune. The poster also highly recommended other travellers to visit this attraction in October during the blooming of the buckwheat flowers in front of the attraction.

Image 10

The House of Pao



Note. Nguyen, A. (2013). *A Hmong man working in the house of Pao*. From Flickr.com. (<https://flic.kr/p/hkrozo>). CC by-NC-ND 2.0.

Another example was in providing information about the best time to view ripe rice fields, as recommended by TPP 8. This thread creator shared her experience with others:

Northwest ripe season calendar

There are three perfect periods for viewing the ripe paddy fields in three perfect areas that you guys should not miss:

- *Sapa, Muong Hum, Y Ty: from the end of August to about 20 September*
- *Mu Cang Chai Valley: from 20 September to 10 October*

- *Hoang Su Phi, Xin Man, Bac Ha: from 1 to 25 October 1*

Places and villages with beautifully terraced fields in each region:

- *Sapa: Muong Hoa valley, Ta Giang Phinh, [...]*
- *Muong Hum, Sam Ma Sao, Den Sang, Den Thang (on the way from Sapa to Y Ty, you will pass these places)*
- *Y Ty: A Lu, Chu Lin area, Thien Sinh valley, Lao Chai 1, Lao Chai 2*
- *Mu Cang Chai: Tu Le (Lung Thai, Long Mong), Cross Kim, La Pan Tan, Di Xu Phinh, Che Cu Nha, Lao Thua Chai, [...]*
- *Hoang Su Phi: Ban Luoc, Thong Nguyen, Ban Phung, [...]*
- *Xin Man is mainly on the main road, or on the way to Border Gate*

No. 5. (TTP 8, 21 August 2015, p. 1)

The content provided the details of the ripe rice season and recommended good places from which to take photographs. To gain more trust from others, the thread creator also attached some of her photographs to increase the credibility of her post (Image 11, 12).

Image 11

The Best View of Terraced Rice Fields in Mu Cang Chai Valley



Note. Bich, T. H. (2017). From Pixabay.com. (<https://pixabay.com/images/id-2846777/>). Copyright 2017 by Pixabay.

Image 12

Clouds and Rice Fields in Ha Giang Province



Note. Nguyen, Q. V. (2018). From Pixabay.com. (<https://pixabay.com/images/id-3059653/>). Copyright 2018 by Pixabay.

4.3.3. Emotional descriptions

Emotional descriptions were different from the other two types of content, in which the content did not necessarily relate to a photograph. Emotional descriptions were predominantly written to express the creators' feelings and thoughts; hence, they might not include information about the destination, provide travel information, or even describe a photograph. For instance, in one of his text boxes, TPP 9 wrote:

Nostalgia of Northwest... it is just an unclear and unforgettable nostalgia... sometimes I remember the reputed echo of the mountains, the whisper like a song from the wind, the hot and bright sunbeam that dyed soil into colours of red, orange, yellow, or even purple... I remember winding roads embracing the mountain, weaving through forests, and disappearing under the white mist... I remember its magnificent and colourful beauty, the deep blue space of the sky, the sunlight shining on the mountain like a gold crystal... I remember freezing and pouring rain nights. (TPP 9, 15 May 2016, p. 3)

Image 13

The Northwest



Note. Han, N. (2019). From Pixabay.com. (<https://pixabay.com/images/id-4217385/>). Copyright 2018 by Pixabay.

The content mostly described the poster's longing for the destination, what he had been through, and how the destination was imprinted on his mind. Although the photograph was taken in northwest Vietnam, the content was not used to describe the photograph or share travel experiences. In this text box, TPP 9 shared his thoughts about the trip to northwest destinations, expressing how he missed the destination, through words and photographs.

The travel forum provided a platform for its users to share not only travel experiences and travel photographs, but also, their feelings. Overall, most of the third type of qualitative content imparted the emotions of the thread starters about nostalgia, feelings, and thoughts related to experiences when travelling in the Northwest region of Vietnam. In these, the photographs and descriptions were not related to each other. Most of photographs posted along with the third type of qualitative content were of significant attractions at the destination.

4.4. Conclusion

The coding frequency of themes in general and of the specific elements, explains the process of forming the cycle of destination image representation through the lenses of the Vietnamese TPPs. The findings showed the similarity between photographs in terms of similar settings of mountain scenery, terraced paddy fields, and the related indigenous people. Narratives shared with the photographs played an important role in guiding and inspiring potential travellers by forming a destination image of northwest Vietnam. In conclusion, landscape scenery and related indigenous culture (e.g. indigenous people, traditional villages, and indigenous architecture) were revealed as two major symbols that appeared constantly, forming the destination image of the Northwest region of Vietnam. The following discussion chapter elaborates on this in-depth and compares the findings with those in the literature.

