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Beyond the Lens: A Barthesian Perspective on the Meaning of Travel Photography

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Article History	Abstract
	Since the introduction of the camera, photography and tourism have had a major link. Tourism companies and regional administrators frequently emphasize the use of images in presenting idealized experiences. The stories that these photographs tell have been studied by academics, but less is known about the individual viewpoints that travelers express through their own photos. Investigating whether travel photos by visitors contribute to national and international narratives is the goal of this study. 17 trip photos were chosen from the Travel Photographer of the Year 2024 (TPOTY) collection and analyzed using the semiotic technique of R. Barthes. The results show that these pictures effectively convey cultural elements, customs, legacy, and genuineness while simultaneously emphasizing the consequences of modernity and globalization. Travelers express changes in society and convey complex identities and perspectives through their photographs. The changing expectations and sensitivities in society are depicted in this visual narrative. Consequently, there is a dynamic interaction between tourism and imagery.

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INTRODUCTION

Communication is fundamental to human history. Individuals have always needed to communicate, which has been critical to organising, regulating, developing, and sustaining their environments. As a result, communication processes have evolved alongside human progress. A diverse array of communication tools and modalities has emerged throughout history (Öztürk, 2017). Visual communication can be traced back to early humans who conveyed messages through images etched on cave walls, stones, and trees. Meanwhile, verbal and written forms of communication developed as a natural result of communal interactions (Yavuz, 2020). Thus, communication has consistently facilitated connections among individuals across different historical contexts, verbally and non-verbally (Batur, 2010). This dynamic interplay has enabled humans to transmit information and ideas, both directly and indirectly, employing a myriad of instruments throughout the ages (Arklan & Taşdemir, 2008).

Today, communication occurs through four primary modalities: verbal, nonverbal, written, and visual (Özezen, 2003). The effectiveness of these forms has been greatly enhanced by advancements in information and communication technologies (ICT). Innovations such as computers, mobile phones, televisions, cameras, and the internet enable rapid production and consumption of information (Özel, 2016). The invention of the camera, in particular, has revolutionized interpersonal communication by elevating the significance of visual imagery (Onursoy, 2019). The convergence of camera technology with other digital devices has democratized photography, transforming it from a specialized profession into a widespread lifestyle choice (Putra & Nindhia, 2024). Today, millions of individuals capture and share photographs to commemorate important moments, thus creating impactful two-dimensional visual communication (Kızıldemir, 2023). Moreover, the tourism and travel industry has been significantly shaped by photographic technologies, as tourism encompasses more than just the physical movement of people; it is enriched by the visual representations that enhance the overall experience (Garrod, 2009; Urry, 2002).

A review of the literature indicates that the relationship between tourism and photography has long been a subject of scholarly interest, examined from various perspectives. Research shows that tourism destinations and enterprises utilize images in brochures, television, websites, and social media for promotion and marketing purposes (Garrod, 2009; Rodrigues et al., 2020). Images serve as crucial documentation of tourist experiences, shaping perceptions and facilitating sharing among individuals (Urry, 1990; Larsen, 2006; Konijn et al., 2016). Additionally, they contribute to the representation of a tourist's identity development (Gillespie, 2006). Despite photography's essential role in the production, consumption, and sharing of tourist experiences, the nuances of the tourist-photography relationship remain insufficiently explored (Scarles, 2013).

Current studies primarily examine the social effects of photographic images on tourist identity (Gillespie, 2006), the construction of tourist expectations through imagery (Li., Xu & Yang, 2025), the motivations for photography among tourists (Christofani & Ahanu, 2025), the relationship between photography and tourist happiness (Gillet., Schmitz & Mitas, 2016), and the frequency of image sharing (Konijn et al., 2016). However, research on the cultural representations, narratives, and myths embedded in tourist travel photographs is limited (Bonarou, 2021; Plakoyiannaki et al., 2022). This gap highlights the need for further academic exploration in this area.

In this scholarly discourse, tourism is posited as a practice of visual culture, necessitating a comprehensive examination of how narratives and discourses emerge within the realm of tourist photography (Yeh, 2008; Lindsay & Sawyer, 2025). Lund (2023) argues that tourists, during their travels, cultivate photographic narratives that

transcend mere documentation of fleeting moments, positioning them as explorers rather than passive participants. Consequently, it is imperative for scholars to scrutinize the narrative structures inherent in tourist photographs and the mechanisms by which these structures are formulated. This analysis is vital for elucidating the cultural and ideological dimensions that underpin tourist imagery. The primary objective of this research is to investigate whether tourists construct a global narrative through their travel photographs. Such photographs serve not only as expressions of mobility but also as vehicles for conveying narratives about destinations, spatial constructs, and cultural representations. Tourism imagery functions as a significant indicator of the discourses and myths that imbue the tourism experience with meaning. To this end, the study employs Roland Barthes' concept of myth to explore the award-winning photographs from the TPOTY. The research critically analyzes how these images generate tourist narratives and what specific representations they articulate. Utilizing Barthes' semiotic framework, this analysis will extend beyond the denotative meanings presented in the travel photographs of global travelers to uncover the underlying ideologies, cultural structures, and narratives that inform them.Thus, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between visual culture and tourism.

