The politics of tourism representations: Discourse analysis of British travel brochures about incredible India

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Abstract

Aim: This research examines how India has been portrayed in UK travel brochures. This research aims to analyze travel brochure portals in terms of both their content and their overall context.

Methodology: A qualitative approach informed by an interpretive paradigm was used for this study. The researchers used a systematic sampling strategy to collect the information. Techniques from the field of discourse analysis were used to examine the data.

Findings: This research offers a glimpse into how British tourism literature portrays India for potential visitors. This analysis sheds light on why the projections based on the country's current geopolitical power and economic growth don't add to the full picture.

Novelty/Implications: Even though India is now widely acknowledged as a major global power, this study also supports the stereotype of India as a backward, orientalism-laden, colonial relic.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism marketing relies heavily on images' power to inspire people to travel. Promotional materials, especially those with visuals or text, can impact prospects at any stage of the tourism cycle, including when deciding where to go. To compete for tourists' dollars, every sector of the tourism industry, especially those in developing nations, uses various visual or pictured marketing materials. Many people from all over the world visit tourist attractions in developing countries, according to the World Tourism Organization WTO (2016). However, for the past two decades, the marketing materials used to promote these places have been highly criticized for the (mis) representation of the places or people.

Most of the previous scholars were focused on the contents (what) of this representation. Few studies have investigated this alleged stereotypical projection's background (why). Reimer (1990) highlights the significance of multi-national tour operators and agencies in promoting tourism, as these organizations are typically based in first-world countries. This means that the primary goal of these businesses is to sell themselves to customers by appealing to their imaginations. Representation of a place or people is a multidisciplinary concept, which is not only connected to tourism but also to post/neo-colonialism, politics, and international affairs. Since India is a South Asian country with a remarkable geopolitical position and history, the current study examines both the content (what) and context (why) of the touristic representation of the nation. It has one of the world's fastest-growing economies, is a popular tourist destination with a long and illustrious history, and was formerly a British colony. It is important to analyze the hows and whys of India's tourism representation, particularly in British tourism promotional materials, to comprehend the politics of touristic representation, especially in light of the country's recent remarkable developments/international recognition.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism brochures are considered as the most widely used tool to identify and choose destination among the future tourists. Berger (2004, p. 71) defines "brochures and advertisements as a genre of communication that uses specific lexis and images to persuade people to purchase the products or services being promoted". According to Holloway (2004) brochures are like any other advertising material and have three main functions i.e., appraising, influencing, and reminding. Fakharyan et al. (2012); Kunnu (2016); Loda (2011); Govers, Go, and Kumar (2007); Pathumporn and Nakapaksin (2015) mention the role of tourism brochure in the process of destination selection and to understand the visitor's opportunities in their selected places. Even if the technical advancements and the introduction of new promotional materials alter the availability of brochures as both in printed or online forms, it still remains the primary source of information for the tourists (Scarles 2004). Brochures of any category i.e., promotional, informative or lure, contain both visual and textual contents. However, the content may differ according to the characteristics.

Nevertheless, being an integral element of tourism communications, brochures link the visitors' anticipation and their experience. The present competition in the industry and the availability of splendid destinations lead to the creation and circulation of constructed representations to make the place more recognisable. This intentional creation can be two ways, either the projection as an amazing destination or negative advertising to catch the sympathy. In either case, it can harm tourists or the hosts through the experience or the degradation. Here in this study, both visual and textual components in the British brochures are analysed to understand the representation of India compared to the contemporary geopolitical positioning.

There are many scholars who detail the characteristics of tourism representations. It is true that the portrayals of a place/people or culture (Brown and Giles 1994) shows the fairness of the sight (Wolcott 1990). Those are signs of place/people or culture and are an integral part of the tourism industry (Hunter 2008). The discourses in the system of tourism are transferred to various modes in the process of representation such as films, photographs, souvenirs, and digital brochures. Hollinshead (2004) points out the factual as well as deceptive nature of tourism projections as they convey social advents in terms of social contexts as commercial exchanges. Being a vital component of the tourism marketing, it delivers or covers a variety of contents from sentimental escapes/spirituality to the materialistic shopping.

In tourism, the representation of a place, people or culture is quite challenging. Though these portrayals are an integral part of destination marketing to attract visitors, to get awareness about the place as well as activities, to endorse tourism, and make it looked-for to the tourists. Any kind of representations; verbal, visual, multi-modal or virtual, can be projected or altered to catch the eye or affect the cultural equipoise of the destination. According to previous scholars, the (mis) representation dilemma is more applicable to indigenous destinations or the developing nations, mainly in those nations that have a post-colonisation history. Hunter (2008) states that "representations are considered evidence of both the ontological problem and the power dynamics of entitlement and exploitation inherited from colonialism". He also questions the neo-colonised perspective of tourism against the trace of colonialism in the tourism discourses.