5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction

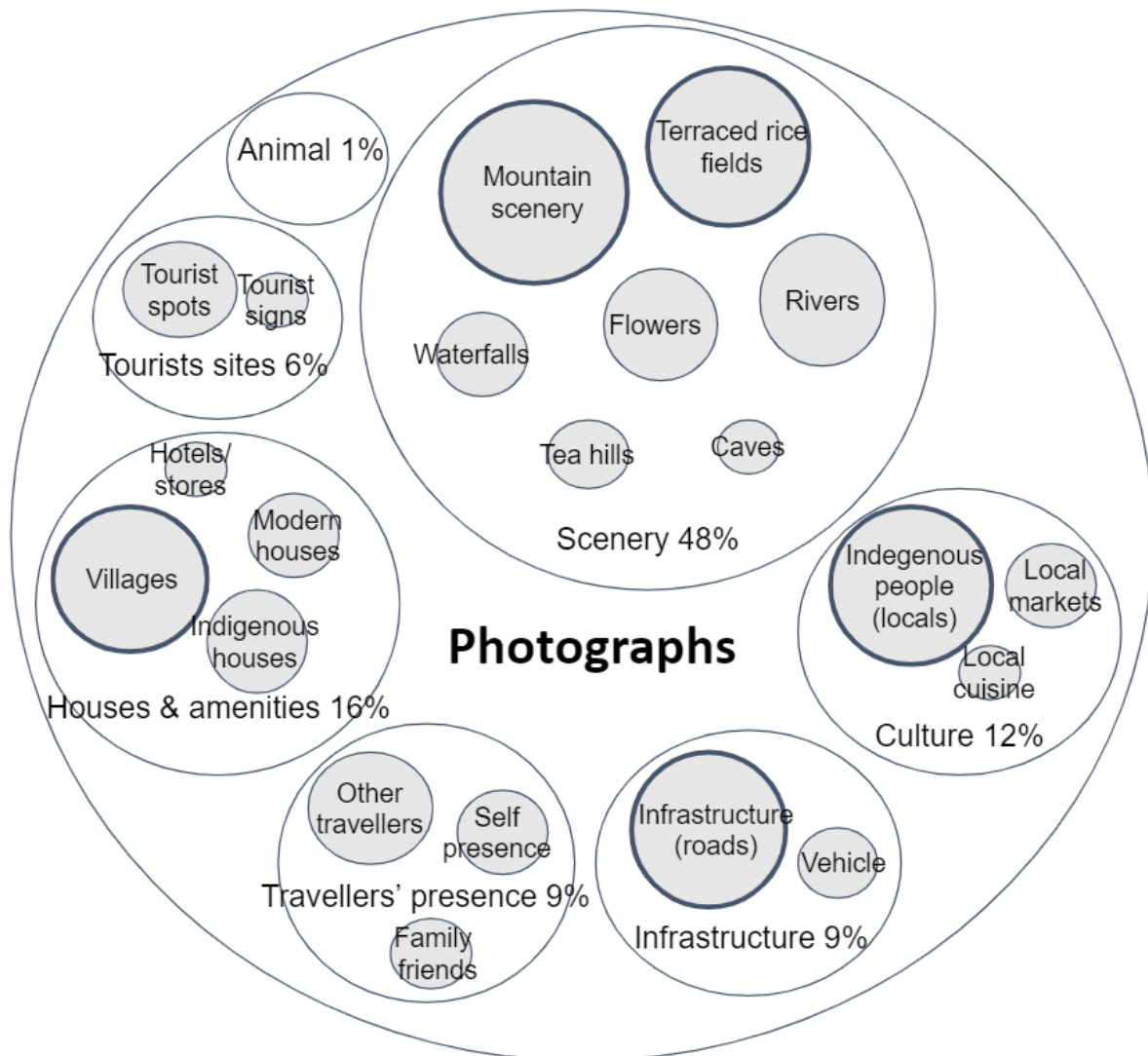
By synthesising information from Chapter 4 (findings) and Chapter 2 (literature), this fifth chapter explicates the influence of taking and sharing photographs of a destination image. The chapter discusses the stance of travellers as destination image producers and destination consumers in the process of forming the destination image through the cycle of representation in photographs. The chapter also addresses other issues such as the impact of social media on the destinations' image, and the posters' desire to construct social identities.

5.2. The thematic model of the destination image of Northwest Vietnam

The study found identified repetition among the photographs in terms of presenting destination images of northwest Vietnam. In terms of themes, the “scenery” theme, which accounted for the largest percentage in the coding frequency (Figure 7), was seen as a destination theme representation of the Northwest region of Vietnam. Following this was the theme of “houses and amenities” (613 codes). In detail, the image of traditional villages taken from a distance, and the images of indigenous architecture appeared commonly among the TPPs' photographs (Figure 12). The third most popular theme was the “culture” one, in which images of indigenous people accounted for the largest percentage (Figure 9). In terms of elements, Figure 4 illustrates five commonly seen elements in photographs: mountain scenery, terraced paddy fields, indigenous people, infrastructure (e.g. roads), and villages, all of which are seen as representative elements of the destination image of the Northwest region of Vietnam. Figure 14 presents the thematic model of travel photographs posted by Vietnamese TPPs on northwest Vietnam.