Literature Review

Photograph and Tourism

The relationship between tourism and photographic imagery is both deep-rooted and significant. Since its inception, photography has been recognized as a vital instrument in the promotional and marketing strategies utilized by businesses and destinations within the tourism sector (Garrod, 2009). Photographs serve as visual representations of individual experiences, capturing moments that foster a sense of credibility by materializing abstract concepts (Sontag, 1977). Acknowledging this, destination management entities have strategically influenced travel decisions by curating both authentic and idealized representations of tourist attractions through photographic imagery (Jenkins, 2003). Moreover, the tourism marketing sector has frequently overlooked the necessary balance between the constructed perceptions of tourism and the authentic attractions of destinations (Garrod, 2009). Nevertheless, the increasing desire of tourists to document and immortalize their travel experiences through photography has transformed the previously unidirectional flow of imagery directed toward potential visitors. Photographs have evolved beyond mere consumables, emerging as cultural artifacts that encapsulate and generate meanings related to family, society, culture, and interpersonal relationships (Larsen, 2005).

In contemporary society, photography has become an intrinsic element of daily life (Garlick, 2002). Tourists frequently cultivate relationships with fellow travelers by capturing unique and authentic experiences, thereby prioritizing the documentation of shared moments over the individual accumulation of memories (Lo et al., 2011). Images taken during journeys that transcend geographical boundaries have become vehicles for the consumption of diverse ideas, objects, locales, cultures, and peoples (Larsen, 2006). Importantly, photographs do not merely serve to document the world through the lens of tourists; they also reflect interactions with the surrounding environment and the meanings attributed to those interactions. In this sense, photographs function as narrative instruments that embody the photographer's perspective and subjective interpretations, rather than representing an objective reality (Putra & Nindhia, 2024). These visual narratives are increasingly generated and disseminated across a range of social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr, and Instagram (Conti & Lexhagen, 2020). This trend underscores the evolving and multifaceted role of photography within the tourism industry, highlighting its

importance not only as a marketing tool but also as a powerful medium for personal expression and cultural dialogue.

A Brief Overview of Semiotic Research in Tourism

Photographs have been employed as a medium for the communication of tourism experiences, diverse cultures, and ideologies. Indeed, it is a method of expressing one's own thoughts and feelings by observing the invisible (Bonarou, 2021). In this perspective, the images in question should be examined using semiotic methods (Godoy & Leite, 2019). Semiotics is the scientific study of signs and meanings in human communication. It is concerned with the processes of how meanings and representations are created, conveyed, and interpreted (de Lima et al., 2025). As a result, semiotics is one of the most probable approaches for understanding the meaning and signs conveyed by visitors in their images (Salvador-Almela et al., 2025).

Research on tourism photos is conducted by numerous academic fields, including sociology, geography, art and tourism (Larsen, 2006; Godoy & Leite, 2019). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in semiotic approaches to the study of visual representations in tourism, particularly within the social sciences (Marine-Roig, 2024). Consequently, when reviewing the literature on the topic, some fundamental conclusions ought to be included. For example Stylianou-Lambert's (2012) research on tourism photography specifically indicates, visitors are influenced by the meaning that a location conveys as opposed to the actual location they are in, and they convey this through visuals. In a similar vein, Kunz et al. (2025) contend that tourist photographs emphasise the host people and their culture rather than the tourists themselves, thereby carrying cultural representation and generating cultural discourses. Also, in his study of myths made using postcards for Greece, Bonarou (2021) confirmed that visual representations shape a perception of the reality of tourism.

In their study of museum visitors and their symbolic interactions, Zou et al. (2022) state that museum architecture and metaphors contribute to tourist identity development. Similarly, He (2024) discovered that landscape objects serve both aesthetic and cultural functions in his study evaluating the landscape elements of a rural tourism destination. Vallverdu-Gordi and Marí-Roig (2023) found that graphics elicit emotional and cognitive responses from audiences, thereby improving environmental awareness and the destination's image. Li and Yu (2023) discovered that, in a Chinese festival, the organisers combined a number of issues, including security, activities, staff, facilities, and fairs, to create a scene based on the expectations of the tourists. In response, the tourists ascribed meanings to the festival such as cultural diversity. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that tourist photographs are not merely visual objects, but also symbols that produce, give meaning to, and distribute cultural representations, thereby building tourist expectations.

