

# Performing the Self Abroad: Travel Writing as Identity Construction in the Age of Social Media

*Anamika Singh*

*Researcher*

## **Abstract**

Travel writing, as a literary genre that records journeys, has become a performative in the digital age, of building an online identity. Social media like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and personal travel blogs have changed the definition of travel by giving people a platform to share a pretty and feel-good story that can be viewed by others. This article explores how the contemporary travel writing helps to create identity but is not an accurate rendition of lived experience. The study is based on Judith Butler's theory of performativity and theories of digital selfhood, which explain that the travel stories shared on social media are created through repetitive performances created to gain visibility, validation and social recognition. In digital travel culture, however, Butler's idea of performativity – one in which identity is not fixed but is instead continually produced through acts and representations – has great applicability to the situation (Butler, 1990).

The article also delves into the ways in which travel influencers and digital creators craft an image of themselves as adventurers, spiritual explorers, luxury travelers, or digital nomads in the images, captions, hashtags, and videos they create. These stories are not meant to present spontaneous experiences, but rather, some editing, aesthetics, and selective telling of the story to maintain an idealized online body. Authenticity is translated through algorithms, audience expectations and platform economies in this context. This study also considers the concept of hyperreality introduced by Jean Baudrillard (1994) and how social media travel content often constructs a fake sense of reality and fake performance of reality (FPR). The “Instagrammable” destination can be more than a cultural experience; it's a visual experience.

The article adopts a qualitative, textual and visual analysis methodology to analyze selected travel blogs, Instagram travel pages and TikTok travel narratives to gain insight into the role of digital travel writing in perpetuating the current cultures of ‘self-branding’ and ‘online visibility’. The study emphasizes the interaction with the audience, algorithmic pressure and the culture of influencers on the construction of modern travel stories. It also suggests that as a result of these cultural changes in identity formation, travel writing in the digital age of social media has come to mean the visibility and performance of the writer, making it a reflection of changing social definition of personal worth and social legitimacy. Finally, the article goes on to argue that today's travel writing is not just about the journeys of places but is also about the ‘doing of the self’ in curated ways for digital audiences. In this metamorphosis, the act of traveling comes to be personal and public, reflecting technology, consumer culture and politics of online representation.

**Keywords:** *Travel Writing; Digital Selfhood; Performativity; Social Media; Curated Identity; Authenticity; Influencer Culture*

## **1. Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

In the history of literature, travel writing has been used to document travel and records of personal experiences, exploring new cultures. The earlier travel narratives were more commonly related to the themes of exploration, discovery and cultural observation, as travelers would try to give a true picture of a remote place and people. Travel writing has always reflected social, technological and other changes from the colonial period stories of expeditions to the contemporary travel memoirs. However, in today's world, with digital media, the creation and consumption of travel narratives is completely different. Travel writing has become an algorithm-driven and audience-focused practice with platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and travel blogs, making it an interactive medium.

As travel culture has increasingly become digital, people have been encouraged to share their experiences as well as to build up their desirable identities in the online environment by choosing and preparing their content. Travel is being marketed more and more by means of beautiful photographs, film footage, captions, hashtags and lifestyle branding techniques to gain followers and social proof. Here, in this digital context, the traveller is no longer a mere "passive visitor of places," but a "active visitor of identity" on the Internet. Judith Butler's notion of performativity is particularly applicable to this shift as identity is created (and recreated) through performative and visible actions and performances, not through a fixed essence (Butler 1990). Through travel related content in social media, users are encouraged to constantly engage in idealized versions of themselves, particularly in terms of providing a representation of freedom, luxury, adventure and personal success.

In addition, the lived experience into mediated representation has also become collusive with the use of digital technologies. More travellers are planning an experience to create content they can share online. More travelers are planning an experience to create content that is engaging to look at online. The "Instagrammable" factor is a testament to social media's impact on travel behavior and how tourism is valued, with its popularity evident in popular destinations. Marwick (2013) posits that there is a culture of social media that encourages people to engage in self-branding activities, in which people market themselves as people and their lifestyles to the online community. This has completely reconceived the nature of travel writing: from reflective story-telling to performative digital spectacle.

### **Research Problem**

In the era of digital travel narratives, but also of the performances of authenticity, the questions of authenticity and identity are of crucial importance. Today, travel writing is more about making images look perfect and engaging the readers than about interacting with the culture and reflecting your thoughts. Travel influencers and content creators selectively showcase what they think their viewers and audiences will want to see and fit within the confines of their platforms, leading to highly curated representations of travel life. As a result, travel writing is becoming more and more performative in its effort to be accepted as a true account of travel.