Figure 14

Thematic Model of Travel Photographs Posted on Northwest Vietnam



5.3. Photographic practices as indispensable activities when travelling

5.3.1. Travellers as destinations' images producers

The invention of the camera has made photographic practices prevalent. As shown in the findings, travellers' photographs are visual records of their journeys. Travellers took pictures to transform intangible experiences into tangible memories and accidentally formed destination images through the practice of sharing. Urry and Larsen (2011) wrote that tourists took photographs to produce visual evidence so they could cherish their memories and consume them after the journey. Also, Jimura and

Lee (2020) suggested that photographs allowed tourists to take ownership of what they gazed upon or of their experience at a destination. Travellers like taking photographs of recognisable sights or representative factors of a destination during their journeys to show their presence there and share their adventures with their friend circles via social media. The convenience of small photographic devices now allows travellers to become amateur photographers and competent gazers.

Travelling allows people to experience things differently from everyday life. Höckert et al. (2018) described this difference as the “otherness” which makes places and people attractive to photograph, and magnets for travellers’ camera lenses. People take pictures of the otherness of a destination based on the idealisation of the destination that they perceived before. As a result, they seek the same or similar sights, experience the same things, and produce similar photographs. This helps present the destination image in a more diverse way but produces a consistent repetition of pictures. Correspondingly, the findings showed that Vietnamese TPPs tended to produce photographs of northwest Vietnam that replicated the previously shared photographs of former travellers. This finding is related to the work of Stylianou-Lambert (2012) and McMullen (2020), who agreed that images produced by tourists to document their personal experiences, often replicated the tourist photographs of the same “must-see” sights that they had seen before.

Therefore, tourism can be considered as a means for individuals to meet their expectations, encounter a destination’s authenticity, accumulate experiences, and turn these into photographs and narratives. Although the content might be presented differently due to objective factors such as different photographic equipment, different travelling purposes, or different travelling time, the similar elements representing the destination can still be seen in the photographs. Hence, photographic practices are seen more as a process of confirmation than discovery.

Different individuals have different ways of consuming a destination and present it differently through their lenses. Stylianou-Lambert (2012) agreed that different tourists present different behaviours in gazing at a destination. The findings of this study showed how travellers gazed at a destination differently. Although the “scenery” theme was dominant in most threads, thread creators also showed their different gazes at northwest Vietnam by showing their interests in different themes such as the “culture”,

“travellers’ presence,” and “houses and amenities” (see Figure 6). Using divergent gazes, people consume places differently, and through that difference, a destination’s image is presented in diverse way.

5.3.2. Travellers as destinations’ images consumers

With the development of the internet and social media platforms, many travellers search for information about a destination before making travel decisions. According to Morosan and Jeong (2020), travellers know where to search for travel information and which social media platforms are effective for them. For example, the forum Phuot.vn is the most popular search site for finding information about destinations and new companions for future journeys among Vietnamese TPPs.

In terms of consuming destination image, photographs are produced to be seen. Hence, travel photographs play a role in inspiring people to travel to specific places, encouraging them to experience the depicted visualised dream experience seen in photographs shared by other travellers. By looking at photographs and analysing the content in the travel forum, it was evident that Vietnamese TPPs gradually shaped the image of a destination. Urry and Larsen (2011) stated that photographs activate people’s imaginations. These visual resources make future travellers become familiar with a destination though they have not yet visited. Urry and Larsen (2011) explained that travellers’ imaginations were satisfied at this stage, creating the desire for travelling and experiencing real feelings. For example, one forum member commented in the thread created by TPP 9 after seeing his photographs:

The photos you took are so beautiful, very soulful and amazing. I also like your writing and the style of your photographs! By the way, I want to go to Mu Cang Chai this December, but I am afraid that the ripe terraced fields will not be as beautiful as in your pictures. Can you give me some advice?”
(03 November 2016, p. 10)

As can be seen, this new traveller wanted to follow TPP 9’s footsteps as depicted in his photographs, hoping to experience the same authenticity.

5.4. The visual rhetoric effect of photographs in creating the tourist gaze

Photographs construct and record actual images of pieces of the world through the gazes of travellers. Urry and Larsen (2011) described photographs as a means of transcribing reality, objectifying, and arranging the world for the tourist gaze. Photographs provide evidence that an object or someone has existed, or something

happened, and all are recorded by the cameras. However, photographs are constructed subjectively to idealise images based on the photographer's perspective. The destination image is accumulated through shared travel photographs from posting travellers, which helps shape the tourist gazes of future travellers.

