

Language and Imagery in Tourist Photography in Sri Lanka: A Linguistic Exploration of Captions and Context

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Abstract

Tourist photography is a powerful medium through which travelers document their experiences and communicate them to others. In Sri Lanka, a country with beautiful landscapes and a rich culture, the combination of language and pictures in tourist photos provides an interesting way to understand how people explain and share their journeys. This study looks at how captions and the text that accompany photos on social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and travel blogs, shape the meaning of these images. By studying the words used in captions, the research aims to show how language adds to or changes the way viewers understand the pictures. By analyzing the language used in captions, the research addresses

the question: How do language and imagery interact in tourist photography, and how do captions influence the way viewers interpret and understand the visual content shared by tourists? Using a sociolinguistic approach, the study explores how captions not only describe the photo but also give new meanings, offering a deeper understanding beyond what is seen in the image. The data for this research will come from tourist photos and captions shared on Instagram, Facebook, and Travel Blogs. A simple analysis of the content will be done to study the language used in captions and how it connects with the images. This method will help find common ways that language is used and show how captions affect how people understand the photos.

Keywords: Captions, Language and Imagery, Social Media, Tourist Photography, Visual Interpretation

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Literature Review

Tourist photography has become a popular way for people to share their travel experiences. As social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Travel Blogs grow in popularity, the interaction between language and imagery in these contexts offers valuable insights into how people communicate their experiences. This literature review explores the key themes and findings from previous research related to language and imagery in tourist photography, focusing on how captions influence the interpretation of visual content.

Captions play a crucial role in visual communication by providing context and additional information to images. According to research by Djonov and Van Leeuwen (2018), captions help to guide viewers' interpretations of photographs by framing the visual content within a specific narrative or context. Captions can clarify what is depicted in an image, offer insights into the photographer's perspective, and influence how viewers perceive the photo. In the context of tourist photography, captions often serve to enhance the viewer's understanding of the location, culture, or personal experience depicted in the image. For example, a photo of a landmark may be accompanied by a caption that provides historical background or personal anecdotes, adding layers of meaning to the visual content (Harrison, 2015).

The language used in captions is a significant factor in shaping the meaning of tourist photographs. Research by Van Leeuwen (2008) highlights that

the choice of words, tone, and style in captions can influence how an image is interpreted. Captions can use descriptive language to convey specific details, emotive language to express feelings, or persuasive language to promote certain viewpoints. For instance, descriptive captions may focus on factual details about a location, such as "The ancient temple of Sigiriya, built in the 5th century." Emotive captions might read, "Standing on top of Sigiriya, I felt like I was touching the sky." Persuasive captions could be used to encourage others to visit, such as, "Sigiriya is a must-see for anyone visiting Sri Lanka!" Each type of language use affects how viewers engage with the image and what they take away from it (Goffman, 1974).

The interaction between language and imagery is central to understanding how captions influence photo interpretation. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) argue that images and text work together to create meaning in multimodal communication. According to their framework, images and captions can complement each other, with captions providing additional information that enhances or modifies the viewer's understanding of the visual content.

Social media platforms have transformed how tourist photographs are shared and interpreted. Research by Marwick (2013) suggests that social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook facilitate the dissemination of visual content and encourage users to include captions that reflect their personal experiences and social identities. Tourist photographs on social media often include captions that

aim to engage and attract viewers. The use of hashtags, emojis, and location tags further enhances the visibility and interpretative potential of these images (Sullivan, 2016). For example, a photo of a popular tourist spot may be tagged with hashtags like #VacationMode or #TravelGoals, influencing how viewers understand the image in the context of travel culture and aspirations.

The impact of captions on the interpretation of tourist photographs is well-documented in the literature. Research by McLoughlin and Lee (2014) shows that captions can significantly alter how viewers perceive and understand images. Captions can highlight specific aspects of an image, direct attention to certain details, and shape the overall narrative presented through the photograph.

Research Problem

How do language and imagery interact in tourist photography, and in what ways do captions influence the interpretation and contextualization of the visual content?

Aims of the Research

- To examine the Interaction between language and visual content
- To identify linguistic strategies in tourist captions
- To understand how captions, influence photo Interpretation
- Research Methodology

Platform Selection: To study how captions and images interact, we collected photos

and their captions from social media sites where people shared travel content. Instagram was especially useful for this research because it focused heavily on pictures and user-written captions.

Data Collection: Researchers gathered a variety of tourist photos and their captions from Instagram, Facebook, and Travel Blogs. This included different types of captions, from detailed descriptions to simple emojis.

Analysis: The research analyzed the collected captions to determine how they added meaning to the photos. This involved examining how the language in the captions influenced viewers' understanding and feelings about the images.

Significance of the Research

This research is important for the study of language because it shows how language and pictures work together to create meaning. By looking at how captions in tourist photos affect the way people understand the images, This research helps us see how language influences our interpretation of visuals. This can provide valuable insights into how language is used in different contexts and how it shapes our understanding of what we see.