Nevertheless, the main question is associated with the "authenticity" of tourism experiences disregard to the marketing tricks; how come the world's most polluted city becomes shiny, are all the waterfronts crystal clear? or all mountains are thick and green in appearance? Moreover, to the visual treat, the socio-cultural experience or cultural exchange between the tourists and place/people at the time of visits is under distrust after equating the contents/contexts of tourism promotional materials. Hunter (2008) notes that visitors might grow doubtful of colourful depictions and performances they encounter, wondering if they are seeing 'real people' playing 'authentic' roles for them, or whether the shows have somehow been created to please them. In addition, the same kind of counterfeit issues are associated with the host nationals as well towards the stereotypical, continuous denigration about their place (Bandyopadhyay 2009).

Touristic Representation of the Third World Countries

Earlier studies Bandyopadhyay (2009); Bhattacharyya (1997); Echtner and Prasad (2003); Morgan and Pritchard (1998) concluded that the presence of the element of colonisation still exists in the tourism discourses

with unceasing hackneyed visual or verbal depictions about the people, places or attractions, disrespect to present international position or economic progress. Tourism is a capitalistic business which not only sells its products (destinations) but also creates or recreates the natural, socio-cultural image of that place. According to Chatelard (2005) "the gaze" is at the centre of the tourist's experience, as Urry (1992) convincingly argued, and tourist destinations are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation of intense pleasure, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered. Hence, the question arises is that who does create the formulaic, maligned illustrations of so-called developing countries or who enjoy this. The multinational companies, who are involved in the business of tourism, are the main producers of tourism promotional materials. Echtner and Prasad (2003) argue that these marketing materials are primarily produced by the first world countries for their vast majority of the consumers in the same region. These, on tourists' exercises, are practised audio-visual or digital media and influence the first stage of tourism gaze i.e., the anticipation phase. The channels of discourses frame the reality in different ways or often stereotype it. In the case of developing countries, these banal illustrations create a tag of the dangerous or germ-infested image to the future visitors or degraded feeling to the host communities. However, Harvey (1989) reminds the power of tourism to create or recreate the image or perception of a nation, the hegemony of Western channels in the tourism marketing, and "eye is never neutral and many battles are fought over the 'proper' way to see" (Harvey 1989; Quyen 2017; Luangsa 2016). Furthermore, as Mowforth and Ian (1998) note, "even the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have a particular geographical imagination of the third world. Their representation of tourism and sustainability may also differ sharply from those of local communities in the countries where the policies of these supranational institutions are applied".

Morgan and Pritchard (1998) documented the unbalanced power distribution between the developed and developing countries as the main culprit for these banal depictions, which allows or enjoys the Western hegemony. Echtner and Prasad (2003) explains this phenomenon as the formation of 'representation loop'. The most astonishing feature is that the colonised spectacles identified by Said (1978) are still persisting as the nostalgia of colonisation identified by Echtner and Prasad (2003). However, at this international politics, it is visible that the power equations are polarising more to the Asian giants or to the BRICS' countries than the Western worlds. Therefore, it is significant to examine the present tourism marketing materials, in terms of geopolitical power change.

Tourism Discourses about India

For the past decades, there are few remarkable findings acknowledged about India's depictions in the tourism communications. Bhattacharyya (1997) examined two guidebooks; India: the travel kit and Lonely Planet-India and denotes that the verbal and visual commentaries lead to a stance of a "dangerous, difficult or stagnant" place to visit. She criticizes the Western viewpoints about the "past glory and colonised exotic India" rather than mentioning what the contemporary India is. She challenges the construed representation of India as an exotic, oriental destination without identifying the cultural importance of such an ancient country. Bandyopadhyay (2009) examined the travel histories about India. He also agrees with the findings of Bhattacharyya (1997), in the projection of the destination as primitive, exotic, and timeless. Bunchutrakun et al. (2016); Dann (1996); Dwivedi, Shibu, and Venkatesh (2007) examined the digital portrayals about India using Netnographical techniques, denotes the unremitting persistent defamation of the country with some appreciation of its culture, diversity, and beauty.

The presence of the trace of colonisation in the illustration makes this study focused on the British version of India in tourism markets to identify the same in the current context of India as the fastest growing economy.

METHODOLOGY

Since the study focused both the content and context of the portals of the tourist brochures, this research adopts qualitative methodology guided by interpretive paradigm. Compared to the positivist approach, interpretivism "denotes an approach to studying social life with the assumption that the meaning of human action is inherent in that action" (Schwandt 2001, p. 134). This approach is significant to understand or uncover the context and reason for the portrayals of India in the English markets. Interpretive paradigm is associated with the qualitative methodological framework. Here, the research is an integral part of this study, acting as a tool of data collection with a subjective epistemological background.

