

Tourism Destination Image: Distortion or Promotion? An Analysis of Web-based Promotional Discourse about Calabria

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Abstract

Nowadays, the formation of Tourism Destination Image can be shaped through the mediation between web tourists' initial mental constructs and web-based promotional discourses. These encounters run the risk of being unbalanced by the social power of discursive agents used to constrain imagery and discourse processing. Such risks are even higher when web tourists have no/little organic images of less known destinations. This paper focuses on how these events contribute to promoting an induced Tourism Destination Image when online searches are performed for either real travel planning or virtual tourism. A qualitative study was conducted on samples promoting the southern Italian region of Calabria. Findings show that linguistic and visual features were manipulated to concur as subtle discursive agents through the use of psychological attributes. Intentional distortion of discourse was found to be facilitated by recipients' trust, and by the absence of web ethics.

1. Introduction

The Tourism Destination Image (TDI) of a place is initially shaped by the *images* evoked, and the *atmosphere* and *attractions* expected from a destination (Echtner and Ritchie 1991). These *stereotypical*, *affective*, and *unique* images (Stepchenkova and Morrison 2008) form tourists' mental constructs (Gallarza, Saura, Garcia 2002). Baloglu and McCleary (1999) propose a model of TDI formation, which considers two important determinants: 1) *stimulus factors*, or functional variables, which can be directly observed and/or measured (e.g. information sources); 2) *tourists' characteristics*, or psychological characteristics, which are not directly observable (e.g. values, personality). Tourists' characteristics determine an initial

organic image of a destination, which is then shaped into an *induced image* (Gunn 1988) by TDI stimulus factors. These can be elaborated through *imagery* and/or *discursive* processing (MacInnis and Price 1987). Imagery processing occurs through multisensory impressions of *common* functional features (e.g. climate) and psychological ones (e.g. safety); discursive processing elaborates attributes of *unique* functional (e.g. events) and psychological features (e.g. atmosphere). TDI formation is thus developed in three ways, which are not mutually exclusive: 1) *perceptual and cognitive*, in which discursive processing elaborates functional components of TDI stimuli; 2) *affective*, in which imagery processing focuses on the psychological components of TDI stimuli; 3) *social*, in which information on common and/or unique features of functional and psychological components of TDI stimuli is processed.

This paper focuses on how web-discursive events contribute to promoting an induced TDI when online searches are performed for either real travel planning or virtual tourism. The web is selected as the largest repository in which online searches for destinations are particularly functional (Pan, Litvin, O'Donnell 2007). Although the credibility of web-based TDI promotional discourse tends to be more accepted as it reaches a global audience, the absence of ethics or the intentional distortion of information is likely to induce a biased TDI.

Against this backdrop, the following research questions are addressed: 1) Which functional and/or psychological components are most frequently introduced to determine an induced TDI? 2) Which discursive and imagery features are used to convey these components? 3) How do these components and features contribute to shaping a web-based promotional discourse of a given destination? A qualitative study is conducted on TDI in web-based discourse samples promoting the southern Italian region of Calabria.

2. Destination image in web-based promotional discourse

TDI formation is grounded in the mediation between web tourists' initial mental constructs (*organic image*) and TDI promotional discourses (*induced image*). This mediation occurs through the use of search engines, the widely preferred way of seeking information, which varies according to potential travellers' background knowledge about travel, the destination, and the search engines

themselves (Pan and Fesenmaier 2006)¹. Online searches are also constrained by technical factors such as *technologisation of discourse* and *search engine visibility* (Fairclough 2001). More than a decade ago, Dann (1996: 161) predicted that “clearly the language of tourism will increasingly become a language of cyberspace”. In particular, technologisation of discourse affects its organisational context in terms of *social power*. This is exerted to earn web tourists’ complicity through *ocular* travel, i.e., by using discursive and visual features, which stimulate web tourists to imagine themselves as eye-witnesses to the destination described, and/or through *epistemic* travel, i.e., by using the language of persuasion, which induces virtual visitors to explore new sociocultural elements (Cronin 2000).