Discussion

The Role of Captions in Tourist Photography

Captions serve as an important tool for adding context, emotions, and information to tourist photographs. When tourists share images on social media, the visual content itself may not

always provide the full story or convey the photographer's intended message. Captions step in to fill this gap by offering a brief narrative or personal reflection, enhancing the viewer's understanding of the photo.

language and imagery in tourist photography, we analyze how captions on social media platforms like Instagram enhance the interpretation of photographs. For instance, consider the following caption:

In exploring the interaction between

“Sri Lanka diary continues.. Galle fort - Our last stop before we headed to Colombo to catch our flight back to India. Such a beautiful fort, mainly because it's on the coast. Reminded me of the Aguada fort in Goa, that overlooks the Arabian Sea. 😍”

The caption's reference to Galle Fort as the final destination before leaving Sri Lanka is available in the photograph within the larger context of the traveler's itinerary. In this case, the visual of the girl in front of Galle Lighthouse complements the narrative by highlighting a key landmark of Galle Fort. The heart-eyes emoji (😍) conveys admiration, which is reflected in the traveler's interaction with the lighthouse. The photograph captures the girl in a moment that likely reflects this admiration, reinforcing the emotional tone of the caption



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omaharjani Sri Lanka diary continues..
Galle fort - Our last stop before we headed to Colombo to catch our flight back to India. Such a beautiful fort, mainly because it's on the coast. Reminded me of the Aguada fort in Goa, that overlooks the Arabian sea. 😍
#galle #srilanka #srilankatrip #gallefort #fort #indianocean #beautifulview #throwback

In analyzing the interaction between language and imagery in tourist photography, this study examines various Instagram captions and their corresponding photographs. One notable example features a caption paired with a photograph of Sigiriya and Pidurangala Mountains:

Figure 1 Photo by omanaharjani instagram page

In analyzing the interaction between language and imagery in tourist photography, this study examines various Instagram captions and their corresponding photographs. One notable example features a caption paired with a photograph of Sigiriya and Pidurangala Mountains

“Hats it thats all! So long Sigiriya and Pidurangala you're quite the magical place! Next stop @clubceylon then on to Heathrow!”

This caption accompanies a photograph showing a distant view of both Sigiriya and Pidurangala Mountains, capturing their majestic presence against the landscape. The caption begins with a casual farewell, “Hats it thats all!” which signals the end of the traveler’s visit to Sigiriya and Pidurangala. This informal tone conveys a sense of personal connection and finality. The mention of the next destinations, including @clubceylon and Heathrow, situates the photograph within the broader context of the traveler’s journey, indicating that these mountains were a significant part of their trip before moving on to other locations.



66 5
 davidfennings That's it that's all! So long Sigiriya and Pidurangala you're quite the magical place! Next stop @clubceylon then on to Heathrow!

Figure 2 Photo by David Fennings

In this exploration of how captions influence the interpretation of tourist photographs, the research examines a

striking example featuring an image of a girl falling from a bridge while a man holds her hand. The caption accompanying this photograph is:

📍Ella, Sri Lanka LK #Don't Try

#srilankatoday #cokgezenlerkulubu
 #gezinti #travelpassion
 #reisenmachtglücklich #SoSrilanka
 #VisitSriLanka #travelsrilanka
 #srilankatravel #wondersoftheworld
 #wonderofasia #wonderlustsrilanka
 #srilankatrip #srilankadaily
 #srilankadiaries #ellasrilanka
 #travelcouples #travelgoals

This example provides a unique perspective on how captions and hashtags can affect the interpretation of visually impactful content. The photograph captures a dramatic moment where a girl is seen falling from a bridge while a man attempts to hold her hand. The caption, "📍Ella, Sri Lanka LK #Don't Try," provides location information and a cautionary note. This caption adds a layer of context by indicating that the photograph was taken in Ella, Sri Lanka, and advising viewers not to replicate the dangerous act depicted. The hashtags accompanying the caption, such as #srilankatoday and #VisitSriLanka, position the photograph within the larger context of travel and tourism in Sri Lanka. The hashtag #Don't Try emphasizes the cautionary aspect of the photograph, reinforcing the message that the depicted action is unsafe.

Another example in this analysis is a photograph of Hiriketiyā Beach,

English, commonly known as Code-Switching method, which is common in Sri Lankan social media posts. It begins with a poetic description in Sinhala: “අශ්ව ලාඛිත් හැඩයක් ගත් අප් රටේ ලස්සන වෙරළ තීරයක්..” (A beautiful beach in our country, shaped like horseshoe). This descriptive sentence is followed by hashtags and emojis, such as “😊😊😊😊🔥👉,” which convey excitement and admiration. The caption also includes location information in both Sinhala and English: “හිරිකටිය වෙරළ තීරය” (Hiriketiya Beach) and “Hiriketiya beach, Mathara.”

According to Barton and Tusting (2005), “captions in visual media not only provide information but also play a critical role in constructing narratives that guide the audience’s interpretation of the images” (Barton, D., & Tusting, K. (2005). Goffman (1974) emphasizes the role of framing in visual communication, suggesting that captions help to frame images within specific contexts, thus guiding how viewers interpret the content (Goffman, E. (1974).