In this change lies the concern that identity becomes "commodorified" and personal experiences become "commercialized. Social media users often create their travel "personas" which mask the mundane, challenging or awkward parts of travel. These manipulated shows result in hyperreal representations, which make reality and simulation indistinguishable. In turn, modern travel writing is a reflection of the culture anxieties of contemporary society in terms of authenticity, visibility and digital selfhood.

## **Research Objectives**

This work will focus upon the analysis of a performative construction process of identity in modern travel-writing in the era of social media. It aims to explore the role of digital platforms as a part of visual culture, the role digital platforms play in engaging the audience, and the role of self-branding in relation to digital platforms. The research also examines the authenticity and self-curation by analysing the negotiation of personal experience and online presence by travellers. Overall, the research aims to show that contemporary travel writing is a less documentary conception of real travel and more a performance of a "curated" digital identity.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **Traditional Travel Writing**

It is no secret that travel writing is a literary genre of great value and significance, and one that bridges the gap between traveling and observing geography, as well as personal reflection and cultural observation. Travel was commonly the theme of the classical travel narratives, with travel seen as an adventure, discovery and self-transformation to the unknown lands. As explorers and observers, early travelers to the new world created their identity in the process of recording landscapes, customs and societies. Travel writing often involved introspection and a quest for knowledge and self-representation, and was intimately bound up with issues of identity and representation.

But there have been doubts cast on the role that colonial ideologies and power dynamics had on traditional travel literature. Travel narratives frequently used a colonial perspective that gave the look of the Westerners traveling and looking at the "other" cultures and societies from their own superior vantage point, while the local cultures looked exotic or primitive from the Western perspective (Pratt, 2008). Travel writing was thus both a new form of literature which expressed the idea of movement and a new cultural instrument that produced the reinforcement of imperial power and Western identity. Representation of foreign places and people was often dictated by the traveller's point of view and this reflects the construction of identity that has always been part of travel discourse.

Travel literature, on the other hand, served a personal, introspective and emotional function. In general, travels were a transformative experience that gave travelers a sense of self and world, which was often described. Such a connection between travel and self continues to be relevant in the digital age of travel, but it's evolved in so many ways with the advancements of technology and social media.

### **Digital Travel Writing**

Digital media has revolutionized travel writing, turning it into a medium of expression which is multimedia in nature and is created online. Today, the travel culture is defined by travel blogs, YouTube vlogs, Instagram posts and TikTok videos, and travelers can share their travel experiences with the world at a split-second's notice. Digital travel writing places greater emphasis on visual considerations, immediacy and engaging the audience compared to traditional travel writing, which was more reflective. People are increasingly building their online brands with photos and videos, captions and hashtags that garner their followers and social validation.

The tourism industry also has been influenced by social media, with travel experiences increasingly tied to branding and commercial visibility through the lens of influencers. Travel is often sold as a stage production and the people who travel are often represented as perfect lives in the image of luxury, adventure and freedom. As quoted by Abidin (2018), the culture

of influencers starts to commodify personal experiences and feelings in order to involve the audience and gain popularity in the online world. This can make travel narratives appear to be between reality and representation, or representation and reality.

Instagram and TikTok are other platforms that influence travel behavior, as they promote audiences to look for attractive locations and “Instagrammable” moments. Today, the worth of a trip more and more relies on the way it might be presented on-line instead of on the personal nature of the trip itself. Therefore, digital travel writing is a reflection of the wider changes in media culture involving the visibility, performance and interaction of the audience and the formation of identity.

### **Identity and Online Selfhood**

Digital selfhood is now a key aspect of the study of the text of travel in the modern era. Internet platforms enable people to constantly build and rebuild their identities with picky self-presentation. In today's context, Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation is very relevant since the creators of social networks present themselves differently for users, depending on their expectations and social situation (Goffman, 1959). Digital travel writing involves a controlled aspect of identity; it is managed in the images, the experience is edited and the story is told carefully.

Self-branding has become a characteristic element of the online culture, especially in the world of travel influencers. Your online presence can be filled with an impression of being adventurous, spiritual, luxurious, or culturally aware, in order to maintain a recognizable online presence. Self-presentation in the target audience is an important part of this process, as the number of likes, comments, and number of followers can have an impact on the performance of identities and its maintenance. Digital travel narratives are thus documents of travelling movements rather than just spaces of performance, however, they are also performative spaces in which identity, visibility and social recognition is negotiated in a continuous way.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

### **Judith Butler's Theory of Performativity**

This is a new idea, and it is a useful concept that Butler has advanced in an attempt to understand identity construction in contemporary travel writing: the idea of performativity. According to Butler (1990), identity is not a given or natural reality but is being produced in a continuous process, which is repeated through social performances and actions. From this view, people establish recognisable identity by performing in ways – in language, gestures and representations – in a social context repeatedly. Identity is not a thing in itself but rather it is created by performing. Butler originally used this theory to explore gender identity, but the idea now has been adapted to investigate digital aspects of self-presentation and digital culture.

