



Research article

The insiders' gaze: fieldworks, social media and visual methodologies in urban tourism

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Abstract: This paper aims at scrutinizing the role of two overlapping dimensions in tourism geography teaching and learning: the real-world perspective, represented by the fieldwork as a long-established practice in geographical teaching; and the digital sphere, namely the use of visual methodologies and social media as tools to activate city image-making in tourist practices.

In particular, the work deepens critical aspects and potentialities of a mixed-method approach combining both traditional methods and more innovative tools to carry out researches and teaching in the field of tourism geography and cultural heritage. Theoretically inserted at the interplay among tourism, digital geography and visual methods, it draws on a series of workshops organized with third-level students between 2016 and 2018. Although problematizing some crucial conceptual issues related to the role of visualities and new technologies, findings highlight the didactic effectiveness of mixed methods that entail the more traditional ones such as team working and fieldworks, and the most innovative such as visual methods and social media, to increase students' interest in geography learning and stimulating their own perceptions of ordinary landscapes through a gaze repositioning.

Keywords: geography teaching; visual methods; social media; urban tourism

1. New perspectives on the tourist's gaze. An introduction

The Tourist gaze is the title of a seminal book written by Urry in 1990 [1], later on issued in an updated version in 2002 and in 2011 [2], this last with Larsen. Inspired by Foucault's medic gaze (1976) [3], Urry considered tourism as a predominately visual practice, a "way of seeing" where tourism business stages visual experiences that tourists consume visually.

Far from stemming from a spontaneous attitude, the tourist gaze is not neutral but rather technologically systematized and socially organized, mirroring such a variegated repertoire of discourses to the point that travelling experiences are considered to occur in veritable mediascapes.

The most recent version of the book, significantly renamed "3.0", reconceptualises mobility in the age of globalization regarding people, objects, information, images, made more complex due to controversial issues such as surveillance, overconsumption and climate change. The tourist gaze is re-thought in the light of the performance paradigm and the relational approach, that highlight the intersections of people and senses in visual encounters with places.

As Urry and Larsen [2] put it, apart from being a relational activity, gazing is a highly performative action that entails negotiations about the object, modalities, spaces and times of gazing, as well as shaping new hierarchies of power between the gazers and the gazes. As underlined by Maoz [4], "the local gaze is based on a more complex, two-sided picture, where both the tourist and local gazes exist, affecting and feeding each other, resulting in what is termed 'the mutual gaze'".

So, this paper aims at exploring what are the consequences in terms of spatial perceptions and knowledge (re)production when the tourist gaze is constantly re-mediated and filtered through a screen of a smartphone, as it happens in contemporary travelling experiences; what are the imageries stemming from this (internet)mediated gaze when tourists are not properly "outsiders", in Simmel's vein, but rather "insiders", namely locals visiting their own cities with a gaze that is positioned halfway *between* acting like a tourist and being a local; and, finally, what can be the potential and critical aspects of exploiting visual methodologies, social media and photo-fieldwork in geography teaching and learning.

In particular, the work scrutinizes the potential of mixed methods in geography teaching combining team-working, fieldworks, visual methodologies and social media drawing on the results of a series activities organized within the Laboratory of digital communication for tourism and cultural heritage from 2016 to 2018 in the Department of Cultural studies of the University of Palermo (Italy).

The aim is twofold. On the one hand, the research is aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of a mix-method workshop, made of team-working, itinerary-building, fieldwork and social media-based visual methodologies, as a pedagogical tool set to increase knowledge in the field of tourism geography and urban landscape perception. On the other hand, it deals with the critical analysis of students' perceptions as "tourists" in their own city thanks to the fieldworks conducted in groups and the use of visual social media by problematizing the controversial implications of visions and visualities. Although limited in geographical scale, the results of the research can provide novel theoretical-methodological insights on the use of mixed-methods combining fieldworks, visual methods and social media, as well as highlighting their potentialities and critical aspects in geographical teaching and learning that can be useful in different pedagogical contexts.

The work is organized as follows: the second paragraph includes the theoretical framework at the intersection between tourism geography and the smart tourism destination concept; in the third paragraph material and methods are explained, with a specific focus on the didactic framework of the used methodologies; the fourth paragraphs deepens the results of the analysis, conducted both through a questionnaire distributed among students and a visual content analysis of their social media-based tourist itineraries; in the final paragraph discussion and final considerations are developed.