The data collection adopted purposive sampling techniques. The selection of data depends on the relevancy of the contents in the brochures. Brochures from 5 different tour companies (based on the British tourism organization ranking) were analysed, from which two sets of brochures were selected based on the year of publication, relevancy of content about India, and weight given to the destination.

The data were analysed using the discourse analysis techniques, as suggested by Francesconi (2011). Both visual and verbal text were analysed. "First, the visual text will be addressed through the observation of participants, perspective, frame, social distance, light and colours and verbal texts were examined by pronouns and adjectives" (Francesconi 2011). For analysing the visual content, the theory proposed by Kress and Leeuwen (1996, 2001) was used and for the textual analysis, Dann's (1996) theory was adopted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This session describes the discourse identified about India in the selected travel brochures. The main discourses identified is categorised into 4 themes; spiritual, ancient, diversity and faceless.

The Spiritual India

All the brochures analysed give an idea to the reader that, India is an ultimate place for spirituality or uplift your soul with its ancient devotional back ground. For the past three decades, this remains the top label for India in the tourism communications as mentioned by Bhattacharyya (1997); Bandyopadhyay (2009); Garrod and Kosowska (2012). Both visual and textual projections saturated with devoutness, the temples, monks, sacred river Ganga, traditional workships, monks, and Yoga.

Extract 1

"With its dazzling breadth of experiences and deep spirituality, India never fails to delight the senses and uplift the soul."

"A powerful insight into Hindu beliefs on the banks of the sacred River Ganges in Varanasi".

Figure 1. Varanasi - The true face of Spiritual India (Saga travel brochure 2017)

The Ancient India

The majority of the visual descriptions about India lead a dint of an ancient place with full of forts, castles, and old historic buildings with faded paint. Even though, there is some evidence for the modern outlook, especially for the accommodation sector.

Most importantly, these ancient buildings are very colourful, however, without any human objects. Together, the visual and verbal descriptions create an ancient, timeless outlook for the readers; Taj Mahal, Castles, people in the traditional costumes, etc.

The Diverse India

The diversity of the country is the key theme for all the promotional brochures selected for this study. It shows the absolute nature of India, the multiplicity in each and every sense, and the variety that makes the country

incredible. It is highly noted that they are splitting India as a holiday destination based on geographical peculiarities, food, cultural, climate or attractions. The words such as diverse, giant, unpredictable, all in one umbrella are commonly used to describe the place. Even if the brochures are saturated with the textual descriptions of diversity, Taj Mahal is the icon of India and it mentions "India beyond Taj Mahal". Surprisingly, Taj Mahal is just a single minute example of the country's tourism attraction. As the tourism multinationals must give awareness to the future visitors that India is much more beyond Taj Mahal, there are many more places to enjoy beyond the historical choice.

Extract 2

"This is a giant of a country, and from the cool climes of the Himalayas to the sultry beaches"

Faceless and Timeless India

Another most prominent theme is the timeless and faceless India. It is identified by many other researchers, specifically in the British travel writings about the faceless projection of Indians. As Bandyopadhyay (2009) mentioned, each and every brochure analyzed gives an impression to the reader that "India was self-justification of their colonial rule. And to achieve that, powerless colonized women needed to be represented as an oppressed group who looked towards male colonial protection from exploitation". Wherever there is a rare appearance of host people, they are either looking hide inside their clothes without a face, exotic women, and timeless men. Moreover, the human vectors are always presented with old and traditional clothes. It is especially striking that in most of the pictures of monuments or artefacts, which represent the ancient India, are shown animals such as elephants, not the human subjects. The appearance of Indian women in the contemporary Western travel marketing materials is noted by various authors such as "veiled 'sarees' and 'odhnis'" (Vaill, 2017) and "women were described wearing heavy jewelry (nose rings, ear rings, forehead ornament, bangles, necklace) and having ethnic body art (Mehndi)" (Bandyopadhyay 2009). These conclusions "substantiate previous literature asserting that tourism representations emphasize the natural, mystical, and raw qualities of the non-Western Other's sexuality" (Parameswaran 2002).

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study provides an outlook about the touristic representation of India in the British travel brochures. This examination provides an understanding about the dissonance between the projections based on the country's current geopolitical power and economic growth. Unlike, the previous studies suggested, there is some kind of alterations in the depictions both visual and textual, there is a kind of recognition of India as a modern, vibrant or colourful destination, rather than the banal portrayal as a poor, oriental, and exotic, dangerous place to visit. It is highly noticeable in the case of accommodation and related facilities. However, the majority of the visual discourses remain the same, within the boundary of Taj Mahal, Tiger, castles, faceless/effeminate people, and poverty. A thorough examination of the textual description often gives a trace of colonisation and presence of Western hegemonic foot prints.

Figure 2. The faceless effeminate representation of Indian people in the brochure
(Source: Kuoni and saga travel brochures)

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