Performativity in social media travel writing can be seen in the production of a series of images, captions, videos and narratives as a way to create an idealised traveler identity. People who travel often present themselves as adventurous explorers, luxury tourists, spiritual seekers, or digital nomads, depending on their travel activities, by strategically using online content. Often, people who travel present themselves as adventurous explorers, luxury tourists, spiritual seekers, or digital nomads, depending on their travel activities, through carefully selected online content. Rehearsals of these roles help the characters assume socially recognisable digital identities which fit the expectations of the audience and modern travelling habits. Social recognition is a significant factor in this process since it is through the likes, comments and followers on the internet that these performative identities are

validated. Therefore, digital travel narratives are not just an account of the trip experience but also are performances that aim at creating visibility and social legitimacy in the online space.

Furthermore, Butler's theory emphasizes the cultural and the system of power in the construction of performative acts. Social media platforms require users to follow mainstream aesthetics and trends of influencers to stay in the algorithm. Consequently, travellers' accounts become more and more a performance of standardized beauty, freedom, success and mobility. The process of creating experiences that seem aesthetically pleasing and socially acceptable is a conscious process that travelers go through, illustrating the intersection of identity and digital performance and perception. Butler's framework thus accounts for the performative nature of travel writing in the present-day, which seeks to construct the self as the subject of the narration and social subject of the display.

### **Digital Selfhood Theory**

Theories of digital selfhood continue to build the way of knowing about formation of identity in online travel culture. Digital selfhood is the ways in which people construct and cultivate their identities in digital spaces via social media and communication tools. In this regard, the theory of self-presentation developed by Erving Goffman is very important because it addresses the fact that people assume different roles in different situations and/or settings in order to present themselves in different ways in the eyes of others (Goffman, 1959). Social media amplify and extend this practice, enabling audiences to constantly curate, edit, and filter out their identities for audiences.

Likewise, Sherry Turkle points out that digital technologies have created a new way to relate to identity and communication, as people are now able to create several identities within the digital realm (Turkle, 2011). Internet environments offer possibilities for a selective representation of oneself, in which the desired parts of one's life are emphasized and other elements of one's life are hidden or ignored. This selective presentation frequently results in travel texts that are aesthetically pleasing, idealized, and eschew reality to the point of being more visible and more engaging.

The self-branding concept is another contribution to this discussion by the work of Alice Marwick. Marwick describes how users of social media are now selling themselves as brands: managing their visibility and audience attention on-line (Marwick, 2013). The curated identities are especially important to travel influencers for the purpose of keeping their followers engaged and ensuring business prospects. Algorithmic visibility also influences digital selfhood from the perspective of the algorithms on platforms rewarding content that is both visually appealing and engaging. As a result, travelers often execute roles that fit in with well-liked online developments and audience anticipations.

These two theories, Butler's theory of 'performativity' and the theories of digital selfhood, can be used together to show that there is a strong relationship between the production of contemporary travel writing and the process of 'online identity construction'. Travel narratives in the era of social media are not just records of travel, but are active creators of performative, visible and digitally recognised selves.

## **4. Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The type of research design used in this study is a qualitative design which aims to analyze the function of travel writing in constructing identity of the writer through social media (Facebook) at present time. The qualitative textual analysis method is suitable for this research, as it enables a detailed study of meanings and representations and symbolic

performances that are contained in digital travel narratives. Qualitative analysis is more interpretation-based and context-based and subjective as compared to quantitative methods which are more analytical and mainly numerical. One key aim of the study is to explore the role of language, visual imagery, and online communications in the creation of “curated” digital selves by travel influencers, bloggers, and content creators.

This research focuses on interpretive cultural analysis, a perspective that does not treat social media as information, but as a manifestation of social media culture that is created by social media technological systems, audience's expectations, and self-presentation practice. Now in the modern world, it is common to see the stories of travel supported with photos, videos, captions, hashtags and audience interaction. All of these play a role in the functionality of online identity. Qualitative research allows the researcher to examine the social reality and culture in its natural setting and provides relevance for analysing digital media culture as Flick (2018) suggests. This will allow the research to explore how journeys become performative digital displays to be seen and recognized.

### **Sources of Data**

The study explores the evolving genre of travel writing in the era of social media, through a variety of online sources. Primary data was gathered from Instagram posts, travel blogs, travel vlogs from YouTube and TikTok travel videos as they are the dominant platforms for today's digital stories. Instagram travel accounts are a visual representation of curated traveling experiences with photos, reels, captions and hashtags. These posts frequently focus on glamorous lives, beautiful places and thrilling identities that enhance the self-branding of the internet.

