



Exploring the Performance of Tourist Photography and the Construction of Social Relations: A Visual Anthropological Perspective

AISHWARYA P RAJ*

Abstract: This photo essay delves into the performative aspect of tourist photography and its role in constructing social relations. Drawing upon personal reflections and scholarly literature, the essay explores how tourist photographers actively frame their experiences and examines the social dynamics that emerge from these performances. The study considers tourist photography not merely as an act of documentation but as a form of cultural production, wherein tourists become active participants in shaping visual narratives and identities. Through a series of photographs captured across various regions of India, the essay examines the performative nature of tourist photography, highlighting how individuals engage with cameras to portray desired images and identities. It also explores the concept of the “family gaze” within the context of tourist photography, observing how families construct and portray intimate moments for the camera. Ultimately, the essay contends that tourist photography not only perpetuates cultural practices but also fosters unique forms of social connection among individuals sharing transient moments. However, it also raises concerns about the potential overshadowing of human connection by the omnipresence of the camera, prompting reflection on the broader implications of tourist photography in shaping perceptions of reality.

Keywords: Family Gaze, Performative Anthropology, Social Reproduction, Tourist Photography, Visual Ethnography

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Introduction

“The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture.”
[Heidegger, 1977, p. 134]

* Humanities and Social Sciences Department, Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar, Gujarat – 382355; E-mail: rajaiswarya@iitgn.ac.in

Throughout my life, I have often been asked about my constant presence behind the camera, the reason why I capture photos all the time. Reflecting on the origin of my interest takes me back to the image of an old wooden cupboard in my grandparents' house— the one that held meticulously organised photo albums in various colours, each filled with snapshots documenting our family's past. One particular photograph, capturing my parents boating somewhere in Ooty while my mother was three months pregnant with me, left a lasting impression on me. Because I existed *in the photo* before I existed outside of it. For my four-year-old self, the idea that a camera could freeze a place and moment in time, preserving fleeting moments as permanent photographs for as long as I wanted, struck me as nothing short of magical.

As I grew up, I became increasingly intrigued by how individuals, particularly the ordinary masses who are not professional photographers, engage with cameras, especially during trips. As Markwell (1997) aptly noted, "To be a tourist is to be, almost by necessity, a photographer" (p. 131), capturing the essence of how capturing moments has become an integral part of the tourist experience. Adding to this account, Haldrup and Larsen (2003) emphasised that taking photographs is a symbolic activity among tourists, suggesting that travelling for leisure without a lightweight camera and returning home without snapshot memories is nearly inconceivable (p. 24).



Figure 1: Image of a couple during a boat ride¹

While there has been extensive research on the role of photography in tourism, less attention has been given to the performative aspect of tourist photography and how such performances generate specific social relations. The present photo essay comprises photographs I took over the past year in various regions of India, during travels with my family or alone. Through this essay, I aim to address two interconnected objectives. First, to analyse tourist photography not merely as an act but as a performance, delving into how tourist photographers actively stage experiences for the tourists. Second, by analysing these visual narratives, the paper further aims to comprehend how these performative aspects of photography form specific social relations, image construction, and bonding among the masses. In this photo essay, my particular way of observing photographic tourist performances primarily revolves around capturing tourists in the act of photographing.

In this study, my approach to visual ethnography diverges from the assumption that the photographs I capture passively reflect reality. Instead, I adopt a reflexive stance in visual ethnography, recognising the subjective, constructed, and partial nature of the presented photographs and the knowledge they convey. This perspective aligns with Pink (2001) and Rose (2001), who emphasised the importance of reflexivity in anthropological research. As an anthropologist, I am acutely aware that the photographs I capture are not objective representations but are shaped by my own perspective, biases, and interpretations, as well as the specific context in which they are taken. By embracing reflexivity, I can critically reflect on how my positionality shapes the production and interpretation of the images and how this impacts the understanding of the tourist photography phenomenon being studied. As Harper aptly noted, “Contemporary visual ethnography employs photography not merely to proclaim ‘this is what it is’ but rather to foster a dialogue surrounding the competing and complementary meanings embedded in images” (Harper, 2003, p. 244).