The above studies all agree that the language of tourism is shaped by verbal and visual narratives. However, the creation and consumption of these myths in tourism has not yet been thoroughly investigated (Marine-Roig, 2024). Furthermore, the construction of experiences displayed in tourist destinations through photographs incorporates ideological and cultural representations. Semiotic studies are therefore an essential approach for understanding how tourism destinations and communities are presented in images (He, 2024). While many studies have attempted to comprehend the representations constructed with these images, the underlying ideological representations and myth-oriented dynamics must still be examined within a critical framework (Kim, Kim & Koo, 2022). Consequently, adopting a critical semiotic perspective to determine the meanings contained in tourist images enables a thorough examination of the relationship between tourism and photography, thereby facilitating the development of tourism

literature. Moreover, conducting semiotic research on a particular tourist destination can benefit tourism practitioners by revealing the images and signs employed.

Semiotics and Roland Barthes Approach

A sign represents individuals' interpretations of concepts through various representational forms, encompassing objects or meanings that simultaneously convey diverse interpretations. Semiotics is the academic discipline dedicated to analyzing the layers of meaning that arise from these signs (Berger, 2014). The term "semiotics" was introduced by the English philosopher John Locke, who aimed to elucidate the underlying significances inherent in represented objects, as presented in his seminal work, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (Pititto, 1998). The root of the concept of semiotics can be traced to the Greek term "semeion," signifying "sign," with the essence of a sign being its role in representing an object. In this light, semiotics emerges as a scientific discipline searching for the meanings conveyed through signs (Siregar, 2022).

The groundwork for semiotic theory was established in the 20th century, notably through the contributions of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (Bali, 2020). Saussure sought to elucidate the function of language in communication, situating it within its social context. He posited that while natural languages are encapsulated within the field of linguistics, other types of sign imagery necessitate a distinct analytic framework, which he referred to as "sémiologie" in French (Wunderli, 2017). Initially, semiotics was predominantly confined to linguistic studies; however, from the latter half of the 1960s onwards, it evolved into an autonomous discipline, driven by the sign theory articulated by Roland Barthes (Ünal, 2016).

Barthes' contributions to semiotic analysis were solidified through his influential text, "Éléments de Sémiologie" (Bali, 2020). Barthes significantly advanced semiotics by introducing new perspectives and extending its boundaries (Yılmaz, 2020). He posited that while language forms the foundation of semiotics, its manifestations are omnipresent. Thus, semiology can analyze a variety of subjects without predetermined limits; elements such as images, gestures, facial expressions, music, and ceremonies may all serve as meaningful components of semiotic inquiry (Rais & Fadillah, 2025). In this regard, Barthes expanded the scope and meaning of signs beyond Saussure's original framework (Bircan, 2015). He categorized his semiotic perspective into four distinct but interconnected dimensions: language-speech, signifier-signified, syntagm-system, and denotation-connotation (Barthes, 1964). While the first three categories are rooted in Saussure's theories, Barthes innovatively introduced denotation and connotation as additional dimensions (Bouzida, 2014). Denotation refers to the universally recognized meaning that is interpreted similarly by all, whereas connotation encompasses the meanings embedded within text or visuals that arise through individual interpretation. According to Barthes, a sign embodies denotation, which directly conveys meaning and specifies an object, while signs also encompass culturally determined meanings and connotations, reflecting the complexities inherent in human communication (Siregar, 2022).

Methodology

The study explores how traveler photographs representing tourist experiences contribute to a global narrative. Photographs serve as a bridge for two-way communication, connecting diverse cultures, individuals, and discourses. In this framework, the research aims to address key questions: What narratives are constructed through tourist photographs? Which themes emerge most prominently? How are both popular and lesser-known destinations

portrayed? Additionally, how is the interplay between tradition and modernity expressed in these images?

The data for this study was gathered through the document review method, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of both printed and electronic materials (Özkan, 2019). A focal point of the research is the Travel Photographer of the Year (TPOTY) competition, which has celebrated global travel photography since its establishment in 2002 by professional photographer Chris Coe, with the first awards presented in 2003. The competition provides a platform for the showcasing of travel photographs by participants to a broad audience through various media channels, including books and exhibitions. Moreover, although TPOTY is dedicated to extending a warm welcome to competitors at all levels of experience, from amateurs to beginners and young people, the event also attracts expert tourists and photographers. It is evident that certain representations and constructions can be comprehended through the lens of expert photographers. Therefore, it is crucial to take this criterion into account when evaluating research implications (TPOTY, n.d.).