In this respect, Locke (2004: 2) underlines the importance of undertaking critical discourse analysis (CDA), which “views [...] texts as sites for both the inculcation and contestation of discourses”. Inculcation and contestation are determined by the interplay of genres, discourses and styles (Fairclough 2003), as well as by web tourists’ prior knowledge, organic images, and their resistance to induced images.

3. The study of the tourism destination image of Calabria

Despite its innate vocation for tourism, Calabria is not well-promoted by the tourism industry. Compared to other famous Italian regions, Calabria still remains a relatively unknown destination to most international travellers. Tourism web-discursive events are therefore likely to take advantage of tourists’ limited organic image by using agents of social power to induce a biased destination image.

3.1. Research design and method

An experimental design was introduced to simulate online searches on Calabria, using *Google*. Keywords were identified to generate search results as they are commonly used by tourists to search a specific destination (Pan and Fesenmaier 2006). A CDA approach

¹ However, search engines will not generate the same results on two separate occasions due to the continuous update of search-engine algorithms to improve online searches (Pan *et al.* 2007).

was adopted to seek relationships between the linguistic and visual elements of texts, their discursive practices and the social context in which these occur. A sociolinguistic approach was also necessary as CDA does not have a unitary methodology. Variables included: *web-based tourism discourse*, *language variety*, *language features*, *content*, *sociolinguistic discursive structures*, and *communication* (macro-level); *communication functions*, *registers*, *linguistic categories*, *themes and topics*, *sociolinguistic perspectives*, *communication mode* (meso-level). At the micro-level, these were expressed through: 1) referential, emotive, conative, poetic, phatic, metalingual functions (Jakobson 1960); 2) elements pertaining to the registers of *old talk* (nostalgia), *gastrolingo* (gastronomy), and *greenspeak* (ecology) (Dann 1996); 3) linguistic categories of keywords and phrases, lexical euphoria (Dann 1996); *linguaging*, or the use of impressive foreign words (Potter 1970); lexical positiveness (Gotti 2006); 4) content related to history, geography, art, gastronomy, handicraft, entertainment (Calvi 2000); 5) sociolinguistic perspectives of authenticity, strangerhood, play and conflict (Graburn 1977); 6) written, visual/sensory, audio communication modes (Dann 1996).

3.2. Hypotheses

Two hypotheses were tested:

H1: categorical variables in tourism web-discursive events act as agents of social power and contribute to the formation of *clichés*, which induce a biased TDI of Calabria;

H2: the abuse of *clichés* distorts rather than promotes Calabria's TDI.

3.3. Procedure

The study was carried out in three phases. In the first phase, three common key phrases were chosen for web searches: 1) *holidays in Calabria*; 2) *visit Calabria*; 3) *tourism in Calabria*. Simulated searches were then performed by typing each set of key phrases in Google's text query box. In the second phase, the endless search results yielded were filtered to keep data collection within manageable bounds. Three criteria were introduced to manipulate the search results for data inclusion. These comprised: 1) the first five hits for each set

of key phrases, following the principle of *search engine visibility*, which allows updated content to be ranked within top search results; 2) the first five hits yielding websites in English, chosen as the *lingua franca* of the web with its potential to reach a global audience, and thus exerting major social power; 3) the homepages of the first five hits, where the web-based event of mediation between *organic* and *induced* images starts to shape an initial TDI of a destination. Frequency analysis was then performed on the three sets of data² (see Appendix I). Huckin's (1997) CDA *framing* technique was introduced to create a corpus of micro-level instances to test Hypothesis 1. In the third phase, a qualitative analysis was performed on the *framed* categorical variables to seek how, as agents of social power, they created a social effect on the TDI of Calabria to test Hypothesis 2.

4. Findings and discussion

CDA micro-level instances are reported below for each set of data.