Travel blogs are also important sources as they contain both personal narratives, reflective storytelling and experiences based on the location. Blogs are typically longer and longer than short-form social media content, and they frequently share extensive stories of travel and the way it has shaped their identities or identities that they want to project. Likewise, YouTube travel vlogs are audio-visual representations of travel, with the aid of cinematic editing, voice narration and audience interaction. The study further benefits from TikTok travel videos, as they highlight the importance of short, engaging, and trendy travel content that are influenced by the algorithmic visibility and virality of the videos.

The data chosen is publicly released travel content by influencers, digital creators and travel enthusiasts. The posts and narratives that exemplify self-branding, aesthetic curation and performative identity construction are given special consideration. Kozinets (2020) states that digital ethnographic methods and online content analysis are becoming more critical for the analysis of modern Internet cultures and mediated social relations. The selected sources are therefore significant of the working of travel writing in the digitally networked environments.

### **Method of Analysis**

The current research adopts narrative analysis, visual analysis as well as discourse analysis to analyze the chosen digital travel content. Narrative analysis is utilized to look at how the travelers make stories about themselves and their travel experiences by writing captions, blogging and speaking into videos. This approach can be used to uncover common concepts or motifs that are used to create digital traveler identities, for example, freedom, adventure, luxury, spirituality, and self-discovery.

Visual analysis is based on photographs, video style, style of editing, body language, color schemes and destination imagery in travel content. Social media sites are very visual, so studying imagery is crucial to understanding how travellers construct their appealing, socially

desirable online image. The visuals are more likely to make an impact on identity than the written narrative, particularly in the Instagram and TikTok travel scene.

Further, discourse analysis is used to examine how language, hashtags, captions and audience interaction help to create meanings of travel and authenticity, as well as of online visibility. This approach investigates the influence of digital travel writing on other cultural values and perspectives of consumerism, the influencer culture and self-presentation. These analytical techniques will give a holistic view of how modern travel stories are enacted as acts of constructing digital identities.

## **5. Performing the Self Through Travel Narratives**

Travel writing in the modern era has increasingly gotten into an increasingly social media-driven, digital seen and heard, and audience-engaging performance. The earlier travel books tended to offer descriptions of travels as a voyage of discovery, cultural interaction, and personal reflection. In the digital age, however, travel stories have come out of written descriptions of places and experiences. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have revolutionized travel, making it a very visual and performative experience in which people continuously create and present themselves as they aim to construct idealized characters. The images, captions, reels, hashtags, and videos that people produce during their travels help to create their identities, which are defined in terms of social aspirations, lifestyle branding, and online desirability.

### **The Curated Traveler Identity**

Social media sites offer users an opportunity to play certain roles within their social behaviors that can bring them recognition and audience. A clear identity is the “adventurer” with the mountains, forests, trekking routes and distant places. They are focused on freedom, courage and exploration and enable the traveller to imagine himself/herself as one who is independent and courageous. Likewise, the term for “digital nomad” has become a strong emblem in the culture of the internet. Digital nomads embody the life of a nomad who works from a distance, moves and isn't bound to any social institutions. Their travel narratives frequently mix laptops, beaches, cafés and co-working spaces to build up a picture of the professional and the personal being mixed together in a successful adventure.

Another popular identity is the “luxury traveler,” whose posts are typically about high dollar hotels, exotic travel, designer lifestyles and experiences, or anything that includes a high price tag. Luxury travel narratives are tenaciously crafted in order to convey status, wealth and sophistication. Often these shows are not true representations of a journey and more of a social capital show. Another important identity category in DTW is the “spiritual traveler.” They typically feature meditation retreats, yoga places, mountains, temples and self healing experiences. These representations are through which travels are done to enact identities of inner peace, emotional development and spiritual awakening.

Judith Butler claims that identity is not something that we automatically have, but is a social action and representation that must be repeated (Butler, 1990). In social media travel culture, this notion is very relevant, as travellers continuously perform ever-repeated recognisable identities through repetitive digital activities. People have aesthetic travel photos and stories that they post online and build secure online personalities that are associated with audience members' assumptions and the platform's trends.

### **Instagrammable Experiences**

With the advent of Instagram and visually driven platforms, the nature of travelling experiences has been altered. Modern culture of travel is more and more valuing destinations

based on their visual appeal and social media potential. Not only are places valuable due to their cultural or historical significance but they can also be valuable because they are able to create beautiful online content. The term “Instagrammable” captures this change, as places are being rated on how ‘likable’ they are, how many followers they have and the amount of attention they receive online.