For this research, photographs were assessed within the categories of the TPOTY 2024 awards. The analysis focused on 17 selected images from the categories One SHOT: Cities-Towns-Streets, Escape, Festivals & Celebrations, and Women in World Culture, due to considerations of scope, time, and cost. The structural diversity and broad thematic range of the ONE SHOT category significantly informed this choice. Notably, each photograph in the ONE SHOT category is unique to a different traveler, enhancing diversity through the restriction of competitors to one image each. In contrast, other categories often feature multiple images from the same photographer, which may pose limitations for comprehensive analysis. The subheadings within the ONE SHOT category touch upon a variety of subjects, including cultures, destinations, cities, and people, presenting a rich assortment of traveler perspectives. This breadth of representation is anticipated to enrich the research findings and lead to more nuanced insights.

Utilizing Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the study seeks to uncover not only the explicit meanings found in travel photographs but also the underlying ideologies, cultural contexts, and narratives that shape these images. Through Barthes' model, the connections between the signifier and the signified can be examined in both denotative and connotative dimensions (see Figure 1). Ultimately, the research aspires to enhance understanding of the intricate interplay between visual culture and tourism. Given the absence of comparable studies in both domestic and international literature, this research aims to make significant contributions to the field.

Signifier	Signified	First Level	Semiotic System
Denotative sign			
Signifier	Signified	Second Level	
Connotative Sign			

Figure 1. Barthes' Scheme of Semiological (Monticelli, 2016).

Findings

This research presents a comprehensive analysis of photographs that illustrate the touristic journeys of 17 distinct travelers. Employing Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, each photograph was meticulously scrutinized, with particular attention given to essential elements such as signs, denoted meanings, signification, and connotation. This thorough examination facilitated the uncovering of layered meanings within the images, elucidating how visual elements articulate the complex narratives and identities of the travelers. The results of this analysis are succinctly

summarized in Table 1, providing a clear overview of our findings. Additionally, the results section delves deeper into these findings, offering critical discussions and interpretations that illuminate the implications of our analysis. This inquiry significantly contributes to a broader understanding of travel photography as a nuanced medium of expression, revealing its potential to reflect and shape cultural narratives and individual experiences.

Table 1. Semiotic Analysis of TPOTY 2024 Award-Winning Photographs.

Category	Rank&Traveler	Photography	Signifier	Signified	Denotation	Connotation
CITIES, TOWNS, STREETS	Winner, Matthew DeSantis, USA		Buddha statue, Bhutanese traditional clothes, Bhutanese architecture, People, Blurry and foggy atmosphere, Large square, Sunlight filtering through the mist, Baseball	Cultural hybridization, Religious and spiritual feelings, Modernization, Worldly tendency, Cultural interaction	People in a misty and expansive square, traditional Bhutanese clothing-wearing individuals, are involved in a game of baseball, where cultural heritage is contrasted with modern recreational activities.	This image shows the conflict between the modern and traditional, the global and the local as well as the spiritual and the material. The tranquility of the Buddha statue is contrasting with the activity of the people playing the game which shows their involvement in the worldly affairs. However, the demand for traditional attire even today denotes the conservation of the local identity despite the increasing influence of the Western culture. The game shown can be interpreted as a microcosm of life, which contains the potential for both success and failure.
	Runner-Up, Shyjith Onden Cheriyath, India		Layered pedestrian bridge, Bicycle, People, Sunset, Different levels of the bridge	Urbanisation, Mobility of life, Stratification in cities based on social and economic status	At sunset, ilhouettes of pedestrians and cyclists are moving across the multi-tiered bridge.	The image shows the systematic and rhythmic pulse of urban living. It appears that in a communal society, individual identity is often lost among a multitude of human figures. In some ways, membership in a community can be seen as the loss of individuality. However, the fight for existence in an urbanized environment is a clear picture of movement and adaptability that is necessary in everyday life. The bridge is a visual representation of societal class distinctions and transitions through its multilayered structure.

