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## **Capturing outdoor experiences using social networking sites: Exploring students' practices through photo-elicitation**

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Photographs taken to capture outdoor experiences can now be mediated by technology, which has transformed their potential reach. Social Networking Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Instagram have enabled people to share information such as photographs, videos and text on open or closed sites, to edit media, to receive feedback or comments, and much more due to the expanding capability of SNSs.

This paper reports on a small-scale research project to explore the photographs of outdoor experiences that students in higher education choose to post on SNSs. This might be a reflection of the way in which students communicate their experiences and portray their identities. The research employs an interpretive phenomenological approach using content analysis of the photographs and photo elicitation interviews. It seeks to ascertain the reasons why students post photographs on SNSs, whether they share them on public (open) or private (closed) sites, whether they edit the photographs and in what way and for what purpose, whether they are influenced by the reactions and feedback they receive from sharing the photographs and if taking photographs has any deeper meaning for them.

Initially, it was assumed that gender influenced the nature of photographs posted on SNSs as there is some (generic) evidence to indicate that males and females use social media in different ways. Females spend more time and have more presence than males on SNSs (Frisson & Eggermont, 2016; Vermern, 2015) and post more emotional and sentimental graphics; males post more 'joke' images or images that reflect more independence (Dominick, 1999). In a later study, Rose et al (2012) found that pictures of males included active, dominant and independent attributes whilst female users included attractive and dependent attributes.

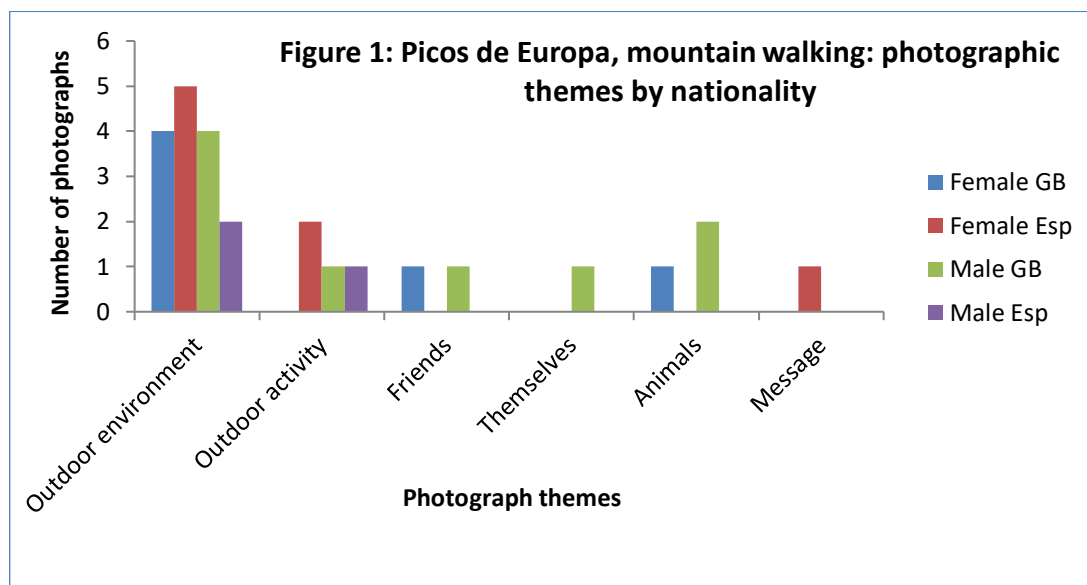
A pilot study was undertaken by McClurg (2017) to investigate the ways in which people capture their experiences in the outdoors through photographs and how they select those to post on SNSs. Eight students, four male and four female (18-21 years) took part in two outdoor activity days (climbing and canoeing) and, after the experience, were asked to identify one photograph from each activity that they would post on SNSs. The photographs were analysed by symbolic interaction (Askan et al, 2009) in a metonymic sense (ie what is present) and coded. Semi-structured 'photo elicitation' interviews took place after the activities to further explore the reasons for taking and posting the photographs on SNSs – a metamorphic analysis (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013).

The symbolic interaction analysis resulted in eight categories being identified, collapsed into four themes: Outdoor activity, outdoor environment, themselves, and friends. These themes are similar to those identified in Loeffler's seminal research (2004a; 2004b) on the meaning making of outdoor experiences through photo-elicitation with students, 18-21 years before the advent

of social media. Where gender was differentiated, females had taken more photographs of the outdoor environment and people during their outdoor experiences and there were slightly more photographs of the outdoor activity taken by males than females (Loeffler, 2004a). In McClurg’s (2017) study, females were more likely to take photographs of the outdoor environment and to edit these before posting; males were more likely to take photographs of the outdoor activity and were unlikely to edit them.

