AUSTRALIA THROUGH THE EYES OF SOCIAL MEDIA: NATIONAL IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION

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Abstract: In the digital age, social media platforms have become vital tools for informal learning and cultural exposure. This thesis investigates how Australia is portrayed on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, focusing on their influence on youth perceptions of national identity. Through qualitative analysis of visual content and online interaction, the research explores how digital representations affect the global image of Australia. The study reveals that while social media enhances cultural engagement and curiosity, it also reinforces certain stereotypes. These findings highlight the need for media literacy in interpreting such portrayals.

Social media has emerged as one of the most powerful mediums for cultural exchange and country learning. For Australia, known for its diverse culture, landscapes, and wildlife, digital platforms have become a key stage for international representation. Millions of users interact with Australian content every day — from beach scenes and outback adventures to Indigenous traditions and multicultural cities. This thesis seeks to analyze the impact of such portrayals on national identity and international understanding, especially among youth who rely heavily on social media as a source of information.

The purpose of this research is to examine how Australia is represented in social media content, to identify common themes and narratives, to explore youth engagement with Australian content, and to evaluate how these portrayals influence perceptions of Australian identity and culture.

The key questions include:

1. What types of Australian content are most popular on social media?

2. How do social media users interpret and react to this content?

3. To what extent do social media portrayals reflect or distort Australian reality?

4. What role do influencers play in shaping Australia's national image?

Previous research shows that national identity is often constructed through formal education and media representation (Anderson, 1983; Hall, 1997). However, with the rise of user-generated content, countries are now represented informally by tourists, influencers, and everyday users online.

Social media platforms, especially TikTok and YouTube, present fragmented yet powerful images of countries. These images may highlight cultural richness or exaggerate specific stereotypes (Said, 1978; Jenkins, 2006). For Australia, images of surfing, kangaroos, deserts, and slang often dominate online content, sometimes overshadowing the country's complex history and Indigenous heritage.

A mixed-method qualitative approach was used for this research. 100 popular videos tagged with #Australia, #VisitAustralia, #AussieCulture, and related hashtags were selected from TikTok and YouTube. A survey was conducted with 120 youth aged 15–25 to gather their impressions of Australian content. Comments from selected videos were also analyzed to understand how people perceive and discuss Australia online.

Thematic analysis revealed common portrayals such as scenic landscapes, wildlife (kangaroos, koalas), beach culture, casual lifestyles, and multicultural cities like Sydney and Melbourne. Indigenous culture appeared less frequently, usually in content created by educational channels or Indigenous influencers.

Survey data showed that the majority of youth viewers had positive impressions of Australia, often related to nature and lifestyle. However, some admitted to holding stereotypical views, shaped by repetitive visual tropes (e.g., deserts, surfing, dangerous animals). Influencers played a key role in introducing personal experiences, but content often leaned toward entertainment over depth.

While social media offers a platform for cultural curiosity and exchange, it also risks creating simplified or stereotypical images. Australia's representation online is shaped by both genuine stories and exaggerated visuals. Therefore, media literacy is essential to help viewers navigate and understand such portrayals critically.

Australia's portrayal on social media influences how young people view the nation and its culture. While the content often encourages interest and appreciation, it can also lead to the reinforcement of clichés. To ensure a balanced perspective, media literacy and critical thinking should be integrated into country learning.

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