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Analyzing Tourism Discourse in the Context of Iranian Promotional Media

Amerrudin Abd Manan & Farideh Moradi Goloshejerdi
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru

ABSTRACT

The role of tourism discourse through verbal and visual elements in creating tourists' destination image has great significance. Most tourism discourse researchers focus on the linguistics and visual parts, but rarely have looked at measuring the elements of destination image associated with tourism discourse. Furthermore, destination image research in the context of some Middle East countries with high potential tourism attractions like Iran has been rather limited. This study tries to address this gap by attempting an in-depth understanding of Iran's image as a tourist destination worldwide, on the basis of data collected from printed and online brochures and travel guides, and by analyzing the images of the tourists who intended to visit Iran through three open-ended structured questions. The findings of this study revealed that the dominant discourse on tourism texts aim to promote the image of Iran as a safe, peaceful, and a rich land in terms of natural scenery, historical relics, gastronomy, museums and architecture; however, the image of the country has been appeared relatively negative and unfamiliar, as this country are usually classified as Arabs and Iranian culture is not distinctive among most respondents. This research further identifies the distinctive features of Iranian tourism discourse which portray various types of destination images of the country. It is concluded that a realistic communication with prospective tourists through the texts has essential influence on the formation of a positive image and consequently, the success of tourism destinations.

Keywords: Tourism discourse, destination image, linguistic elements, visual elements, brochures, travel guides

INTRODUCTION

The most effective discourse types in terms of communication is tourism discourse which attempts to promote tourism attractions such as culture, landscape, history, traditions and other social and natural entities (Razusova, 2009). Tourism discourse through pictures and words as its two main elements can communicate with prospective audiences and convert them from potential tourists into actual ones. Furthermore, the effect of globalization has led tourists to focus not only on popular destinations in the West, but also on some other Eastern countries such as Iran. However, in spite of the rich and countless attractions, tourism industry in Iran has not shown any significant developments. To attract more tourists into the country, proper and realistic information should be accessible for tourists through promotional media such as brochures, travel guides and tourism websites. Tourism marketers should use different motivations and strategies to portray the image of a given destination as unique characteristics (Zahra, 2012). Through language, visual elements and discourse, promotional media effectively contribute to the mental image formation and the success of destinations. Many tourism researchers attempted to define mental image. In the word of Jenkins (1999) and Pike (2004) the term 'image' can be used as an individual's perception about the

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*Correspondence to: Amerrudin Abd Manan (email: amerrudin@ic.utm.my)

destination and stereotypes projected by destination marketers. According to Echtner and Ritchie the destination image is defined as: '… *not only the perception of individual destination attributes but also the holistic impressions made by the destinations* (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991: 8). Therefore, it is highly important to create a favorable image for a destination to attract tourists. Undoubtedly, a destination with positive image has more chance to be considered in the destination selection process than a negative image (Beerli, 2004).

Tourism Discourse and Country Image Issue

The image of a country portrayed through the media plays a big role on destination selection process. Media, particularly in tourism industry, because of their great influences and reliability among people are considered as the only image formation factors capable of changing a destination's image radically in a short period of time (Gartner, 1994). In the case of Iran, the role of media in tourism can significantly impact on Iran's image formation (Khodadadi, 2012). Negative image about the country and lack of adequate advertisements are among the main causative factors for underdevelopment of Iranian tourism industry. To address this issue, tourism marketers should portray a persuasive and informative image of Iran through the media and to select effective strategies for communication with potential tourists. Extensive research on tourism development, tourism planning, tourism management and tourism investment has been conducted to address this matter in Iran (Zaki, 2008). On the other hand, little research has given attention to the role of textual structure, such as linguistic and visual devices in presenting desirable image of the country. Therefore, this research can provide a better insight into this issue by looking at the discursive factors – linguistic and visual elements in depicting the image of Iran.

Tourism in Iran in Brief

The Iranian tourism industry was established about 50 years ago. Before the 1979 revolution, Iran was characterized by a significant number of visitors travelling to the country for its diverse attractions. Tourism declined dramatically during the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s, but has subsequently revived. In general, Iranians are warm, friendly and generous individuals with a strong interest in foreigners from other cultures. Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, the majority of visitors to Iran have been religious pilgrims and business people. Official figures do not distinguish between those travelling to Iran for business and those coming for pleasure, and they also include a large number of diaspora Iranians returning to visit their families in Iran or making pilgrimages to holy Shia sites near Mashhad and elsewhere.