5.4.1. *The romantic gaze*

The objects constructing the tourist gaze in the Northwest region of Vietnam were mostly scenery and indigenous culture. Because of the unique landscapes, which cannot be found in other regions of Vietnam, an illusion is created that when a photograph includes those elements, it becomes a typical symbol of Northwest Vietnam. After analysing the photographs and narratives, it was evident that Vietnamese TPPs seemed to focus on a destination's natural and related indigenous elements and show deep feelings of awe and reverence. They spent hours capturing images of what they thought represented the Northwest region, and produced narratives related to their travel experiences. In this gaze, called the "romantic gaze" by Urry and Larsen (2011), objects are emphasized, and the traveller's gaze is described as "solitude, privacy and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship" (p. 27). Karlsdóttir (2013) explained that in the romantic gaze, personal pleasures are created of an appreciative feeling and the extraordinary experiences of encountering impressive physical sights which are often of nature. This suggests that people spend a solitary and lengthy gaze on scenes of nature and significant elements such as mountains, terraced rice fields, and indigenous people in this case (see Figure 4, Figure 8, and Figure 9). Through the images of the natural world and scenery, the romantic gaze can affect human emotions, creating an image of places as worth seeing and worth encouraging other travellers to continue reproducing, recapturing, and sharing.

People look for extraordinary experiences that are different from those in their daily life, when they are travelling. Karlsdóttir (2013) claimed that when people travel, they perceive the new environment, which is different from their everyday environments, with interest and curiosity. Although the romantic gaze itself is constructed individually, the process of forming the gaze is affected by social patterns in a systematic way. Based on the findings of this study, there are three visual icons commonly seen: mountains, terraced rice fields, and indigenous culture (e.g. indigenous architecture,

local cuisine, local markets, and indigenous people). Through the Vietnamese TPPs' photographs, these three distinctive "crown jewels" (see section 5.4.2) contributed to shaping the tourist gaze of travellers visiting the Northwest region as a destination for the romantic gaze. The destination image had already been formed successfully in these travellers' minds as a destination of mountainous and terraced rice field scenery, and related indigenous culture.

5.4.2. *The visual rhetoric effect of photographs*

As discussed above, travellers take photographs to collect memories of their trip, turn intangible experiences into tangible objects, and share these with stories to impress or obtain recognition. In terms of the destination image, this practice has a major role in shaping tourists' perceptions, by turning an unnamed location into a popular one (see section 2.3), which Bordelon and Ferreira (2017) called the "crown jewels" of a destination. The repetitive images of a destination posted by different users occurs when a place receives many visitations, and its images are taken and uploaded by different travellers over different time periods. Although the destination perceived by different travellers is different, the duplication of "crown jewels" icons exists in these photographs.

It is interesting to consider why the same icons of a destination seem to appear so frequently in various traveller's photographs and why travellers tend to replicate the same itineraries and produce similar images to those previously produced. According to Bordelon and Ferreira (2017), this phenomenon is the result of the power of visual rhetoric. *Visual rhetoric* can be understood as the ability of images to persuade and influence people's choices, behaviours, and decisions (Bordelon & Ferreira, 2017) which is constantly nurtured in the environment where the social media-induced tourism phenomenon occurs (Shin & Xiang, 2019). Vietnamese TPPs participated in the travel forums to search for information about destinations, find inspiration, and share travel experiences. Through online interactions, their perceptions about the destination were influenced by travel posts of other experienced Vietnamese travellers, so they absorbed the destination image of Northwest Vietnam in an unconscious and consistent way by being constantly exposed to similar and repetitive photographs containing the "crown jewels" of the destination. In the case of Northwest Vietnam, the

“crown jewels” icons are images of mountains, terraced paddy fields, and indigenous culture.

5.5. The narratives

Tourism is a process of accumulating travel experiences, whereas photographs decide how a destination image is shaped by visual images, and narratives provide details with journey schedules, photograph descriptions, and travel diaries. Photographs only share how photographers see the world through the lenses of cameras, whereas narratives accompanying with photographs contribute to guiding travellers to a destination and describing the location.

Narratives are a way for travellers to fulfil the desire to share impressions, experiences, and emotions of travellers to others deeply and persistently. Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2008) argued that travellers construct stories based on their own basic judgments of things, objects, events, phenomena, and people at a destination they have encountered or experienced. They created narratives to organise their experiences and record memories in documents, through which they can express thoughts, opinions, and feelings that might be difficult to express through visual content. Similarly, Azariah (2016) suggested that travel contents shared on public social platforms not only represented personal narratives, but also were seen as a form of self-presentation; hence, they were public on purpose, for others to read.

According to the findings, there are three main types of narratives shared on travel websites: travel experiences, photograph descriptions, and emotional narratives. Although each type of narratives had a different role alongside the photographs, the object of the narratives is to describe travellers’ actual experiences, and how the destination was seen in their own way. The majority of the narratives were written from the first-person perspective, to help develop a personal relationship with the audiences. This position also allowed the writers to deeply interpret the feelings, stories, experiences, and events happening around them.

The first type of qualitative content is the photograph’s description. Photographs themselves only provide visual data; image descriptions, which are usually posted alongside photographs of travellers, aim to describe information in the image. With the attribution of descriptive narratives, photographs and their descriptions both reflected and illustrated the destination images in the travellers’ minds. The main purpose of

this content is often to provide information about the time or the location where the photograph was taken, the background, describe objects, events, and phenomena recorded in the photographs.

