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To cite this article: Kamoliddin Fayzullaev, Susanna Heldt Cassel & Daniel Brandt (2018): Destination image in Uzbekistan – heritage of the Silk Road and nature experience as the core of an evolving Post Soviet identity, The Service Industries Journal, DOI: [10.1080/02642069.2018.1519551](https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2018.1519551)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02642069.2018.1519551>



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Published online: 11 Sep 2018.



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Destination image in Uzbekistan – heritage of the Silk Road and nature experience as the core of an evolving Post Soviet identity

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to analyze the destination image of Uzbekistan presented by the DMO and the destinations images emerging from user generated content in social media posts. In this study, promotional images and user-generated images on the platform Instagram were examined by using content-semiotic analysis. The main findings show that the destination image of Uzbekistan is dominated by heritage and reference to ancient cultural traditions of the region. However, the image represented through user generated content on Instagram is more diverse and to a larger extent depict the destination through natural heritage and experiences in the natural landscape. Furthermore, Uzbekistan is concurrently trying to create a post-Soviet identity through a focus on its history prior to the Soviet past, with focus on heritage of the Great Silk Road which highlight that destination image construction is related to geo-political processes in society which includes contestations of national identity.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 26 April 2018
Accepted 30 August 2018

KEYWORDS

Destination image; content-semiotic analysis; post-Soviet identity; tourism representations; the Great Silk Road; Uzbekistan

Introduction

The power of destination images to encourage travellers to visit faraway destinations is well documented by academicians and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) yet to date, (re)forming and maintaining desired destination images has been challenging for DMOs. This is because users of the Internet worldwide can share their experiences, feelings, and opinions about destinations and tourism facilities with other users, via text, image, audio, and video, often referred to as user-generated content (UGC). It has been argued that for a long time, before the Internet became widely accessible, DMOs could control the destination images with brochures, guidebooks, postcards and TV commercials (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). However, to date, tourists have opportunities to share their travel experiences publicly on the Internet, which made the situation more challenging for the DMOs to control their destination images (Pike & Page, 2014). According to Alcázar,

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Piñero, and Maya (2014), photographic material produced by DMOs are induced, while UGC is organic in nature. UGC is considered to be cognate and a modern way of 'word of mouth' on the Internet and social media. Because UGC owners do not usually have financial incentives for promoting particular destinations, UGC is highly powerful in terms of forming or reforming destination images and expectations of potential tourists (ibid). In this context, one may argue that tourism companies and/or DMOs acknowledge the importance of UGC and thus, try to create their intended destination image through UGC.

Further, visualization is important in tourism in general, because it is common for people to communicate personal travel experiences and perceived destination images through photographs and slideshows (Schmallegger, Carson, & Jacobsen, 2010). In this context, Instagram is a social media platform, where users share photos and videos with captions. Miles (2014) stated that by the year 2013, 50% of the top brands worldwide were using Instagram as a marketing channel, and even though Instagram is considered to be an effective tool to reach consumers, to date there are few studies that primarily focus on the platform and its communication. By 2018, there are 700 million active Instagram accounts and the platform is considered the most widely used social media for both companies and private persons, as well as a tool widely used for political lobbying, influencing and branding (Colliander & Marder, 2018; Muñoz & Towner, 2017).

It is of importance to study tourism development in newly emerged countries because such development may become a key feature of the establishment and promotion of an emerging national identity (Szondi, 2007). Since its independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has been trying to rehabilitate and restore its cultural and natural heritages, and lately also to promote the country as a tourism destination. Soon after Uzbekistan took its independence, the country opened up for tourism. Uzbekistan is in Central Asia, comprising three main hubs of the Great Silk Road (GSR), and the country's tourism is mainly based on the GSR theme (Saliev & Soliev, 2015). The government of Uzbekistan established its national tourism company, Uzbektourism, in 1992 (Paramonov et al., 2006). The establishment of the organization Uzbektourism made it possible to assess issues related to tourism such as advertising, information services, licensing, statistics, and compilation of economic data from one united body (ibid). Uzbekistan is a developing country where tourism is becoming a strategic sector of the economy. Recently, a resolution was signed by the president of Uzbekistan on 'measures to ensure the rapid development of tourism in the Republic' (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2017). The decree is aimed at using effective ways to promote tourism, creating comfort for tourists and assistance for organizations in the area of tourism. It can be argued that implementing effective ways of tourism promotion includes formation and maintenance of positive destination images.