Iran has a rich culture and civilization as well as an outstanding natural environment. Its natural and cultural diversity have led to be placed as one of the top ten tourist destinations in the world. Its archeological, cultural and natural attractions form an excellent basis for developing ecotourism. Its geological features have attracted the researchers from around the world. Despite this great range of geological attractions, tourism industry in Iran is just emerging and taking its first developmental steps. There are number of factors contributing to the decline of the Iranian tourism industry. Some of them are the lack of appropriate regulatory framework, efficient planning, sound management and clear sustainable development guidelines (Seadat abadi, 2009). However, one key factor that has been underestimated in Iranian tourism literature is the role of effective, informative and communicative texts in attracting tourists. The small rate of tourists' arrival can also be caused by ineffective promotion of Iran's uniqueness which could be depicted by linguistic and picture elements in tourism brochures (Amiri Aghdaie and Momeni, 2011; Aref *et al*., 2009; Kaffashi, 2009; Salehi and Jamshidi, 2011)

AIM OF THE RESEARCH

Most researchers on tourism discourse have focused on social, cultural and political aspects of tourism destinations and rare works have examined the role of tourism texts such as brochures and travel guides in tourism marketing. Specifically, in Iran very little academic works have been concentrated to the effective power of information texts in attracting the tourists. Therefore, there is a big gap in understanding the image of Iran as a tourist destination among western and even some eastern tourists.

Hence, the main objective of the research is to examine the features of discourse obtained from Iranian tourism promotional media. These features refer to the linguistic and visual elements embedded in the discourse. Tourism promotional media in this research comprise written texts such as printed and online brochures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism Discourse and Shaping of Destination Image

The role of tourism discourse in shaping the mental image of an individual has great importance to the tourism industry. According to Khodadadi (2012), due to its high market influence, the media can be a dramatic source of image formation in a short period of time. Tourism discourse through a variety of media provides information about tourist destinations and can effectively shape people's images (Zahra, 2012). In order to attract the desirable quantity of tourists, it is important to create a positive image of a country. Tourism discourse tends to persuade people and convert them from potential into actual clients. However, despite the important role played by tourism discourse in the formation of destination images, this concept has not been thoroughly investigated in the field of tourism research. It is important to note that images projected by tourism discourse are the mirror that reflects the unique characteristics of a country. It is equally important to note that a destination with a negative discourse could prevent potential tourists from other countries to visit that particular destination (Khodadadi, 2012).

Promotional Media and Destination Image

Promotional media is the heart of tourism marketing. According to Echtner and Ritchie (1991), promotional media such as the Internet, TV, radio, celebrations, festivals, sports events, promotional literature (brochure, magazine, newspaper, travel guide, etc.) have a key role in tourism destination making. Printed media including newspapers, magazines, travel guidebooks, pamphlets and brochures have been considered as important tools in obtaining information and have been regarded as the most vital means of destination-image making (Molina and Esteban, 2006) Printed media has attracted various researchers from different fields over the years (Gromakov, 1961; Pritchard and Morgan, 1995; Dann, 1996; Anuar *et al.*, 2009; Sirakaya and Sonmez, 2000 and Molina, 2006). As Pritchard (1995) observes, tourists use brochures for three purposes: to choose a destination, to validate choice and to facilitate their visit. Therefore, brochures play an important role in shaping images and convey information (Moragan and Prichard, 1995). According to Molina (2006) the influence of tourism brochures on image destination is resulted from the tourist's need for information. Another study conducted by Bass (1989) and Anuar *et al.*, (2009) also attempted to study the effectiveness of information brochures in increasing awareness and interest in tourism. Their research suggest that potential tourists are often dependent upon the information found in brochures and use travel brochures to explore the attractions to visit and plan future trips.

In addition to the effectiveness and image creation role of the promotional literature, researchers who are interested in tourism promotion have addressed the content, photography and symbolic meaning used in brochures. For instance, Selwyn (1993) examined large samples of tourist brochures and analyzed both their texts and photographs. He found that the depictions and texts used in tourism brochures portray imaginary and exotic natures within the travel destination. Urry (1990) examined the role of photography in tourism brochures. He suggested that pictorial elements of promotional material often convey myths, fantasies and authenticity to tourists. Similarly, Tomtitchong and Goodwin (2008) also studied tourist brochures produced in Northern Thailand as a part of a mountain hillside-hiking expedition. They found that pictures and texts included within the brochures are used to transfer a false image of authenticity by depicting the hiking experience as an activity or a ritual practiced by an indigenous tribe within the area. Edelheim (2006) also studied pictures of brochures. Based on his research, the brochures are clearly targeted at different groups of travelers while reinforcing dominant views of society

LIMITATION

There was no research available that studied tourism discourse in Iran as its main focus. Moreover, very little was found regarding destination image in the Iranian context for academic use. Furthermore, as stated previously, there is a lack of promotional materials in the Iranian tourism industry especially the promotional texts written in English.