Another example features a photograph of Galle with the caption:

“Galle | ගාල්ල”

The photograph captures Galle, showcasing its architectural features and scenic surroundings. The caption consists of a simple location label in both English and Sinhala. The absence of descriptive or emotional language in the caption means that viewers interpret the photograph based on its visual elements alone. The text functions primarily as a straightforward label, providing location information without adding

deeper context or personal reflection. This approach results in a more factual understanding of the image, focusing on the visual representation of Galle.



Figure 4: Photo by Ella srilanka Travel page on instagram

Among the various types of captions, some are minimalist, relying solely on emojis or hashtags instead of descriptive text.

Emoji-Only Captions

Emojis, small digital images or icons, are widely used in social media captions to represent emotions, objects, or ideas. In the context of tourist photography, emoji-only captions communicate feelings and impressions of the experience without using words. The simplicity of emojis allows users to quickly express their emotions, and because they are universally recognized, emojis can communicate across language barriers. The primary function of emojis in captions is to convey emotions. For example, a tourist may post a photograph of a beach sunset and caption it with a combination of emojis such as “🌅😊🌊.” Here, the emojis represent a sunset (🌅), admiration (😊), and the ocean (🌊). Even

without words, these symbols give the viewer a clear sense of what the tourist is feeling—excitement and admiration for the beauty of the beach.

Emojis help set the emotional tone of the photograph. A heart-eyes emoji (😍) expresses love or awe, while a fire emoji (🔥) can signify excitement or something impressive. For example, a tourist visiting an ancient site like Sigiriya in Sri Lanka might post an image with only the following emojis: "🔥🏰." These two emojis imply that the tourist found the site both impressive (🔥) and grand (🏰), even though no words are used.

Hashtag-Only Captions

Hashtags serve a different purpose in social media captions. Rather than expressing emotions, hashtags are used to categorize content and make it discoverable to a larger audience. In tourist photography, hashtag-only captions provide context, make posts searchable, and link the photograph to broader trends or topics.

Hashtags offer an immediate understanding of the photograph's subject or theme. For example, a tourist might post a photograph of Sri Lanka's famous Sigiriya Rock with hashtags such as "#Sigiriya #SriLanka #HeritageSite." Without any further explanation, these hashtags inform the viewer that the photograph is of Sigiriya Rock, located in Sri Lanka, and is a heritage site. They provide a quick, factual context to the image. In addition to providing context, hashtags help make the photograph discoverable by others on social media who are interested in the same location

or topic. For example, by using popular travel hashtags like "#TravelSriLanka" or "#Wanderlust," tourists increase the chances that their posts will be seen by people searching for Sri Lankan travel content or travel inspiration in general.

Hashtags also help frame the experience for the viewer. A tourist sharing a photo of a beach might use hashtags like "#BeachVibes #IslandLife #Paradise." These hashtags not only categorize the photo as a beach scene but also imply a sense of relaxation, tropical escape, and luxury. This creates an expectation for the viewer, who will interpret the photo as being about an enjoyable and leisurely beach vacation. By using hashtags, tourists can associate their images with broader social media trends or movements, such as "#TravelGoals" or "#AdventureAwaits." This links their personal travel experience to a larger, collective narrative shared by other travelers, enhancing the social significance of the photograph.

In many cases, tourists combine both emojis and hashtags in their captions to achieve a balance between emotional expression and functional categorization. A caption that includes both can make the context, emotional and Informative.

Conclusion

The use of Sinhala to describe the beach carries cultural significance, as it connects the experience to the local identity and heritage. By referring to the beach as “අපේ රටේ” (our country's), the caption emphasizes pride in Sri Lanka's natural beauty. This adds a layer of cultural pride to the post, inviting locals to appreciate

and take pride in their country's scenic locations while also promoting it to tourists.

This study has explored how language and imagery work together in tourist photography, especially through the captions that travelers use on social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Travel Blogs. The analysis shows that captions do more than just describe the photos; they add new meanings, emotions, and context to the visual content. Captions help guide how viewers interpret the images, influencing their understanding of the locations, cultures, and personal experiences shared by tourists.

Tourist photography, especially when shared on social media, creates a rich interaction between the visuals and the accompanying text. The use of language whether descriptive, emotional, or persuasive, plays a crucial role in shaping the viewer's interpretation of the photograph. By studying the words used in captions, we see how language can affect the way people see and feel about the photos, making the combination of text and image a powerful form of communication.

The key finding from this research is that emotive language in captions significantly shapes how viewers interpret tourist photographs. Captions that use expressive words or phrases, such as "amazing," "breathtaking," or "unforgettable," influence the emotional response of the audience. This means that captions don't just describe what is seen in the image but also convey feelings and attitudes that can alter the viewer's

perception. For example, a caption describing a beach scene as "paradise" creates a positive emotional frame that can make the viewer feel a stronger connection to the image. This finding underscores the importance of language in enhancing the impact of visual content and highlights how captions can transform a simple photograph into a more engaging and emotionally resonant experience.

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