4.1. CDA findings for *holidays in Calabria*

Results on *holidays in Calabria* yielded the following micro-level instances, matched to their corresponding meso-levels: 1a) *Calabria, the southernmost 'toe' of the Italian boot; like a fractured metatarsal on the foot of Italy, the Tropea promontory juts out...* (poetic function of metaphors); b) *perfect for romance and relaxation; safe place for kids* (emotive function); 2a) *Tropea's curative red onion; cuisine in the region of Calabria tends to be spicy and flavourful, featuring pasta, cheeses and some typically Greek ingredients such as honey and figs* (gastrolingo register); b) *the regions' unspoilt beauty, full of rugged mountain landscapes and spectacular coastlines, with craggy cliffs set against the brilliant blue seas* (greenspeak register); 3a) *holidays, summer, white-sand beaches* (keywords); b) *spectacular, superb, white-sand, panoramic, unspoilt, impressive, sandy, rocky, magnificent* (lexical euphoria); c) *sagne chine³, tartufo⁴* (linguaging); d) *Calabria is the best kept secret; Tropea is one of the most famous beach holiday places in the world; such*

² The generated corpus will not be expected to yield the same results on other occasions (cf. Pan *et al.* 2007).

³ Stuffed lasagne.

⁴ A typical ice-cream.

a treat; the best time of your life (lexical positiveness); 4a) *gastronomic souvenirs like olives and local wine; the area produces sweet white wine* (gastronomic themes and topics); b) *the region of Calabria boasts ancient ruins from Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Norman times* (history); c) *visit the magnificent Renaissance churches* (art); 5a) *simple and authentic charm; very rural, rich in tradition; traditional villages remain relatively untouched* (authenticity); b) *the gently sloping beach makes a safe place for kids to play; enjoy bird-watching in the national parks; on the beaches find hideaway grottos and secluded coves; visit the Sanctuary of Polsi, San Francesco of Paola; discover St. Bruno's Monastery* (play); 6) the main communication mode used was a combination of written and visual media. *Foregrounding* of texts (Huckin 1997) was found to occur in all cases to give textual prominence to the CDA variables employed. Visuals were mainly attractive photos of three important Calabrian resorts: *Tropea, Capo Vaticano, Scilla*. These visuals supported the textual prominence of the keywords: *holidays, summer, white-sand beaches*.

4.2. CDA findings for *visit Calabria*

CDA results on *visit Calabria* yielded the following micro-level instances, matched to their corresponding meso-levels: 1a) *the ankle and toe of the Italian boot; the inevitable charm of the boot country; its coastline and its sights are set like gems among the balconies* (poetic function of metaphors and similes); b) *Reggio Calabria was the hometown of Gianni Versace, where his family were tailors; prices for shopping in Calabria are lower than in the northern parts of the country* (emotive function); 2a) *the taste of Calabrian food is worth the journey itself; the rich products of our land and sea cooked following the spicy Calabrian tradition* (gastrolingo register); b) *It is a place relatively untouched by modernization with pristine Mediterranean beaches; stunning rolling hillsides that fall into the bluest and clearest waters; grapevines, fig and olive trees cling to arid mountainsides; wildlife is rich and various* (greenspeak register); 3a) *beaches, seaside, towns, mountains, poor* (keywords); b) *astonishingly beautiful, stunning, hearty, tasty, ideal, picturesque, dumbfounded* (lexical euphoria); c) *testa dura*⁵, *duomos*⁶, *limoncello*⁷, *Bronzi di Riace*⁸

⁵ Stubborn, hard-headed.

⁶ Cathedral churches.

⁷ A sweet lemon aperitif.

⁸ Ancient bronze statues discovered off the coast of the town of Riace.