Yet, there are few research publications about the destination image of Uzbekistan, which investigates the role of tourism representations in the country's approach to creating an independent identity. The work by González, Araujo, and Kim (2016) brings up and analyses the relation between the nation building and tourism development processes in Uzbekistan and the promotional strategies of the country. A related study from Kyrgyzstan (Palmer, 2007) investigates how tourism is used in building national identity, which similarly addresses issues of post-Soviet identity formations in a neighbouring country in Central Asia.

The aim of the research is to compare the destination images of Uzbekistan on the official website of Uzbektourism with the UGC produced on Instagram and discuss in what ways and with what symbols the photographic representations construct the identity of Uzbekistan as a tourism destination. This is done through a content-semiotic analysis method to identify and interpret the denotative and connotative meanings conveyed by photographic representations (Metro-Roland, 2009). The research questions addressed in this paper are how destination image is constructed through visual communication in different channels and how social media in particular is influencing the overall image. Further, we want to answer the question of how destination image and national identity is related in post-Soviet countries, with a case study from Uzbekistan.

To identify and analyze the images, this study compares the online destination image promoted by the official DMO of Uzbekistan with the country's destination image produced in UGC, specifically through the platform Instagram. The reason for choosing the platform Instagram for this research is the major impact this particular platform has in marketing and social communication in contemporary society.

Destination image

The concept of destination image has been researched in tourism studies for decades (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2007; Ruiz, González, & Zamora, 2018). Destination image is a dynamic concept that tends to change over time, and it can influence tourists' destination choice (Xu & Ye, 2016). There are many definitions of the concept *destination image*. Similarly, Kesić and Pavlić (2011) define destination image as a subjective perception of an objective reality, which every individual creates in his or her consciousness. A wider definition is proposed by Gallarza, Saura, and Garcia (2002), that destination image is a multidimensional concept covering three different parts: touristic landscape of destination, projected destination image, and perceived destination image. Mossberg and Kleppe (2005) further adds the dimension of country image versus destination image in their research and they conclude that the elements of the images of countries and destinations are mostly overlapping. The destination image is influencing the decision making among potential tourists and visitors in all of the stages of the destination selection process, not least in the era of smart tourism (Ghaderi, Hatamifar, & Henderson, 2018). On-line descriptions, images and narratives in travel blogs influence the decisions of tourists (Wang, 2012). The projection of images is important because images consist of denotative (literal) meaning and connotative (social and/or value added) meanings (Hunter, 2016).

Online destination image

Mak (2016) defines online destination image as 'the online representation of the collective beliefs, knowledge, ideas, feelings and overall impressions of a destination' (p. 282). Online destination image is considered to be a dynamic social structure compared to the traditional destination image communicated through brochures, guidebooks, and postcards (Hunter, 2016). In other words, online destination image is reproductive and cumulative in nature, because social media users continue sharing visual and textual representations related to particular destinations. One of the main differences of online destination

image from traditional destination image is the Internet and the Web 2.0, which have allowed users to create and share UGC on different social media platforms. Consequently, it has empowered users to form or reform online destination images (Mak, 2016). The destination image is formed by an organic and an induced dimension according to Gunn (1972). The first term refers to information about a destination without commercial intentions while the latter refers to promotional messages. He proposed a model which includes different stages in which the destination images are formed. These steps include; a pre-travel phase where the images and representations of the destination is molded as new information is processed, a second phase where the actual decision to travel is taken. In the third stage the journey to the destination is taking place. The next phase includes all the interactions of the destinations. The last two steps in the model include the travel back to the origin and the post-travel processing of the trip. All of these stages are considered important for the formation of the destination image and are constantly formed by both the induced and organic dimensions.

Initial destination images are shaped based on organic images that are mental images of a destination. An accumulated mental destination image gets modified based on an individual's research through induced image sources, such as DMO websites and travel guidebooks. This is a crucial stage when DMOs have to control intended destination image. During the actual travel, an individual formulates a personal experience and opinion on the destination image of a particular destination (ibid). UGC is involved in the initial stage when individuals accumulate mental images of a destination, since UGC on the Internet is a cognate and modern type of word of mouth on the Internet and social media (Alcázar et al., 2014).