RESEARCH METHOD

Given the aims of the study which include the analyzing of tourism discourse through visual and verbal elements of the texts, three methods were used: First, *Systematic Functional Linguistics* (SFL) described by Halliday (1985) for determining the functions of verbal elements and secondly, *Reading Image* introduced by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) as a tool for analyzing the function of visual elements. Third, for measuring the components of destination image, the study used the model developed by Echtner and Ritchie (1991) which is shown in Figure 1 (see appendixes). Echnter and Ritchie (1991) developed the elements of destination image, namely, functional, psychological, holistic and unique. Next section wills explain these elements in details. For measuring these elements, they proposed a list of 35 attributes that include functional and psychological attributes (Figure 2). They refer to those tourism attractions that can be found in different destinations. For measuring the holistic and unique components of destination image, they used three open-ended questions which are:

1)   What image or characteristic come to mind when you think of X as a vacation destination? (*Functional-Holistic components*)
2)   How would you describe the atmosphere or mood that you would expect to experience while visiting X? (*Psychological-Holistic components*)
3)   Please list any distinctive or *unique* tourist attractions that you can think of in X?

X can be modified to any destination. Echtner and Ritchies' model are most popular one among destination image models.

Having applied this model, the current researcher interviewed with 20 respondents visited in Matta Fair 2013 held in Kuala Lumpur. This helped to validate the results of the textual analysis as well as to answer the above –mentioned questions introduced for measuring the holistic and unique image of Iran.
The methods are described in below sections.

COMPONENTS OF DESTINATION IMAGE BY ETCHNER AND RITCHIE (1991)

To analyze the image of Iran as a tourism destination, the model introduced by Etchner and Ritchie (1991) was applied to study the elements of destination image in details. The components of destination image are namely *attribute-holistic*, *functional-psychological* and *common-unique* characteristics of destination image (Figure 1).
Attribute-holistic: Attribute is the pieces of information in a tourist's mind about any tourism product. This could be climate, accommodation or friendliness of the people of the host country. On the other hand, *holistic* is the overall image which a person has about any given place. For example by just watching Indian movies, one may generally imagine the India as a dance country, which in reality may not be true.
Functional-psychological: Functional attributes are those characteristics of a country that are observable and measurable such as a goods' low price, and poor roads; while *psychological* attributes are less tangible and are difficult to measure, for instance atmosphere or mood of the destination such as friendliness, romance and peacefulness. *Common-unique*: *Common* characteristics are those that are shared by most destinations, such as local foods and costumes, whereas *Unique* attribute is the features that

distinguishes a destination from other similar choices like Taj Mahal in India, Twin Towers in Malaysia, Indian dance, Eiffel Tower in Paris and Persepolis in Iran. It acts as a symbol of a country.

THE GRAMMAR OF VISUAL DESIGN

In this study, the visual elements found on tourism promotional texts were analyzed using Kress and Van Leeuwen's method which it is called the *Grammar of Visual Design* (1996). According to this model, visual elements such as photos can be analyzed through two categories: *participant* and *process*. *Participant* is an analogy for a subject in grammar and *process* is analogy for a verb. Participant in a picture refer to people, places and things. Process also can be *Conceptual* or *Narrative* (Figure 3). The *conceptual* process is the process of 'being' or 'having' while the *narrative* process is the process of 'doing' or 'happening' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). *Conceptual* process shows participant of a picture more likely in a static positions such as trees, seas, cars and also a person. On the other hand, *narrative* process represents an event or an action in a picture, such as depicting a musician while playing his/her instrument.

Firstly, the aim of the analysis was to identify represented participants of the current data which can be *things, places or people*. Second aim is to discuss how the participants are depicted and what meanings they convey to readers. Then it was followed by process analysis to determine whether the visual image uses a conceptual process or a narrative process.

On Iranian tourism texts, places and things are commonly depicted as represented participants but not people. However, places are the most common type of represented participants used on the current data for this study. Follow this, places can be depicted in two ways: as historical relics and as natural scenes. The *things* also portray Iranian commodities as unique attributes. These images that appeared on Iranian tourism texts signify the types of tourism attraction found in Iran.

SYSTEMATIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS (SFL)

The study employed *Systematic Functional Linguistics* (SFL) as a model for analyzing verbal elements of the Iranian tourism in terms of transitivity (Halliday, 1994). This model involved with the functional system of grammar, which is related to the words, phrases and sentences of a discourse analysis. SFL helps discourse analysts to identify the ideology behind through the grammatical structure of a verbs used in sentences. According to Halliday (1994) verbs are used in order to create e a specific meaning. Halliday comments that a true discourse analysis should base on grammatical analysis. Consequently in the light of SFL, the analytical tool used to analyze the verbal elements is *Transitivity*. Transitivity means the different modes of verbs appeared in sentences. Similar to the *processes* mentioned in visual grammar section, here the mode of verbs also can be *action, events and states*.

Based on SFL, generally verbs define three different categories of transitivity (Kraft, 2011).

- Event- what is happening?
- Action- what is being done?
- State of affairs- what is?

Depending on what kind of messages the text producers aim to deliver to the potential readers, he or she will choose verbs which present either of three above possibilities. Consider the difference between *"tourism industry is now developing everywhere"* (events: something is happening here: <u>developing tourism</u>), *"tourism promotional texts persuade people to travel"* (action: something is being done: <u>persuading</u>) and *"the numbers of tourism attractions in Iran are high"* (state: what is here: <u>number of tourism attraction</u>).

These examples are examples of the effects of *transitivity* with two categories: *Material process* and *relational process*. Again *material process* here denotes *narrative process* in *Visual Grammar* and *relational process* is analogy to *conceptual process*. *Material processes* represent what is being done (action) or what is happening (events) in physical or intangible ways. *Relational processes* show static or stable situation. What it can be concluded from above-mentioned categories of transitivity are a range of different ways that texts producers may use for presenting their texts and each of them convey different ideological impacts.

DATA

The material for this research focused on the textual parts of the texts including photos and words which collected from existing online and printed sources. To this end, convenience sampling was used. Out of fifteen online and printed texts, the size of data for this study was decided to be three printed and online brochures and one travel guides. Having thoroughly reviewed all the three brochures and travel guide together, thirty clauses and sixty seven photos were extracted for the analysis. The next section will discuss the results of the study.

THE RESULTS OF VERBAL AND VISUAL ANALYSIS

The summary of the verbal analysis are described in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of Process shown in textual analysis

Process	N		%
	Action	Event	
Material	11	0	36%
Relational	19		63%

As Table. 1 demonstrates, *relational process* and *material action process* were by far the most numerous type of process found in all mentioned data. Interestingly, no clauses were seen in the form of *material event*. Out of thirty clauses analyzed for this part, none of those represented *Event*. Mostly the modes of verbs were in *action*: persuading and affecting tourist: Esfahan *dazzles tourists*, or highlighting the tourist attractions and providing information: *the garden and the pond adjacent to the castle make the Castle –eye catching*.

This suggests that the tourism text is principally concerned with representing *action* rather than *event*. These actions are generally referred to as the experiences that have already occurred. Hence, the verbs realizing the processes are either simple preterit (e.g. *ornamented*) or mostly present perfect (e.g. *has given birth, has added, have come into, has manifested…*), which emphasizes both the recentness of past actions and their relevance to the present time. the ideological possibilities of the expression of the action in present prefect rather than other tenses is to stress on portrayal Iran as a unique ancient land, known as crossroads of the world in the past and present. The ideological meaning of simple present is to depict an action or situation as an absolute and unchangeable fact (e.g. Iran _houses_ many museums…the Iranian soil _holds_ relics…), which everyone should know about these realities because all these are obviously fact.