2. Smart tourism, new travelling practices: an overview

As Novy puts it [5], a conceptual shift has occurred in several multidisciplinary approaches to tourist studies that has reconceptualised the “visitor class” owing to the recent fragmentation of contemporary travel experiences and, consequently, the increase in more independent, flexible and experienced travellers. Theoretically inserted in a wider shift from fordist to post-fordist tourism production and consumption, the rise of so-called post-tourists [6] has accelerated the upsurge of “new tourism precincts” [7]. This entails a new form of conviviality and overlapping practices of “exploring the city” among a variegated repertoire of actors, ranging from the properly called tourists, often belonging to the cosmopolitan elite of consumption, to white-collars working in the knowledge sector and transient city-users (temporary residents, business visitors, digital nomads etc.).

As Candevaux et al. highlight [8], post-tourism is “thought to be characterised by the end of tourism as a field offering specific social, spatial and temporal horizons and a de-differentiation between tourist and non-tourist destinations and practices. The boundaries are becoming blurred between the here and the elsewhere and between the exotic and the everyday”. As a result, a tourist can no longer simply be defined as “someone who made the periodic, temporary transition from the ordinary space-time of industrial work to the extraordinary space-time of going on holiday” [9]. In this vein, Rabbiosi [10] underlines that “everyday life and tourism are increasingly intermingled, since the “resident” or the “tourist” as subjectivities are gradually overlapping”.

Thus, what was called the “tourist gaze” in the above-mentioned Urry’s seminal work is not only a prerogative of the “outsiders”, namely the tourists as formally defined by UNWTO, but it entails a broader typology of city users and/or inhabitants, included those living temporarily in cities and/or who experience it “touristically” as an everyday urban practice (ib.).

This is conceptually and operationally connected with the broader question of the search for authenticity that distinguishes contemporary postmodern tourist practices. Although authenticity is an elusive concept, that can be re-built and reshaped in a performative *mis-en-scène* by several actors involved in place branding strategies, nonetheless it is at the core of several recently-emerged labels overcoming mainstream cultural tourism. While the role of cities’ “creative and relational capital” [11] nourishing the so-called “experience economy” has been at length investigated [12], new practices have recently emerged, such as, among the others, experiential tourism, slow tourism, off-the-beaten-track tourism. Most of them are based on the performative co-production/consumption of the tourist experience [13].

In particular, emerging “alternative” tourist practices such as those enacted in off-the-beaten-track sites challenges the already-established dialectics between tourist and non-tourist destinations [8] to

the point that “tourist destinations are the ordinary places whilst ordinary places are becoming tourist destinations” [ib.].

This process of growing *prosumption* enacted by tourists, no longer passive recipients of pre-organized tourist offers but proactive actors re-producing travelling experiences, has been further exacerbated by the rise in new technologies that provide tourists with the possibility to co-create and share their on-site travel experience with the aim of gaining information, sharing “live” experiences and personalizing the trip [14].

While the co-creation in travel experience is not a recent phenomenon, nonetheless the increased possibilities of *prosumption* provided by ICT’s have further exacerbated it, being recently incorporated in the wider concept of the “networked travel” [15] based on the growingly pervasive role played by the Web 2.0, namely social media, in shaping unprecedented tourism practices.

So, although “the mediation of the tourist experience by varying technologies has always been part of the tourist gaze literature” [16], the advent of Web 2.0 has recently shaped a new “mediated” gaze, which entails unprecedented practices of re-territorialization and, consequently, new travel experiences.

The so-called “smart tourism” stems from the increasing merging of tourist experiences with new technologies, generally defined as “tourism supported by integrated efforts at a destination to collect and aggregate/harness data derived from physical infrastructure, social connections, government/organizational sources and human bodies/minds in combination with the use of advanced technologies to transform that data into on-site experiences and business value-propositions with a clear focus on efficiency, sustainability and experience enrichment” [17].

Three distinctive features of smartness can be identified (ib.):

- Smart tourist destination, entailing the use of cutting-edge technologies and integrated infrastructures which make the destination accessible, interactive, sustainable;
- Smart experience, which promotes technology-mediated experiences producing real-time monitoring, information aggregation, travel personalization, ubiquitous connectedness through mobile devices and active co-creation of online contents for tourists/prosumers;
- Smart business, which refers to a multi-layered entrepreneurial ecosystem capable of enhancing smart tourist experiences through the dynamic interconnection among stakeholders, based on public-private collaboration, in addition to the digitalization of core business processes and organizational agility.