One of the roles of shared travel narratives was to guide potential travellers to a destination. Shared travel experience narratives such as travel schedules and guides, were based on the actual experiences of posters about the locations they visited. Along with photographs, shared experience narratives contribute to increasing the credibility of travellers' stories. Photographs posted with these narratives are often supplementary visual information.

The last type of narratives to be discussed is the shared feelings descriptions (emotional descriptions). In this content, the main purpose of the thread creators was to share feelings, thoughts, opinions, and personal stories with emotions. Photographs and emotional descriptions are not related to each other.

In general, these three types of shared qualitative contents are seen as another way for travellers to express how they perceived the destinations and expressed this through words, and to present themselves to others.

A further issue for consideration, is that compared with sharing photographs, the vast majority of travellers shared very little of their experience in words. Hence, instead of sharing long narratives about their journeys, people prefer to share their images of destinations with short descriptions. Robinson (2004) explained that one of the reasons for this was that travellers seldom transcribed for a wider audience, except in photographs or postcards. This was also evident in the findings, as thread creators preferred sharing photographs of their journey and short narratives related to photographs, rather than long narratives to describe their experience.

5.6. The formation of the Northwest region's destination image through photographs and narratives

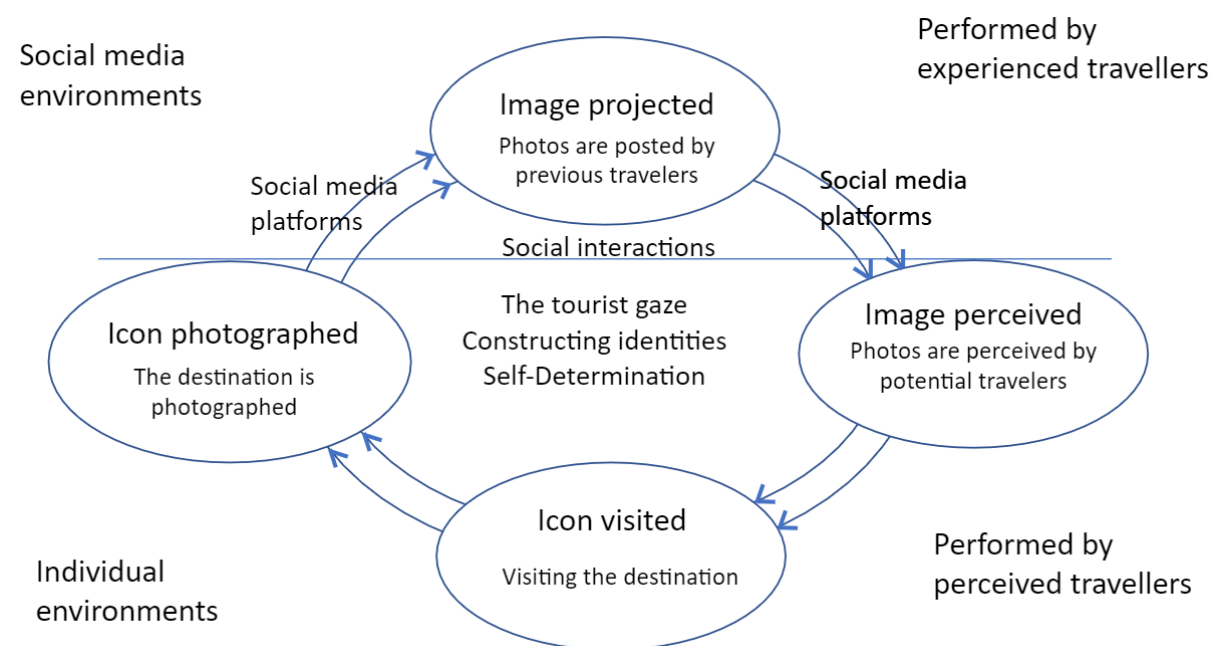
As discussed, there was repetition in the images representing the Northwest region in the Vietnamese TPPs' photographs (see section 5.4.2). The "crown jewels" of the Northwest region of Vietnam belong to the three categories of the "scenery" theme, the "houses and amenities" theme, and the "culture" theme. The practice of taking and

sharing photographs and narratives on destinations seemed to create a task for all travellers, which was to look for and photograph the “crown jewels” of a destination.

These practices took part in inspiring and guiding prospective travellers to the same locations. By providing specific information of where and when to go in detail (e.g. in travel itineraries and travel guides) (see section 4.3.2), experienced travellers provided offered reference itineraries for others. As a result, subsequent travellers tended to travel to the same places, as they had been introduced to these by experienced travellers. This tendency generates repetition in travellers’ photographs over time.

Figure 15

The Cycle of Destination Image Representation Performed by Vietnamese TPPs



Note. This figure presented 4 stages of circles of destination image representation performed by Vietnamese TPPs. Adapted from “Photography and travel brochures: The circle of representation”, by O. Jenkins, 2003, *Tourism Geographies*, 5(3), p. 308 (<https://doi-org.ezproxy.aut.ac.nz/10.1080/14616680309715>). Copyright 2003 by Taylor & Francis.

