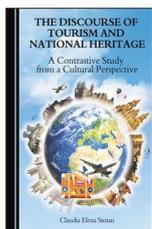


Reseñas/Book Reviews



The Discourse of Tourism and National Heritage: A Contrastive Study from a Cultural Perspective.

Claudia Elena Stoian

Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. 435 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4438-8219-4.

The book by Claudia Elena Stoian contributes to the field of online tourism promotion by exploring how destination branding is carried out on the web in three European countries, Romania, Spain and Great Britain. As the literature in the field claims, by deploying a set of representational and discursive strategies, branding aims to turn a place into a destination that will attract potential tourists. Arguably, however – and this is the main assumption in Stoian’s contrastive study – these semiotic strategies will vary, both transnationally, because of cultural variables typical of each individual country, and internally, because of the different goals of market-driven versus institutional actors in tourism promotion.

In light of the prominence of web-mediated communication in contemporary tourism discourse, Stoian’s data set is entirely digital and comprises six websites in English, two for each country under examination. The institutional website is maintained by the national Tourist Board, while the commercial one is run by a tour operator. Websites are analysed through the tools of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics, which is adapted to other semiotic resources according to Kress and van Leeuwen’s model. The focus on lexico-grammatical and visual features is integrated with studies on intercultural communication, in particular E. T. Hall’s model of cultural variability. On each site the pages that are chosen for detailed analysis are those dedicated to UNESCO World Heritage Sites (e.g. the Monastery of Horezu, Santiago de Compostela and the Tower of London), exploiting these landmarks’ potential for attracting cultural tourists. Thanks to the recognition of their historic legacy as an outstanding value that transcends national boundaries, World Heritage Sites always feature as main places of interest for international visitors.

Stoian approaches the multimodal composition of meaning with meticulous care. She clearly prioritises the linguistic analysis of the page content, which is summarised in the text and reported in full in the eighty-page-long appendix before the bibliography. The analysis of visual materials is equally careful, though the low resolution of the chosen screenshots does not do justice to her work, making it occasionally difficult for readers to follow the descriptions she provides. Despite the poor quality of the images, linguistic and visual data are collected and interpreted systematically. One of the assets of her work is that such a methodologically sound approach to the decoding of Internet pages can be easily adapted to a variety of web-mediated discourses elsewhere and is a very good illustration for practitioners.

Ultimately, a reflection that Stoian's analysis suggests is that the multimodal features of websites make webpages convergent rather than divergent, with a recognisable visual and verbal grammar that is globally shared in contemporary semiotic economies. The same can be said for content, since all UNESCO World Heritage Sites are discursively constructed according to very similar "universal" values.

The main differences Stoian finds in the three institutional websites have to do with the quantity of information as opposed to connotation and with the predominance of the verbal versus the visual, with *Visit Britain* as the most convincing of the three at the time of writing. This inevitably provisional comparison, however, should be weighed against a survey of the best digital practices enacted in public discourse in the three countries examined. Though this policy issue is somehow omitted in the technicalities of the discussion, the point is that the implementation of a digital agenda on the part of the government seriously impacts institutional and professional knowledge, thus affecting the cultural variable of context Stoian frequently draws on in her analysis. Thanks to consistent public investment over the years, Great Britain is a leader in digital innovation in the public sphere among European countries, a benchmark that probably explains the more user-centric, visitor-oriented approach Stoian captures on *Visit Britain*.

The websites run by three national tour operators also show similarities and differences in design and stance. What they have in common is a focus on more circumscribed information, which is necessary to sell a tour, an activity or a service, and also on the appeal of World Heritage Sites as impressive "sights" that the tourist gaze will appreciate. Compared to the institutional set, the use of multimodality is less prominent, with more blatantly

promotional and less articulated messages. National Tourist Boards, instead, show greater skills in branding, not in the least because they have the financial means to invest more extensively in professional expertise. On the practical side, the book ends with a recommendation to train in teams all those who are involved in online destination branding, like tourism professionals and website designers.

In a nutshell, Stoian's thorough and exhaustive study is an interesting contribution to the understanding of multimodality in tourism discourse that will hopefully inspire further investigations into the realm of online branding.

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