Aesthetic travel culture places a high value on the carefully edited photo, color coordination, cinematic videos and curated caption that creates aesthetically pleasing narrative. Out-of-the-box photographers often take a long time to create photos, find the perfect camera angle, edit, and organize the content prior to posting it online. Thus, spontaneity is itself put on display. Any spontaneous or natural moments are usually carefully arranged scenes to be consumed by an audience. This phenomenon is the result of the convergence of experience and performative travel writing in the digital realm.

Visual storytelling is at the heart of the creation of these travel performances. Images convey life and aspirations for society, emotions more readily than written narratives. Sunsets, luxurious hotel rooms, mountain views, and café decor all help to create the perfect travel narratives. Influencer culture is all about visibility and relatability, which makes it more likely for content creators to showcase their polished yet seemingly real lifestyles to their followers, states Abidin (2018). These carefully selected and crafted images are often perceived as reality on social media, emphasizing that they are subjective and manipulative. Carefully selected images are often perceived as reality on social media and it can be noted that they are subjective and manipulative.

Moreover, algorithmic systems in social media platforms take care of aesthetic performances by promoting aesthetically engaging content. When posts gain more engagement, they appear more prominently as it attracts others and helps create a visually perfect travel story. Travelers therefore might value creating content over any interaction with places and cultures. The desire for being online increasingly becomes the medium for travelling experiences.

### **Travel as Self-Branding**

In the digital age travel writing is intricately woven with the concept of self-branding and the influencer culture. More and more, people view themselves as a product that can be sold on social media for visibility, popularity and money. Travel influencers build their own brand by having a consistent look across all of their blog posts, social media content, and lifestyle ideas, as well as by engaging their audience in a specific way. Their identities are bound up in certain travel experiences like luxury travel, backpacking, wellness travel, adventure travel, or minimalism.

The attention economy is a key factor in influencing these online performances. The visibility in digital space is a power of social and economic nature. A number of likes, comments, shares, followers translates to personal value and influence. This means that travelers are constantly updating their content to keep it relevant and engaging to the audience and the algorithms. Social media culture fosters a culture of self-branding in which people try to control what others can see of them and put together an “online marketable self” (Marwick, 2013). Travel tales turn into a instrument for maintaining web popularity and establishing a business relationship with brands, lodging, airlines and tourism businesses.

Another aspect of monetization is that travel writing becomes a professionalized online show. The incentive for influencers to sell travel experiences that are best suited for commercial interests is the sponsored post, affiliate marketing, paid collaborations and tourism promotion. In many cases, travel becomes a part of the content production and promotion of

the brand. The traveller is not just a storyteller, but a digital entrepreneur who needs to deal with personal visibility and audience engagement.

As the commercialization goes on, questions regarding authenticity and emotional labour come to mind. To be relevant in the competitive digital landscape, influencers frequently must be active online, have a positive image and brand, and be consistent in their aesthetic. But there's a lot more going on behind the slick self-portrayal and fun-filled holidays than is revealed in those pictures. Therefore, the current writing of travel is a product of wider shifts in what has been called 'digital culture' in which notions of identity, visibilities and value are now highly intermingled.

## **6. Authenticity and Hyperreality**

In the modern travel narrative, authenticity has become a central concept due to the swift growth of social media. Social media's rapid evolution has had a profound impact on the definition of authenticity in contemporary travel writing. All of the old travel stories had a certain humanistic and cultural dimension, as well as a sense of reflection. By contrast, the digital travel writing focuses more and more on what looks good, is visible and can reach the audience. Social media like Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are platforms that are often used by travellers to showcase perfect pictures, videos and captions of the trips they have been on. This has led to a growing sense of a merging of authentic experience and constructed representation. Travel narratives today are more like performances than a direct representation of reality, and are influenced by digital culture, influencer practices and audience expectations.

### **Authentic Experience vs Curated Content**

Selective representation is one of the hallmarks of digital travel writing. When thinking about a trip, travellers tend to record only the best and most evocative moments and will not bother to record any moments where things were not so pleasant. Generally, a traveller will only remember pleasant or memorable moments while traveling, and not record anything unpleasant, such as discomfort, tiredness, loneliness, or cultural or other problems. Social media sites value aesthetically pleasing content that looks well put-together, prompting users to carefully craft their online image. This makes travel into a seemingly thrilling, lavish and heartwarming experience on a consistent basis. As a result, audiences don't face the full picture from a perspective, but rather, the filtered representations.

“Constructed authenticity” becomes the key in unveiling this phenomenon. Whether it's a lot of planning, editing and performing, travelers try to make their experiences look natural, spontaneous and real. Pictures taken naturally often are shot many times over with different poses, lighting and manipulation in computer software. Likewise, captions and travel writing are written with purpose and sensitivity to convey emotion, change, or a sense of culture. The practices are designed to give the impression of authenticity to reinforce audience trust and engagement.