UGC in a tourism context

UGC may contain text, audio, video, and photographs that are shared on the Internet by any individual (Burgess, Sellitto, Cox, & Buultjens, 2011). In the context of tourism, UGC presents experiences, discussions, and opinions about tourism products and services that influence destination images. To date, the Internet is considered to be the primary source of information about tourist destinations for potential customers (Manap, 2013). Internet users consider experience reviews and photos shared by other users who visited particular destinations. Online evaluations shared by other users have not only the power to increase or decrease tourist visits, but also to develop expectations of a potential tourist and form destination image in the potential tourist's mind (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008).

Further, common travel planning processes among younger generation, such as 'pre-trip,' 'the trip,' and 'post-trip' may involve UGC (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009). For instance, a potential tourist may discover a destination on social media and then begin to look for more information and photos regarding the destination's facilities, attractions, and services. This allows the potential tourist to analyze the destination by contrasting it with the other destinations and make a decision on travel. According to Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), tourism consumers rely to a larger extent on UGC compared to information presented by DMOs and other travel agencies. Further, Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013) have pointed out that 'photographs are the means of "capturing" reality' (p. 591). In this context, the online photo uploading facility as provided in Instagram is a

representation of reality and the user's experience as a traveller. Currently Instagram has around 700 million users and on average 52 million images are shared through the platform everyday (Statistic Brain Research Institute [SBRI], 2017).

Visual representation in tourism

Photographic representations are referred to as characteristics and symbols of a destination transformed into imitations (in the form of photographs and/or texts) and transferred through different sources of media to promote the destination (Hunter, 2008). The concept of representation involves the description or portrayal of destination in a particular way (Ribeiro, 2009).

Visual images continuously circulate within a culture and get permeated with certain meanings and associations (Jenkins, 2003). Visual images chosen for photography by a tourist are usually chosen in the destination and replicated from the perceived images that can already be seen in travel brochures, personal photographs, television, and social media (ibid). According to Hall (1997), representations always go in circles with images by using and reflecting identities. Further, representations can serve as visual clues that guide audiences to the identity of particular destination (Hammett, 2014). Thus, it is interesting to study different approaches that have been used in post-Soviet countries in relation to identity (re)creation.

Post-Soviet identity and tourism in Central Asia

It has been argued that many countries around the world make efforts through national tourism organizations or by other similar governmental organizations, to project a particular destination image and/or political identity (Light, 2000). This is particularly evident in post-Soviet countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This is because those countries have been trying to proclaim that they have departed from state of socialism and have been opened up for connections with countries all over the world (ibid). According to Lanfant, Allcock, and Bruner (1995), identity building can be discussed in a tourism context because identity is about how a country presents 'itself' to 'others' via international tourism. Thus, identities are produced (or reproduced) and affirmed by the images and representations of a country constructed in a tourism context (Light, 2000).

Post-Soviet countries in Central Asia are required to be more creative in building and promoting their national destination images because they share a similar recent history, and it might be challenging to differentiate the different countries from each other based on national identity (Kantarci, 2007). However, the (re)construction of national identities is a complex process that involves geographical as well as symbolic and cultural boundaries where definitions, exclusion/inclusion and the representation of different ethnic groups are crucial elements (Aydingün, 2002; Palmer, 2007; Pretes, 2003).

Light (2000) studied different approaches employed to create post-communism identities by countries in Central and Eastern Europe, specifically in Germany, Hungary, and Romania. According to Light (2000), Germany and Hungary are careful or hesitant in acknowledgement of tourism development through communism heritage. Yet, in Germany, some part of the Berlin Wall is retained around Checkpoint Charlie as a distinct heritage space. Another example is the Statue Park constructed in Budapest for tourists

interested in communism heritage. In Romania, the socialism past is kept in silence and more or less hidden in the context of tourism development. Socialism heritage buildings such as the House of People are now instead interpreted through new meanings associated with post-socialism and democracy (Caraba, 2011; Light, 2000).