As a result, smart tourism can be regarded as a further step in the process of increasing digitalization of the tourist experience, progressively based on the extensive use of new smart technologies not only in the pre and post travel phase, as it happened with e-tourism, but also during the on-site experience, thanks to mobile devices and the growing use of social media.

As a matter of fact, social media such as Facebook and more recently Instagram have deeply changed the ways through which travel is experienced, shared and performed, growingly embedded in a wider and multi-layered circularity of intertwined spaces between the digital and the physical sphere. In particular, being a “visual-locative social medium” as defined by Boy and Uitermark [18], Instagram can be considered as a participatory sensing system combining the real-live co-creation of visual contents, often geo-localized, that can be used by social researchers “to make sense of contemporary urban dynamics” (ib.). However, as the authors put it, “researchers seeking to put these opportunities to use should be aware that social media data do not simply reflect the activities of urban dwellers [...]”.

Instagram users selectively represent their lifeworlds by showcasing images they feel are suited for circulation. This also means that they represent the city and their place within it in a curated manner [...]. By mapping these processes of association and place demarcation, we can investigate how communities emerge at this interface and create sociocultural domains”.

In spite of the methodological limitations of using social media-based data, it is undeniable that the contemporary tourist gaze is increasingly re-framed with and filtered by a screen, through which the travel experience is constantly re-imaged and performed at the intersection between the two dimensions in the *phygital* sphere (physical + digital).

3. Material and methods

In order to scrutinize the potential of mixed approaches in geographical teaching combining fieldworks and social media-based visual methods, a series of activities were organized within the Laboratory of digital communication for tourism and cultural heritage that I held from 2016 to 2018 in the Department of Cultural studies of the University of Palermo. The main Sicilian city boasts a rich and variegated cultural heritage, stemming from the complex and multi-layered historical evolution marked by several dominations, ranging from Greeks to Arabs and Normans. According to the Regional Observatory for Tourism, in 2019¹ the Palermo province was the most visited of the whole island in terms of tourist arrivals (1.181.889) and presences (3.320.361).

Theoretically based on the tourism/visual geography literature, with a specific focus on the above-mentioned Smart Tourist Destination framework, the “Living Laboratory” (*#MyPalermo Lab*) was aimed to explore the role of new technologies in geographical teaching and learning, particularly during fieldworks, with a specific focus on their role both in shaping new travel experiences and re-moulding new place imageries.

After a series of more traditional classes based on introductory lectures, the more than 100 students were first asked to work in small groups to critically analyse the online place branding strategies developed by the Italian regions, starting from the content analysis of their websites and social media accounts, in order to be accustomed with social media analysis. The results of this analysis were collectively presented during a series of classes organized according to the flipped classroom methodology.

In the final part of the course, students were asked to set up a 3–4 people small groups and work together in class in order to identify an off-the-beaten-track tourist route of the historical centre of Palermo, drawing on a variegated repertoire of online informational sources: official tourist websites, tourist guides, blogs and online magazines.

After the in-class team working, students were asked to carry out a self-organized fieldwork in small groups to integrate desk analysis with the on-site experience and collect a series of pictures about the tourist route. Fieldwork is an essential part of training in geography, first aimed at developing what is always been regarded as “the great power of observation”, a crucial skill to the point that Salter and

¹ Data related to 2020 were not taken into account because negatively influenced by the pandemic. Source of data: https://pti.regione.sicilia.it/portal/page/portal/PIR_PORTALE/PIR_LaStrutturaRegionale/PIR_TurismoSportSpettacolo/PIR_Turismo/PIR_Aretematiche/PIR_Linkutili/PIR_7338501.618136477, retrieved on February 2022, 1st.

Meserve said that “to be a real geographer, one must observe” [19]. So, observation-based fieldworks are necessary stages of geographical training and research, carried out through a variegated repertoire of conceptual frameworks, operational methodologies and even observational technologies, that are not just tools of fair reproduction but often instruments of new hegemonic powers hierarchy. Ryan [20] tackles the role of photography in the “imaginative geography” of the British Empire, by highlighting the limits of the assumption that photography entails a “mechanical means of allowing nature to copy herself with total accuracy and intricate exactitude”. On the contrary, the author underlines the symbolic codes and cultural constructions running through the photographic observation of places, particularly those perceived as culturally distant.