The concept of simulation and hyperreality developed by Jean Baudrillard could offer a possible explanation for how social media affects notions of authenticity. Instead, postmodern society has been one where representations are not a reflection of reality, but rather are a simulacrum of reality that seems more real than reality (Baudrillard, 1994). In the digital realm of travel culture, pictures and travel videos are often more significant and desirable than the actual travel experiences that they convey. These representations are consumed by an audience as idealized realities regardless of how they are highly constructed.

Platform technologies enhance the realities further, including image filters, editing apps, and algorithmic suggestions. Social media promotes users to showcase idealised lives and adheres

to the desired online aesthetics. A common phenomenon is that travelers select these experiences for their looks and pictures instead of their real-life value, whether it's a destination, outfit, café or any activity. So travel is now of course influenced by the expectation of online presence. Experiences are no longer just lived, but performed with the view of future visibility and acceptance of the audience.

Furthermore, as there is a culture of influencers that adds to the commercialization of authenticity. Travel bloggers, for instance, have a vested interest in encouraging visitors to visit a destination, hotel, or airline or even a lifestyle brand, but they're not being completely honest or relatable. The commercial sponsorship and personal narration makes it difficult to define what is 'true' about travel writing. Even though influencers' stories are often crafted to fit a brand and its financial interests, audiences often see them as true recommendations. So authenticity in the digital travel culture turns into a performative and market element.

### **Hyperreality in Digital Travel Writing**

Social media travel narratives are well suited to the consideration of the concept of hyperreality. Baudrillard defines hyperreality as being that which is more important than reality; that which is more influential than the actual (Baudrillard, 1994). Nowadays, travelers are first exposed to a destination's images via social media rather than physically visiting the destination. Places should look and feel like Instagram feeds, TikTok videos and travel vlogs. Because of this, there is a growing trend for travellers to copy and recreate the images they have already seen on the Internet, rather than confront reality.

A digital travel writing creates simulated experiences instead of real interaction, thus emphasizing on the spectacle. The reason that famous tourist sites are important is because they are able to produce visually appealing content and not necessarily for historical, cultural or emotional reasons. A lot of people will go to places specifically to emulate "social media" pictures, illustrating the impact of online representations on real-world behaviours. It is a process that makes travel a repetition of visual aesthetics, people eat and excrete the same visualities.

Another concept related to hyperreality in the context of digital travel writing comes from the theory of spectacle culture, formulated by Guy Debord. In an era of modern society, the significance of images and spectacles has been increasing, overshadowing real life experiences (Debord 1995). These conditions are exacerbated by social media which invites people to make their lives into 'performances' to be consumed visually. The experiences of travelling are now made public, validated by others and passed along by algorithms. In digital culture, scenes from the picturesque landscape, luxurious resorts, and adventure activities serve as indicators of status, freedom, and success.

Social validation also helps to validate hyperreal travel experiences. Likes, comments, shares and followers are indicators of social approval, which influence how travellers present themselves on the internet. So, the travellers might have to come up with more and more stylish and unique content to boost the visibility and attention of the audience. Based on Abidin (2018), the role of the influencers is to repeatedly enact intimacy and authenticity to keep followers engaged and to also deal with the commercial identity. It can be a pressure to become an extreme version of oneself who travels because of the desire to perform well in front of the camera versus being emotionally in touch with oneself.

In conclusion, the writing of the present time shows the general shift in thinking about reality, identity and experience in a digital culture. Algorithms, audience expectations and performative aesthetics replace authenticity, and hyperreality takes the place of genuine engagement with a simulated visual experience. The social media travel stories thus

document the nature of travel that has become both the personal and the public story of travel in an age of digital visibility, consumer culture and constant quest for online recognition.

## **7. Gender, Class, and Power in Travel Performance**

Gender, class and power are fundamental concerns in the culture of travel via social media. Digital platforms may seem like equal opportunities for expression, but the depiction of travel experiences can be used to reinforce and reproduce social inequalities and cultural hierarchies. Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and blogs are places where travel accounts tell a story that is as much about social privilege, financial availability and gender norms as it is about travel from one place to another. Whereas contemporary travel writing is then an important arena for analyses of negotiating identity and visibility in digital culture.

### **Gendered Digital Identities**

The digital travel culture has been revolutionised by the emergence of female travel influencers, who are making waves by breaking the mould on traditional views of women's mobility and independence. Social media is often a vehicle for women travelers to portray themselves as adventurous, self-confident and self-reliant. The personal growth and empowerment and freedom are themes that are presented particularly in solo female travel narratives. The feminine influencers build identities which challenge the preexisting notions of females as passive and home-bound by using photographs, vlogs and travel blogs.