By applying the concept of the hermeneutic circle of destination image representation (Figure 1), the formation process of the destination image of Northwest Vietnam performed by Vietnamese TPPs (Figure 15) can be explained. Firstly, Vietnamese TPPs created threads and used photographs and narratives to attract the attention of other forum members. At this stage, these travel resources were approached by others interested in the region. The forum was created for public access purposes, each region of Vietnam is divided into specific boxes, each containing topics created by forum members. Therefore, users who accessed the thread for the North of Vietnam may already have had the intention to visit or do research on the region. Through a process of constantly reading other's threads, potential travellers became inspired, and the destination image of Northwest Vietnam was gradually formed through photographs and journey stories of experienced travellers.

Along with the photographs, narratives played an important role in guiding potential travellers about where and when to visit, creating an invisible trend in travel. New travellers tend to visit places which are considered the "crown jewels" of the Northwest region of Vietnam during recommended periods and produce similar photographs. These photographs then become new projected images that influence other potential travellers. In this phase, a circle of Northwest image representation has been formed, and restarts a new cycle for new travellers. Based on the concept of the visual rhetoric of photographs (see section 5.4.2), this explains why there was so much repetition in the frequency of elements specifically, and themes generally, in the visual data in this study.

Social media platforms not only make a major contribution to spreading photographs and narratives of journeys to others, but also form the cycles of destination image representation. Through travel forum platforms, travellers' experiences and memories are shared with peers who have the same interests. In each thread, there were many interpersonal exchanges evident between Vietnamese TPPs. Other peers also shared their experiences, posted their photographs of the same locations, asked for information for future trips, expressed their admiration of nice photographs, or praised the effort of the thread owners. For example, comments such as "such a nice photo," "the photo is wonderful," "If I go in November, will the ripe rice season still occur?", "where did you take the photo?" and "where is this place" were common conversations

in the threads. Through travellers' participation in activities on online travel forums, these interactions create a closed invisible society for people with similar interests. Consequently, this subset of society nurtures the cycle of the destination image representation.

5.7. Photography related practices as leisure activities

The findings showed that there is a significant number of Vietnamese TPPs who post actively and frequently as leisure travellers who prefer travelling on their own. Instead of booking their trips through tour agencies, these travellers prefer following itineraries and recommendations from experienced travellers and design their own journey plans. They travel to recommended locations, not only to reaffirm what was presented in the photographs but also to satisfy their yearnings, desires, and expectations, created after seeing images of a destination. Furthermore, they are also active in taking photographs during their journeys and sharing them with their own discourses later. Again, the destination image is repeated in photographs.

Among the 12 chosen Vietnamese TPPs, there was only one thread starter who travelled on a booked tour; the others were free and independent travellers. Consequently, the image of infrastructure (e.g. roads) was present in many images (Figure 10). Independent travelling allows travellers to stop on the road to take photographs of a scene that caught their eyes. As can be seen, photographic practices in this way are seen as leisure activities performed by leisure TPPs when travelling. As a consequence, the images of roads were presented together with Northwest Vietnam's "crown jewels." These were also shared online to increase the credibility of their stories.

These leisure travellers have a role in spreading a destination image through their leisure photographic practices and help to shape what the destination should look like in a diverse way. Due to the unique geography and landscapes, it is difficult to locate attractive places in the Northwest region of Vietnam with specific addresses. Hence, posters tend to share detailed guides with textual narratives and photographs, to guide prospective travellers (see section 4.3.2). Without these travel guides, it is difficult for new travellers to explore a destination and find the best places to visit.

In terms of considering photographic practices as factors influencing self-development (see section 2.7), travelling also creates opportunities for improving the skills of the

photographers. The more people travel, the more their photography skills are improved (Nov et al., 2010). As a result, photographs from highly skilled photographers take part in inspiring people with pieces of art containing the destination image. Hence, these practices create a desire to visit specific sites, photograph the same views, and experience the same activities.

5.8. Constructing identities influences forming the destination image

Potential travellers perceive a destination through others' posts, which might or might not take part in motivating them to go to that specific destination, and after visiting, they themselves present the destination in their own way. It is interesting to consider why do travellers share photographs and narratives on social media platforms. Lee and Oh (2017) argued that travellers talk about their previous travel experiences with others to build and develop their self-image in a strategic way. By using their own words and personal lenses to recreate the journey in images and narratives, travellers shape their self-identities and the visited destinations' images from an individual's point of view. Lee and Oh (2017) suggested that in a social environment, people behave in ways that project the image that fits how they want to be positively perceived by others. Accordingly, they seek experiences to enhance the self, to find a different environment, to achieve the expectation, or just to show off.