Nation building is related to the construction of destination images of nations, and the representation of people and places, where the specificity of and difference between nations are stressed rather than similarities, in order to attract visitors and create senses of belonging (Dann, 1996; Hall, 1999). These processes are particularly complex in geographical contexts of political transformation and the re-organisation of national borders, as in Central Asia after the fall of the Soviet Republic. The breakdown of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in early 1990s resulted in several new countries that emerged on the world map, including Uzbekistan. In the case of concurrent Uzbekistan, as in other post-Soviet countries, tourism is gaining increasing importance as a key industry for creating a sovereign national identity

Previous research of the process of nation building related to tourism and destination image in Central Asian countries have found that reasons behind the interest for Silk Route destinations and the ancient past is a combination of the political history of the countries and the growth of tourism in this region (González et al., 2016). Since the countries of Central Asia, such as Uzbekistan, have a mix of different ethnic identities partly due to them being part of the Soviet Union, nation building and the (re)construction of national identities are important and at the same time highly contested issues.

Nation-building is, as Palmer (2007) notes, a major challenge, closely linked to the history of the region, the loss of all-Union structures and the impacts of the loss of central government subsidies. Since the ethnic meaning of the different republics were assigned by the Soviet Union, the contemporary processes of national identities is following waves of nationalism and redefinition of identities after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time there is an increasing demand for tourism experiences related to nostalgia of the past and heritage in Post-Soviet countries (González et al., 2016).

Tourism in Uzbekistan

Although the Republic of Uzbekistan is considered to be a newly emerged and little-known country, it has a long history dominated by its position as a hub of the Silk Road linking China with Europe (Kantarci, 2007). The total territory of the country is 447,400 sq. km., and according to World Bank's estimation, the current population in Uzbekistan is about 31.8 million (World Bank, 2017).

Uzbekistan is located along the Great Silk Road, which adds value to its cultural and historical heritage. Together with tangible heritage site, Uzbekistan owns numerous intangible heritage comprising folklore, music and festivals. Five properties out of 7,500 historic sites in Uzbekistan are included in UNESCO's World Heritage List (WHL), namely, Itchan Kala, Historic Centre of Bukhara, Samarkand – Crossroad of Cultures and Historic Centre of Shakhrisabz, including Western Tien-Shan as a natural heritage (UNESCO, 2016).

The Great Silk Road has been travelled by conquerors, traders, pilgrims, and more recently, tourists. The road also served an important role in exchange of cultures, craft-goods, and ideas. Three regions of contemporary Uzbekistan, namely Samarkand,

Bukhara, and Khiva were main hubs of the GSR as they were situated at the crossways of the road. Therefore, Uzbekistan has for some time developed its tourism related to the GSR theme, and it is common for tourists in Uzbekistan to make a round trip visiting the three regions of the GSR (ibid). It was reported that the Bukhara, Samarkand, and Khorezm (Khiva) regions and capital city Tashkent accounted for 76.2% of the total tourist visits to the country in 2009 (Turner, 2010).

The key markets of Uzbekistan are the Russian Federation, Turkey, Germany, France, Italy, the United Kingdom (UK), Japan, and the United States of America (USA). The average length of stay for international tourists has been 6–9 nights (Kim, 2013). The number of tourist arrivals was 1,968,650 in 2014 (World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2016).

The government of Uzbekistan established its National Tourism Company, Uzbektourism, making it possible to assess issues related to tourism in the country, such as advertising, information services, licensing, statistics, and compilation of economic data from one united body (Paramonov et al., 2006). The government of Uzbekistan has so far monopolized the process of brand image development (Marat, 2009). Uzbektourism held a competition to create a tourism brand for Uzbekistan in 2009, and consequently a slogan was created for tourism promotion as 'Uzbekistan – the symbol of the magic east' (Kim, 2013).

Research methodology

Data for this study were collected from web-pages presenting promotional materials of Uzbektourism through the official website, and the UGC on Instagram was accessed via the Instagram extension www.mulpix.com

Induced promotional materials are defined as images presented on the official website of the Uzbektourism website, www.welcomeuzbekistan.uz. The website contains a 'Cities' section with a photo gallery categorized by six geographical regions in the country. All the images in the 'Cities' section were downloaded because some of the common themes represented there were broad, such as 'Sightseeing,' 'Arts and crafts,' 'Museums,' 'Restaurants and cafes.' The photo gallery in the 'News' section was also downloaded for the analysis. A total of 448 images were downloaded from the website for analysis in May 2017.