Highly Commended, Dinos Michail, Greece		Desert landscape, Traditional architectural structures, Multi-story buildings, Women in black dresses, Trees, A long road, Mountainous area	Nature-human harmony, Traditional life, Sustainability of nature, Culture and components, Women's collective action	A group of women, in traditional black clothes, are walking along a long road towards a small desert town with traditional multi-story buildings.	The buildings are multi-storied and built in the traditional architectural style to connect the heritage with the modern. The landscape of the town is dominated by the natural colors, which give the feeling that the place has not been altered much. Also, the traditional clothes of women and their collective action also preserve the culture of wearing traditional clothes and living style and thus conserve the cultural heritage. Furthermore, this also shows that there is a low density of excessive concrete structures, which means that the natural environment has not been affected to a large extent. In most of the societies, traditional values are seen to be resistant to modernization and Western influences.
Commended, Tuan Nguyen Tan, Vietnam		The crowd of people, Beach, Waves, Umbrellas, Baskets, Lighted areas, Various items	The deep connection between human life and nature, A blend of work, relaxation, and survival in daily life, human-made environments vs. Untamed nature, th ever-changing motion of the ocean	A large crowd of people is seen on a crowded beach at night time. They are both at leisure and conducting business with one another while the waves crash against the shore.	Through the use of shadow casting lights and umbrellas the marketplace is depicted. People's movement within the apparent disorder and randomness of the environment is however a clear manifestation of the order that is evident in society. Also, the blurred people's figures show the impermanence of time. Furthermore, the visual focus on the beach shows the lively and active connection of people with their natural environment.
Commended, Alain Schroeder; Belgium		Murals, Vivid colors, People wearing hats and walking, Cars, Light and shadow reflections	Past-future connection, Time travel, Cities and artistic values, Fiction and reality	As people in various dress styles pass in front of a colorful wall, their reflections are seen on the surface.	In urban settings, men in caps and traditional apparel are the past, and those in modern clothes are the present. In addition, the connection between figures and shapes is a temporal shift, to link different time periods. The color tones and reflections variation is the identity evolution, and the way of viewing the reality through the lens. The image captures a dynamic composition to effectively relate the past and the present.

ESCAPE	Winner, Ngar Shun Shun Victor Wong, Hong Kong		Foggy atmosphere, A high hill, A church, Trees, Unclear path	A peaceful atmosphere, Spiritual fulfillment, Loneliness and isolation, Purity of faith and nature, Cleanliness, Purification	A church is depicted on a steep hill, lost in a fog.	The act of cleansing shown in the image is the calmness that humans want to find in the natural environment. The church which is set on a hill shows the concept of spiritual cleansing and the attainment of serenity through the strength of religion. Also, the presence of trees and the misty weather create a feeling of purity and cleanliness. However, it is a widely held notion that nature is a source of calmness for humans and achieving this balance is as easy as it is challenging.
	Runner-Up, Ignacio Palacios, Spain/Australia		Mountain, Valley, Erosion field, Sunlight, Shadow, A straight and long unpaved road, A single vehicle	The destructive power of nature, The destruction of nature, Man's intervention in nature, Adventure, Man's loneliness, Escape from routine	A lone vehicle travels along a long and smooth asphalt road built in a vast, rocky valley.	The fight between people and the environment is shown by the contrast between the steep valley and the level ground on the asphalt road. The car on the mountainside is a symbol of the modern man and his helplessness in the face of the might of nature. While mountains build up gradually through a process that takes millions of years, man is a relatively new comer in the scheme of things. Furthermore, the picture of the vehicle as a part of the journey brings out the theme of withdrawal from the society and a search for self-identity.
	Highly Commended, Matt Jacob, UK		Sand dunes, Perception of infinity, Sand surface, Lonely person, Distinct human footprint, Pathway, Misty atmosphere	Loneliness, Escape from the world, Adventure, Exploration, Time running out, Flow, The power of nature, Man's life bowl	A person travels along a long sand dune, leaving footsteps.	The image of a man walking in the sand hills of the desert embodies the spirit of a person who is lost. The endless desert which is often associated with infinity and the feeling of being alone, highlights the might of nature and the insignificance of human being. The tracks that have been created in the sand can be used to represent the temporal nature of existence, everyone who has lived will one day be wiped from the face of the earth. The image also has a link to the philosophical question of the meaning of human existence.