In a society where people have similar interests, they are easily inspired by photographs and narratives of others, and tend to imitate the same journeys and retell their experiences with similar stories. Sharing images and telling stories are a means of constructing and reflecting on who they are, and by that, travellers shape their social identities. For example, TPP 4 stated at the beginning of his thread:

This post is simply for those who have not yet gone, or are still shy about something intangible, for new members, and for those who have not yet visited the mountains. Here is my itinerary with simple routes for you guys. I went pretty fast because of my limited time. (TPP 4, 28 November 2014, p. 1)

After these opening words, TPP 4 presented his itinerary in detail, with photographs of maps in which the paths he chose were marked and plotted for viewers. Here, TPP 4 shaped his identity as a travel guide for new travellers who might or might not be familiar with travelling to northwest Vietnam.

The motivations for taking and sharing photographs on social media platforms are based on the expectation of receiving compliments and to being recognised by others. Lee and Oh (2017) suggested that sharing activity was a form of social interaction and promoted happiness. Pleasure was experienced by TPP 4 in helping new travellers by sharing his travel stories. Through these processes of constructing self-image and social identities via sharing activities, the value and meaning of shared previous stories to a destination are ceaselessly reinforced.

5.9. Conclusion

This chapter presented the formation process of the destination image of the Northwest region of Vietnam in Vietnamese TPPs' minds. The process starts with travellers perceiving images posted by experienced fellows in the travel forum as destination's image consumers who produce the destination image by distributing their own photographs and stories. The chapter also linked the relevant literature with the findings, to discuss the impacts of the visual rhetoric of photographs in terms of forming the images representing northwest Vietnam. Besides photographs, qualitative contents posted with images not only provided information about the photographs, but also contributed to guiding travellers to the destination. In addition, the processes occurring in individual environments such as constructing social identities and self-determination contributed to the process of forming the cycle of destination image representation. In the next chapter, these findings and discussions are reviewed to answer the research questions and present the implications of the study, and recommendations for future research.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

This research aimed to understand the destination image of the Northwest region of Vietnam through the practice of taking and sharing photographs and narratives of Vietnamese TPPs. By collecting and analysing collected data, the study aimed to explore the kinds of photographs often posted on social travel forums, and the kinds of narratives people often share with their photographs. In this, the study was able to show how the destination image is formed through these photographs and narratives, and identifies which elements contribute to shaping the image of a destination.

6.2. Research questions revisited

RQ1. What kinds of photographs do Vietnamese TPPs travelling to the Northwest region of Vietnam share on travel forums?

The common reason for travelling is to escape daily life. Therefore, people tend to travel to places that are different to their environments. The mountainous terrain and the adaptations in the lives of locals, have created a unique natural landscape in Northwest Vietnam. The highlights of the destination commonly photographed were nature (e.g. mountain scenery), and indigenous culture (e.g. terraced paddy fields, traditional villages, indigenous architecture, and indigenous people). These “crown jewels” have become tourism symbols of the Northwest region of Vietnam. The destination image representations can be seen through the overwhelming number of the appearance of elements coded through the quantitative examinations of the photographs.

RQ2. What kinds of narratives (related to photograph description purposes) do Vietnamese TPPs use to describe their experiences of the Northwest region of Vietnam?

While photographs provide tangible evidence of journeys, narratives supplement the intangible stories behind the scenes that cannot be seen on images. Shared stories of actual experiences not only provide travel guides and tips to prospective travellers, but are also a way of communication. In the findings, narratives accompanying

photographs were classified into three main types of travel narratives: photograph descriptions, travel experience descriptions, and emotional descriptions. Photograph descriptions were written only to describe and provide information already included in the photograph. Travel experience narratives, as the name implies, suggest travel itineraries, giving travel guides, and sharing travel experiences. Emotional narratives were posted to express feelings and personal thoughts about a destination and experienced after the journeys ended.

RQ3. How is the destination image of the Northwest region of Vietnam formed through the practices of taking and sharing photographs and writing narratives by Vietnamese TPPs who travel to the region?

The destination image of the Northwest region of Vietnam results in a process of constantly perceiving and reproducing images and narratives performed by Vietnamese TPPs. The findings presented the replication of five outstanding elements among the photographs over time (see Figure 14), which was the result of the cycle of representation of the destination image explained by Jenkins (2003). With the effect of the visual rhetoric phenomenon in the era of social media-induced tourism, the destination image is constantly reinforced through the practices of taking and sharing photographs and narratives by travellers. These practices contribute to shaping the destination images in prospective travellers' minds if they have not yet been to northwest Vietnam. Narratives accompanying the photographs also had a role in providing more information about the destination in terms of impressions, inspirations, guiding, and sharing. Jimura and Lee (2020) agreed that the formation of a destination image was created by photographs and textual information.

In the process from perceiving to reproducing destination images, processes of constructing identities, especially social identity, and self-determination, are nurtured. People try to identify their social identities with those of others with similar interests. It was evident from the narratives accompanying the photographs, that the travellers presented themselves by sharing their experiences with their social communities. They found enjoyment and pleasure in sharing their travel experiences, with beautiful photographs of destinations, travel stories, and replying to others' comments with enthusiasm. These practices also help to complete the cycle of destination image representation.