With regard to the Instagram sample, the data collection was slightly more intricate. To decrease the numbers of obtained Instagram posts, without losing any variety in content, the researchers adopted a data collection method used by Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013) and chose images with the #uzbekistan hashtag accompanied with a #travel hashtag. This brings up more relevant photo content posted by travellers rather than by residents. Adding a #travel hashtag reduced the cumbersome amount of 547,124 image results to only 362 images, and these were downloaded from Instagram. Moreover, to date, Instagram does not allow searching multiple hashtags. Therefore, the researchers decided to use www.mulpix.com, the Instagram extension that is created specifically for searching content on Instagram with multiple hashtags.

Content analysis used for quantitative categorization of collected images according to their denotative sign elements as demonstrated in previous researches has been adopted in the first stage of analysis (Hunter, 2016; Prebensen, 2007). Denotative signs are interpreted here as the literal representations of the destination. In other words, collected images from the two sources (the official website of Uzbektourism and Instagram) were separately categorized according to themes and contexts. Images were categorized in

one or more categories, in accordance with the dominant theme represented in the photograph. Categorization was carried out based on the methods used in previous studies that compared destination images in induced promotional materials and UGC: Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013) and Hunter (2016). Further, semiotic analysis was conducted in the second step, based on connotative sign elements on collected images. By doing so, it is believed that extra value would be added to the literal denotative content analysis. Connotative signs may cover several denotative signs (Barthes & Heath, 2010) because categorization of denotative sign elements would create frequencies and categories, whereas connotative sign elements produce more insight into what is revealed about the destination due to the interpretive analysis feature. Physical attributes in images, such as clothing of people, architecture styles of buildings and sites were examined. Consequently, images were subdivided into three categories: pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet sites. Heritage sites that are dated prior to the Soviet period were regarded as pre-Soviet sites, whereas any other sites that were developed after the Soviet period were regarded as modern sites. Subsequently, images were cross-tabulated by the thematic groups that were identified: Heritage/Sightseeing, Nature/People and Entertainment/Recreational. Consequently, the content-semiotic analysis method used in this study is designed to identify and interpret the denotative and connotative meanings conveyed by photographic representations (Metro-Roland, 2009).

Findings and analysis

All collected images were categorized according to the messages displayed in the images. The analysis of the pictures resulted in 23 categories representing all features of Uzbekistan's destination image.

Table 1 presents the recurrence of collected images within several pre-established categories. Some images were classified under more than one category based on the predominant themes that were identified in particular images. Because the numbers of images in the two samples vary, percentages were calculated for the purpose of comparison. Calculations were done based on respective sample sizes, and percentages were rounded up during interpretation.

Based on the categories presented in Table 1, the researchers identified broader thematic groups in which all the categories could be placed except an 'other' category, which was ignored in further analysis because it did not contain photographs relevant to the destination image of Uzbekistan.

Photographs were sorted in terms of space, which refers to physical tourism environment that was presented in images. Consequently, three broader themes were identified, namely, Heritage/Sightseeing, Nature/People, and Entertainment/Recreational. Table 2 shows frequency of images in grouped categories in terms of dominant themes that were identified in images.

The Heritage/Sightseeing theme in the official website sample made up 95% of the photographic representations. The Nature/People theme accounted for 4%, and the Entertainment/Recreational theme accounted for 11% of the images. On the other hand, the Heritage/Sightseeing theme in the Instagram sample accounted for 71%, the Nature/People theme was 30%, and the theme Entertainment/Recreational made up 10% of the photographic representations.

Table 1. Recurrence of categories.

Categories	Website (N = 448)	Instagram (N = 362)	Website (%)	Instagram (%)
Historical buildings	232	71	51.79	19.61
Architectural features	87	101	19.42	27.90
Cultural events	25	6	5.58	1.65
Traditional clothing	25	13	5.58	3.59
Other sightseeing places	22	27	4.91	7.45
Mausoleums	19	–	4.24	–
Theatre	17	–	3.79	–
Museums	16	1	3.57	0.27
Public transport	15	14	3.35	3.86
Local handicrafts/souvenirs	8	19	1.79	5.24
Cinema	7	–	1.56	–
Gardens	7	–	1.56	–
People	5	37	1.11	10.22
Mountains	3	33	0.67	9.11
Cuisine	2	24	0.45	6.62
Deserts	2	6	0.45	1.65
Lodging and restaurants	–	16	–	4.41
Lakes and rivers	–	24	–	6.62
Plants	–	8	–	2.20
Wet market	–	15	–	4.14
Other	–	14	–	3.86

Heritage/sightseeing

Heritage/Sightseeing is the dominant theme. Within this thematic group, photographs that portrayed various historical buildings located in different regions of Uzbekistan made up more than 47% of overall images in the official website sample. The same

Table 2. Frequency of categories according to thematic groups.