Feminine travel performances on the web, however, are also influenced by gendered presumptions and expectations. Female travelers tend to be more closely monitored by others on their appearance, behavior, what they wear, and how they act than male travelers. Social media sites promote an "aesthetic" and "beautiful" image of the self and can reflect the stereotypical notions of beauty as well as femininity. Butler's concept of performativity provides some insight into how femininity is continually performed in online gestures and interactions, visuals and aesthetics, and online performances (1990). Empowerment and performance converge for female travel influencers, creating a complex space.

Women's travel content also features gendered safety stories as a major theme. Women travelers will talk about their feelings of harassment, safety measures, cultural limitations, and being a woman traveling alone. The narratives reflect the differences in mobility of women across cultures and regions. Feminist visibility is often being commodified through the lens of contemporary digital culture, which transforms women's empowerment into a marketable brand, image and identity for women, who are taught to be confident, independent and empowered (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This can therefore result in travel content which can simultaneously critique and reinscribe gendered power structures online.

### **Class Privilege and Luxury Travel**

The privilege a class has is important to the performance of travel today, as international travel and global mobility can be costly and may not be accessible to everyone. The luxury travel culture of social media shows off a lifestyle that is both elite and expensive, including luxurious hotels, exclusive dining, private resorts, business class travel, and exclusive travel destinations. These representations make traveling a tangible icon of wealth, status and social success. Travelers' influencers often showcase aspirational lifestyles that resonate with consumers and help them to equate value with consumption and mobility.

Elite mobility is the idea that some people enjoy access to global mobility whereas others are denied economic, political or legal mobility. These inequalities are seldom talked about in luxury travel stories, and instead, travel is seen as an equally accessible experience for all. Consumer culture is also reinforced by social media, which promote a desire among its users

to achieve lifestyles that are aesthetically pleasing, linked to achievements and freedom. The act of consuming lifestyles and culture can also serve as a symbolic indicator of social difference and class identity, as described by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). With this in mind, digital travel writing is a symbolic capital in which curated experiences form a social privilege and aspirational identity.

### **Neo-Colonial Tourist Gaze**

The narrative of travel also exhibits the new colonialist modes of representation, such as the representation of local cultures and communities. Often travelers from wealthy parts of the world convey images of Asia, Africa and Latin America that exoticize the place, highlight difference, poverty, spirituality, or cultural "authenticity." These images frequently demean the local people and communities as mere scenery in the making of digital images.

Mary Louise Pratt's work (2008) suggests that travel writing has always been an act of colonialism in which the traveller establishes himself as an observer of "foreign" cultures, and as a director of their representations. These are manifested in digital tourism by visually mediated travel discourses that idealize traditional, natural and life practices, places and people, without necessarily connecting with social reality or cultural complexity. People in the local area are often cast as victims or as part of a tourist economy that perpetuates unequal power dynamics between travellers and place.

Social media algorithms are also contributing to the exoticization of digital tourism by prioritizing content with a strong visual impact and cultural stereotypes. For some travellers, "authentic" culture is an experience that may be sought out for the purpose of what it looks like online and how it engages the audience, but not for any substantive purposes. As a result, digital travel writing often mirrors neo-colonial understandings of the cultures that are consumed as 'spectacles' for audiences around the world. These images highlight the ways in which travel performance continues to be interwoven with other networks of gender inequality, economic privilege and cultural power in today's digital society.

## **8. Audience, Algorithms, and Surveillance**

In the social media era, audiences, algorithms and digital surveillance have taken the spotlight in the field of travel-writing. The emergence of digital travel content has introduced a new paradigm that isn't just about personal observation and cultural critique, but also about the audience's engagement, the platforms' visibility and the monitoring of technology. Travelers actively build identities on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube that are always seeking to gain users' attention and algorithmic appreciation. Researchers of digital culture suggest that online identity is now being created through regimes of visibility that "produce identity through the cooperation of audiences and platforms.

### **Audience Engagement**

You can't tell a story about digital travel without audience engagement as viewers interact with the platform and respond to the content. Likes, comments, shares, and follower counts are public forms of social validation which play a role in the social visibility of travelers. Within networked digital spaces, social media users' deliberate enactment of identities serves to ensure visibility and to gain audience's attention (Marwick, 2013). With the online social media platform's popularity influencing the chances of sponsorship, collaborations and economic gains, travel influencers really rely on audience engagement.

Travels stories are, therefore, carefully structured to have the maximum emotional and important appeal. Contents that appeal to the audience's emotions are often used such as

scenic landscapes, luxury destinations, adventures, and motivational captions, as they evoke more emotional responses the audience can relate with. Audience validation is also one of the components of identity formation: travelers start to relate social validation with value and digital relevance. This process is a reflection of Erving Goffman's concept of "self-presentation" in which people enact certain identities as they interact with others, whose reactions are anticipated and calculated (Goffman, 1959). In the digital travel culture, travellers constantly adapt their online profiles according to the reaction that they get from followers and how they are engaging.