With respect to *relational process*, the data suggests that the broad category of this process types includes all those processes concerned with the expression of *being,* or something *is*. The relatively high frequency of copula verb – *to be* – here is corresponding with the function of promotional tourism text that are intended to provide *facts* about Iran as a main participant in this category. According to Kraft (2011), an ideological discourse described by *relational process* is to present something which is supposed to be quite common. Indeed, it seems to have become naturalized, an indisputable logic or common sense, or at least it is very often unquestioned (Kraft, 2011). The lexical items used as subjects in *relational process* can act as a persuasive tool to highlight the unique commodities and features which are Iran's identification, and accordingly they shape the mental image of readers based on these attribute:

Esfahan is Iran's masterpiece
Shiraz is a city of sophistication

With respect to visual analysis, sixty seven photos were extracted from the brochures and travel guide. The data suggests three types of participant namely, *places, things and people* as well as two categories of processes: *conceptual* and *narrative*. Compared to the other participants such as *things and people*, the most frequent participants of these photos were *places*. The *places* are highlighted in the form of the Iranian historical relics and natural scenes. These two participants act as Iran's main unique commodity: the first aims to demonstrate the country with a long millennia and a repository of civilization and culture, whereas the second attempts to depict Iran with a particular geographical location and a country with climatic diversity of four seasons. The second types of participants in these texts are *things* and *peoples* which are very few in number. The *things* also portray Iranian commodities such as handicrafts, traditional fabrics, Persian carpets, traditional arts as well as the Iranian cuisine. Other participants are *people* who are portrayed whilst performing some actions: traditional dancing, playing music or making handicrafts. This also implies that one of the main tourism attractions of Iran is traditional art including music, dances and handicrafts.

The numbers of depicted people are very few and they are portrayed in long shot and in the background. No participant was seen as an actual tourist visiting the places. The lack of people, especially the people in action, makes the photos less persuasive. Table 2 shows the frequency of participants depicted in the photos. The examples of these participants are given in appendixes.

Table 2 The frequency of participants shown in the pictures

Participants	N
Places	50
Things	9
People	8

Based on the list of tourism attributes introduced by Echtner and Ritchie (Figure 2), 20 attributes (Figure 4) were identified through content analysis of the materials selected for the study. The attributes include museums, islands, festivals, ceremony, scenery, natural attraction, sports, activities, cities, accommodation, restaurants, climate, architecture and different cuisine which represent *functional* and observable attributes in above-mentioned texts. The *functional attributes* are mainly stressed to portray Iran as an ancient, historic and old country while the other attributes such as hotels, transportations and shopping centers associated with contemporary life are somehow overlooked. For example:

> In Iran you can visit **tens of thousands of historic sites** such as **Persepolis and Pasargad** in Shiraz, the **Naqsh –e-Jahan Square** in Esfahan which are listed on UNESCO's World Heritage

With regard to the *psychological attributes*, the data concentrate on keywords such as safety, peace and political stability of the country. In spite of the propaganda broadcasted by Media about Iran, the discourse found in Iranian tourism texts attempts to represent the peaceful image of the country for the prospective tourists, e.g.:

> - *Iran is an ancient country where numerous cultures have come into being, and where **different cultures and <u>religions can be seen living alongside each other</u>***.

Similar to the words, pictures also are mainly based on *functional* attributes rather than *psychological*. It means the potential readers can acquire the knowledge about Iran through observable/functional attributes such as handicrafts, museums and historical relics compare to atmosphere/psychological attribute such as the sense of tranquility, pleasure or night life. These facts also supported by respondents that were interviewed.

As mentioned previously, 20 respondents were interviews using three structured open-ended questions (Figure 5) to identify the components of destination image (functional and psychological, overall and unique image). The first question '*What images or characteristics come to mind when you think of Iran as a vacation destination?*' This recorded *functional* characteristics of Iran as a rich destination in terms of natural scenery, historical relics, gastronomy, museums and architecture. The next open ended question (*psychological* characteristics?) is: '*How would you describe the atmosphere that you would expect to experience while visiting Iran?*' The answers given by the respondents showed the atmosphere of Iran as a friendly, hospitable and peaceful country which possesses different cultural, ritual, religious and ethnic groups. The third question, '*Please state any distinctive or unique tourist attraction that you can think of in Iran*' was mostly answered 'none' and 'do not know' as most people had limited knowledge about the uniqueness of Iran. Mostly, respondents visualized Iran likewise some Middle East countries that covered by vast deserts and described it as a hot and dry climate or few of them assumed that Iran is a mysterious oriental by the name of Persia.

CONCLUSION

This research is only groundwork for forthcoming studies in the realm of tourism discourse studies in Iran, with a starting point to convert negative image about the country for any prospective tourist. The above results were based on the current condition of tourism sector of Iran and its contribution in the economic growth; its unexplored potentials and negative image worldwide. If Iran seeks to promote its tourism attractions and create a realistic and good image for their prospective tourists, then the serious plans for promoting should take place by using different kinds of media including websites, brochures and travel guide. To this end, employing persuasive verbal and visual elements in these media should be prioritized.

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