The Tourist as a Cultural Producer

Drawing from Richard Chalfen’s (1972) interpretation of a “tourist,” for this essay, a tourist is characterised as someone who ventures away from home, either alone or in a group, to witness or engage in something different from the daily routine of life. According to Chalfen (1972), individuals can assume a tourist-like role within their own familiar settings by observing specific events, places, individuals, or groups, as well as “experiencing” a particular environment or activity (p. 437). This notion of “experiencing” involves

immersing oneself in unfamiliar or novel aspects of their surroundings, similar to how a tourist explores new places or events, whether within their own country, state, city, or neighbourhood. As one can observe in Figure 2, it is evident that the individuals at the tourist beach were not primarily foreigners from far-off locations; instead, they were mostly locals, including some from the immediate vicinity or neighbouring states, much like myself. Yet, what unified them across generations—children, families, and elderly couples—as depicted in the photographs, upon reaching the beach was their immediate inclination to pull out their mobile cameras.



Figure 2: Local tourists capturing photographs²

According to Sontag (2002), travel involves the accumulation of photographs, with the camera serving as a tool for tourists to authenticate their experiences while simultaneously removing them from direct engagement by converting those experiences into visual mementoes. This observation prompts a critical examination of tourist identities, wherein individuals often assume the role of cultural reproducers through the acquisition of souvenirs or the documentation of their journeys, signifying encounters with foreign cultures without necessarily comprehending their deeper meanings. In essence, Sontag’s argument underscores how the acts of purchasing souvenirs and photographing visited locales serve as a form of “certification” of the travel experience. Moreover, as Bourdieu suggests, what is considered natural to photograph is indeed a cultural idea, and therefore, tourists are caught up in what they must photograph and how a landscape or portrait photograph should look (Bourdieu, 2003). They often seek to reproduce the culture of the tourist destination by photographing themselves in ways inspired by popular magazines, postcards, and guidebooks. This “cultural reproduction” through photographs frequently involves taking pictures with locals, wearing traditional attire and ornaments, and adopting other cultural practices.



Figure 3: A local tourist photographer presenting his portfolio to potential clients (left image) & a child posing in traditional Kashmiri attire for a photo (right image)³

Figure 3 vividly pictures this very act of cultural reproduction by tourist photographers. As David Bate, in his work “Photography: The Key Concepts” (2016), rightly pointed out, “Tourists who brought images of other places back home to their respective spheres of public and private life created another enthusiasm, not just for others to visit those places but to photograph them too.” (Bate, 2016, p. 150). Similarly, tourists frequently employ the camera as a shield, a tool to bridge the emotional gap they experience from the tourist destination, seeking a sense of connection and belonging, almost as if the new place is within their grasp at their fingertips.

According to Sontag (1977), we tend to take more photographs when we feel most uncertain, particularly in an unfamiliar place where we don’t know how to react or what is expected of us. Taking a photograph, then, becomes a way of lessening the unfamiliarity of a place, covering the otherness one might feel inside (Sontag, 1977, p. 15).



Figure 4: A child posing for a photo, attempting to grasp the Taj Mahal within her fingertips⁴

In other words, one could say that “The camera functions as a filter, or even better, a transparent wall which separates the known from the unknown and thus offers a sense of control and security” (Lambert, 2012, p. 1819). Therefore, the act of tourist photography becomes a way of familiarising oneself with an unfamiliar place by reproducing cultural imagination through photographs.

The Performance of Tourist Photography

An essential component not to overlook in this analysis of the cultural reproduction of tourist visual narratives is the performative element associated with it. According to Goffman (1959), a pioneering social scientist of performance studies, the self is a performed character, a public performer with carefully managed impressions. For him, being in a public sphere is described as fundamentally performative and put on stage for an audience (Goffman, 1959, p.30). Building upon this notion, Haldrup and Larsen, in the late 1990s, coined the term “performative turn” to describe tourists’ inclination to photograph themselves and their loved ones. This perspective portrays tourists as active participants in shaping visual narratives and identities, elevating them from mere cultural consumers to cultural producers. Drawing from theatrical terminology like “performance,” “actor,” “stage,” and “choreography,” this approach considers tourist photography as more than a mere reflection of reality – instead, it is perceived as a way of directing, acting, and seeing people and places.