Commended, Marsel van Oosten, Netherland		Exotic trees, Silhouette of trees, Rocky terrain, Twilight sky, Camping tent, Light	Attachment to nature, Renewing nature's energy, Natural mystery, Isolation, Loneliness, Security, Calmness, Passion for adventure	At night, a lit camping tent may be seen under the woods.	The shapes of the dragon trees create the atmosphere of a magical place. The camping tent, which is relatively small compared to the height of the trees, represents the conflict between man and nature as well as the spirit of adventure. The light that comes from the tent in the darkness of the night shows the isolation of man in the natural environment. However, it also conveys the message that in solitude, there is light at the end of the tunnel.
Winner, Jo Kearney, UK		Traditional hand-embroidered clothes, Women with feather, and bead headdresses, Smiling faces, Hennaed human hands, Hand-made accessories, Crowded groups of people	Cultural identity formation, Continuity of culture, A traditional ceremony, Cultural celebration, Social ties and solidarity motivation	It is a customary festival in which women dress in elaborate and vibrant attire.	A picture of joy is captured from the pose and the happy faces of women. The elaborate embroidery on their clothes, the henna design on their hands, and the jewelry they wear show the continuation of generations of traditions. The fact that they are all wearing similar clothes and accessories shows that they are a single group and have a strong communal spirit. The colors used in the various objects also enhance the idea of celebration and the continuation of cultures.
Runner-Up, Tittu Shaji Thomas, India		Colored powders, Objects in red, yellow, orange colors, People with painted faces	Happiness and joy, Sharing, Sustainable traditions, Cultural richness, Cultural belonging, Religious ritual	A sizable crowd is celebrating the festival while wearing vibrant clothing and having their faces painted.	A set of people with painted faces shows the continuity of cultural practices. The practice of face painting creates a picture of social equality where everybody is equal before society and can be considered as one whole. The person who is leaping up in the air and throwing colored powder can be seen as a symbol of energy and leadership. The involvement of a number of people in the celebration brings out the connection between culture and freedom.

FESTIVALS & CELEBRATIONS

Highly Commended, Athanasios Maloukos, Greece		Children with shaved heads, Men with shaved heads, Fire, Facial expressions, People positioned around, Lights	Religious ritual, Ritual of passage, Purification, Protection, Social identity, Cultural belonging	Children and people perform a ritual by lighting a fire over their heads.	The expression on the child's face reveals fear and surprise, which indicates that rituals are important in the formation of any society. The fire in the man's hand could mean a number of things; it could be a ceremony, a chant, or even a way of cleansing. Fire, being associated with both risk and spiritual cleansing, is a symbol of the human kind's natural tendency to seek safety and regeneration. The fact that the child is young could mean that after this ceremony he will be accepted by the community. Other hand positions also show loyalty and a feeling of belonging to the group.
Commended, Yan Li, China		Boats, Vegetables, Fruits, Flowers, Shadows, Various shades of color, People	Local development, Sustainable development, Local economy, Traditional market and promotions, Socialization and sharing, Time flow and routine	Flowers and vegetables are offered for sale at an outdoor market both on the land and aboard boats.	A market is shown as having many people and boats in it. The boats are a symbol of people's fight with nature and its elements. The structure of the market and the apparently random organization of activities differ greatly from the rationality of the industrial society. Furthermore, the way flowers are placed on the table indicates that though the marketplace seems messy, there are set rules that govern it. Different from the modern industrial form of production, this kind of trade is based on human labor and cooperation.
WOMEN IN WORLD CULTURE **Winner, Erhan Coral, Turkey**		An old woman, Candles, Orange flowers, A cemetery, A small group	Mourning, Remembrance, A connection with the past, A communal commemoration or day, A commemoration and remembrance of the dead	It shows a group of people and an elderly woman strolling through a twilight graveyard.	The images that have been chosen depict a yearning for the past and for family. The look on the woman's face shows that to her, death is not a loss but rather a way to be with the departed. However, she may be depressed or lonely due to the absence of a loved one. His age and the traditional clothing also indicate that this ritual has been going on for many years. The light from the candles and the presence of orange flowers give the impression that the family has a strong faith in the afterlife and wants to pay respect to the departed.

Runner-Up, Jo Kearney, UK 	Girls, Students, Traditional clothes, Traditional decorations, Books, Pens, Hennaed hands, Wall pictures	Education, Cultural heritage, Friendship, Community belonging	Girls wearing traditional clothing and headdresses are in the classroom.	The importance of women's education is shown through dramatic contrasts: girls in traditional clothes are going to a modern classroom. This shows their wish to move forward while at the same time preserving cultural traditions. The variety of headgear and ornaments of the girls speaks about the multicultural population of the area. Furthermore, the girls' facial expressions as they talk to each other show that they are friends and have a common goal.
Highly Commended, Priska Seisenbacher, Austria 	Yellow soccer ball, Young girls in uniform, Goalkeeper, Goal posts, Clouds, Overcast sky, Mountain peaks	Power and struggle, Sense of achievement, Gender equality, Passion for nature, Freedom, Dealing with challenges	A bunch of teenage girls is playing soccer on a difficult terrain.	Girls playing football represents the part of girls in society and their fight for equality. The dramatic terrain and the location of the football field far from civilization reveal other challenges that women face in gaining education and choices. However, the determination and resilience demonstrated in the game show the strength of women in combating all forms of oppression and fighting for their rights.
Commended, Partha Pratim Roy, India 	Sunlight, A woman sitting on a stool, A traditional red dress, An old and smoky kitchen, Kitchenware, A teapot	Power and resistance that defy time, Labor, struggle and sacrifice, Sustainable life, Nostalgia, Traditional life	An elderly woman is preparing meals in a typical, dark kitchen.	The woman's use of vintage kitchen equipment and traditional cooking style is to preserve the cultural heritage. The lack of modern technological appliances creates an impression of a natural and simple lifestyle. Her engagement in this traditional domestic task as a solitary activity represents conventional gender roles; her age represents wisdom and experience.