6.3. Limitations, implications, and recommendations

6.3.1. *Limitations*

Twelve topics posted from 2011 to 2019 were collected in order to analyse the formation process of the destination image of the Northwest region of Vietnam. However, there are some limitations which need to be considered for future research. First, there is a lack of academic research using pictorial analysis, hence, its application is still not common for studying the formation of a destination image through photographs. Secondly, online platforms are just one source of destination image information. Therefore, these do not represent the perception of all Vietnamese TPPs about the destination image of northwest Vietnam. Furthermore, due to limited time, data for the research were selected on condition that it contained many interactions in the threads and represented each year studied. Therefore, the number of images in each thread was uneven, leading to unequal quantities in the sampled threads. As a consequence, data could not present enough of the formation process of the destination image over time. Finally, all resources were collected from one travel forum, hence, the sample was small and might not represent the travel behaviours of other Vietnamese TPPs.

The copyright permission of photographs presented in this dissertation is one of the issues of the study. Because some threads were posted many years ago, some of the thread starters have not been active for some time. Consequently, it was difficult to contact and ask for copyright permission. In order to avoid legal issues, the dissertation used similar photographs with Creative Commons licences to provide examples for some arguments. This substitution also proved the repetition in the cycle of the representation of destination image of the Northwest region of Vietnam through Vietnamese TPPs' photographs.

The bias of the researcher is also a potential limitation in this study because of the subjective view of the researcher in the process of analysing visual data and qualitative content.

6.3.2. Implications and recommendations

In terms of theoretical implications, the study supported the theory that the cycle of destination image representation manifests in a closed online community, in this case,

a travel forum on northwest Vietnam. With the development of the internet and the desire to communicate with others, the destination image is formed through a process of constantly reinforcing images posted by travellers on a social platform. It is therefore proposed that this effectively transfers the destination image to travellers in a closed online community through the practice of taking and sharing photographs. People feel connected and satisfied when their efforts are recognised, and others tend to follow their recommendations by reading their shared travel posts. Consequently, the study found a replication of various outstanding elements among photographs of travellers who had visited the Northwest region of Vietnam and shared their journey on the travel forum platform.

In terms of research method implications, the study employed the pictorial analysis method using simple calculations in Microsoft Excel and presenting the findings in simple charts. In this way, this study contributes an example of employing the pictorial analysis technique to the small quantity of studies that have adopted visual analysis. This simple analysis technique can be applied in a practical environment. Destination marketers can use this research as an example of determining what attracts travellers in terms of visuals and online social platforms.

In terms of marketing for the image of the Northwest region of Vietnam, the results of this study show that photographs are effective tools in marketing a destination. Kim et al. (2014) claimed that travellers have become more independent in arranging their travel plans using a range of media and online information. Travel posts with photographs and narratives from experienced travellers in a typical social media platform could promote a destination in either a positive or negative way, as the destination image depends on how tourists perceive information about the destination through the abundant online resources.

Therefore, destination marketers and travel agencies should take this phenomenon into consideration in order to develop appropriate marketing campaigns and objectives. Herath et al. (2020) suggested that pictorial representation through photographs could create an impression and perception of a destination in travellers' minds, influencing their travel decision-making, attitudes, and behaviours. Thus, this study provides a better understanding for destination marketers, of the factors that can represent the present destination image of Northwest Vietnam as significant sites for photographs

through the practice of taking and sharing images of Vietnamese TPPs. As the main findings revealed, the Northwest region of Vietnam can be promoted as a destination of nature and culture.

6.4. Overall conclusion

Photography practices have been seen as a phenomenon in contemporary tourism in the community of overwhelming numbers of online interactions. In the cycle of destination image representation, travellers are both producers and consumers of the destination image. In the hermeneutic circle, the perceiving and reproducing the destination image process, is influenced by processes of forming the tourist gaze, social media-induced tourism, and constructing identities.

The travel forum itself is a social interaction platform providing an online information exchange environment, where travellers can share travel posts such as photographs and travel stories containing personal valuable timelines in terms of retaining memories. People take photographs during their trips to record memories and share them afterwards with narratives. Somehow or other, this sustains the hermeneutic cycle of representation of the destination image and constantly reproduces the image between subjects. Therefore, travel forums provide an environment where people can easily find travel information and share travel experience after their trips, which also helps form the destination images of places such as northwest Vietnam while they construct their social identities.

Social identities play an important part in motivating people to share their experiences with others. The desire to share derives from the desire to be recognised by society. People only share stories of their journeys that they want others to see, and long for their contributions to be recognised by a closed community of people with the same interests. Therefore, it can be understood that social identities play a key role in shaping the destination image through communication between humans. This phenomenon is further understood when viewing the shared photographs and narratives in travel forums. By employing the qualitative method to analyse the content of those narratives, the findings were able to show that people tend to share information to get attention from others and feel satisfied when their posts are noticed. This means that the thread posters are also willing to answer questions related to the destination and their journeys, as asked by other members. While photographs take

others' attention, narratives provide details about the journeys, such as travel itineraries, destinations descriptions, and thread creators' emotion.

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