So, keeping in mind that “taking pictures” is not a neutral mechanical action, but it embodies implicit multi-layered cultural assumptions, I asked students to produce a set of pictures about their already developed off-the-beaten-track routes, in line with Rose’s [21] framework about visual methodologies that considers the visual in terms of the power relations, social practices and cultural meanings stemming from visibility: images are not just “windows” mirroring the world outside but they act as catalysts of representations and interpretations of it.

In particular, this step of the fieldwork is grounded in Rose’s photo-documentation as a research approach, based on images that are not found by the researcher but rather made by him/her as a part of the research project. As Banks [22] puts it, images are not regarded as visual objects that reproduce a redundant visual representation of something described in texts, but they are active performative tools of investigation like ethnography or interviewing. Thus, they do not only provide evidence of material reality, but they especially reproduce the ways through which social position, cultural relations and hegemonic powers are shaped by (and shape) different urban experiences.

After an in-depth exploration of the cultural and power implications embedded in visual methods, students were asked to make a selection and eventually share 5 pictures on Instagram, together with a caption that could make the itinerary attractive for a visual storytelling project.

Finally, students were asked to present their final project in class through the flipped classroom methodology in order to explain the reasons both behind the itinerary building-process and the image selection.

After the presentation, I asked them to anonymously answer a questionnaire, made of closed questions together with a final open ended question in order to explore to what extent they felt comfortable with using social media and the effectiveness of the photo-fieldwork to reposition their own gaze about the city. Finally, I carried out a visual content analysis on the photo-based storytelling projects.

4. Results

4.1. *The questionnaires: the pedagogical effectiveness of a visual fieldwork*

I identified two main strands of results. While the first is related to the students’ perceptions stemming from the photo-fieldwork in order to explore the effectiveness of “photo-elicitation” [21], the second is focused on the visual content analysis of the students’ projects, so images are scrutinized in terms of “photo-documentation” (ib.). The main aim was to evaluate both their opinions on the

effectiveness of a mix-method fieldwork as a pedagogical tool to increase knowledge in the field of tourism geography as well as their perceptions as “tourists” in their own city stemming from the visual fieldworks conducted in groups.

As far as the first strand is concerned, students who participated at the visual fieldwork and answered the questionnaire were 109, mainly belonging to the 18–25 age class (104 over the 110). Students came mostly from the Palermo central area, the not historical post war urbanized area, while 37 come from cities and town belonging to the Palermo province and from other Sicilian provinces (mainly Agrigento and Trapani) that include the usual catchment area of the University of Palermo, located in the western part of the island. Only 4 students over 104 live in the historical centre of the city, the fieldwork area.

As far as the use of social media is concerned, 82 students over the total had both a Facebook and an Instagram account, while 10 had only a Facebook account and the remaining part other social media platforms in addition to Facebook (Twitter, Pinterest, Tumblr, Youtube).

Most of them declared to have discovered unusual or unknown aspects of the city thanks to the visual fieldwork, namely 85 over the total.

The content analysis of the open-ended questions has led to identify 3 macro-narratives about the intersection among social media, visual methodologies and urban landscape perception (Figure 1), each corresponding to a main semantic dimension: the knowledge-based, the pedagogical and the socializing dimension.