References: It was created by the researcher using TPOTY (2024) photographs.

Discussion

The thematic content of the examined photographs suggests that subjects such as cultural interaction, degeneration, and delay are frequently addressed. The challenges faced by societies are posited in the context of acculturation and modernisation, as opposed to being viewed through the lens of natural or human crises. Indeed, tourism is frequently linked to cultural degeneration and change (Can et al., 2017). However, while the cultural degeneration of destinations is emphasised in the images, elements that might prevent or reduce this situation are not included. It has been observed that the problems arising from interactions between local people and tourists, in particular, are not sufficiently addressed. When analysing tourism experiences, it is important to consider all the relevant factors, rather than merely the positive aspects. Ekici and Çizel (2014) provide a clear exposition of the dual impact of tourism on the regions in which it occurs, demonstrating its simultaneous positive and negative effects. Encounters between tourists and locals do not always result in a positive atmosphere; in fact, there is a possibility of conflict and disagreement arising (Al Haija, 2011). In this respect, it can be argued that although tourist travel images capture the narrative from the perspective of tourists, they do not adequately represent the experiences of local people.

One of the prominent representations in the photographs is traditional activities and rituals. Some travelers emphasize the traditional practices of destinations that have been ongoing for centuries. This conveys the message that the cultural heritage of local people has become an attractive factor, encouraging individuals to travel to participate in traditional celebrations and festivals. Similarly, Atasoy (2025) highlights that both the tangible and intangible heritage values of nations serve as a significant source of motivation in cultural tourism. Cultural activities are commodified to enhance their appeal in the tourism sector (Xie, 2006). However, these activities also regulate social bonds and a sense of belonging, as evidenced by the religious and spiritual rituals depicted in the images. They indicate the formation of identity and social acceptance, marking individuals as adults after participating in religious rituals. At the same time, these visual representations evoke notions of class distinction and inequality in the context of religious ceremonies. Another striking observation is that while festivals and celebrations are depicted in prominent tourist destinations, religious rituals are primarily included in underdeveloped tourism regions. This suggests that visual imagery in tourism serves as a tool reflecting the socio-cultural dynamics and social structures of various nations. In this regard, Larsen's (2006) assertion that tourism is a dynamic sector that both shapes and is influenced by images appears to be justified.

Tourism is an industry that promotes women's economic and social empowerment through the opportunities it provides (Yetiş & Çalışkan, 2020). While the analyses support this view, they also reveal that women and their rights are frequently highlighted in touristic images. In the photographs, travelers portray women who are sometimes struggling and other times thriving. The discourses represented in these images advocate for women's right to education, women's empowerment, and social equality. The juxtaposition of traditional and modern education in underdeveloped regions suggests that equal opportunities in education contribute to social solidarity and development. In areas where women's roles in society are undergoing transformation, the involvement of women in activities or games that require strength emphasizes their fighting spirit. In this context, touristic images convey that women are not confined to specific roles and can achieve success in various fields.

The results also show that touristic travel photographs serve as some of the best explanations of traditional and modern life. The differences in clothing and appearance captured in the images illustrate the contrast between

classical and modern lifestyles. While the visual images convey the naturalness and authenticity of rural, traditional life, they simultaneously emphasize the monotony and ordinariness of urbanization. This complex and chaotic environment necessitates a reevaluation of the sociological issues related to tourism (Atasoy, 2024). The themes most frequently emphasized in the images include urbanization, lifestyles, struggle, and labor. Conversely, travelers indicate that despite the passage of centuries, the struggle and manual labor associated with classical life have remained unchanged. This focus is also portrayed through human figures set against the backdrop of nature. The power and majesty of nature sometimes underscore human helplessness, while at other times, nature is perceived as a key component for purification and renewal away from worldly pursuits. This representation suggests that a person's search for identity cannot be separated from nature and that touristic travel is, in essence, a journey undertaken by individuals to rediscover themselves.

Conclusion

Theoretical Implications

Despite the fact that a number of academic disciplines have examined images and their roles in tourism, research on the representations, narratives, and myths embedded in touristic travel photographs remains limited (Godoy & Leite, 2019; Xiao et al., 2022). Furthermore, there is a need for additional research to ascertain the role of visuals in tourism and their contribution to the tourism language (Picazo & Moreno-Gil, 2019). The representations and meanings of digital photographs created in the age of social media have not been adequately investigated (Lindsay & Sawyer, 2025). The aim of this research is to contribute to the existing body of literature by examining whether tourist photographs provide a global narrative. The methodology employed in this study involves the analysis of a selection of award-winning photographs from the TPOTY, with the analysis conducted from the perspective of semiotics.