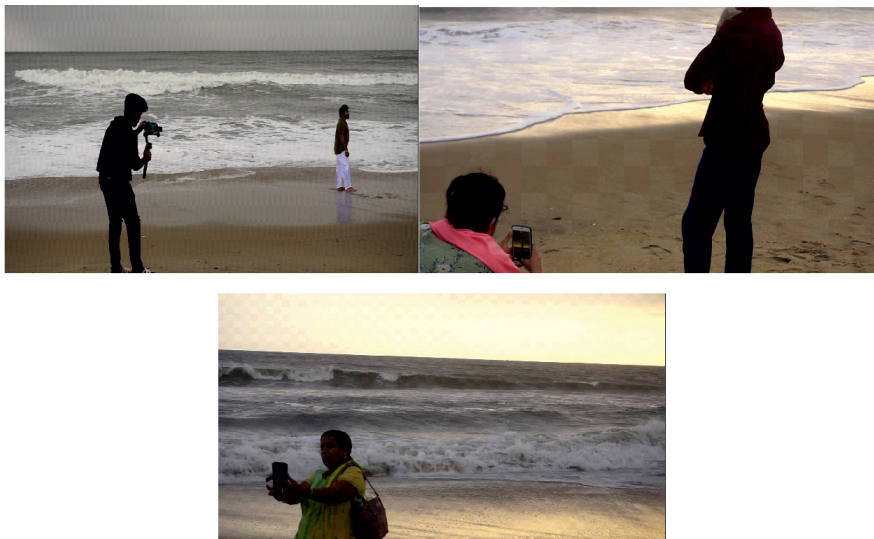


Figure 5: Individuals posing against the backdrop of the beach⁵

Larsen (2005) added to this discourse and stated how tourists shouldn't be undermined as mere spectators or cultural consumers. Instead, he argued, "they are also actors in shows directed by themselves and/or the tourist industry." Further, Larsen stated, "In addition to looking at places, tourists enact them corporeally. They step into the landscape picture and engage bodily, sensuously, and expressively with their materiality" (Larsen, 2005, p. 422).

As depicted in Figure 5, it becomes interesting to note how tourist photography extends beyond capturing static scenery; it involves capturing people as corporeal "actors" (Larsen, 2005). By striking various poses—gazing far into the sea, sitting in different positions, and taking selfies against the beach backdrop—individuals actively construct a desired image that shapes or reinforces a particular identity for themselves. Daniel Miller's visual anthropological essay "Crafting the Looks" (2016), discussing how photographs frequently artificially fabricate specific identities for social media, could offer intriguing parallels in this context. In his essay, Miller wrote about how, in recent years, the act of taking photographs has significantly shifted with the increasing interference of social media in one's life. He wrote:

"Taking a photograph has become rather like holding a drink – a key mode by which everyone acknowledges how much fun they are having. People respond to the raised phone during a party by demonstrating this experience to a camera. As a result, being photographed prompts them to have a more exciting time. The very act of taking pictures enhances the vitality of the party itself" (Miller, 2016, p. 87).

When considering Miller's argument within the context of tourist photography depicted in the images above, it becomes evident that tourists aim to portray to the world that they are having a splendid time, often more concerned with displaying this perception than genuinely experiencing it themselves. In addition to their poses, equal attention must be given to the background of the picture—the landscape against which they capture photographs. As Larsen suggested, people "step into the "landscape picture" and engage bodily, sensuously, and expressively with their materiality and "affordances" (Larsen, 2005, p. 425).

As the tourist enters the landscape for photographs, they simultaneously transform the landscape into stages hosting tourist performances. As shown in Figure 6, there is a distinct portrayal of familial connection against the beach



Figure 6: Individuals posing against the backdrop of the beach⁶

backdrop, effectively transforming the beach into a stage. Thus, through the performative act of photography, tourists “become players in the game of directed viewing” (Scarles, 2009, p. 478) by anticipating photographic views.