Categories	Website	Instagram	Website (%)	Instagram (%)
<i>Heritage/Sightseeing</i>				
Historical buildings	232	71	47.15	17.11
Architectural features	87	101	17.68	24.34
Traditional clothing	25	13	5.08	3.13
Museums	16	1	3.25	0.24
Mausoleums	19	–	3.86	–
Public transport	15	14	3.05	3.37
Local handicrafts	8	19	1.63	4.58
Cuisine	2	24	0.41	5.78
Other sightseeing places	22	27	4.47	6.51
Total			86.59	65.06
<i>Nature/People</i>				
Gardens	7	–	1.42	–
People	5	37	1.02	8.92
Mountains	3	33	0.61	7.95
Deserts	2	6	0.41	1.45
Lakes and rivers	–	24	–	5.78
Plants	–	8	–	1.93
Total			3.46	26.02
<i>Entertainment/Recreational</i>				
Cultural events	25	6	5.08	1.45
Theatre	17	–	3.46	–
Cinema	7	–	1.42	–
Lodging and restaurant	–	16	–	3.86
Wet market	–	15	–	3.61
Total			9.96	8.92
Grand totals	502	415	100.00	100.00

category of photographs accounted for more than 17% of the Instagram sample. This could be explained by the decision of Uzbektourism to develop and promote heritage tourism through its historical buildings that are located on the ancient Great Silk Road. However, findings from the Instagram sample resulted in fewer images of this kind as compared to the official website sample. 'Historical buildings' is the second most dominant category of images in the Instagram sample. The category 'Architectural features,' was created for the images of historical monuments that were partially showing historical buildings. Architectural features included pictures that show specific decoration details used in historical buildings and minarets, which in total accounted for 24% of the images in the Instagram sample, and 18% in the official website sample. The users of Instagram, who are also believed to be mostly tourists, were obviously interested in observing, capturing, and sharing unique architectural features of historical buildings in Uzbekistan. Interestingly, this subcategory included more images in the Instagram sample than in the official website sample. However, the category 'Architectural features' was the second largest in the official website sample as well.

The architectural styles vary with regions, because of the history of the country prior to the Soviet period, when Samarkand, Khiva, and Bukhara were different empires and khannates. However, the organization Uzbektourism is trying to present an image of a collection of various architectural styles and built heritage of the country as a whole, without presenting details about the different historical regions. Other images in this category portrayed the heritage in Uzbekistan through traditional costumes and clothing, heritage sites and museums, and images of local handicrafts.

Nature

This thematic group highlighted different kinds of natural resources and natural scenery and landscapes related to tourism as well as images of local people in rural areas. The photographs contained several features of natural surroundings that are mainly found in rural areas of Uzbekistan. The official website sample had noticeably fewer images than was the case for the Instagram sample (3% and 26%, respectively, that portrayed nature and natural surroundings).

Many of the photographs showing natural landscapes and scenery were pictures of mountains. Generally, the images of mountains in both of the samples lacked people in the pictures, which indicates that mountain areas are kept pure and untouched. This focus on the natural environment as separated from people and visitors was also reflected in the Instagram sample, where notably few of the pictures of mountains and landscape scenery contained selfies, as compared to the other categories of Instagram posts. Further, most of the photographs of mountains on Instagram also portrayed lakes or rivers. Overall, there is a much stronger focus on nature and landscape images in the photographs posted on Instagram as compared to the images on the official website. It is clear that Uzbektourism is concentrating image-creating via the website on heritage tourism development and promotion of culture and traditions of the country. Images of nature and possibilities of nature experiences are almost totally lacking in the website material. Apart from pictures of mountains, lakes, and rivers, the photographs of natural scenery also contained pictures of deserts. Two deserts dominate this category with different foci on the two samples. The official website sample portrayed images of the