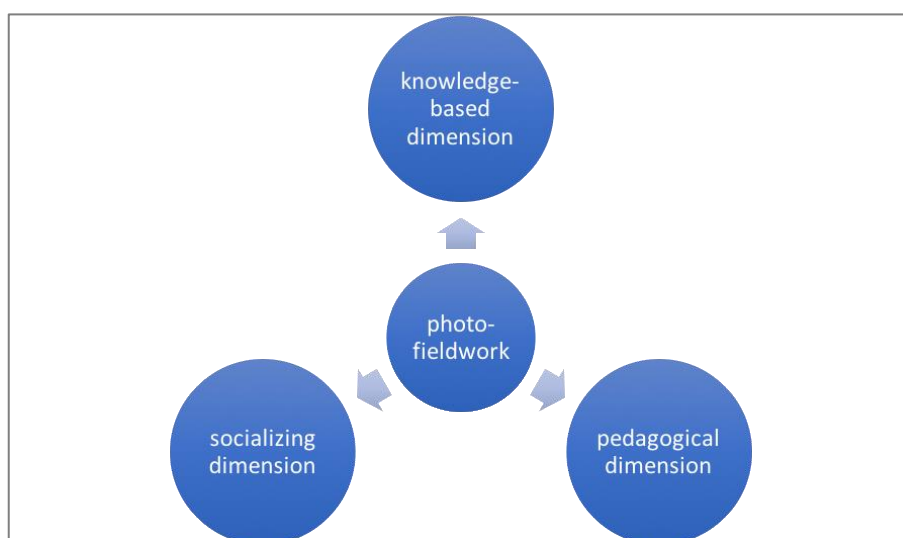


Figure 1. The three macro-narratives. Source: Author’s processing, 2021.

4.2. *Discovering the city like a tourist: the knowledge-dimension*

The first macro-narrative refers to a conceptual framework well-known in the urban tourism literature, articulated around the “like-tourist” mythology that provides a multisensorial travel experience encompassing the emotional dimension: “It was an extremely dynamic experience that I lived not only as a student, but rather as a tourist. By taking pictures I had the chance to get new

information about my own city, tasting street food and interacting with the members' group. It was effective both from the didactic point of view and from the personal one" (S1). As a respondent underlined, "I live in the historical centre of the city, but I've never lingered on some unusual corners or realize their potential from the tourist point of view" (S34).

For a student coming from the surrounding province, the experience provided the opportunity to know the "true Palermo, that is much more than it is normally perceived" (S3). The sense of enthusiastic discovery is shared by other students coming from the province, that can be regarded as being halfway between insiders and outsiders: "I discovered some aspects of the city that I totally ignored" (S5); "I discovered a completely different city, particularly with reference to the local residents, very welcoming" (S8).

The most common feeling is wonder: "I felt wonder for re-knowing a place that I already knew but from a completely different perspective as it was the first time" (S9), that triggers out a new curiosity "for the most trivial landscapes, namely those we passed through every day but we don't notice anymore" (S11). This new gaze on "ordinary landscape" is a recurring narrative among the respondents: "Although I live in Palermo for two years, coming from the province I didn't had the chance to dwell on the "ordinary" elements. I was attracted by the most renowned tourist sites or the places crowded by students over the nights, but I never lingered on some parts of the city, more decayed although extremely fascinating" (S108).

Just a few students do not find an "added value" in doing photo-fieldwork: "although it was a funny way to apply concepts learnt during the class, I didn't learn additional things about my own city, it was just a confirmation of what I already knew" (S33, S65, S94, S101).

4.3. *Photo-fieldwork and social media as didactic tools: the pedagogical dimension*

Respondents highlighted the effectiveness of *#My Palermo Lab* combining more traditional methods (desk analysis, team working, fieldwork,) and more innovative ones (visual social media, flipped classroom) in activating not only a fresh gaze on ordinary landscapes but also going beyond the surface of places in order to have an in-depth knowledge about them.

Using visual methodologies was also regarded useful for widening knowledge: "I usually take pictures and this experience gave me the possibility to express myself in an original and creative way, by focusing on what I consider more attractive in the city beyond the most famous sites and monuments" (S10, S17, S25). Apart from widening knowledge, visual methods were appreciated because they helped students to develop their own landscape perceptions, acting as proactive gazers: "It was a peculiar experience since it was articulated around us, our visions and perceptions. We were not passive users of traditional lectures but main characters free of choosing and enhancing the places that have a meaning for us, even though they are not the most renowned from the tourist point of view" (S13, S27, S58, S103).

In particular, combining visual methods with more innovative tools of image-sharing in social media platform made the photo-fieldwork more attractive for students: "This on-site workshop was extremely enlightening because we learnt how to promote our city from the tourist point of view thanks to pictures and attractive captions on a social media such as Instagram; in particular the choice of this social media was useful to emotionally involve us since we use it everyday" (S44).