The Enactment of *Familiness* in Tourist Photography

A common occurrence in the visual realm of tourism, specifically in the Indian context, is the representation of “family” as one tightly bound social unit. The concept of the ‘family gaze’ (Haldrup & Larsen, 2003) observed here revolves around forming social connections, highlighting the enactment of “familiness.”

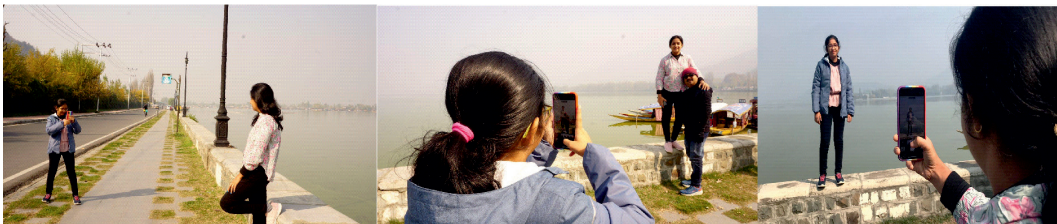


Figure 7: A family capturing photographs of one another⁷

Locations then serve as stages for capturing and framing intimate family moments for the camera. “The ‘family gaze’ is enacted through the active participation of all family members. The family thus becomes both the subject and the object of the photographic event, and everyone seems to fulfil both roles: picturing and acting” (Larsen, 2005, p. 427). The act of the ‘family gaze’, as described by Larsen, is distinctly portrayed in Figure 7. Both the mother and daughter are actively engaged in creating specific images, alternating roles as both objects and subjects in the photographic portrayal of “familiness.”

Often, this photographic portrayal of “familiness” involves gestures like holding hands and wrapping arms around each other’s shoulders. What is intriguing here is the shift in physical closeness within this setting. Despite



Figure 8: A child photographing a couple⁸

the crowded and unfamiliar surroundings, the perception of public touch and physical affection swiftly transforms when a camera is introduced. Families instinctively adopt tender, non-sexualised poses—holding hands, embracing, and hugging—when cameras are present (Larsen, 2005). While these behaviours might revert to the original state once the camera shutter closes, the captured moments, however, challenge the societal norms and public morality regarding physical affection, particularly within the Indian context. From all the provided photographs in this photo essay, it becomes increasingly apparent that photographs don't merely reflect "geographies" but actively produce them. That is new bodies and "ways of being together" are constantly produced when camera action begins (Larsen, 2005, p. 429).

Another interesting aspect of the visual dimension of tourism is how families ask other tourists to take photographs of them so that their whole family can be portrayed in the same pictures. Here, as one could observe, people are willing to give away their mobile phones or cameras to strangers to get a perfect picture. As Lambert (2012), in his study, explained, perhaps tourists seem to see other tourists with cameras as less threatening, as sharing a common photographic "language", as one of "them" (Lambert, 2012, p.1835). After taking the photo, many individuals often reciprocate with a gesture of gratitude by asking, "Would you like me to take your photo?" It's a subtle exchange—a way of saying, *you've helped me, so I'm willing to help you in return by capturing your picture*. And this is what Lambert (2012) called 'Photographic etiquette' (p.1835).

Thus, to conclude, it is now evident how tourist photography not only perpetuates cultural practices but also fosters distinctive forms of social

connection among individuals who, despite being strangers, share the same destination. The camera acts as a common thread, facilitating these connections and unique bonds between people in transient moments. However, as the presence of the camera outweighs the presence of human connection, as Susan Sontag (1977) contended, may lead us all, sooner or later, to a point where we become tourists in our reality.

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Note: All the photographs utilised in the paper were captured by the author, with full consent obtained for their use.

Notes

1. A photograph from my family album, capturing my parents' boat ride in Ooty.
2. Both images taken from Pondi Marina Beach in Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu.
3. Both photographs were captured during a Shikara boat ride on Dal Lake in Kashmir.
4. Image taken in front of Taj Mahal, Agra.
5. Photos taken from Kozhikode Beach, Kerala.
6. Images taken from Pondi Marina Beach, Pondicherry.
7. Photo captured in front of Dal Lake, Kashmir.
8. Image taken from Pondi Marina Beach, Tamil Nadu.

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