(linguaging); d) *bluest and clearest waters; one of the most beautiful places in the world; all your needs will be met; treasure chests of culture; mild winters and warm summers* (lexical positiveness); 4a) *Greeks made Calabria the capital of Magna Grecia or Great Greece; Albanian heritage of the area; Ulysses and his crew, for instance, sailed through the monstrous pass of Scilla and Charybis, the narrow, turbulent strait between the Calabrian mainland and the Island of Sicily* (history and mythology); b) *They've milked their goats, made bread, rolled pasta, fermented wine and distilled limoncello, and still continue* (gastronomy); 5a) *Calabrian old villages with their stone houses; medieval streets; observing holy days around the year with pious gusto; worshipping in their numerous churches and duomos; even the prices are still traditional!* (authenticity); b) *It's true that the Calabrese are not quite ready for masses of English-speaking tourists; indeed, you won't find too many people who converse confidently in English, nor will you be able to buy English books, newspapers or magazines; you will get by with very few problems if you are patient* (strangerhood); 6) a combination of written and visual media was the main communication mode used. *Foregrounding* of texts was found to occur, while photos illustrated the *Bronzi di Riace* (sculptures), *Capo Colonna*, *Stilo*, *Roccelletta di Borgia*, *Gerace* (ancient Greek and Roman settlements), *Le Castella*, *with its scenic Aragonese Castle surrounded by the waters of the Marine reserve* (ecology).

4.3. CDA findings for *tourism in Calabria*

CDA results on *tourism in Calabria* yielded the following micro-level instances, matched to their corresponding meso-level variables: 1a) *located on the toe of the Italian peninsula boot; the Capo is synonymous with paradise of surf and water sports* (poetic function); b) *its coasts offer sights of extreme beauty; a somewhat rural feel; the allure and the peace* (emotive function); 2a) *citruses, grains, various types of vegetables, olives and wine grapes are cultivated; the cuisine with its full-bodied and sincere flavours* (gastrolingo register); b) *natural reserves, rural courts, beautiful forests, stunning scenery; all covered with forests rich in torrential rivers, the so-called "fiumare", which wind to the plain; the mountainous terraces over the sea; resting on the crystal clear waters of the Mediterranean, Capo Vaticano is famous*

for its white sand beaches, and its crystal blue water (greenspeak); 3a) beaches, sports, paradise, crystal water, agriculture, culture, cathedrals, churches, sanctuaries (keywords); b) charming, vast, crystal-clear, beautiful, romantic, splendid, rich, stunning, famous, rustic, ideal, spicy, crystal, extreme (lexical euphoria); c) The Capo⁹; nduja¹⁰; Raggiu¹¹; fiumare¹² (language); d) the intent of the Region of Calabria is to bring within everybody's reach a delightful holiday full of the splendours of an ancient region in the heart of the Mediterranean (lexical positiveness); 4a) Calabria is one of those regions that in the past had an important migratory flux; its history to which Mediterranean and European civilisation can trace their roots; throughout the years about 600.000 people left to search for a better future and work elsewhere (history); b) pottery production is yet the primary handicraft activity; the essence of bergamot, a fruit growing only in a little Calabrian area, is extracted as the basis for the best perfumes and cosmetics; taste biological products, enjoy swordfish, baked or fried, with a typical sauce and tomatoes (handicraft and gastronomy); a romantic cloister with splendid frescos; the National Museum of Greater Greece, housing the two famous Bronzi di Riace statues (art); the glass tomb, a magnet for miracle seekers, is in the sanctuary Chiesa degli Ottimati; the church of Saint Gaetano (religion); numerous small shops and businesses, modern harbour with sailboats; skiing and shopping in winter; take diving courses; go water skiing, wind surfing in summer (entertainment); 5a) rustic houses built upon cliffs; explore the innumerable villages and hamlets; Calabria has a myriad of cultures and traditions which are unified (authenticity); b) its strong contrasts, and scenic anomalies, its different natures; these rivers are unpredictable (strangerhood); 6) communication modes included informational hypertexts on tourism in Calabria, Calabria Activities, Tropea, Calabria Food; interactive maps of Calabria with destination names mentioned in the hypertexts.

⁹ The Tropea promontory.

¹⁰ A very spicy paste salami.

¹¹ The local term for the city of Reggio Calabria.

¹² Torrents.

5. CDA framing of findings

Destination websites are expected to move beyond web tourists’ initial organic images by providing new information on niche attractions and unique features which induce the TDI of a destination. The CDA *framing* technique was therefore applied to qualitative findings to gain insights into how the overall TDI of Calabria was shaped and induced, as shown in Table 1 below.