Kyzyl-Kum desert, effectively avoiding images of the desert around the Aral Sea. The desert around the Aral Sea was created through a drying out of the sea, and a massive salt desert has been created in recent decades. A very large area of salty desert contains many old, abandoned ships and is quite spectacular; however, this part of the country and this specific dramatic landscape is not shown on any of the images at the official website. However, the Instagram sample contained several photographs of old, abandoned ships in dried parts of the Aral Sea under open blue skies, so obviously this area is an attraction and for visitors. The dried-out sea and salt desert is spectacular and different, but it is not a place that has been included in the overall image of the country as presented by official actors, perhaps because of the environmental disaster that the dried sea mainly represents internationally. So, images of nature are obviously a large part of the image of Uzbekistan from the point of view of Instagram posters, but a largely ignored theme in the official branding of the country. Nature is represented mainly through images of the Japanese garden located in the capital city. Moreover, images of local people were presented only through cultural events where locals were dancing and playing traditional music instruments in traditional clothes, which presents a stereotypical image of the local citizens of today.

Entertainment/recreational

Recreational activities and different types of accommodations were included in this thematic group of categories. Correspondingly with the above-mentioned two thematic groups, this category also showed obvious differences between the findings from the official website compared to those from Instagram samples. Cultural events such as traditional dancing performances, puppet shows, and festivals were represented more than 5% in the official website sample, while the same category of images accounted for less than 1% in the Instagram sample. It is obvious that Uzbektourism is trying to showcase different cultural events as a feature of the overall image of the country and perhaps also because it connects to heritage and ancient traditions. The events portrayed are not mainly for tourists, and this might be the reason why these events were not reflected in the images of the Instagram sample.

National identity and the role of the Soviet period

Contemporary Uzbekistan is considered to be a newly emergent country; the country took its independence in 1991 from USSR. To get an idea of to what extent the different images reflected different parts of the national history and how that national identity was represented in the tourism images, all of the collected images were cross-tabulated according to the thematic groups presented in the previous sections. This was done to explore the contemporary identity of Uzbekistan as represented in photographs in relation to its newly created destination image. Subsequently, all photographs were divided into three segments: pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet representations.

Photographs in the pre-Soviet segment portrayed heritage includes historical buildings, traditional clothing, and cultural performances. The images that could be connected to the Soviet period contained photographs representing the Soviet regime in different ways, including buildings with Soviet architecture, abandoned ships in the Aral Sea, and also

more subtle connections such as people taking part in typically Russian games (garmon). Lastly, images representing the post-Soviet period that could be detected in the material included all other images that represented a modern and Westernized lifestyle and material culture, such as architectural features from newly built houses, decorations in buildings, and the way people were dressed.

Within the category of Heritage/Sightseeing, the pre-Soviet segment was dominant with 76% of the images in total for the official website sample and 67% for the Instagram sample. These findings may be related to the strong focus on heritage tourism in Uzbekistan. Moreover, the official website sample showed more representations of pre-Soviet heritage and sightseeing activities compared to the Instagram sample. This could also indicate that tangible heritage is seen as more important or easier to promote than intangible aspects of heritage. Pre-Soviet images detected in the category within the Heritage/Sightseeing thematic group, the Soviet past of the country, is relatively little represented in the images of both samples. Photographs portraying Soviet-style architecture and museum items from the Soviet period accounted for around 6% of the total number of images in the official website and around 2% in the Instagram sample. Photographs in the Instagram sample mostly displayed abandoned ships in the Aral Sea and musicians playing Russian garmon, while these type of images were absent in the official website context. Similarly, within the category 'Entertainment/Recreational' category, images that could be related to the Soviet period in terms of heritage and symbols accounted for around 20% of the total amount of images in the sample) compared to the official website sample, where these kinds of images only accounted for 6% of the sample. This indicates an interest from travellers towards the Soviet past, which is not taken into account by Uzbektourism.

Images that represent contemporary Uzbekistan were regarded as portraying the country through a post-Soviet identity. Across the category 'Heritage/Sightseeing,' this part accounted for more than 18% of the total number of images in the official website sample and more than 30% in the Instagram sample. It is important to mention that these images mainly portrayed popular sightseeing places in Tashkent.