The act of online sharing, that marks everyday life for students being “digital natives”, made a didactic experience very close to their habits and ways of using spaces: “I felt a wide range of emotions, it was wonderful to see our pictures shared online gathering likes and sharing!” (S83, S92, S100); “I usually spend a lot of time on Instagram. Using it for study was funny and I had the chance to express my own idea of what is worth to be enhanced in a city with a rich cultural heritage such as Palermo” (S56, S71, S85).

Several respondents (S19, S36, S67, S74, S95) highlighted that taking pictures with their smartphones was an “ordinary” activity, although doing it with a specific purpose forced them to do it in a more reflexive way, without the compulsive need to share every moment of their life. This experience provided them with a new “filter” to select the scenes the most coherent with their fieldwork goals by making them more relevant and meaningful.

While using social media within a didactic work is comfortable for young users accustomed to these online tools, the most traditional methods, such as fieldworks, were appreciated too: “Going outside to carry out the fieldwork was extremely useful to apply conceptual frameworks and skills developed during the classes” (S21, S38, S53).

4.4. *Working in groups to share landscape perceptions: the socializing dimension*

Several students highlighted that both the in-class work for the tourist route preparation and the final photo-fieldwork were useful to “make us socialize in-depth apart from the university classes, share different perceptions about the places that we selected and visited as well as comparing our ideas for developing the project” (S5, S26, S87, S99).

As other students underlined, “the fieldwork gave us the possibility to go out from the classroom and take time for us as groups of people, more than merely students, having in common several interests” (S15, S21, S45, S55).

The positive implications in terms of team-building were highlighted by all the respondents, who unanimously underlined the effectiveness of a fieldwork conducted in small groups and outside pre-fixed times and spaces of the university class-rooms, thus triggering out a more creative and free approach to spaces and places.

4.5. *The visual content analysis of the projects*

The second strand of research is focused on the visual content analysis [21] of students’ projects as a corpus of images based on the photo-elicitation perspective with the aim of understanding what are the main visual discourses and frames stemming from photo-fieldwork². I finally identified 4 main categories of visual imageries: stereotyped, contested, sensorial, unusual (Figure 2).

² In answering to the questionnaires, I students explicitly allowed me to use the screenshots retrieved from their photo-projects exclusively for research reasons.

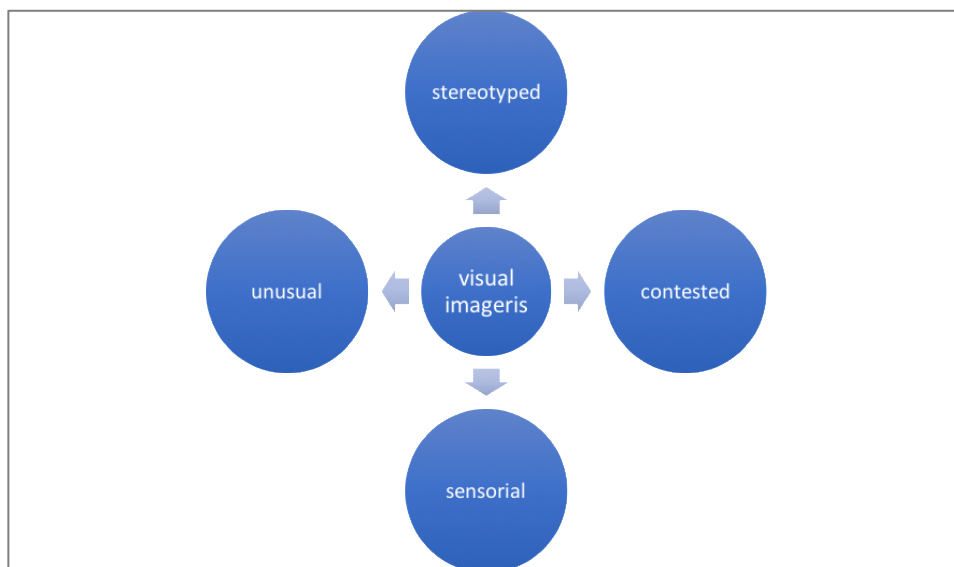


Figure 2. The categories of visual imageries. Source: Author’s processing, 2021.