### **Algorithmic Visibility**

Another way algorithmic systems influence digital travel writing is by deciding which material is seen by the wider audience. Social media prioritize posts that engage a lot of their users, which means travellers should fine-tune their posts based on the algorithmic optimizations. Popular hashtags, soundbites, editing filters and hashtags are regularly used by travelers to boost visibility and stay relevant online. As a result, the algorithmic logic directly affects the way that a travel experience is portrayed online.

Algorithms are not neutral technological systems, but they organise what is visible and how one participates in a culture in digital platforms, Gillespie (2014) notes. This puts pressure on performance in travel culture, where users are compelled to put out content that's engaging and relevant on a continuous basis in order to stay visible. Travelers thus become "surveillance subjects" who perform their identification, narrative in accordance with the trends of the platforms and the expectations of the audiences. The algorithms that determine the visibility of experiences can also shape the kinds of experiences themselves, as more users opt for locations and activities that have the most potential for digital interaction or engagement.

This is a process that is helpful in online identity commercialization as visibility can give rise to monetization opportunities. Travel influencers convert their experiences into content that can be sold and shared with an audience and algorithms. Consequently, travel writing is closely related to the branding, performance and platform economies.

### **Digital Surveillance**

There are also ways of surveillance and self-monitoring that mould the digital culture of travel. Users of social media are always cognizant of the fact that what they do, how they appear and how they interact is made public. This awareness promotes a self-awareness that encourages travelers' behavior regulation and guides them to control their online presentation carefully. The images are manipulated and texts/descriptions are carefully composed then carefully selected and shared to promote certain identities in the public sphere.

According to Foucault (1977), surveillance theory describes mechanisms of surveillance that can be used to incentivize people to self-monitor through various practices of self-discipline. In the social media landscape, the audience becomes an integral part of the user, with a constant monitoring and assessment of their visibility, popularity and image in the public sphere. Influencers traveling in particular are subjected to the pressure of having to maintain online consistency as the trust of their audience and economic opportunities rely on their digital reputation.

## **9. Conclusion**

The study shows the significant change in travel writing today in the era of social media. Now, the presentation of the self, the spectator and the culture has become more of a spectacle, more performative, and more mediated in traditional travel accounts, which are

typically defined by a focus on exploration, observation, and personal reflection. With the rise of social media apps like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and travel blogs, travelling is now a performance being broadcast online, and we are creating our identities while doing so. The study finds that contemporary travellers are not just documenting the places they visit, but they are creating and enacting carefully-crafted versions of themselves that they perform for digital users. Visitors actively engage in a process of visibility, popularity, and online recognition in the form of photographs, captions, videos, hashtags and aesthetic storytelling.

According to the findings of this study, the theory of performativity of the French-American theorist Judith Butler is also worth considering in the understanding of digital travel culture. Identity is not fixed or natural within social media traveling stories, but is continually produced on-line via performances that are organized by the structures and expectations of the audience of the platform. People assume different roles when they travel, like for example, an adventurer, a luxury traveller, a digital nomad or a seeker of spiritual meanings; they create a known online identity. These performances are further enhanced by social validation which comes in the form of likes, comments, shares and follower engagement. Hence, social media becomes a performative site, and personal identity is continually created, presented and assessed.

The study also shows the growing complexity and mediation of authenticity in digital travel writing. Travel narratives in the modern times often include filters through visuals and selective representation that construct idealized versions of reality, as well as staged spontaneity. Digital representations are sometimes more desirable and influential than real experiences, making Baudrillard's (1994) term of "hyperreality" a relevant one. Travel experiences are influenced by aesthetics and the visibility of the algorithms, eroding the idea of direct cultural engagement, and leaving the traveler with a skewed notion of the experience, as aesthetic elements often take priority over cultural experiences. Social media promotes the notion of attention to the aesthetic and visibility of the algorithm, creating a distorted notion of travel experience, in that sometimes, the aesthetic takes priority over the cultural experience. Authenticity is thus not the natural truth, but an identity created on the computer and strategically acted out.

In addition, the study emphasizes the role of larger systems of power in shaping travel writing, such as gender norms, class assumptions, consumer and digital surveillance norms, and more. In spaces of travel and tourism, travel influencers are a gendered group that embodies a range of expectations and privileges, along with an empowerment that is both negotiated and liminal. Travel influencers are a gendered group which carry a range of expectations and privileges online, as well as an empowerment that is negotiated and liminal, reflecting economic privilege and aspirational consumption of luxury travel culture. Meanwhile, algorithmic systems, and audience engagement, put pressure on constant content creation and self-monitoring. The digital space becomes a place of visibility, where relevance and influence are given to travelers who become performers and being watched.

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