The results support the argument that the images captured by the camera lenses of international travelers contain not only entertaining and exotic atmospheres but also significant messages and narratives. Urry (1990) argues that images represent a form of consumption of the tourist experience in his theory known as the tourist gaze. Furthermore, Urry emphasizes that the basic senses shaping and giving meaning to tourist travel are vision and imaging. Larsen (2014) supports Urry's argument that tourists are encouraged to travel to special places through media images. However, Urry's approach does not fully explain the discourse and meanings contained in travel images. Therefore, more attention should be directed toward Urry's approach in understanding the relationship between images and tourist behavior (Stone & Nyaupane, 2019). Aware of this limitation, MacCannell (2001) suggests that it is necessary to question what is presented on the surface of the images and to trace the deeper meanings shaped in the cultural subconscious. Similarly, Haldrup and Larsen (2011) argue that visual images produced by tourists not only reveal the surface of a destination but also reflect the worldview of travelers and their individual and collective identity formations.

In addition to accepting Barthes' myth approach, the study theoretically assesses tourist travel photos as a linguistic communication tool. Myths, according to Barthes (1984), are the second stage of linguistic signs and contain hidden messages directed at the sign, signifier, and signified. Based on the construction of second-level meanings with the signifieds, Barthes' semiotic framework contends that these become a hidden communication with the individual's association (Barthes, 1964). The findings here acknowledge that Barthes absorbs myths from a variety of sources,

including movies, pictures, and cultural materials (Tager, 1986). Due to the fact that tourists use photographs of their travels to question and make sense of their surroundings rather than just viewing them as objects (see also Duda, 2023). Barthes (1987) defined narrative as an individual's action that emphasizes the established pattern between reason and action. Accordingly, the image conveys a story and a conversation (Berger, 2014). The findings demonstrate that images that depict a visitor's experience can also be regarded as narrative. These images feed on a variety of intricate patterns, including lifestyle, subconscious, and sensory responses, in addition to the visitor's experience perceptions (Herry et al., 2024). This perceptual action is a response that travels from the items in the pictures to the entirety of the person's complex cognitive process. In this regard, identifying myths in tourist photographs is analogous to deciphering the messages hidden in an artist's work (Plakoyiannaki et al.,2022).

Managerial Implications

Tourism image is defined as the unique characteristics and offerings of destinations and businesses (Xiao, Fang, & Lin, 2020). Consequently, the efficacy of the communication of a destination's image is contingent upon the utilisation of the appropriate linguistic medium. Given that one of these language tools is photographic images of tourists and the myths embedded in them, it is necessary to reconsider the dynamics of the social media age. As Picazo and Moreno-Gil (2019) emphasise, the role of tourism photographs in shaping the perceived image of tourism destinations and the narratives that evolve around them is indisputable. However, as Garrod (2009) argue, comprehending and managing the content of tourist photographs is of greater importance than the creation of an image of any tourism destination. Tourists can share their travel experiences with others by uploading photos to social media sites such as Facebook, Flickr, and Panoramio (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Instagram has evolved into a platform that facilitates the direction of tourists to their desired destinations. It is evident that the content disseminated by destination management and businesses is perceived by tourists as a desirable experience. However, photographs captured by tourists that reflect their personal experiences and emotional perceptions are regarded as a more effective and trustworthy source of data (Salvador-Almela et al., 2025). In this context, destination managers should prioritise researching tourist images, determining the most commonly used practices, identifying the most frequently emphasised contents, and determining the destination's strengths and weaknesses in this area. Conversely, discourses embodied within tourist photographs cannot be captured, and a positively perceived issue may in fact reveal an imaginative attitude toward the destination with a concealed message. Subsequent to this, following the determination of the messages conveyed in tourism images and the destination's perception of reality, the tourist experience presentation and competition strategy can be developed accordingly.

Limitations and Future Research

The research focuses on the photographs provided by TPOTY, which may be of professional or semi-professional tourists. This limits the research's conclusions and generalizability. Conducting studies on some social media platforms or organising amateur photographers' travel images will help tourism and photography research. The study examined tourist images in various categories, but this restricts the evaluation of research findings. Specific destinations and events, such as festivals and events, are required. Simultaneously, examining destinations is critical for image management in the digital age. This study calls on tourism academies to conduct more research to help develop tourism and photography literature.

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