Concluding discussion

According to the analysis of the photographs presented in the official website, Uzbektourism wants potential tourists to know that Uzbekistan is dominated by cultural heritage resources. Images of historical buildings dominate in the official website of Uzbektourism, including traditional clothing and artefacts at museums. As Uzbekistan possesses more than 7,500 historical sites (UNESCO, 2016), it is clear that this is a major attraction and a potential for further tourism development and cultural heritage could not to be left out from the destination image of the country. However, results from the Instagram sample also show that travellers seem to be interested in architecture and decoration styles used in historical sites. Many of the posted Instagram images show parts of buildings from iconic sites such as Registan in Samarkand and the border walls in Khiva.

The projected image, in the form of images uploaded on the official website and photographs shared by friends and relatives, shape the perceived image of Uzbekistan in a potential tourist's mind. When the country is visited, the tourist tries to visit iconic site

(s) which he/she accumulated in his/her mind. Findings of the research show that Instagram users visit not only heritage sites but also natural sites such as mountains, lakes, and rivers. This is because visual images chosen for photography by a tourist are usually chosen in the destination and replicated from the tourists' perceived images, which are already seen in travel brochures, personal photographs, television, and social media (Jenkins, 2003). Thus, UGC by tourists always goes in circles with projected images, influencing each other.

The connotative analysis of the pictures is much more subtle because it is related to symbols and compositions that transfer a message. These symbols and signs are highly dependent on common identities and historical narratives that trigger feelings, attitudes and actions in receivers of the symbols. Our findings in this article indicate that the symbolic language of the marketing material of the DMO in fact signals independence, cultural exclusiveness, and particularity. This is signalling that the historical legacy from the Soviet era is something that seems to be avoided in the process of building an identity of the independent Uzbek state.

It is evident that the period of the Soviet hegemony of the 20th Century is missing in the image communicated by the official DMO, which may indicate the importance of creating a new cultural and national identity of Uzbekistan. However, this does not have to be part of any official state campaign. It could be interpreted as something that Edelheim (2007) calls 'hegemonic views of society' (p. 5). The correlation between the pictures on the official web site and UGC could be a sign of a common view in society that the Soviet era should be kept in silence and portrayal for the international market avoided. This kind of approach corresponds with the approach chosen by Romania, to keep socialism's past in silence and interpret Soviet-built architecture with new meaning associated with post-Socialism and democracy (Light, 2000).

The absence of these milieus in the UGC is a clear indication of this. On the other hand, the similarity between the visual content of the two sources could also reflect a strict political control of the society, which deters users from uploading content that differs from official policy on social media networks. Because our analysis has not included the origin of the person uploading the media content, it is not possible to draw conclusions regarding this question from our paper.

By using the content-semiotic method applied in this paper, it was possible to trace both the open and the hidden meanings in the marketing material. The conclusion from the analysis is that one of the most important messages sent by the DMO and the visitors of the region is the systematic avoidance of portraying the Soviet era. This is rather strange because, as Marat (2009) has argued, in the eyes of many foreign tourists, daily life, the people's attitudes, and city infrastructure in Central Asian countries are heavily influenced by Soviet heritage. The results of our study have shown that concurrent Uzbekistan is trying to create a post-Soviet identity through its pre-Soviet history and heritage. This result is particularly interesting in the light of the ongoing geo-political shifts in the region where national identity and particularity of the different nations become more important but also more contested.

Implications of this research is that tourism organizations and official DMOs need to be aware of and to take into consideration the massive impact of user generated content on social media platforms in constructing destination images. This also implies that knowledge about potential tourists and the experiences of previous tourists are easily collected

and analysed and offerings could be developed based on this information. More generally, the implication of the research is that destination image formation through visual communication is a highly contested practice that includes construction of national identity and symbols that is not possible to understand separately from contemporary geo-political processes in society.

The findings in our paper open up new paths for future research. Firstly, our paper uses a content-semiotic method that has been applied in a comparative analysis of online destination images of Uzbekistan and UGC. By applying this method to other geographical settings, overt and hidden meanings in other countries can be examined. Secondly, the method could be extended to include textual data and video content. This would extend the generality of our research and better reflect the information-gathering behaviour among the travellers in the pre-travelling stage. It would therefore allow an analysis of how the organic destination image is reshaped based on all available market content and not just pictures, as in our study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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