Although students were explicitly asked to create an off-the-beaten-track itinerary, some groups selected a corpus of stereotyped images and, consequently, created a more “traditional” visual storytelling focused on the most renowned tourist sites of the city: the project called “Our home” (Figures 3 and 4), for instance, is focused on established tourist sites (monuments and public spaces), widely recognizable as the most attractive of Palermo and further reinforced by captions reproducing a famous sentence attributed to Goethe about the city (“Who once saw the sky of Palermo will never forget it”): the title itself emphasizes the process of territorial identity confirmation that leads to interpret public urban spaces as familiar and comfortable “home” spaces.



Figure 3. Our Home (selection). Source: Students of the #MyPalermo Lab, 2016/2017.



Figure 4. Our Home (selection). Source: Students of the #MyPalermo Lab, 2016/2017.

In the same vein, the project “Palermostelling” explicitly exploits the “storytelling” approach to “tell” the city through famous quotations retrieved from writers’ and travelers’ works. In spite of being less stereotyped as far as the narrative structure is concerned, the visual imageries are nonetheless those more easily recognizable since the selected pictures portray the most famous tourist sites.

On the contrary, despite being stereotyped in terms of the selected sites, in the project “Le sfumature di Palermo” (Palermo Shades, Figures 5–7) the formal choice of using colored filters to put emphasis of some landscape elements makes this project more original as far as the place image-making process is concerned: colors are not neutral tools but they are instrumentally mobilized to convey an emotional interpretation of urban landscape. As students highlight in the captions: “colors represent places and landscapes thanks to the emotions they convey, thus we show Palermo’s uniqueness through them”.



Figure 5. Le Sfumature di Palermo (selection). Source: Students of #MyPalermo Lab, 2016/2017.



Figure 6. Le Sfumature di Palermo (selection). Source: Students of #MyPalermo Lab, 2016/2017.



Figure 7. Le Sfumature di Palermo (selection). Source: Students of #MyPalermo Lab, 2016/2017.

Several projects emphasize unusual elements of ordinary landscape, by focusing on the main aim of the photo-fieldwork. The project called “Il doppio volto di Palermo” (Palermo doubled face, Figures 8 and 9) portrays very renowned places but in unusual day-times, such as the Vucciria historical market, depicted as a symbol of nightscape devoid of its original function; or landscape contrasts emerging from natural or anthropic elements: sea/mountain; the harbor as a landscape outpost and caught in its commercial functions.



Figure 8. Il doppio volto di Palermo. Source: Students of #MyPalermo Lab, 2016/2017.



Figure 9. Il doppio volto di Palermo. Source: Students of #MyPalermo Lab, 2016/2017.

So, the image-making process, although starting from ordinary elements of landscape, actually reconfigures them by discovering unusual elements as well as helping in re-positioning the gaze.

“Palermo ieri e oggi” (Palermo yesterday and today, Figures 10–12) is also focused on the overturning of the dialectic between past and present. By depicting old artisan traditions and jobs still surviving in a growingly globalised world, the project underlines the capacity of resilience of a city reinventing itself from the past, by unveiling the forms of identity (re)appropriation through ancient jobs.



Figure 10. Palermo ieri e oggi. Source: Students of #MyPalermo Lab, 2016/2017.



Figure 11. Palermo ieri e oggi. Source: Students of #MyPalermo Lab, 2016/2017.



Figure 12. Palermo ieri e oggi. Source: Students of #MyPalermo Lab, 2016/2017.

The project “Palermo, I Quattro sensi” (Palermo, four senses) highlights the sensorial dimensions of urban landscapes focusing on the 4 senses as “platforms” through which it is possible to deconstruct forms of landscape perceptions. As in above-mentioned cases, despite being quite stereotyped in terms of visual imageries, using the senses as decoding tools is in line with the theoretical-operational framework of experiential tourism. Finally, the project titled “L’Arte del Coraggio” (The art of braveness, Figures 13 and 14) is based on a selection of graffiti exploiting street art for conveying messages of protest against crime and mafia, trying to contest and overturn negative images of the city.



Figure 13. L’arte del coraggio. Source: Students of #MyPalermo Lab, 2016/2017.

Street art is not only mobilized as an expression par excellence of counter-narratives and new power relations between subjects and objects of culture, but it is also used as a conceptual tool to deconstruct over-stereotyped and simplifying imageries of resignation often characterizing image-making in Sicily. So, the graffiti portraying two famous Sicilian judges killed by mafia in the '90's and an "octopus" (*Piovra* in Italian, as mafia is commonly known) represent unconventional ways to visit and explore Palermo from an off-the-beaten-track perspective.