The main study comprised two further outdoor experiences with students with the opportunity for cultural comparisons. In the first, British students and Spanish students undertook a mountain walk together in the Picos de Europa, northern Spain (n = 20, females = 11 (of whom 5 were British), males = 9 (of whom 6 were British)); in the second, British students participated in a five day sea-kayaking expedition in the Outer Hebrides, UK (n=6, females = 4, males =2). In addition to gender and nationality, students were asked to state their age in classes (18-21; 22-25; 26-29; 30-39 years).

The emergent themes from the Picos de Europa mirrored those in the pilot study with the addition of ‘animals’ (3 students, all British; 1 female, 2 males) and ‘message’ (photograph of a sign, ‘muerte y destrucción’ (‘death and destruction’) – 1 Spanish female). The majority of students both male and female, British and Spanish would post photographs of the environment (see figure 1).



The emergent dominant theme from the sea kayaking expedition was of the outdoor activity and half the students offered a photograph from the same location (see Figure 2). There was no discernible difference in themes between males and females.



Figure 2: Sea kayaking expedition. Example of photograph posted on social media.

Students or the researcher also gave written summary of their answers during the photo elicitation interviews in their native language to facilitate naturalistic answers. Where notes were made by the researcher, the respondent gave their agreement that these were an accurate representation of the conversation, post interview. The responses in Spanish were later translated to English.

The most frequently cited reasons for taking photographs in the outdoors were: to capture/document memories, to show family/friends and, for the views/picturesque. There were no differences in the qualitative data between males and females. There was evidence of more extrinsic motivations of older students (22-25) particularly amongst Spanish males, “to see others enjoying what is new to them”; “to encourage others to value nature more”; “taking photographs is a fusion between man and nature”. Similar numbers of students would edit or not edit their photographs before posting from both cultures. The most common reasons for editing were to alter ‘saturation’, ‘sharpness’ and ‘size’ and responses emphasised that editing would be to improve photographic quality rather than the nature of the image it portrays, “to enhance detail rather not distort reality”, “to improve/strengthen what I am trying to express with a photo”, “for my blog”.

The interviews explored the posting preferences of the students and there was a marked difference between older and younger students. No students 26 years and older would post to public sites, one would post to a private site with the rest rarely posting (n = 5). In contrast, the younger students would all post to public or private sites (n =21), with the majority of 22-25 year olds publishing to both.

The students were asked whether they felt that taking photographs had a deeper meaning for them. Students aged 18-21 nearly all reiterated the reasons for taking the photographs but the older students’ responses illustrated consideration of their *value*, “I don’t think that a photo can ever fully reflect an experience. It is literally a snapshot of an experience. It often reflects a beautiful place but not always the experience as a whole” (Female, Spanish, 26-29) and more *extrinsic* meanings, ““I would like to think it would encourage more people outside/to

experience beautiful places” (Male & Female, Spanish, 22-25; Female, British, 18-21); “We do not know many places that surround us and people are not aware of landscape degradation” (Male, Spanish, 22-25).

Older students seemed to have a broader perspective on the function and meanings of photographs, “Photography can have a deeper meaning as an art form, a means of expression, and as a way to process an experience” (Female, Spanish, 26-29); “Seeing photos afterwards adds new perspectives I didn’t think about before” (Female, British, 30-39). They were considerate of the function of SNS’s, ““I am not so keen to live in the public age as I feel that this dilutes the experience in some way and we are losing the act of storytelling” (Male, British, 30-39); “A lived diary” (Male, British, 30-39).

The qualitative research with a larger sample found no differences between genders in the themes of photographs that they would post SNSs. Students posted photos to share to capture/document memories to share with family and friends, and for their aesthetic value. (as in Loeffler,2004 a; 2004b; 2005). There did not appear to be differences in the reasons for posting between males and females, although there was evidence of extrinsic values particularly amongst Spanish males. For older students, there is evidence of deeper meaning in photographs and where and why they do or do not post them on SNSs; nearly all younger students see the meanings in the same way as their reasons for taking photographs and posting them; older students rarely post photographs and a minority posted to private sites (including WhatsApp).

This research has indicated some interesting differences in the sharing of photographs on SNSs with age and the meaning to individuals. There are limitations to the study in that the researcher was a member of staff (and not a peer as in the pilot study) and requested the photographs after the event. Thus, students might have selected photographs more judiciously for the research and they might deviate from the immediacy of posting during the outdoor experience. The data interpretation is qualitative and they have not yet been subject to multivariate analysis.

The outcomes of the research to date raise a number of questions in terms of whether SNSs and the possibilities offered in opening content to a wide audience if so desired, made some students interrogate more deeply the meanings of photographs and the reasons for taking them and sharing them, or not? Why is it that younger students do not see a deeper meaning (beyond memories, capturing the moment and sharing with family and friends)? Have they lived with SNSs all their technological lives? Or, are they not yet mature enough to see or reflect on any deeper or extrinsic meanings?

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