The main communication functions were found to be poetic and emotive. The purpose of the poetic function was to create *ambiguity* of reference (Jakobson 1960) to convey a *new truth* to web tourists so as to induce TDI formation both perceptually and cognitively. The use of the emotive function was complementary to the poetic function, as it stimulated imagery processing by focussing on the psychological components of TDI formation.

TABLE 1
CDA Framing of the TDI of Calabria, following Huckin (1997)

Macro-level Variables	Meso-level Variables	Micro-level Variables
Tourism Discourse	Functions	Poetic, Emotive
Language Variety	Registers	Gastrolingo, Greenspeak
Language Features	Linguistic Categories Language Style	Keywords Lexical Euphoria Languaging Positiveness
Content	Themes and Topics	Gastronomy, History
Sociolinguistic Discursive Structures	Perspectives	Authenticity, Strangerhood
Communication Modes	Written Visual	Texts Photos

Furthermore, registers presented manipulated information as legitimate and reliable. Gastrolingo and Greenspeak were used as a social way of inducing the image of Calabria mainly through TDI psychological components. Language features denoted the positive

and glowing language of tourism as follows: the verbal rhetorical strategy of keywords triggered the web tourist's need to escape daily routine; the use of adjectives expressed lexical euphoria to convey the feeling that Calabria is a problem-free destination (Dann 1996); impressive foreign words (*linguaging*) were used to stimulate authenticity through non-transparent language; adjectives and superlatives were incorporated to express a positive image of Calabria. Themes and topics further focused on gastronomy and history, and marginally on religion to reinforce authenticity.

In a sociolinguistic perspective, the TDI of Calabria was induced through *keying*, or lexical emphasis on the authenticity and strangeness (unfamiliarity) of its image. Differentiation of the host culture was thus stressed through *cultural markers* (MacCannell 1989) to create *staged authenticity* of *pseudo events*. As to communication modes, texts were written similarly to general language (cf. Gotti 2006) for effective interaction with a wider audience. They also revealed a twofold function: text *foregrounding* for authenticity through textual prominence, and *anchorage* (Barthes 1977) to slant the interpretation of photos. The visual rhetorical strategy was thus employed to create *visual clichés* of undiscovered paradises.

A more detailed analysis of the framed variables showed their decisive role in (mis)communicating the functional and psychological attributes of the TDI of Calabria by repeatedly using the following features: ambiguous language; unveiled hidden truths; controlled imagery processing; manipulated information presented as correct and reliable; euphoric and problem-free atmosphere; positiveness of destination benefits; credible gastronomic and historical content; sociolinguistic perspectives of staged authenticity, reinforced by cultural markers; prominent texts, and controlled interpretation of visuals; illusionary reality. Acting as agents of social power on *discourse* and *mind control*, these variables easily imposed the formation of *clichés* and *stereotypical imagery* (Dann 2001), and of a subsequent biased TDI of Calabria (Hypothesis 1).

TDI distortion, generated through imposed stereotypes is exemplified in the following instances: *a stubborn, no nonsense people whom other Italians say are 'testa dura' – hard headed; It's true that the Calabrese are not quite ready for masses of English-*

speaking tourists; Indeed, you won't find too many people who converse confidently in English, nor will you be able to buy English books, newspapers or magazines; you will get by with very few problems if you are patient; for millennia they've milked their goats and continue to; even though Calabria is quite poor for an Italian region, it does have proper services available; meandering through Calabria is as good as stepping back in time; to Homer, the Greek author of The Odyssey and The Iliad, Calabria was a far-off, magical and dangerous place.