Figure 14. L'arte del coraggio. Source: Students of #MyPalermo Lab, 2016/2017.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The visual fieldwork triggered out a kind of spatial epiphany that acts as a revealing momentum during a *flânerie à la Benjamin*, highlighting elements of places (both the immediately visible and those related to the emotional sphere) that are usually concealed in ordinary landscapes. As the questionnaires and the visual analysis underlined, social media emphasize the role of tourists seen no longer as passive actors but rather as proactive experiencers thanks to the possibility to co-create and share their on-site travel experiences [14].

The results of the research highlighted to what extent the framework of the “networked travel” [15], structured around the Web 2.0, and specifically social media, shapes new tourism practices.

The “mediated” gaze, where the real travel experience and the virtual dimension are strictly overlapped, produces unprecedented practices of re-territorialization and, consequently, new travel experiences.

The visual fieldwork activated a process of resignification of dialectics entailing a gaze repositioning of insiders that look at ordinary landscapes as if they were outsiders, with a fresh gaze that give a new light to everyday places. Generally, respondents highlighted the bewildering perception of discovering (and/or rediscovering) a city by reframing the gaze upon it, halfway between the insider

and the outsider's gaze. It is in this liminal space, interstitial between the known and the unknown, that the knowledge of the relationship with the city is re-activated through.

So, I argue that from the didactic point of view there are no doubts about its effectiveness, as emerged from the analysis. Combining traditional methods of tourism research, such as developing an itinerary through a desk analysis and team working and carrying out a fieldwork, with more innovative ones, namely the use of social media, highlighted the potentialities of using a mixed-method approach to carry out researches and teaching in the field of tourism geography and cultural heritage.

Nonetheless, the relationship between social media, visualities and travelling experiences hide some controversial issues. First, there is the risk that contemporary tourism practices over-emphasize the role of new technologies by transforming them from intermediating tools into the final objectives of the travelling experiences: that is to say making them more relevant than the tourism practice itself as it happens with extreme forms of "selfie-taking tourism". Second, the "epiphany" of (re)discovering new perceptions about ordinary landscapes not always is matched with a completely "fresh" gaze going beyond stereotyped images. As the visual analysis underlined with reference to some storytelling projects, perceptions and their visual representations are often trapped in a kind of imagery-inertia that tends to (re)produce the same ubiquitous imageries for which a city is known.

Apart from the conflicting implications of (over)using social media in travelling practices and the risk of over-simplification, other controversial features emerge from the conceptual point of view with regard to the relations between geography, images and power relations. In line with Cosgrove's view [23], according to whom "vision in the sense of active seeing is inescapable in the practice of geography", Palermo [24] underlines that "the relationship between geography and the visual is deep. Indeed, the suffix has meant and continues to mean a writing of the earth made visible through images, in the form of pictures, photographs, and of course, cartographies". However, several relevant issues should be faced, stemming from the unequal power relations of visuality (regarded as the ways through which the vision is constructed) that produces the ontologic dichotomy between the subject and the object of vision. Questions such as "How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? What to see for? Whom to see with? Who gets to have more than one point of view? Who gets blinkered? Who wears blinkers? Who interprets the visual field? What other sensory powers do we wish to cultivate besides vision?" are crucial, in Haraway's view [25], to deconstruct "histories of science", insofar as they can be regarded as "histories of the technologies", among which the "practices of visualization" are included. Following the feminist methodology, Palermo [24] calls for new visions and, consequently, new worlds and ways of constructing knowledge and imagining worlds starting from "those interstices of power of visualization technologies" [ib.].

To conclude, while the didactic advantages of using visual methods in geographical learning cannot be denied, at the conceptual level the research problematizes the growingly overlapping processes connecting the real-world dimension and the digital sphere in urban tourism, highlighting to what extent social media have been embedded in travelling practices. The main consequence is not only that digital technologies (re)shape the tourist's gaze and re-produce new spatiality perceptions and understanding, but also that, far from being "neutral", new technologies drive and influence a complex system of intertwined visualities fostered by (in)visible power relations. As a result, using these multi-method approaches in geographical teaching and learning should entail a deep understanding of their critical features going beyond their immediate pedagogical effectiveness.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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