Considering these samples, the holistic TDI impression is that: *Calabrese are stubborn, hard-headed people, who are perceived as inferior by other Italians. The truth is that they have a basic educational level so tolerance needs to be used with them to avoid major problems. Despite their persistent poverty and backwardness, they do happen to have decent facilities. Nevertheless, Calabria remains a remote, mysterious and dangerous destination.*

Beyond a mere subjective interpretation, discourse abuse was clearly based on the interplay between authenticity and strangerhood. Authenticity legitimated the social power of dominance as "the more authentic a tourism product is, the higher is its value" (Taylor 2001: 10). Strangerhood stimulated interest in "[...] customs and cultures different from [people's] own" (Cohen 1972: 165). TDI formation was therefore mainly induced through *affective* discursive processing, and control was exerted on tourists' supposedly limited organic image of Calabria. Imagery and discursive processing was then made to converge into a *controlled stereotypical, affective and unique* image through processes of *distortion*. The resulting TDI of Calabria was distorted rather than promoted through the social perception of: local people's personality, social status of inferiority, sociocultural conditions of poverty, backwardness and low educational levels, and their dangerous, mysterious and remote environment (Hypothesis 2).

6. Conclusion

The web is perhaps the most powerful social setting and instrument yet known for shaping TDIs. It allows users to enact the role of virtual tourists, who *gaze* at destinations while staying comfortably at home (Ritzer and Liska 1997). These web-discursive encounters

of organic and induced images run the risk of being unbalanced by the social power of discursive agents used to constrain imagery and discourse processing. Such risks are even higher when web tourists have no/few organic images of lesser known destinations such as Calabria.

The present study has attempted to investigate how Calabria's TDI is conveyed through a corpus of web-discursive events. Findings revealed that linguistic and visual features were manipulated (cf. Hallett and Kaplan Weinger 2010) to concur as subtle discursive agents especially through the frequent use of TDI psychological attributes. It appears that "[...] in many situations, and sometimes paradoxically, power and even power abuse may seem jointly produced, e.g. when dominated groups are persuaded, by whatever means, that dominance is 'natural' or otherwise legitimate" (Van Dijk 1993: 250). Intentional distortion of discourse is facilitated by recipients' trust in the web, and by the absence of ethics. "In the Web environment, the message source plays a different role because of dispersed authorship and uncertainty about exactly who the message source is" (Warnick 2007: 27).

Nevertheless, strategical actions can be taken by web tourists to shape their organic images and form their TDIs in two ways, which are possible thanks to the current web. First, *word-of-mouse* communication enables exchanges of opinions and information among virtual tourists, for example, via chats and forums. Online review services can also be sourced for suggestions on the credibility of tourist websites, as well as for reviews of biased information (cf. Plastina 2007). However, these services do not have the power to remove and replace biased information, or even to limit access to objectionable content. Nevertheless, they can help raise awareness of the unethical discursive function of neutralisation through which biased information is treated as objective (see Deetz 1990). In taking these alternative actions, however, web tourists need to be aware of the subjectivity of suggestions that may influence their formation of destination images. In this case, web tourists are confronted with unintentional rather than intentional distortion of discourse due to the individual factors at play.

APPENDIX I: THE TOURISM WEB CORPUS (Top 5 Hits)

Google search for *holidays in Calabria*

1. www.holidayincalabria.com
2. www.thomson.co.uk/destinations/europe/italy/calabria/holidays-calabria
3. www.directline-holidays.co.uk/Calabria%20Region
4. <http://nuke.holidaysincalabria.com>
5. www.tropea.biz/english/holidays

Google search for *visit Calabria*

1. <http://www.italianvisits.com/calabria/index>
2. http://www.intercomm.it/calabria/calabria_benvenuto
3. <http://www.torredelgolfo.it/excursions>
4. www.placesonline.com/europe/italy/reggio_calabria
5. www.happytellus.com/calabria/italy

Google search for *tourism in Calabria*

1. www.sprachcaffe.com/english/study_abroad/language_schools/calabria
2. <http://calabria.indettaglio.it/eng/turismo/turismo>
3. www.agriturismiebedandbreakfast.com/italy/Calabria/Reggio_Calabria
4. www.emmeti.it/Welcome/Calabria/index.uk.html
5. www.promozione-italia.com/eng-calabria/region-calabria.html

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